

Endorsements

A well-written story; it really held my interest. Wichelman's lively descriptions of the Italian countryside and Alpine village life bring an exquisite richness to the narrative.

Dave Fessenden
Editorial Consultant, Author, Literary Agent

Our town, settled in 1893 by “Valdesi” pioneers, is humbly honored and gratefully blessed by Donna Wichelman’s delightful literary voyage into Waldensian chronicles as she pays worthy homage to the rich history and unfailing faith of our founding fathers.

Barbara Hefner
Valdese Dept. of Community Affairs & Tourism
www.visitvaldese.com

There's nothing like a good ol' romantic, suspenseful, inspirational novel like *Light Out of Darkness* to curl up with on a rainy day. Add Donna Wichelman's impressive weaving-in of little-known historical detail and you'll be there long after the sun comes out.

Nancy Rue
Best-selling Fiction Author

Donna Wichelman has crafted a wonderful tale of intrigue, murder, and family surrounding the art world and a Christian sect begun in the 12th century. The history of both worlds intertwines effortlessly throughout the story, reflecting the meticulous research by the author.

Majorie Vawter
Editorial Consultant and Author

I began reading *Casting Down Shrines* and couldn't put it down. It pulled me into the story as Jamie tries to solve a mysterious riddle connected to a vicious crime. I found myself pulling for her to

connect with the people around her as she uncovered her past and beliefs. This book caused me to think what walls I have built and how they have affected my spiritual walk and relationships. This would make a great Book Club read!

Adrienne Cornetet Yates
MOPS Colorado Community Event Coordinator

The Waldensian Series

Light Out of Darkness

Donna Wichelman



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Publisher's Note: This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. All characters are fictional, and any similarity to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

To my husband Jim for all the years of love and support.
This book is as much your work as it is mine.

And to my father, Joseph Steve Chonko, who never had the chance
to see my name in print, but always believed in my ability to get
there.

As we walk beside the hills that have been so violently shaken by a severe earthquake, we realize that times of complete calm follow those of destruction. In fact, pools of clear, still water lie in the valley beneath the fallen rocks of those hills as water lilies reflect their beauty to the sky. The reeds along the streams whisper in the wind, and the village rises once again, forgetting the graves of the past. And the church steeple, still bright after weathering the storm, proclaims a renewed prayer for protection from Him who holds the corners of the earth in His hands and gives strength to the hills.

— John Ruskin

CHAPTER 1

Varenna, Italy

Jamie Holbrooke only wanted to take a relaxing stroll to Varenna's ferry wharf and back to her hotel along the lakeshore walk in the clear, cool, spring evening. She gave little thought to what dangers might lie around the next bend. Instead, she thought about why she had come to Varenna.

The provincial village had lured artists from all over the world for centuries. Its exquisite proximity to grand vistas of verdant mountains, plunging into the depths of Lake Como's pristine waters, made it a place to behold. During the day, wherever one wandered along cobbled lanes among gold and russet dwellings, she could find scenes worthy of an artist's brush. At night, Varenna's honey glow in the lamplight among those same dwellings radiated across the dark waters of Lake Como toward far-off shores. But Varenna's picturesque charm was not why Jamie currently leaned at a wrought-iron railing, gazing at a similar village across the lake with its own points of light.

For the last year, Jamie had worked at the *Pinacoteca di Brera* in Milan. The museum, renowned for its Renaissance art, participated in an annual art exhibition, and she was in Varenna to represent the Brera at the prestigious event. Many of her peers at the Cleveland

Institute of Art would sell their souls to be in her shoes. Little did they know that something about her shoes didn't quite feel comfortable, and her soul yearned to find a place where it belonged. But that also was not why Jamie stood in a place halfway around the world from home.

Abruptly, the horn of an approaching ferry interrupted the quiet lapping of the water below her, and Jamie pushed herself away from the railing. Digging her hands into her jacket pockets, she set off in the direction of the shoreline walk, known to locals as the Passerella.

Ambling past the ferry, she barely heard strains of Tony Bennett's *The Shadow of Your Smile* bellow from the PA system above the engine's deafening grind as it labored into precise alignment with the dock. Moments later, a number of people descended the gangway and spread out in all directions away from the boat. Several of them scurried past her in merriment toward the Passerella, leaving her alone again in the quiet of the night as she rounded a tiny cove with its narrow slip and stepped onto the shoreline walk. The only sounds she heard, then, as she made the curve around the inlet came from the several small sailboats that pitched in the shallow water, their various lines clanking against the masts and the boats thumping against the rocks.

She continued through a trellis of wisteria, its sweet fragrance motivating her to stop and look up. Stars peeked through the budding branches. It seemed almost a perfect night. She continued on.

Then she heard them; the footfalls seemed to come from behind. She slowed and twisted her head to listen. Were those footfalls echoing her own? She stopped. So did the footfalls.

Jamie froze. Panic choked her throat.

She whirled around and peered down the path behind her. No one else seemed to be on the darkened walkway. Those who had hurried past her were nowhere in sight. She heard only the calm lap of the water against the shoreline. She relaxed. *Wasn't it just like the darkness to make insane fools of us all?* she thought.

She came to a stretch of the walkway where the path widened. A bench sat under another lighted lamppost.

At once she caught glimpse of a shadowy figure trailing her and a tremor chased through her body. There was nowhere to go except straight ahead. She began to run, but the footfalls matched her pace. Her feet shifted into high gear.

“*Signorina!*” A man’s strong hand took hold of her left arm from behind and dragged her to a halt. His other hand came up to muffle her scream.

Her gaze darted past him down the pathway. Dread took hold of her. Was this it? Was this the night she was going to die?

Jamie tried to turn her head away, repulsed by the rancid stench of cigarette residue on his breath, but he held her still. His cheek brushed hers, and she could feel the stubble of days-old whiskers. She writhed.

“Stop fighting me.” He hissed in accented tones. “I promise not to hurt you, but you must promise not to scream.”

She nodded vigorously at his command. Her only hope of escape was to make him think she would cooperate.

Slowly he released her mouth and jostled her around to face him.

Jamie looked up at a man only a couple of inches taller than her five-foot-seven inches. She gasped. Though his cap shaded some of his face in the lamplight, she saw enough to see a likeness to one she knew very well. A freakish fear flooded her heart. She tried to shake the eeriness. Of course it couldn’t be him! She shivered in spite of the mild night air and uttered under her breath. “Jason?”

“Jason? I do not know a Jason.” He wrinkled his nose. “But it is of no import. I—”

“I have money—”

“I do not want your money.” He fingered her long hair. “Dark hair, like *Italiana*, yes?” He looked into her eyes, and she felt her body shudder. He dropped her hair and straightened. “I will not hurt you.”

Too scared to trust him, caught in his trap, she only convulsed.

He shifted. The lamplight gave her fuller view of his face. She gasped. Yes, he could have been a twin or at least a close relative. A

bygone, practiced instinct told her to mentally collect every detail of his features, though she already knew them. He was about the age Jason had been. But his blue eyes told her the most. They seemed more nervous than menacing, as if he feared something or ... *someone*. Her panic began to subside, though she remained cautious.

Tentatively, he dropped his hands until he seemed sure she would not run.

Jamie crossed her arms. "What do you want?" she said with more bravado than she felt.

"*Per favore*," he said with more urgency. After glancing about, he withdrew a folded scrap of thin paper from his jacket pocket, and pressed it into her hand. "Please read this, Signorina Holbrooke."

Jamie narrowed her eyes. "I don't remember—"

"I have no time to explain. You must read it when you return to the Villa."

"And how do you know where I'm staying?"

"*Non importa*," he said. "The note—that is what is important."

Her skeptical eyes perused him. She didn't like his familiarity. Nor did she understand the likeness. She crossed her arms.

"You are an art curator for the *Pinacoteca di Brera*, no? That is why you are here, no—to attend the *Regalia di Belle Arti*?"

"Yes, but—"

"You will know."

"I—"

"*Per favore*, Signorina." He pleaded. "You have not seen me. *Buonanotte*. Goodnight." He tipped his hat, and then sprinted off in the direction of the ferry dock, his footfalls echoing his retreat.

Jamie gawked, her gaze following after him until his form disappeared around a bend of the Passerella into the night. What had just happened?

She stared down. The note! She drew a sharp breath. Whatever it was, she would not linger another moment to find out. She shoved the folded paper into her shoulder bag, and then dashed down the Passerella toward the center of Varenna and the safety of her hotel.

Zamir wandered the dimly lit cobbled streets of Varenna's central district, chewing on a toothpick and waiting for instructions from the boss. Two youths passed him, the odor of their cigarette smoke trailing them and making him long for a drag. Once a heavy smoker, he had given the habit up long ago for health reasons, but he still yearned for the taste of his beloved Turkish tobacco.

He mused. Health reasons? That was a laugh. His current occupation would probably kill him before the tar and nicotine would.

Zamir's vocation was the administration of death. Success often depended upon luck—luck that would most likely eventually run out. He still had no idea when he would be called upon to make his mark—only that it would happen at a prestigious art exhibition at the Villa Cipressi. Thus far he'd enjoyed a delicious pork chop at a quaint little restaurant on the waterfront and spent a few euros on a toy for his nephew.

Still, the longer he lingered, the more the familiar sadness grew in his heart. Varenna held the kind of charm and serenity he longed for—a place to bring his family and settle, maybe buy a boat and fish the lake for a living.

He inhaled deeply and pushed away the comforting thoughts. It was all a pipe dream anyway. His sister Liliana was married to the *krye*, his boss. There would be no way out for either of them as long as the Albanian mobster was in control of their lives. He had been since the years following the Kosovo war.

Zamir was not a born killer. He had been trained as a marksman during the Kosovo war during the late 1990s and had killed many Serbians. His hate for them ran deep—for their murderous acts against thousands of his ethnic brethren—Albanians—and God-only-knew how many rapes and heinous acts of violence against their women and children. *They* deserved to be crushed for their crimes against his people.

He snarled. The *krye* had used Zamir's rage as a weapon against him in the years after the war to enlist him in a criminal war of a

different kind—a war fought in dark alleys and amid civilians. He'd needed the money and a receptacle into which he could pelt his anger. But once he had agreed to do one job, he discovered he'd been ensnared in that lifestyle of sorrow and death forever.

Zamir's cell phone vibrated in his shirt pocket. Mechanically he pulled it out and brought it to his ear. "Hello."

He listened to the familiar voice on the other end of the line. "It is time, Zamir. Tomorrow morning at the Villa Cipressi our target will have breakfast with his colleagues. You should have an opportunity then."

Zamir gnawed on his toothpick, plucked it from his mouth with his free hand and tossed the sliver of wood into the gutter at his feet. "There will be witnesses. You want to make a public spectacle?"

"It will be a message to our enemies. Toy with us, and you pay the consequences."

"As you wish."

"There will be a car waiting for you at the end of the block down from the Villa. Do not disappoint us."

"That is all?"

"I have one more thing I would like for you to do before tomorrow morning," said the krye. "He has a man already in Varena who has valuable information we need. I want you to find him. He is young—mid-twenties. Blue eyes, blondish hair. Often wears a gray cap. You will know him by the birthmark on his forearm—looks like a small bird.

"Rough him up a bit. Make sure he understands that he may preserve his life as long as he helps us procure our objective. If he refuses, you know what to do."

"What about Marianni, the art professor? I understand he is also in town."

"He is not our concern for the moment. Just do as you are told."

The phone went dead.

Zamir's frown deepened. Yes, Zamir knew what to do. He had done it many times before. But the task never failed to sicken him.

So many killings, he thought. Guilt weighed heavy on him like an iron barbell pinning him to the bench.

At ten-fifteen, Zamir found his mark's flunky at the pizzeria on the Piazza San Giorgio across from the church. He observed him a while and made sure he was the right man. A pack of Marlboros and a cap sat on the table next to the man's plate of food. Then he saw the birthmark. The boss wasn't kidding. It looked like a small bird on his forearm.

Zamir meandered about the plaza outside the restaurant for more than forty minutes, striving hard not to be conspicuous. There was, typical in the village, considerable foot traffic even at this hour. He made it look as if he drifted with the tide of humanity forward and back before the building.

Before the meal was finished, Zamir couldn't believe the man ordered a second cappuccino. What sort of Italian would order a second coffee after dinner? Even Albanians knew a second cappuccino defied the accepted norm. He must be a man of lower social order.

Several minutes later, Zamir had his chance. He watched the man leave the pizzeria and scurry down an alley toward the Passerella. He trailed the man at a short distance on the lakeshore walk, frustrated by the numerous people out for a stroll at this time of the evening. Their presence hindered his objective, and the human camouflage he'd exploited in his reconnoiter of the pizzeria became an annoyance.

When twenty yards remained between his quarry and the dock, the ferry horn shattered the silent serenity of the wharf. Now it was a race for the clock as the boat was set to leave. The man broke into a mad and ultimately fruitless dash for the ferry.

Zamir had been in these situations before. He allowed his body to stretch full bore forward to reach the flunky. The flunky could not scramble fast enough to make the ship. Zamir slowed his pace to a walk as he watched the young man halt and bend with hands on his thighs, while he attempted to catch his breath. Zamir smirked as he approached him. "Too bad for you, my friend," he

said in a companionable tone. “It appears we have both missed the boat.”

He jammed his cloaked HK automatic into the flunky’s side and hissed a command into his ear. “You will accompany me. Attempt to run, and there will be a very large hole where your stomach used to be.”

He steered the man past several people and turned left away from the hotel and restaurant next to the dock. They strode a distance down a dark alley and stopped. Zamir jostled the man around to face him. “My *kye*--the boss is a very unhappy man.”

The young man trembled. His eyes widened with terror.

“He paid a lot of money for a piece of artwork that was promised to him, but your boss has chosen to betray his trust. Trust, my friend, is a fragile and valuable thing—costly when broken. He will pay for that with his life. However, the *kye* has decided that you can be useful to him, so he has, in his great benevolence, decided to offer you a chance to save yourself from that very same fate.”

“S-save myself? I-I don’t understand.”

“It is quite simple. Since your employment will soon be—what shall we say?—terminated, you will now shift allegiance and work for us.”

“W-work for you?”

“Consider it a promotion—an opportunity to work for the winning side. Follow instructions completely, ask no questions, and nothing will happen to you. Do not follow instructions or betray us in any way and, well ... Trust, as I said, is a fragile thing, my friend. *Capire?* Do you understand?”

The man nodded, his eyes wide with fear.

“Good. I will be contacting you in the morning with more instructions. And just so that you understand very well, I leave you with one more message.” Zamir made a sudden movement toward the man and pistol-whipped his cheek.

The flunky stumbled backward and crumpled alongside a dumpster. He knelt there for a moment, gingerly rubbed the back of his hand against his cheek, and drew it away, now bloodied.

“Have I made myself clear?” Zamir directed his gaze into the man’s eyes.

“Very.” The flunky continued to kneel amid the refuse alongside the dumpster and touched his cheek carefully with his fingertips.

“You will be hearing from us.” Zamir straightened his jacket and collar and strode away toward the ferry dock. He had preparations to make for the morning.

CHAPTER 2

Jamie gasped for breath at the entrance to the Villa Cipressi. She jiggled her key in the lock of the front door until she heard it unlatch and pushed open the heavy wood door into the darkened corridor.

Her anxiety escalated.

He'd known her hotel. What had possessed her to walk along the Passerella alone? At night, no less?

She made for the dimly lit lobby through a set of glass doors. No one attended the reception desk, though the door into the administration office adjacent to the desk stood ajar and light illumined the doorway. Jamie shot across the reception area to the ornate marble stairway and scrambled up. Not until she reached her third-floor room did she slow her pace. Once inside, she leaned against the door, breathing heavily, to shut out the world.

Once her breathing came back to normal, she felt a sardonic laugh rise in her throat. She'd come to Italy to escape her nightmares—to leave Cleveland and start a new life without fear of her past haunting her. Now an apparition had appeared, it seemed, in living flesh. Tumultuous emotions churned at the pit of her stomach. She *never* wanted to relive that part of her life again. Still, she would give anything to have Jason back with her in this moment.

She closed her eyes and blew out a long quivering breath, allowing the built-up tension to release. She inhaled slowly. At once, her eyes popped open. The note!

She shrugged her shoulder bag around and removed the folded scrap of paper. What was so important that this man had felt he must get her attention in such a clandestine manner?

She snapped on the bedside lamp, and then sat on the double twin bed to read the note. She took great care not to rip the thin paper and smoothed the creases until it laid flat on her lap.

She stared. The note was written in English—not in Italian as she had expected—the handwriting small but legible. She read the text. Then confused, she spoke it aloud.

*“Here is a noble lesson, crying out from the darkest grave:
Return to the green fertile valleys what piteously the artist gave.
Light shining out of the darkness,’ it said, for all who would receive.
But little did the people know what did the artist leave.”*

Fertile valleys? Darkest grave? Light shining out of darkness? An artist? What artist? This wasn't a coherent note. It was a riddle!

She read the riddle again. What could have possibly made him think she'd understand it let alone know what to do with it? Jamie slapped the note onto the nightstand and stood with her hands on her hips and fumed.

She turned around. Her eyes lit on her laptop computer sitting on the dresser. She grabbed it, then sat on the edge of her bed. She opened it, let it start up, and then clicked on Google to search the words.

She typed in “fertile valleys.” Pages of valleys popped up on the screen—The valleys of Tasmania, the Willamette Valley in the United States, valleys in Asia, Ireland, France and educational documents about fertile valleys that formed as a result of the receding ice age. None of these articles helped her come any closer to understanding the riddle.

Next she typed in “Light shining out of darkness.” A number of religious poems popped up—one in particular by William Cowper titled *Light Shining Out of Darkness* and various analyses of the poem. Another poem by John Keats came up, as did photographs and physical images of light shining out of darkness. She also found

numerous biblical references to the phrase as well as sermons and hymns. There were too many references—too many rabbit trails—to help her gain a clearer picture of what the riddle could mean.

She also typed in “darkest grave,” which only led her to various gothic music sites and gruesome pictures of graves. This couldn’t be it. She tried searching the phrases together, but still no answers were forthcoming. She nearly slammed the computer shut in frustration, but thought better of it. She closed it and carefully put the machine back on the dresser.

She crossed the room, opened the French doors and stepped onto a narrow balcony. A gentle breeze brought up the fishy smells of the lake, seasoned with the pungent odor of garlic ascending from the restaurant below. She leaned on the black wrought-iron rail. The village lights across the lake shimmered as they had earlier, but now they represented a world electrified by the events that had trespassed into her life. She shivered.

The most prudent course would be to call the police—tell them about the encounter and give *them* the note to dissect. Yet what was it that kept her from contacting them?

Jamie puffed out her cheeks and exhaled a steady breath. In spite of her fear of the man and his intentions, his likeness to Jason compelled her to find out more about him. In reality, the riddle intrigued her, but she needed more information.

Jamie returned inside, taking care to lock the balcony door. Then she shut off the light and collapsed onto the bed. The pillow engulfed her head, the waves of her long dark hair spreading out like a fan about her. She stared at the ceiling fixture in the dim light. She closed her eyes, feeling the wave of exhaustion washing over her.

“Because you dare to hope you will find me.”

“Jason?” She sat up on her elbows and looked around the room half expecting... expecting what? She was alone. She was speaking to a figment of her imagination.

Sadness settled in her chest, and she fell back onto the bed. Jason was dead. She had watched him die. She spoke into the darkened room. “But why does he look so much like you?”

“Do you really think you’re up to the challenge? Are you ready to accept the truth?”

She bolted up. “Who’s here?” She waited, every hair on her body stood at full attention.

Still the silence met her with a deafening poignancy.

Dear God! The nightmares—the voices! This can’t be happening to me again.

“Go away,” she said into the empty room. She covered her temples with the palms of her hands. “You don’t exist. You’re just a figment of my imagination.”

“Really?” A face appeared before her—a rugged face with eyes loving, beckoning. “What are you afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid.”

“Have you really become so apathetic about life that you would let a failed Google search keep you from finding the answers to a riddle? Don’t you remember how relentless we were at solving a mystery?”

Jason was right. He would have tackled the riddle—deciphered it at all costs. And he would have persuaded her to help him solve it—whatever it took—because she could never resist his winsome smile. They had always worked as a team.

“Why have you come back?” she said barely above a whisper. She felt tears surfacing.

“I’ve always been here with you, close to your heart. Don’t you know that?”

“No, it’s this guy—he looks like you. He’s brought back all the memories.” A stream of tears fell from her face. “Is it really you, Jason?”

“I taught you everything I know. If you need me, I’ll be right here to coach you along,” he said, backing up until his face and voice faded away.

“No, please don’t go. I-I didn’t mean for you to go!” she cried out.

At once, her eyes popped open. She sat bolt upright, her heart pounded. She searched the room. All was as it should be, but ... She touched her tear-moistened cheeks.

Donna Wichelman

“No. It couldn’t be.” She spoke into the darkness. Still, her heart said differently. The specter had been real. Jason *had* been here.

She laid down once again, the tears streaming down her cheek and onto the pillow. What was she going to do next?

CHAPTER 3

Jamie startled awake to the alarm buzzer, blaring like the ferry horn she had heard on her walk yesterday. She hit the snooze button and fell back onto the pillow with her eyes closed. A moment later, her eyes popped open and she fixated on the events of the night before—her assailant, Jason, the riddle.

Was it all just one big nightmare? Her eyes found the riddle on the table next to the bed. No, she had been accosted by someone who looked like Jason. That much was real. Certainly his likeness to Jason had prompted her dreams, she thought.

She allowed the words and phrases of the riddle to tumble around inside her mind. Nothing made sense. *Okay, Jason, if I'm going to figure this thing out, you have to help me—lead me to discover some clues in the riddle.*

She stopped cold. There it was again—the awkward declaration that somehow Jason had spoken from the grave. Why did she go on as if he were alive? Again, she thought of her assailant. She *needed* to find him.

The buzzer sounded a second time. This time she rose, aware that she had less than an hour to meet her employer, Giovanni Gadolfo, and her colleague, Paolo Spretti, for breakfast.

She cast the blankets aside and padded to the French doors where she opened them onto the balcony. The morning mist above the lake had begun to burn away, giving depth to the soaring height of the Alpine peaks surrounding the lakeside villages. She drew an astounded breath. What a spectacular view! The family who had

built the fifteenth-century Villa Cipressi where it sat on a rocky promontory over Lake Como must have felt like royalty. She reveled in the terraced gardens below with their Italian columnar cypresses and eucalyptus trees, bold and leafy, reaching up for the sky, and delighted in the colorful array of orchids, begonias, wisteria, and violets tripping through the greenery.

Regretfully, she turned back to her cozy space to prepare for the morning.

A half-hour later, she stood before the mirror in a black linen suit and silk fuchsia blouse and put the last finishing touches on her hair. When she turned, her eyes lit on the riddle still sitting on her nightstand. She could not ignore it any longer.

She walked to the nightstand, picked up the fragile paper, refolded the crinkled page, and tucked it into her jacket pocket to retrieve later. Then she headed out the door for the white marble staircase to the lobby of the Villa Cipressi.

Downstairs, Jamie scoped out her surroundings while she waited for her two colleagues. In the daylight, the lobby appeared much less sinister than it had the night before.

She was just about to give up on Giovanni and Paolo when a voice drew her attention to the top of the staircase. "Ciao, Jamie." She watched Paolo sweep down the stairs. He dripped with haughty self-importance as he stood before her and then bent to kiss the back of her hand. His lips lingered just a little too long, and she felt like wiping her hand when they finally left their mark. He lifted his head of blond cropped hair and gazed longingly into her eyes. "Setting up yesterday bored me to tears. At least this morning I may look upon you with joy in my heart." He straightened.

She choked off a laugh and withdrew her hand. "Nice to see you, too, Paolo."

"Jamie." Paolo's saucy eyes implored her. "What fireworks we could ignite!"

"I always thought fireworks were best enjoyed at the fairgrounds."

Paolo came up close behind her, his voice low and seductive at her ear. "Ah, but you have never experienced the fireworks

displayed on the eve of *Redentore* in Venice. They say lovers' emotions reach their most intense as the night is illuminated by the fire."

Jamie inwardly recoiled. She'd heard of Paolo's other exploits and had no interest in pursuing fireworks with him. No way would Paolo ever fill the empty places in her heart. Those could only be filled by a man of depth and integrity. "Please, Paolo," she said. "I thought I made it clear. We are colleagues and friends. That's all." She put some distance between them and searched the room. "I wonder where Giovanni is?"

She thought Paolo looked as if he might protest, but as if in answer to her question, she saw Giovanni breeze in from a side entrance with a jacket over his arm.

"It is a most glorious morning," Giovanni said, his face glowing and the perspiration beading up at his receding hairline. "You must find an opportunity to enjoy it."

"It looks like you have already." Jamie smiled, feeling relieved.

"We'll have to thank the organizers of the Regalia for their brilliant choice of venue." Giovanni shrugged on his suit coat and patted the inside breast pocket and dug in his pants pockets. He seemed to be searching for something.

"Can we help you find something, Giovanni?"

Paolo's wry tone was not lost on Jamie. Perhaps Paolo still held a grudge for losing out to Giovanni for his position at the Brera. She wondered if he would ever forgive the board.

"No, no. All is well." He looked up and grinned as his hand found what he had been looking for. "But now, I am quite excited for you to meet someone very special—someone you had hoped to meet months ago."

Jamie raised her eyebrows.

"Alessandro Marianni is here," he announced.

"Here? In Varenna?" Excitement rose in Jamie's voice. Giovanni knew from her early days at the Brera that she had come to Italy hoping to work with Dr. Marianni—a desire she'd had since she'd heard him lecture at the Cleveland Institute of Art. His enthusiasm

for Renaissance art had influenced her focus in art history. “Why didn’t you tell us he would be coming to the exhibition?”

“Yes, Giovanni, why *didn’t* you tell us?” Paolo’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

Jamie knitted her brows. Paolo was becoming more abrasive by the moment.

“The matter was not altogether decided until a day ago when Alessandro’s plans changed,” Giovanni said.

“I thought he was working with Albanian refugees. A mission, I understand. He was not due back for months.” Paolo’s tone held an icy edge.

“What do you have against Dr. Marianni?” Jamie asked.

Paolo shrugged. “Who, me? Nothing. He is a man of great esteem. Who could have anything against such a revered man?”

Jamie bristled. His voice dripped with nothing less than sweet acidity.

“Well, yes, of course, he has been on—how do you say?—Sabbatical—from his position at the *Accademia di Belle Arti*. But, he has business here in Italy, and the *Accademia* asked him to make room in his schedule.”

“You mean *you* asked him to make room,” Paolo said. “I’ve never understood the mutual admiration society.”

Jamie eyed Paolo with contempt. “I don’t know what your problem is, and frankly I don’t care. *I* am excited he’s here and anxious to meet him.”

“As he is to meet you, my dear,” Giovanni said. “Come. We should not keep him waiting.” He started forward.

“Yes, let’s all give homage to the illustrious Alessandro Marianni,” Paolo said. He remained rooted in his place.

Jamie shimmied past Paolo. She would not let him pour vinegar on her spirit. “Right behind you.” She followed Giovanni across the coral and white inset tiles to the red carpet of gold fleur-de-lis that led to the dining hall.

* * * * *

Zamir pretended to read a brochure of the Villa Cipressi as he waited for his target and two companions to leave the lobby. They stood close enough for him to become mildly aware that some matter of conflict had risen between them, but he really didn't care. He had a job to do. As soon as the group left for the hotel's dining hall, he began a covert examination of the lobby and staircase.

Cognizant of his masquerade as a visitor to the Villa, Zamir aped the tourists' survey of the Romanesque features of the lobby. He wandered along the edge of the crowd, ran his fingers in mock appreciation along one of the ornate marble columns, and made his way to the foot of the stairs that wound upward. One set framed the staircase that wound up to the third floor. He took the white marble stairs two at a time to the second floor and then the third, holding onto the ornamented wrought-iron railing. Arched niches surrounded the walls and windows at the top of the staircase at each floor.

At the third floor, Zamir paused and glanced about to ensure he was alone. Along the balustrade, furniture and plants provided a comfortable setting to sit and relax, and offered a convenient shelter from the eyes of individuals who might climb the stairs. Looking over the railing, he had a direct line to the staircase below down to just beyond the second floor landing. On the right side of a large leather sofa, two broad-leaf plants surrounded a floor lamp.

Satisfied that no one observed his actions, he squatted in front of the leaves, parted them, and then bent his head and positioned his hands as if he observed through a gun scope. He pictured his target ascending the stairs, and then...*click*.

The assassin played the scenario through his mind. Two quick shots: the first would be fatal—the one that mattered—the one to the back of his victim's head. The second would be directed to a shoulder, its intent to spin the victim through the throes of death and momentarily confuse witnesses regarding the source of the shot. Yes, if he set up the situation right, he could get a clean shot and yet look inconspicuous enough to be part of the setting.

He paused, a vacant look passing over his face. Eons ago, enacting this succession of events would have troubled him. But

the Zamir who might have felt qualms over these preparations had died long ago. Now the matter was strictly one of business—a job to do.

Zamir did not hate his target. He had nothing against the one he'd been instructed to kill. Why should his skill at killing be used on innocents? Still, his boss, the kyre, had been very explicit. “Do not expect to see your sister again if you miss.”

He knew words for such a man—vile words he had spoken many times against the men he hated. Zamir wanted to turn them upon the repugnant monster who threatened his sister. But instead, he stood and prepared for what he was about to do next, mapping out his escape route down the stairs and out the door of the Villa Cipressi.

CHAPTER 4

When they reached the dining hall, Jamie searched for Dr. Marianni among the tables already abuzz with guests while Paolo made his way to the food table. She leaned toward Paolo, hoping to prod some civility out of him while she placed food on her plate. “You’ve made it abundantly clear how you feel. Couldn’t you *try* to be amiable for Giovanni’s sake?”

Paolo made a half-twist in her direction. “I know you have a high opinion of Giovanni, and for that I respect you. But Alessandro Marianni? It’s as much up to him as it is to me.”

“There he is.” Giovanni pointed toward a round table near the center of the room.” With a plate of food in hand, Jamie followed her employer past a granite fireplace to Alessandro’s table.

Alessandro wiped his mouth with a napkin before rising to greet them.

Jamie felt her pulse race as she watched the professor rise smoothly to his feet, his body lithe and nimble. He stood a head above her five-foot-seven-inches, dark hair, eyes blue. He reached out. “An absolute pleasure, Signorina Holbrooke.”

Jamie set her plate down and returned the handshake. She wished she could control the tremor in her own hand as she shook his. And those brilliant blue eyes! She averted hers, suddenly aware of her own brazen stare.

“Please join me.” Alessandro motioned toward the chairs.

Jamie sat next to Alessandro, still feeling uncontrollable jitters racking her body. What was wrong with her? It wasn’t as if she

hadn't been exposed to the many dignitaries and celebrities among her parents' friends and acquaintances over the years—world-renowned musicians, colleagues of her mother as first violinist for the Cleveland Orchestra—and government officials, investing time and money into her father's research as an astrophysics specialist at Case Western Reserve University. Wasn't Alessandro Marianni just another of the same class of people?

Giovanni sat next to Jamie, leaving the only open spot across from her. Paolo had no choice but to sit next to Alessandro. A sneer crossed his face as he sat. "Alessandro."

"Paolo." Jamie heard Dr. Marianni return the somber greeting as he watched the waiter pour coffee into the cups around the table.

Paolo dumped a good amount of cream into his coffee before directing caustic eyes at Alessandro. "The *Accademia* must have paid you handsomely to distract you from your charity work." He put the cup to his lips.

Alessandro gave a brief nod of thanks to the waiter, and then met Paolo's gaze. "The *Accademia* pays me well enough."

"As I've already pointed out," Giovanni said, "Alessandro is here, because I asked him to come, and he graciously agreed."

"I see. You had no one else you could call on?" Paolo reclined back in his chair and played with a packet of sugar.

"Paolo!" Jamie glared him nonplussed.

"*Non ha importanza.*" Alessandro seemed unfazed. "Paolo and I go back a long way."

Paolo grinned. "Oh, we get along well enough, if we stay out of the other's way."

"You see, Miss Holbrooke. No love lost between us." Alessandro set candid eyes on Paolo once more. "And to answer your question, no one is indispensable."

The two men stared each other down; hostility settled on the air like hoarfrost on a frigid winter morning. Alessandro broke the hold first. He turned toward Jamie. "Giovanni tells me you are from America, yet your features are Italian and you speak excellent Italian."

“Thank you.” A brief smile crossed her lips. “I was born and raised in Cleveland, but my maternal grandparents are from Italy. They own a restaurant in Little Italy on Murray Hill near the Cleveland Institute of Art.”

“Ah, yes. I believe I had dinner somewhere on Murray Hill several years ago. Perhaps it was your grandparents’ establishment.”

“The Italian is due to my grandmother. While I was growing up, she insisted I learn as much Italian as she could fit into my young life and quizzed me quite often.”

“*Ab. È una donna saggia,*” he said, complementing her grandmother’s wisdom.

“*Si, è,*” Jamie replied of her grandmother. She felt a wistfulness surface. “My *Nonni* Silvia is very wise in many respects.”

“But you seem almost sad as you speak of your family. You miss them, yes?” His eyes seemed to probe her soul.

Jamie wanted to run. He could not know what lay behind her doleful yearnings. Instead, she met his gaze. “Isn’t homesickness normal when you’re away from home, Dr. Marianni?”

“Alessandro, please,” he said, smiling into her eyes.

A small silence followed.

“You might be surprised to learn that Jamie became interested in the Brera after you lectured in Cleveland several years ago,” Giovanni said.

He raised an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“My class sat in on your lecture about Renaissance art. I ... fell in love with the period.”

“You see how you’ve influenced our staff at the Brera once again, Alessandro,” Giovanni said. “I’ve been extremely pleased with her work.”

“Ah, I see.” His eyes examined her.

Jamie felt the heat rise under his scrutiny. Could he guess what lay underneath her easy façade? She felt disquieted by the idea that someone was trying to open the cover and read the tale of her life.

But perhaps it's time, Sis. You've been hiding behind the pages far too long.

Jamie drew in a sharp breath. She shivered.

“Are you feeling all right?” Alessandro asked.

Jamie jumped. He must have noticed her reaction to the sudden intrusion on her thoughts. “Yes, yes of course.” She needed to move the conversation away from herself. “You also have an excellent command of English. I thought so even in Cleveland.” She sipped her coffee.

He seemed puzzled by the change of direction of the conversation but accepted it, and commented. “You are surprised.”

“I—” From the corner of her eye, she saw Paolo shift his position away from them and heard what sounded like his tongue sucking air across his teeth.

Alessandro smiled whimsically. “We were bilingual in my home. My mother is English.”

“English?”

“It is a long story. My mother’s maiden name is Drake. She is the granddaughter of English Reformers who came to Italy in the 1800s and settled in the Waldensian valleys.”

“Waldensian?” She said the word as if she was trying it out on her tongue.

“Few people know much about us, though the Waldensians played a great role in Europe’s history throughout the Middle Ages and into the Reformation.”

“I’m still somewhat confused.”

“Of course you are.” Paolo snapped before Alessandro could answer. “Alessandro takes great joy in trifling with the intellect of others.”

An uncomfortable silence descended around the table once again. Jamie saw Alessandro’s eyes turn icy, the cold hard stare of a man who cared as little for Paolo as Paolo cared for him.

Alessandro grinned. “Paolo would have you think I am cold and unfeeling. Some of my past students who did not fare well might agree with him. But I assure you that I take many subjects quite seriously—one of those being the religious heritage of my family.”

“Then the Waldensians are a religious group?”

Alessandro turned toward Jamie, placing one elbow on the table. “Yes, some say we were the first reformers—even before Luther or Calvin defied the Roman Church.”

“Dissidents.” Paolo smirked. “Heretics, according to the Church of Rome.”

“Yes, we disagreed with many of the Church of Rome’s practices. But my ancestors did not want a fight with the Church. They only wanted to worship in peace left to themselves in their home valleys.”

“An interesting concept, wouldn’t you say, Alessandro?” Paolo said suggestively. “A lesson on war and peace from the annals of history.”

“Perhaps there would have been much less bloodshed and innocent people would have been spared their lives,” Alessandro equivocated with Paolo before turning back to Jamie. “Nevertheless, we survived the persecution. And though we were exiled to Switzerland, we fought to return home to our valleys over the rugged mountains.”

Jamie leaned in. “It must have been a difficult journey.”

“Indeed, and while our enemies sought us out and tried to kill us, we did not falter. Soon all Europe began to hear of our *Glorious Return*, as it became known. Our emblem stood as our symbol of light shining in the darkness, leading the way to God.”

Jamie’s jaw dropped. What had Alessandro just said? Light shining in the darkness? Valleys? These were the same words used in the riddle! Her mind reeled.

“Jamie?” Giovanni wrinkled his brow.

CHAPTER 5

“You look pale, *cara mia*. Are you sure you’re not feeling unwell?”

Jamie jolted back to the present, hearing Giovanni’s concerned voice next to her. She met Alessandro’s eyes. “I’m sorry. It’s just ... *what* did you just say?”

Alessandro furrowed his brow. “You mean about my ancestors?”

“Yes. Your ancestral history sounds interesting.” She pulled the note from her pocket and held it up. “In fact, I would like to hear more. I came across—was given, actually—this note. A riddle, really.”

“A riddle?” Alessandro placed his cup on the saucer.

“Yes. It contains the same phrase you just used.” She unfolded the paper. “I didn’t know what to make of it; now I think you may be able to tell me what it means.” She took a deep breath and read slowly.

*“Here is a noble lesson, crying out from the darkest grave:
Return to the green fertile valleys what piteously the artist gave.
Light shining out of the darkness,’ it said...”*

“Where did you get that?” Paolo sat forward and reached out to take the scrap of paper, but Alessandro’s hand was closer.

“May I?” Alessandro said.

She handed Alessandro the paper, but noted how Paolo had snapped his hand away as if he'd been burnt. "I was going to tell Giovanni about this earlier, but I didn't have the chance."

"How did you come across it?" Giovanni asked.

She felt her cheeks flush as they all stared at her. "I took a walk along the Passerella last night, and this man—"

"You did what?" Giovanni said.

"Please, Giovanni. I can take care of myself. It's just—"

"All the same," Alessandro said with constraint. "You should not put yourself at risk. Not all my countrymen have good intentions."

"He scared me at first, but he didn't hurt me. He just seemed to think it important for me to have this ... this ... riddle."

"Did you recognize him?" Paolo asked.

Jamie stared at her colleague. His voice had seemed obscure, but perhaps no more fuzzy than her own emotional state or knowing how she should respond. "I'm not sure. He was young—scruffy, wore a cap. He seemed more scared of someone or something than dangerous. I didn't fear him at all after a while."

At once, Paolo grew even more agitated than he had been before and, it seemed to Jamie, at least more pallid. "I am glad you were not harmed, Jamie, but—" He scraped back his chair and rose. "Please excuse me. I have some things to attend to." He picked up his cup and drank the dregs of his coffee. After clanking the cup down on his saucer, he marched off toward the exit and the hallway beyond.

Jamie stared after him, her mouth agape at his display.

"I don't know what to say, Alessandro." Giovanni sputtered. "I have never seen Paolo so irritable as he has been today."

"No worries. Paolo's always struck me as a bit mercurial," Alessandro said.

"I think it's more than that," Jamie said, her face pensive. "I can't shake the feeling that something else has disturbed him. Originally I thought it was just your presence that caused his hostility, but—"

“Then let him be,” Alessandro said. “We have more important things—”

“No. I saw his face when I brought out the riddle. He was definitely upset.” She rose. “I want to talk to him.”

* * * * *

No one had questioned Zamir’s presence. In the frenzy of the expansive kitchens, his presence as an additional server had been accepted without question. A uniform of the Villa Cipressi house staff had been thrust upon him with an inducement to dress hurriedly and assist with tending the guests.

He looked like he belonged and a man no one would remember—just a uniformed waiter bedecked in a white linen jacket over black trousers and shoes. *Like a specter among the living. Hidden in plain sight.*

After a perfunctory circuit of the lobby and breakfast room bearing a tray of croissants for the breakfast buffet, he had exited via the staircase in the lobby, a phantom presence as easily ignored as the mildest zephyr.

Calmly he ascended to the mezzanine, and then crouched behind the ornamental plant to retrieve the HK tactical .45 and silencer he had hidden earlier. In seconds he threaded the silencer onto the gun. Then he waited.

It would not be difficult to keep post on the mezzanine while he pretended to attend to electrical maintenance on the outlets behind the plants. Another waiter, had he ascended to the third floor, might have questioned his activities, but to any casual passerby Zamir would appear as a hotel employee engaged in some minor task. In the meantime, the plants provided excellent cover to hide the gun and get a clean shot.

Sweat glistened on his brow. He really did not want to kill the target. And yet . . .

Liliana’s beautiful face swam before his eyes—his lovely sister, sweet and innocent . . . until she experienced the cruelty of the man she had married. The only time she remained relatively safe from

him was when the man left his home country, though even that did not stop him. His soldiers did his dirty work for him in defense of their own safety—following her every move to ensure her complicity with all his demands upon her life.

Rage gathered as he recalled her first clandestine visit to him with bruises on her arms and face—beaten for going to the market at the wrong time of day and without her *hijab*. Loathing for the man accumulated with each detestable beating thereafter. But it made no difference. He and Liliana remained within the man's evil clutches; Liliana by marriage and Zamir through fear for her safety.

Hatred assaulted Zamir's senses. He no longer saw his target, only the face of the man he hated even more than the many Serbians he had killed during the Kosovo war.

He fingered the trigger and took aim.

* * * * *

Jamie caught up with Paolo on the stairway a couple of steps below the second landing. "Paolo, wait!"

He spun around, staring at her with annoyance. "What is it, Jamie?"

His impertinence caught her off guard, but she would not back down. She moved past him up the steps to stand so their eyes were level. "Are you all right?"

"Can a man not attend to his *toilette*?" His dry smile mocked her.

She raised an eyebrow. His attitude toward her had certainly changed from when she had first seen him that morning. "Yes, of course ... if that's all it is."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You've been agitated ever since you knew Alessandro was here. And then I brought out the riddle and—"

"And I think you are hallucinating." Paolo smirked.

"No, Paolo. I could see you were upset. I—"

He rose up a step. "I like you, Jamie. You're beautiful and charming and clever as well. So I will give you some advice: never get involved with things that don't concern you, and never think

you understand the content of a man's thoughts." He ascended several more steps.

She followed him and caught his arm. "I'm only trying to help. If you would only—"

He stared at her hand, and then put it away from him. "Stay out of it, Jamie." She heard the rebuke in his tone. "I will say it again. This is not your concern." He turned.

* * * * *

Zamir's opportunity came soon enough.

His aim was directed at Paolo Spretti, but he held his fire when the woman positioned herself near him on the staircase and placed a hand on the target's arm. He tensed; every moment of delay was a risk. He would give the woman a moment's respite to retreat in the direction from which she'd come, but a moment was all he could dare pause.

After a brief confrontation, Spretti shook free from the woman's restraining hand and turned to resume his climb up the staircase.

Zamir squeezed the trigger twice in rapid succession.

* * * * *

Jamie heard a pair of harsh coughing sounds from above and felt the swift puff of air almost simultaneously as she watched Paolo's head snap forward and his body spin to the right. Then he crumpled into a somersaulting roll past her and down the few stairs to the tile floor below.

Jamie felt a momentary paralysis—an endless instant wherein her mind strove ineffectually to fit the horrific into a mental framework that she could understand. Then—

"Paolo!" She screamed and scurried down to where he had come to rest. He laid face down, one knee bent. Blood ran out from underneath him. The concierge dashed to where Paolo lay as people gathered around. A murmur of excitement coursed through the hotel.

Jamie stood rooted, gawking at the blood pooling beside her shoe. Her body trembled, but she was too stupefied to move.

She did not know Giovanni and Alessandro had come alongside her until she heard Alessandro's anxious voice. "Jamie ... Jamie, come, please. You can't do anything."

She gazed up, then, into Alessandro's distressed eyes. She saw the plea within them, and then nodded.

He took hold of her arm and guided her through the crowd and out the doors that led to a terrace and a chair. "You need to sit."

Numbly she sat, her emotions yet to surface. Then at once she convulsed. Uncontrolled waves of sobs reared up from the depth of her soul. They racked her body and seized her mind. When, at last she was spent, the storm quieted, and she fell limp against Alessandro's chest.

* * * * *

The silencer and the secondary shot intended to spin his mark's body had ensured nobody knew immediately from where the bullet had come. Zamir restored the weapon to its hiding place among the potted plants, stood, and walked calmly down the hallway and away from the head of the stairs.

The police would find the automatic, but its discovery would be meaningless. Like all the tools of Zamir's trade, the HK was untraceable, stripped of its serial number and procured through that curious network of illegal weapons to be found in every city. Try as they might, it would be impossible to connect the gun with him, or with anyone else, for that matter.

Zamir had hit his target. Jamie screamed. The art curator lay at the bottom of the stairs face down.

Along the wall to his left Zamir spied the cover of the chute that led to the incinerator. Casually he stripped off his gloves, dropped them into the receptacle, and continued to the plain door at the end of the hallway that led to the employee stairs.

Perhaps ten seconds had passed since the twin shots. Behind him Zamir could hear the growing tumult that echoed from below,

but this became indistinct as he passed through the door and closed it behind him.

He brushed his hair back, descended the stairs leisurely, and emerged one floor below. Ahead of him he could see the crowd gathered at the foot of the stairs. He parroted the efforts of those gathered to catch a glimpse of what had happened.

“I don’t know,” he overheard a man say. “I think someone fell down that flight of stairs.”

After a moment, certain that all attention had been placed elsewhere, he paced to the front of the lobby and down the hallway to the front door of the hotel. Outside, he shrugged free of the waiters’ jacket, draped it over his shoulder and slowed his steps.

He heard the sirens before he saw the police cars race to the front of the hotel.

Behind him, he heard the scramble of footsteps into the Villa Cipressi and the cacophony of voices down the inside hallway.

Still, he did not turn around. He continued striding toward the car that would whisk him from the scene. Liliana would live to see another day, and for this he was glad.

And then came the moment of remorse

CHAPTER 6

Jamie stared at the wall behind Investigator Visco, who had taken temporary possession of the executive office of the Villa Cipressi to investigate Paolo's murder. From somewhere beyond her current state of dissociation, she felt an insistent tug for her attention. Her eyes shifted to meet the investigator's stare. "*Scusi?*"

The middle-aged man with graying mustache wore a brown tweed sports jacket over a wrinkled white shirt and a brown tie to match the jacket. Jamie considered looking under the desk to discover whether the detective's trousers were hiked halfway up his calf. She felt nervous laughter threatening to bubble to the surface. Jason would have enjoyed the moment with her. She averted her eyes. What a thing to think about at a time like this!

You're right, Sis. I would have found amusement in the moment. But we're all grown up now. The concerns of life and death aren't a laughing matter anymore—they never were.

"Signorina, I am very disturbed by your lack of attentiveness to our discussion. Perhaps this is a ruse to hide information you prefer not to divulge, huh?" Visco now leaned forward with arms outstretched on the mahogany desk, and rapidly juggled a click pen between his fingers.

She blinked. No, she had nothing to hide, but she couldn't seem to concentrate on anything the investigator said. Her mind still careened in shock. How long had it been since she had witnessed Paolo's murder?

“*Mi spiace, Investigatore Visco.* I’m sorry. I really have no idea” She gulped. He couldn’t guess how truly sorry she was. “Honestly, we exchanged only a few words this morning. He seemed . . . distracted—bothered by something. I don’t know anything more.”

“And you are positive you know of no one with a vendetta against il Signor Spretti?”

“No, no one.”

“Dr. Gadolfo.” The investigator’s eyes moved to Giovanni. “You are certain you cannot think of anyone who might have wanted to see your employee dead? No enemies?”

Giovanni spread his hands wide apart. “*Io non penso.* I can’t think of anything offhand. If he had enemies, I don’t know of them.”

Jamie felt her heart stop. Alessandro Marianni. After this morning—the obvious antagonism The horror of it sent shivers through her body. She shook the thought away. No, of course Alessandro wouldn’t have—*couldn’t* have. It was unthinkable.

True, the two men had little respect for one another—that much was obvious. But murder? He had stayed in the breakfast room with Giovanni. He didn’t even have the opportunity. She stole a glance at Giovanni. What must be going through his mind?

Investigator Visco raised an eyebrow at Jamie’s employer. “Dr. Gadolfo, I find it hard to believe that a man in your employ has been killed in cold blood at an exhibition of this stature,” he waved his hand in circular motion, “and you have not one suggestion to offer up as to why it happened.” He paused, studying them both.

Jamie squared her shoulders against the detective’s intimidating posture. He could think what he wanted. *She* was clueless.

“Investigatore Visco,” Giovanni leaned forward with an insistent pose. “How can I get across to you that you will not get a different answer to your question no matter how many times you ask it? There is no other answer to give.”

“All right, I am done for now.” A heavy sigh escaped the investigator’s lips. “You will keep me informed of your whereabouts will you not, Signorina Holbrooke, Dr. Gadolfo?”

“*Ovviamente*, of course,” Giovanni said, as if there was no question about the matter.

“*Buono*.” The detective’s grim-set face displayed his dissatisfaction with the interview.

Jamie wandered in silence down the corridor with Giovanni toward the exhibition hall. “Well, I guess that’s that,” she said at last.

“What is what?” Giovanni asked, halting next to her.

Jamie’s stomach flip-flopped, a familiar angst rising to the surface. “Isn’t it obvious? Investigator Visco didn’t believe us.”

He turned and started walking forward again. “Puh! He’s only doing his job. He knows neither of us had anything to do with Paolo’s murder. The *polizia*—they like to act like big shots. They’re used to the likes of the Mafia—intimidate some, show a puffed up posture, and maybe you get a little more information.”

She bit her lip. Regardless of what the investigator hoped to get from her, she couldn’t have killed Paolo. She wasn’t capable of it. She already felt the guilt of one death lurking deep inside her soul. But she was worried about Alessandro.

“*Cara mia*?” Giovanni coaxed.

She didn’t know how to articulate it. “Alessandro...”

He nodded. “But it is good you did not mention it, yes?”

“He wouldn’t—”

“No! But other people—they might draw different conclusions.”

She averted her eyes. “I heard the shots. I felt the puff of air. I didn’t know what was happening until She swallowed hard. “I even wondered for a moment if perhaps the bullet had hit me, and I was in too much shock to know it.”

“You?” Startled, Giovanni creased his brow.

“After last night—the note. . . .”

Giovanni gathered himself up, nodding. “Strange, no? Could be coincidence, maybe not. These events may not be wholly disconnected from one another.”

She shivered. “I just keep seeing Paolo lying there in a pool of blood”

She crossed her arms, remembering another day—Jason lying face down on Euclid Avenue, awash in blood. A piece of her had died with him that day. Over the years, she had made every attempt to push that memory far into the recesses of her mind, but now. . . . Now the pain had resurfaced, and it still tormented her.

Jason's rugged features swam in front of her. *But perhaps I am very much alive, Sis.*

"No!" Jamie jumped, cupping her face in her hands. Had she really heard what she thought she had heard?

"Cara mia?" She felt Giovanni's hands on hers. He brought them down away from her face. "This has traumatized you, yes? Perhaps you should lie down, take a tranquilizer—"

She shook her head, and her heart pounded with a terrifying reality that he hadn't heard Jason's voice. "I-I just—it suddenly hit me how very close I came to being killed today, but I don't think lying down would help. I need to stay involved—find out who did this."

"I understand," he said sympathetically. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Someone must have been very desperate. They used a silencer, of course. They knew what they were doing." He turned toward the executive office, and then vacillated.

"What is it?" she asked.

He met her eyes. "I do not believe you were the target, though we would do well to take precautions. However, I think all will become clearer when we have a chance to talk to Alessandro."

"Alessandro? Then you *do* think he might still have had something to do with it!"

"One step at a time, cara mia." Giovanni put up a hand. "I know sometimes you can be an impatient woman, but I'd rather not say just yet. Trust me, eh?"

She eyed him skeptically. "Trust is not an easy thing for me."

"This is so, cara mia. But you must learn it, yes?"

Reluctantly, she nodded.

"Very well, then," he said. "We are due to be in the exhibition hall. It will take our minds off of this, even if for a little while, yes?"

From his vantage point at the top of the staircase, Alessandro observed the consternation on Jamie's face as she followed Giovanni into the room. Perhaps the meeting with Investigator Visco hadn't gone well.

His own meeting with Investigatore Visco had been disconcerting. Alessandro reflected back on his conversation with the detective.

Of course, there had been the usual questions. Then Visco caught him unawares with a remark designed to put Alessandro off balance. The question had hit closer to home than the detective realized. "Your relationship with Paolo Spretti goes back a long way, does it not, Dr. Marianni?"

"Yes."

"The relationship—was it amicable?"

"No."

"I see," the detective mused. His gaze fell as he shifted the papers on the table before him aimlessly. "So perhaps you had a vendetta you wanted to see executed?"

"Investigator Visco, I don't think I like what you are implying. I am well aware that you would like to resolve this case as quickly as possible. But you will not accomplish your goal if you continue to go down rabbit trails."

"But is it just a rabbit trail? Curious that you returned home from Albania just at this time. You were on sabbatical, no?"

"I was."

"And this sabbatical, it happened to end at a convenient moment for confrontation?"

Alessandro frowned. "The sabbatical has not ended, Detective."

"Why would you come out of sabbatical for this exhibition? Were you not working some Albanian mission?"

"In fact, I was with my parents in Tropojë."

"Tropojë?"

"Near the Kosovo border."

“I see.” The detective went silent. Then, “You speak Albanian, Dr. Marianni?”

“Only a little; but I fail to see what that has to do with anything, Investigator Visco.”

“Just curious, Dr. Marianni. Just curious. It seems to me that your work in Albania would have superseded a rather mundane arts exhibition where another person might have done the job as easily.” He tapped his pencil on the table.

Alessandro leaned forward in his chair, assuming an offensive position. He refused to let this detective intimidate him. “Investigator Visco: first, the *Regalia di Belle Arti* is *not* a mundane arts exhibition. It is one of the most prestigious in Italy, as you very well know.

“Second, you make many assumptions about my relationship with Paolo Spretti. I had no use for the man and do not weep for his passing. However, you are, I presume, also well aware I was still at breakfast with Director Gadalfo at the time of the shooting. He will verify this, and his word is beyond reproach. And if you will not believe him, you may query the many diners around us in the room.

“If you have evidence to prove differently, I would like to see it. Otherwise, I believe I should be free to go.” Alessandro rose with an air of finality.

A smirk slowly formed on Visco’s face. “I have no other evidence—yet. But make no mistake, if you so much as sneeze, Dr. Marianni, I will know about it.”

Alessandro got up to leave, having been summarily dismissed. But at the threshold, he heard Visco’s insistent voice once again.

“Dr. Marianni, one more thing. Do you own any guns?”

Alessandro whirled around. The question was another stab in the dark. “I do not and never have. But you’re welcome to search my flat in Milano, if you wish. I have nothing to hide from you.”

Investigator Visco lowered his challenging eyes. “Thank you, Dr. Marianni.”

A short time later Alessandro descended a short set of white marble stairs in the lobby to the atrium doors that led to the Villa’s

portico. He wandered about the portico, his footsteps crunching the gravel as he ambled thoughtfully around the hotel's modest fountain to the edge of the balcony. There he rested his arms on the white wrought-iron railing above the gardens and gazed out toward the lake, musing at the turn of events.

The natural beauty of the lake and lakeside villages made the provincial lifestyle compelling. He envied the people who lived here and spent their lives under the grandeur of the mountains. Perhaps that was why he missed the alpine valleys of his home province of Piedmont—simple and uncomplicated by the complexities of life. He could almost forget a murder had just taken place in this setting. But it had, and now darkness hovered over the land, and life had become more complicated.

Alessandro frowned. Investigator Visco had no idea what he was up against. Alessandro had not killed Paolo. His murder was a devastating blow. It meant the stakes had changed. Paolo's alleged shady dealings of the past had not carried the finality of these fated consequences. If Paolo had been an ethical man, surely he would have had a very different end.

And what about Jamie Holbrooke's encounter? The proximity of both events indicated they were related. Did she know more than she let on? Only recently he believed God had placed into his hands a long-awaited piece to the great puzzle that had hovered over his family for generations. This enigma had given rise to one of the most illustrious legends to have ever descended upon their community in Bobbio Pellice—a legend that lived on in spite of its implausibility.

He leaned his back against the rail and considered Jamie's riddle. It seemed the message was intended to entice Jamie to take action toward a particular direction. If he was right, it would lead down the same path he'd been following. But the question still demanded an answer. Who was her assailant and why did he approach *her* with the riddle?

Jamie had *seemed* oblivious to the elements in the riddle. She hadn't even shown a prior knowledge of the Waldensians. So what did her assailant know that escaped the rest of them? The

conundrum frustrated him, but he knew the key had to be in the riddle.

Paolo's murder compounded the stakes. Alessandro also knew the detective would not allow anything to escape his notice. Alessandro would have to be skillful at evading the man's scrutiny if he didn't want to tip off the wrong people. He had to formulate a plan. Better to talk to Giovanni sooner than later. Thus he made his way indoors to the exhibition hall.

At the threshold, he stopped before descending on his colleagues near the exhibit. In spite of the ill-timed present circumstances, he had to admire Giovanni's choice of artwork for display, including one of his favorites for its subject matter and artistic skill: Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus*.

At his approach, Giovanni reached out a hand. "You look tired, my friend."

Alessandro cast him a whimsical smile. "I'll be fine. But I'm not so sure about Jamie," he said, noticing the line of stress around her eyes. "How are you holding up?"

"To be honest, I'm still in shock. I can't think about Paolo without wanting to throw up all over again."

"Did you know Paolo well?" He hoped she would say no. Paolo had been a womanizer; he'd watched other women fall for his charms and get burned.

"Only professionally, but even so, I just can't believe someone murdered him."

He exhaled, unaware till just then that he had been holding his breath while waiting for her answer. "You are right. It is unthinkable."

"Unspeakable. And here, in a public place—an art exhibition with so many people in and out and moving about."

Alessandro nodded. "Yet someone was bold enough to take the risk—most likely a killer for hire."

"A hit man, I suppose you mean." Jamie seemed stunned. "I heard of such things back in Cleveland on occasion—the syndicate they called it—but I've never known anyone involved in organized crime."

“Indeed, the Mafioso is still alive and well in spite of periodic attempts to remove its influence,” Alessandro said grimly. “When the heat is on, the Mafioso go into hiding and operate behind a veil of secrecy. When things cool down, they become quite bold again.”

Giovanni clicked his tongue. “No amateur would have been audacious enough to kill a man in cold blood with an audience surrounding him. It is a professional who understands these things. Death inflicted in a public setting breeds chaos, and in that chaos the killer leaves both a message and confusion for those who surround him. If, as we suppose, the killing was done by a man.”

“A woman scorned?”

Jamie’s eyebrows went up.

Alessandro couldn’t prevent the smile that came to his lips. “People who hire assassins are equal opportunity employers, no?”

Alessandro watched Jamie cross her arms in protection and couldn’t help feeling amused by her indignation.

“Did Investigator Visco grill you, as well?” Giovanni asked.

Alessandro came out of his reverie. “Visco? He is just doing his job. I can’t blame him for exploring the possibilities and narrowing the field. No doubt he knows all too well that Paolo’s murder has all the markings of an execution.”

“Yes, I would agree,” Giovanni said, surveying the room. “I suggest we not talk about these new developments here. Paolo’s death changes everything. We should have dinner tonight outside the villa to discuss the things I had intended to bring up at breakfast.”

“Yes, that would be wise.” Alessandro glanced at Jamie’s creased brow. Of course, she would have to be included. The encounter, riddle, and Paolo’s murder had entangled her in their affairs. “There is a trattoria, a little café, in Varenna’s historical center on Via Settembre. Shall we say—nineteen hundred hours?”

CHAPTER 7

Carlo Benedetto lifted a forkful of *tortellini di pesto* to his lips and devoured the pasta as if he hadn't eaten for days. Fortunately for him, this was the second course of his ritualistic dinner meal. A sumptuous meat course would come next, prepared by Vito, his most excellent cook, and then a dessert—a small sweet, because he did not like to indulge his taste for sugar.

At age 38, an active physical regimen kept Carlo's body in excellent form. Most days, he worked out for two hours in the elaborate gym on the lower floor of his expansive villa. He never knew when he would be called on to perform difficult feats needed to evade the law or the various organized crime entities that he competed against. Besides, he was just vain enough to recognize that a handsome physique could be used to his advantage. He considered the faded scar above his left eye his only physical flaw. Otherwise, the legitimate world knew him as an attractive Italian businessman of good repute.

Carlo glanced at his wife Vincenza, ten years his junior, sitting kitty-corner to him at the excessively long table. Currently she chewed delicately on her *ensalata caprese*, made of tomatoes, mozzarella, and basil. Her stylish Brunette hair framed her face and hung loose to a point below the neckline of her apricot blouse. A necklace of three one-carat diamonds dangled over the blouse.

A feeling of pride washed over Carlo. He knew other mob men admired Vincenza's beauty. Any one of them would have vied for her attentions. But he was the one who had won her affections.

And while other self-respecting mob bosses took mistresses, their *comare*, to keep them happy, he hadn't found that particular recreation enticing. He believed he actually loved her and believed she was just as madly in love with him. Hadn't she demonstrated that fact over and again? Theirs was a marriage made in heaven if not in the marriage bed.

He put down his knife, captured her long elegant fingers into his hand, and gazed into her eyes. "I have a surprise for you, cara mia."

Girlish gaiety reflected in her dark eyes. "Carlo, you know you spoil me too much."

"I love to spoil you." He rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb.

"What is it?" She searched his face; and then when it appeared he would not give in too easily, she attempted a playful assault at his black suit coat.

He put up both hands and laughed. "I don't have it on me."

"*Che brutal!*" She leaned back with a pout. "You brute. You lie."

"No, I really do not," he said in casual amusement. He picked up his knife and fork again, as if he had dismissed the matter. "Upstairs." He pointed upward with his knife. Then he took a bite of pasta, a look of content crossing his face as he swallowed.

She started to get up. "Why do you just sit there eating? We should—"

He roared, and then dropped his utensils on his plate again. He grabbed her onto his lap. "It'll keep." He lowered his mouth to her neck where her perfume—a mingling of jasmine and rose—intoxicated his senses. He dressed her with kisses, and then found her mouth.

Carlo's cell phone rang to the tune of La Bamba. He hesitated, finding her mouth again. But the phone would not cease its irritating call. He let her go.

He reached into his suit coat pocket to retrieve his phone and cleared his teeth of debris with his tongue as he answered. "Si. This had better be good." His brow creased as he listened.

He rose and strode away from the table, his heels clicking across the tile floor to a set of sliding glass doors. He pushed one side

open and stepped onto the garden terrace. With one gigantic shove, he slammed the door behind him. “But did you get the merchandise, Benni?” he shouted into the phone.

Across the terrace, he stopped in front of waist-high, white stone balusters and stood with one hand on his slim hip. His dark eyes fixed on Lake Como without really seeing it. He could hear the hesitation on the other end. “Something you want to tell me, Benni?”

“He gave us trouble, Boss.”

“You took care of it?”

“No sweat. But we still didn’t get what we came for.”

Carlo’s eyes hardened. “Get it done. I don’t care what it costs.” He pressed the off button with his thumb and uttered a curse. He had parted with a lot of money for a down payment. He wasn’t about to lose the goods now. He slipped the cell phone back into his suit coat pocket and rested his outstretched arms on the wall.

Gazing out across the lake from his villa near Tremezzo, Carlo inhaled deeply. The golden-tawny world of twilight in front of him enhanced the beauty of Lake Como and the surrounding Alps. The expansive villas on the darkening green hillsides on either side of his mansion seemed to reside in glowing splendor. Everyone in his world knew he had some of the most coveted property in all of Italy with its hectares of private terraced terrain, two tennis courts, lavish swimming pool and deck, and opulent fountains. Paths through the gardens wound down to the lake. No one from his childhood would have guessed the boy of poverty would come to live as royalty.

Indeed, Carlo was king in his world. He felt smug. He had earned his place of honor.

He took a foil-wrapped mint from his suit coat pocket, and then removed the wrapper and popped the mint into his mouth.

No one would ever have questioned his loyalty to Lorenzo Garibaldi. Carlo had made sure the mobster could trust him with any job Lorenzo had assigned him. Very quickly, Carlo proved himself trustworthy, and Lorenzo assigned him all the good jobs.

The job that sealed his position took place when he was sent to “deal” with a city official in Milan for having crossed the Garibaldi clan. Carlo hadn’t intended to kill the man. He just wanted to impose a solid threat. But the guy made a stupid move, surreptitiously dialing his cell phone. That discovery had resulted in a fatal gunshot wound to the man’s chest. From that time on, Lorenzo made sure everybody in the mob world knew Carlo was a made man.

As a way to show Carlo his appreciation, Lorenzo set him up with women he thought would suit Carlo’s tastes. But none of those women came close to Vincenza, Lorenzo’s daughter.

Ah, his lovely Vincenza. For nearly a year, Carlo was infatuated with her, but he would not touch her. She was as sacred to him as the Virgin Mary.

One day, Lorenzo put his hand to Carlo’s back and led him to the gaming room down the hall from the gym. He indicated the rack of billiard sticks on the wall. “Let’s play,” he said, leaving no choice about the matter as he took a stick.

Carlo considered Lorenzo as he broke the balls. Lorenzo had probably had too many beers in his lifetime. The once handsome man carried too much flab on his belly, and his balding head seemed too small for his body. But, he’d been generous to Carlo, and Carlo loved him like the father he’d never had. The balls spread out in all directions, the four-ball falling into the left center pocket.

“I’ve seen the way you look at my Vincenza,” Lorenzo said, bending over the table again. He took his time, and then he took his shot. The six-ball easily made the corner pocket. He straightened. “She’s beautiful, huh?”

“She’s beautiful.” Carlo wasn’t going to deny the obvious.

“You know, Antonio had high aspirations to run this operation one day.” Lorenzo raised his cue stick. “I always wanted my son to take my place.”

“Si, I know.” Carlo had spoken the words quietly.

A sickening remembrance of Antonio’s demise plagued him even now as he pictured the Bugatti Veyron convertible that had

sat in the circular driveway in front of the villa. Antonio had planned to take his mother Sonia into Milan for a hair appointment while he checked on a shipment of cigarettes—only one of several “businesses” the Garibaldi family operated.

The sun radiated from an azure sky. The regal Queen Segò flanked the driveway in the warm breeze as a strong scent of lavender wafted up from the nearby flower bed. “Are we on for tonight?” Carlo asked Antonio before he got into the car.

“Sure. I have to watch out for my sister, don’t I?” Antonio teased back.

“Time to go, cara mia. I don’t want to be late for my hair appointment,” Sonia said in the passenger seat.

Carlo moved away from the car toward the entrance of the house while Antonio slid into the driver’s seat. Why Antonio hadn’t started the car immediately no one would ever know.

At the door, Carlo turned to wave. But then his smile froze as an amazing and awful display of fireworks shot up and resounded in a deafening explosion in the courtyard. Carlo dove into the doorway to miss the shrapnel flying at him. A front window of the villa shattered. The putrid odor of burning gasoline and human flesh reached his nostrils.

Footfalls echoed down the tile stairway from the second floor. Lorenzo’s voice bellowed down the corridor. He helped Carlo to his feet, and the two of them stepped outside. Fire leapt from the windows of the car, as both men held up their hands before their faces to ward off the intense heat.

Then Carlo heard a terrifying scream. He whirled around to see Vincenza grabbing at her hair. He grabbed her before she could run out to the car.

“Mama! Antonio!” She shrieked, fighting him for freedom.

But it was too late—too late to save her mother and brother—their bodies now incinerated in the empty shell that used to be the Bugatti Veyron. Carlo held onto Vincenza with the force of a man faced with his own death.

Hours later, Lorenzo’s tears flowed unchecked. He downed two shots of vodka and then vowed his vengeance against the family

responsible for the deaths of his beloved wife and son. “I’ve always known I could trust you, Carlo. Find out who did this. And if something happens to me, I want you to take my place.”

“You can always count on me, Lorenzo.” He’d said it the day of the explosion and the night of the billiards game, unaware that a week later Lorenzo’s body would wash up on the rocks near Bellagio. A poor ill-fated jogger found him at daybreak before the public swarmed the area.

Carlo would have preferred Vincenza remain at home. He knew the scene would be gruesome. But she insisted.

Even now he remembered the bile rising to the surface as sand fleas and sea gulls hovered above the decaying body. “You think you people would stop killing and brutalizing each other this way,” the detective said while Vincenza clutched at Carlo’s jacket and bawled in horror. “Leave justice in the hands of the law.”

“There is no justice in the hands of the law, Detective,” Carlo said. “But do not worry. Someone will pay.” He led Vincenza away, still sobbing.

Two days later, two of Lorenzo’s enforcers hauled in another member of the clan, his swollen face and blood-stained mouth evidence of the duress that had forced him to buckle under. The disloyal stooge had confessed to the killing, but he would not rat on the family that had hired him.

“Alberto, Alberto,” Carlo said. He slapped the traitor lightly on the cheek. He walked away from the man and spoke in a dispirited voice. “What’s the matter with you, eh? Didn’t Lorenzo treat your family right—your mama and your sisters when your father took the bullet for me? Why did you have to go to another family, eh?”

Alberto narrowed his eyes. “You call how they live ‘treating them right?’ Their flat is infested with cockroaches, and Julia is forced to clean toilets for a living. They should have been living in Lorenzo’s mansion.”

Carlo pivoted around and jabbed the man in the chest. “You took the *omerta*. Your loyalty was to *this* family—to Lorenzo and *this* family.”

“This is what I think of your family. I spit on you and your family,” the stooge said. He sent a stream of sputum at Carlo.

Before Carlo could respond, one of the enforcers clobbered the stooge in the mouth with the butt of his HK Expert pistol, breaking the man’s teeth.

Carlo removed a handkerchief from his suit coat pocket and cleaned up the spit. “You are nothing—*nothing*, do you hear? A man’s word of honor is worth blood!” He turned to his underling. “Make sure his body will never be found.”

“Yes, Boss.” The two men dragged the traitor out of the room, his curses following. That had been the beginning of Carlo’s reign and a new generation of the clan.

Coming back to the present, Carlo dropped his arms to his sides. He was a patient man, but he would not be crossed, and he would do everything he could to protect his interests, his wife, and Lorenzo’s legacy. Lorenzo’s name would never be forgotten.

He turned back to rejoin Vincenza, but she had already come out to the deck.

“You’re disturbed, my love,” she said, linking her arm through his.

He smiled and patted her hand. “Nothing you need worry about.”

She drew back and met his gaze. “I know that look. I have seen it before—in the eyes of my father and my brother. And now they are both dead.”

He caught her hand fiercely and forced her around to face him. “I am not dead. Feel my heart beating wildly.” He led her hand to his chest.

“Yes, Carlo,” she said, her fervor reflecting his own. “And I want to keep it that way.”

He swallowed hard, compulsion overtaking his senses. He now caressed her hair, her back, her face with his hands. “Ah, but you are very beautiful. I want to make a baby with you.”

A soft smile formed on her lips, and she leaned her head on his chest. “Of course we will make a baby, and you will be a very good father.”

He directed his gaze into her eyes. “Right now.”

She tipped her head back and responded with an amused little laugh. “But you haven’t finished your dinner!”

His lips came to within a breath of hers. “I am only hungry for one thing right now.” He picked her up in his arms, kicked open the sliding door, and climbed the stairs.

CHAPTER 8

The young man scuttled down the perfumed pathway of the Villa's gardens. He'd known all along his life could be in grave danger, and this morning's events had proved it. His stomach churned. He touched his bruised cheek. Zamir had made good on his threats.

Paolo had been a fool. He had toyed with the wrong people, called their bluff once too often. They were dead serious about the game they played. They hadn't been bluffing; when it was time to show their hand, they made certain that Paolo wouldn't have the winning hand a second time.

Unlike Paolo, he hadn't been willing to place himself in the line of fire—not even for the money. And there was quite a bit of money to be had for the right player—more than enough money to get out from underneath the poverty that had kept his family down for generations. Yes, his ancestors had made the ancient Waldensian vow of poverty, and they had remained faithful to their religious creed.

But these were different times.

He could provide an opportunity for his three brothers and two sisters to get a decent education. He could go to a reputable university—maybe even become a doctor. He'd be able to take care of his aging parents and provide for a family. And then there was Maria! They could make a good life together—maybe even buy a small villa outside Torino—Turin—where he would practice medicine.

Rambling forward on the pathway, he paid scant attention to the flora leading to the shoreline and rounded a bend where there was an opening in the columnar cypresses with a view to the portico. He needed to think. But he felt too terrified to be rational.

He froze. Alessandro had wandered onto the patio and looked in his direction. Alessandro could not discover his presence at the Villa.

He scurried farther down and around a curve in the pathway where the trees hid him from view, and then stopped in front of a grotto. An old worn statue of a man without arms within the cavernous rock stared at him as if to say, “You have become like me—trapped in half of a man, hiding from the world in a cave that you yourself have carved.”

He shuddered. How did he let it get this far? He wished he knew. He had only wanted to make a better life for himself and his family. But instead, he had brought disaster upon everyone.

He retrieved a pack of Marlboros and matches from his shirt pocket and lit a cigarette, the birthmark on his forearm noticeable as his jacket sleeve crawled up his arm. He must be more careful from now on. He needed to hold on to his anonymity as if his life depended on it. If anyone discovered that he was privy to information that he shouldn't know, he could be the next corpse. He inhaled his cigarette deeply and allowed the smoke to billow from his nostrils.

Who am I kidding, anyway? I need help.

Needing help was what had led him to Signorina Holbrooke in the first place. She had not recognized him, of course. He had changed since their first meeting more than a year ago when he had come in search of Alessandro for work at the Academia. He was more clean-cut then, and had carried more meat on his bones. He took great pains that day to dress in his best trousers and a clean white shirt. His spirits had soared as he entered the Brera, believing Alessandro would help him find a position—even if he had to start at the bottom.

At first he thought Signorina Holbrooke was a professor. He still could not fathom why she had been in that part of the palazzo.

In any case, she appeared genuinely disappointed to tell him of Alessandro's sabbatical and how she, too, regretted missing him when she had come on internship from the United States. Since then, she had been hired on as an assistant curator at the Pinacoteca.

"Your Italian is too perfect," he had told her.

She blushed, revealing a quality he found disarming, and he warmed to her immediately. Of course, he harbored no illusions she would have an interest in him, but she was easy to talk to and her manner seemed authentic. That's when he learned she came from the Ciabonero family. "Holbrooke is my father's side of the family," she had said.

Ciabonero. He startled. Yes, there was a likeness. Did she see it? "Ah, a very good name," he had said, without revealing his own familiarity with it. He thanked her for her help and left. Only much later when he had made a brief visit to Bobbio Pellice, his hometown, did the idea dawn.

He did not want his family and friends to get hurt, but he needed a way to get information to the right person without revealing his part in Paolo's scheme. He knew it was a long shot, but Signorina Holbrooke could be his ticket out of the conundrum.

He wasn't completely sure she would be able to put all the pieces together, but even if she could not, her expertise in art history would surely pique her interest to investigate further. And just to be sure that the puzzle came together, he would send a similar but different note to Alessandro in Albania to prompt his immediate return to Italy, and specifically to attend the *Regalia di Bella Arti*. Signorina Holbrooke's admiration for Alessandro would bring the two of them together at the exhibition.

Still, there was one flaw in his plan: would Alessandro and Signorina Holbrooke hit it off enough to confide in one another? Again, it was a long shot, but he had to create a compelling reason for them to do so. Thus was born his idea to intercept her on the Passerella—scare her enough but not too much—to gain Alessandro's sympathies.

Odd, though—why had she called him Jason on the Passerella? Who was Jason? Of course he *did* look different from their earlier encounter. He had lost his glasses to a pick-pocket and now only saw half the distance clearly, and his hair was longer and scruffier. He had also started smoking—like a fish on the grill—and, no doubt, reeked of cigarettes.

His thoughts turned back to the current situation. He believed Jamie would have read the note and tried to decipher it by now. But the immediacy of the morning's events may have pushed the riddle aside. That would be a serious error and a miscalculation on his part. He must make certain that she would not forget the missive.

After taking a final hard drag on his cigarette, he threw the butt down and ground it with the toe of his shoe. It was time for him to make his next move.

* * * * *

Jamie labored up the steep cobblestone alleyways of Varenna toward a crest. With each step, she felt her muscles stretch and release the pent-up emotions that threatened to erupt like a tumultuous volcano. She needed to vent.

The events of the last twenty-four hours had stirred up the long-buried agitation. It seemed so unfair. She had come to Italy to forget. And it had worked—for a while. But now her past confronted her—followed her, it seemed, to taunt her even here.

Jason

She doubted anyone here would have read an obscure obituary in a newspaper from Cleveland, Ohio.

She'd had a brother—a beloved older brother whom she had worshiped and who had loved and protected her in return. Their relationship was close, borne out of a need for companionship. While their parents spent most of their waking hours teaching university classes or attending to their professional concerns, Jamie and Jason found ways to idle away their time when they were not at school or helping out at their grandparents' restaurant.

She and Jason had foraged many exploits together. In their younger elementary years, they went on long explorations in their neighborhood, sometimes on their bikes, other times by foot. At various times they were pirates looking for booty, spies observing enemy forces wanting to invade their world, or archaeologists like Indiana Jones, discovering the magical properties of a little-known Peruvian tribe. As they grew older, their adventures took them further afield by bus or rapid transit to downtown Cleveland or Shaker Heights.

Sometimes, their antics bordered on destructive—like the time at Halloween when Jason created a ghost out of a sheet, and then Jamie climbed an elm to hang the ghost from a limb. That little joke turned ugly when their neighbor, believing someone had hanged himself, rammed his car into the tree. At the time, no one knew who had been responsible for the act, and she and Jason had made a pact never to tattle.

Years later, Jamie confessed to the “crime,” the deed no longer able to affect either one of them. She had grown up. But Jason? The scene played out in slow motion in her head.

They had just enjoyed a nice lunch with their father—their chatter jovial and animated. James Holbrooke had proposed a trip to Europe the following summer, since their mother Sophie was to be guest violinist at the Berlin Symphony Orchestra. After lunch, their father headed off toward his office on campus, and she and Jason ambled toward Euclid Avenue where they would cross to make their way to the Rapid Transit.

At the crosswalk, while waiting for the light to turn, she and Jason still laughed about a joke her father had shared at lunch. Neither of them saw the city bus barreling down Euclid Avenue. But in her uncontrolled laughter Jamie got too close to the curb, and Jason jumped into the bus’s path to push her out of the way. Jamie let out a blood-curdling scream as his body soared through the air and landed with a thump on the pavement thirty feet away. She dashed to his side only to find him staring up at her vacantly.

Jamie did not know how long she sat on the ground shrieking in horror. A professor who had come along at the right time and

knew their father called his cell phone and 911. By the time the first responders had arrived, James had also made his way back. Jamie was unaware of his presence until he dragged her kicking and screaming away from Jason's mangled body, her arms outstretched to the lifeless form on the blood-stained ground.

For days, Jamie could not speak. She lay in bed or sat up on her window seat, propped up by a pillow which her mother had put behind her. No one, not even her father, could reach the fragmented heart of a young girl whose very existence depended upon her beloved brother. How could she bear the loss?

Then the nightmares began. Grotesque faces appeared before her—always laughing, always accusing, taunting her until she screamed in abandoned horror. She had killed her brother. She had kept him too distracted to notice the bus coming. She neglected to warn him.

She had escaped death. He lay stiff in a coffin.

None of these things were true, but to a grieving teenager, the sense of guilt overwhelmed her. Questions and regrets oozed like plasma from an open wound. She loathed her own part in the horror. Why Jason and not her?

Their family doctor prescribed Ambien to calm her anxiety and suggested grief counseling. She attended one session and announced afterward that she would not go again.

That night, Jamie stood like a zombie in her bathroom with the container of Ambien in her hand. Minutes ticked by as she considered her dreaded empty future without Jason. Then, in one final horrific act, she downed the entire bottle of pills.

She did not know it then, but her father found her lying on the bathroom floor. He swept her up in his arms and told Sophie to call 911.

Frantic, James and Sophie waited as doctors pumped her stomach and shocked her heart back into rhythm. At last, she was rolled into ICU where doctors kept vigilance for the next forty-eight hours.

Five days later, Jamie was released to a rehabilitation center where time and therapy erected a protective shell that encased her

heart. Still, while her psychiatrists and family tried to tell her that time would heal all wounds, she knew that no matter how much time marched on, the protective shell would always remain fragile, threatening to unleash the painful memories she wanted to keep buried deep inside.

Thus, when Jamie returned home three months later, declared fit to return to normal daily life, she made it her mission to avoid anything that would break the shell and release the terror again. And when the opportunity at the Cleveland Institute of Art opened up for her to go to Italy to intern at the Pinacoteca di Brera, she jumped at the chance.

Her plan had worked ... until now.

Jamie closed her eyes. Seeing Paolo's body lying on the floor with all that blood had cracked the protective mantle about her heart and brought back the memories of her brother's death in all its hellish, nightmarish color. She'd never revealed this side of herself to anyone before. Nor could she reveal the emotions that plagued her now to either Giovanni or Alessandro.

Abruptly, two boys hastened past her going the other way, startling her out of her thoughts. She whirled around to watch them take the cobbled steps two at a time, heedless, it seemed, to the possible consequences of tumbling to their own fateful end. She and Jason would have been so foolish at one time, behaving in cavalier ignorance about the consequences of their choices. In truth, death always darkened the threshold of a person's life, and no one knew when it would burst in to steal the light away.

She turned and trudged forward to the top of the hill.

When she reached the summit, Jamie spun around and drew a deep breath at the view before her. Lake Como's calm waters shimmered in the golden glow of the sun. The snow-capped peaks of the surrounding Alps reached to the sky, and their steep verdant slopes stretched down to envelop the shoreline villages. Yes, there was something tangible in the beauty of the world to draw from, to redeem those things that were too ugly to face. She was grateful to have at least come that far in eight years. She would never return to the days when death seemed preferable to life.

Jamie might have remained longer had she not needed to keep the appointment with Giovanni and Alessandro. It was time to trek back down to the village.

She negotiated the rugged, narrow, cobbled steps with less desperation, as she returned to the center of Varenna. The angle of the sun now cast a tawny light on Varenna's hillside community of stucco and wooden-framed buildings. Many housed modest shops, others provincial dwellings. Flower baskets, hanging outside the entrances, overflowed with colorful arrays of begonias and pansies. She delighted in the treasures that abounded in the timeworn back streets. Some distance farther down, she glimpsed pieces of Murano glass through a shop window and peered inside. Unlike the view she had seen from the hilltop earlier, these were specimens of man's creative work, but just as intricately detailed and beautiful.

Then she caught her breath. The reflection in the window—*Jason!* No, it was the stranger! She could have sworn that his blue eyes met hers. Her pulse quickened.

Jamie spun around. She searched frantically up and down the street for a man in a cap, but he had disappeared. How could this mirage appear and disappear at will? After one last look around, she hurried on to meet Giovanni and Alessandro.

CHAPTER 9

The small *trattoria*, the Italian version of a café, was nestled back from the cobbled street in the corner where two small streets met. A handful of tables sat outside, their umbrellas open. Inside the cozy restaurant, another half-dozen tables could seat up to twenty-four people. Italian classics played softly in the background.

Jamie spotted Giovanni and Alessandro at a table in the back, the Venetian lamp burning low above their heads.

Giovanni saw her and rose to seat her. “We were—concerned,” he said when she took her seat. “After the events of the last day, you cannot be too careful.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you,” she said with a tinge of regret. “I walked up to the overlook, and time got away from me.”

Giovanni chuckled. “What did I tell you, Alessandro? She is not so easily daunted by the unknown. I think she might even thrive on it.”

“Maybe you should be.” He stared her down, and then relaxed with a loose smile. “But then again, you show the same spirit as the men and women who defied the Church of Rome centuries ago. I think you would have made a fitting dissident.”

Jamie noted the admiration that now emanated from his eyes, in spite of the dry tone. She couldn’t fathom why it mattered to her so much.

They ate their dinner in relative ease until the waiter removed their plates and asked about dessert. Alessandro waited until they had ordered their cappuccinos, and the waiter had gone. Then he

leaned forward in his seat. “Perhaps it is time we talk of the things that have brought us here.”

Jamie noted Alessandro’s restlessness as he shifted positions. “I am anxious to hear what you found from your research,” he said to Giovanni.

“Gladly, but perhaps we should first clue Jamie in on why you are here.”

“Why Alessandro is here?” Jamie knitted her brow and turned to Alessandro. “I thought you were here for the exhibition.”

“It’s complicated.” He waved a hand toward Giovanni.

“You might recall the time of my absence last month,” Giovanni said.

“You and Laura decided to take a holiday to England.”

“That was true. We spent some wonderful days in London. But we went to London, because Alessandro had contacted me from Albania.”

Alessandro played with a sugar packet. “Like you, I received an anonymous note—not a riddle, but alarming enough to get my attention. I contacted Giovanni to make subtle inquiries before involving the rest of my family.”

“Laura and I left for England the next week under the guise of taking a much-needed rest. My main purpose, however, was to conduct research that I could only do in England.”

“I see,” she said, though she really didn’t. “Please go on.”

Giovanni leaned in. “My sources confirm what you have already concluded from your own research while you were still in Albania.” Giovanni leaned in closer. “From time to time over the last one hundred and sixty years, rumors about a certain painting have surfaced. Most of the time, the rumors were dismissed without evidence of the painting’s existence. Of course, no one would believe a stray Turner existed somewhere, especially in—”

“An undiscovered Turner?” Jamie looked up astonished. She was familiar with the works of Joseph Mallord William Turner, the so-called painter of light. “How extraordinary!”

“Indeed,” he continued. “The majority of Turner’s works are housed at the Tate Gallery in London. But what makes this

particular watercolor even more interesting is how Turner came to paint it.”

“What do you mean?” Jamie said.

“Turner’s original watercolor was based on a penciled drawing done by the English architect Sir Charles Barry.”

“Charles Barry?” Jamie said.

“Architect of the Houses of Parliament in London,” Alessandro said. “He came to Italy in 1820 to study Renaissance architecture. Many young wealthy British gentlemen traveled the Continent during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for their Grand Tour. It was an integral part of their education.”

“Yes, I’m aware of the practice.”

“In Italy,” Giovanni continued, “Barry met up with like-minded sojourners who traveled on to Greece and Turkey. But as he prepared to return home to marry his fiancée, Barry met an archaeological traveler from Cambridge. The archaeologist—David Baillie—greatly admired Barry’s drawings and asked Barry to accompany him to Egypt and Palestine to sketch their observations. Barry was astounded. Essentially, he would be the first modern European to sketch the sites of the Holy Land. Barry stayed with him for three years.”

“Amazing!” Jamie said.

“Si,” Giovanni said. “Only a fiancée remained at home waiting for him to return.”

Ah, the fiancée! Jamie averted her eyes. In her case, the situation had been reversed. Clint hadn’t even waited for her to leave the country before breaking up with her. It was him or Italy, he had said.

Alessandro burst out laughing. “You don’t need to look so disgusted. Many women waited for their men in earlier days. They ‘kept the home fires burning’—as I believe the American saying goes.”

“Times have changed.” Jamie couldn’t keep the skeptical edge out of her tone.

“A bitter experience, perhaps?”

She looked at him suggestively.

“Ah, I see.”

His eyes met hers. She wanted to look away, but the light behind them beckoned her to stay fixed on his. “You know, true love waits,” he said, “especially if one believes God has had a hand in bringing them together.”

Now she averted her eyes and played with her spoon. God, huh? In her experience, God had taken away the people she loved. She lifted her eyes again to see that Alessandro still studied her with an intensity that made her feel vulnerable. What was she doing? She could not let him have this effect on her—not while the wounds threatened to open up and fester again. Life never happened the way one hoped or expected.

She turned to Giovanni. “And so what happened to Barry?”

“He was handsomely rewarded for his efforts.” He swallowed the last of his cappuccino. “His drawings are *magnifico*—unsurpassed in detail.”

“You’ve seen them?” Jamie’s eyes grew wider.

“At the Royal Institute of British Architects in London.” Giovanni became more animated. “Few in the West before him since the Crusades had ever set eyes on the beauty of Egypt and Palestine. The drawings inspired geographers, artists, and wayfarers to explore the Holy Land—to discover what they’d only imagined before.

“Then William and Edward Finden commissioned several artists, including Turner, to illustrate a book on the Holy Land.”

“You mean Turner went to the Holy Land, too?” Jamie felt baffled. So far, the pieces of the story didn’t connect.

“Of course, that would have been ideal,” Giovanni said. “But men like Barry had made the pilgrimages and produced sketches, so Finden approached them for their drawings to use as models. In the end, more than half of Turner’s twenty-six watercolors came from Barry’s sketches—fourteen of them to be exact. Their colorful landscapes and brilliant light gave them an ethereal quality, enticing more wayfarers to travel to the Holy Land.”

Jamie nodded briefly, caught up in the story. Then her mind abruptly leaped back to the present.

None of it made sense.

Jamie narrowed her eyes. “Okay, guys. This all makes for interesting history, but I don’t understand what Paolo’s death has to do with Turner? And what does this all have to do with my assailant and the riddle he gave me?” Jamie observed a conspiratorial look pass between them and cocked an eyebrow.

Giovanni leaned forward and spoke barely above a whisper. “People have theorized over the years on the existence of a fifteenth painting based on one of Barry’s sketches—one larger in size than the original plates for the book. The say Turner didn’t care for it and hid it among other paintings he rejected in his studio as unfit for public view. Fire marshals speculated that a minor fire accidentally destroyed it. But”

“But you believe it exists,” Jamie said. She could read the assent in his eyes. The idea was fantastic. “The painting that generated the rumors.”

“I think it is fair to say there is no longer any doubt. The painting exists,” Giovanni said.

“And it’s worth millions on the black market,” Alessandro said flatly.

Jamie stared at Alessandro in stunned silence. Why didn’t he seem happier about the discovery? As an art historian, he should have been delighted to find a fifteenth Turner Bible Lands painting.

“You are right, of course.” Giovanni called the waiter for the bill. “Let us take a walk.”

CHAPTER 10

“It’s not unheard of to find previously unknown art works in the art world,” Jamie said, as they walked the cobbled streets of Varenna. “People come across them all the time—in an attic, on Grandma’s wall. They’re always considered quite astounding—” She paused, thinking she had heard Alessandro. “Did you say something?”

“Huh? No, no. Please continue,” he said, obviously still distracted.

“This Turner could be worth *tens* of millions of dollars. Its concept based on Charles Barry’s sketches of the Holy Land in tandem with having been thought to be destroyed in a fire would certainly place high value on it, not to mention the composition, the—” Once again she stopped, confused by their reactions, or rather, lack of reaction. “So why aren’t the two of you excited about this?”

The two men glanced at one another, as if they shared a secret. She felt like the darting ball between the paddles of a pinball machine. What was wrong with them? Then she lit on a realization. Giovanni hadn’t really answered her last question at all, had he? Why was he so edgy? Then another light went on.

The timing was too perfect. The exhibition. Alessandro’s return from Albania. Paolo’s death. The encounter. The riddle. Her mind kept seeking the answers like the pinball falling through the obstacle course seeking the right hole in which to land.

They turned down an alley. A number of people stood in front of an open doorway with a sign overhead declaring this was the only real nightclub in Varenna. Music blared and boisterous laughter emanated from inside. A peek through the entrance revealed a dimly lit, smoke-filled, crowded room. They continued on, the rhythmic beating of the music fading away as they ambled farther down the alleyway toward Lake Como's shoreline.

At last they came to the Passerella and automatically turned toward the ferry docks. Had it really only been just the night before that she'd been accosted on this same walkway? So much had happened in those twenty-four hours.

Just like the night before, the walkway took them under fragrant, flower-adorned trellises, past beautifully manicured gardens of centuries-old residences, and along the sides of steep ledges. Tiny waves lapped against the shore. The lights across the lake lit isolated villages along the water. The night air was comfortable. Jamie could have allowed herself to revel in the serenity of it except for one thing—the problem before them roiled like an imminent storm.

She halted under a lamppost. Problem? What exactly was the problem? She didn't even know what kind of storm was brewing.

Giovanni stopped beside her. "I know this all feels very confusing—" Alessandro's cell phone interrupted before Giovanni could finish.

Alessandro retrieved the phone from inside his jacket. "*Buona sera.*"

Jamie and Giovanni listened while Alessandro said, "*Nonna, che sorpresa! Una momento.*" He held the phone to his other palm. "Please excuse me. My grandmother."

"Of course." Giovanni said. Then he turned to Jamie. "Shall we have a rest?" He indicated the stone sculpted bench near the lamplight.

Jamie followed him toward the bench and sat. "I still don't understand, Giovanni. What is it the two of you are trying so hard not to say?"

“Please be patient, cara mia. There is a lot to explain, and you need to hear much of it from Alessandro.”

She let out quick breath. As Giovanni had said earlier in the day, patience wasn’t her strong point.

A giggle down the walkway diverted Jamie’s attention toward the source. She watched as the young man grabbed the girl into an ardent embrace. She felt the twinge of regret. Why hadn’t Clint waited for her as Charles Barry’s fiancée had done? *Because I didn’t deserve his undying love.*

The revelation shocked her. Of course! How could she? She wasn’t sure she could have given him the same in return—her emotions were always so tightly kept under the lock and key of her heart. Clint probably suspected her heart would never be accessible until she unlocked the door.

“You are disturbed, cara mia,” Giovanni said next to her. When she didn’t respond, he continued. “Of course you would be. These events—they trouble us all.”

She gave him a brief smile. “It’s not that. I—”

“*Nonna. Rallentamento. Che cosa è la material?*” Alessandro began to pace.

“What’s the matter?” Jamie heard Alessandro say. By the tone of his voice and the furrow of his brow, she deduced that something had gone terribly wrong. All other thoughts forgotten, she now turned her attention to the phone conversation.

“Missing?” Alessandro pivoted on his heel. “How?” He listened for another minute. “Okay, Nonna. I need to finish here.” Pause. “But of course. I will come as soon as I can.” Another pause. “*Sì, Nonna. Arrivaderci.*”

Jamie and Giovanni rose to meet Alessandro as he swung around.

He turned to Giovanni. “It is as I feared. Nonna’s painting—*Jerusalem at Twilight*—was the target. It is gone.”

“But are you certain?” Giovanni held a hand to his chin.

“It hung on Nonna’s wall yesterday, but when she returned from her afternoon outing at three o’clock, she found an empty wall. She called the *polizia* right away, of course, but—”

“Wait a minute.” Jamie interrupted. “Are we talking about the Turner?”

“I *knew* the painting was in danger. I should have gone there first—taken more precautions.” Alessandro pounded a fist into his hand.

“You did not know.” Giovanni tried to calm him.

“But I *did* know, and I chose to come here first.” He walked to the black wrought-iron railing next to the bench and stared out into the dark expanse. He dug his hands into his pockets.

Giovanni placed a hand on Alessandro’s shoulder. “You cannot blame yourself for someone else’s misdeed, *mi amici*, no more than you can blame yourself for Paolo’s murder.”

Alessandro exhaled loudly, followed by a long pause. “You are right, of course. But tomorrow I must set out for Bobbio Pellice.”

“Yes, yes, that is the right thing to do,” Giovanni said. They turned and started toward Varenna’s city center.

Jamie crossed her arms. “That’s it?” she demanded. “Don’t I deserve an explanation?”

CHAPTER 11

The men turned around.

Alessandro looked apologetic. "I'm sorry. I was distracted."

"I'm waiting." She glared at him. He wasn't getting off the hook that easily.

He came back around her to stand at the wrought-iron railing under the lamppost. "Of course you deserve an explanation." He shoved his hands into his pockets and inhaled deeply. "You could not know how close you came to the truth earlier."

"I gather from the call you just received that the Turner in question hung on your grandmother's wall."

"The lady is astute," he mused. "Do you know the name John Ruskin?"

"The late nineteenth century art critic? As I recall he was an eccentric of sorts, obsessed with Turner, though some thought he was a genius."

Alessandro leaned his back against the railing and crossed his arms and legs. "Ruskin was a complicated man—a Reformed Christian, similar in theological position to the Waldensian faith. After some devastating circumstances in his life, he denounced his faith. He came back to it much later, but he preferred a more socially conscious religious view. He said that a man's faith meant nothing unless he took seriously his moral duty to better the lot of mankind. So, he contributed much of his wealth to the arts."

“He also believed Turner’s art exhibited a moral truth of the kind that he had philosophically come to believe in,” Giovanni said.

“Certainly an interesting supposition worthy of discussion for another time,” Alessandro said. “But by the time of his death in 1900, Ruskin owned at least three hundred of Turner’s paintings. Yet he seemed to be fixated particularly on Turner’s Bible Lands paintings. Ruskin believed these paintings’ display of light and color represented truth and beauty in a way no other painter had articulated. For Ruskin, they were Turner’s most exquisite works. It isn’t beyond reason to believe that he would have sought to own one.

“But how do you know this?” Jamie asked.

He looked vacantly past her, and then settled his gaze on her again. “I think I always knew there was something special about the painting that hung in my grandmother’s house—”

“Your grandmother’s painting,” Jamie said.

“Well, only in a manner of speaking is it my grandmother’s painting. My family—my father’s ancestors—have passed it down for more than a hundred and fifty years. In reality, it belongs not just to my family but to our community of brothers and sisters in Bobbio Pellice. The ancient Waldensian vow to forgo materialism prevented my family from claiming the painting as solely theirs. For a time, it hung on the wall in our small church. But it eventually came back to the Marianni family.”

Jamie gaped at him, ran the fingers of her right hand through her wealth of hair as she recovered from the revelation. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You said yourself that it is not uncommon to find previously unknown paintings hanging on grandmothers’ walls.” He cocked an eye.

“Yes, I said that, but I had no idea”

Alessandro lowered his arms from the railing and indicated the stone bench. “You might want to sit down again. There is a story that has passed down with the Turner, and the story will take some time.”

She took a seat while Giovanni remained standing beside Alessandro, seemingly lost in his own thoughts as he faced the lake.

Alessandro began. "On one warm and sunny afternoon in August 1858, a ten-year-old boy, whose name was Luciano Marianni, rambled far from his home in the alpine valleys west of Torino—Turin. Of course, he knew the valleys very well. They were his playground. He also knew most of the residents of the valleys at least by family name—perhaps as it was one time in your Appalachian valleys. They were all the "Poor of Lyon" (an early name for the Waldensian movement)—like him. They often met at various assemblies and gatherings of the Waldensian churches.

"But on this particular day, Luciano wandered much farther than his parents would have allowed. He wasn't worried, though, because like most boys out for an adventure, he had not a care in the world or a thought to how far he had gone.

"But then he heard the thunder of what seemed to be twenty horses on a road thirty or so meters overhead and hid in the coppice—"

"Coppice?" Jamie frowned.

"Yes, forgive me. It is old French. It means a cluster of trees."

She nodded. "Please go on."

"The rumbling ceased, and Luciano waited, his body trembling. Could it be a highway man? Moments later, he heard a blood-curdling cry and the whoosh of something as it flew through the air. It landed and tumbled, crashing through the woods. His heart pounded, his limbs paralyzed. Suddenly, he feared he had just witnessed a body being tossed into the ravine. Then his imagination grew. Maybe it was some magical creature that had descended into his woods. He continued to wait until the horses moved off.

"When at last he ventured from his hiding place, he crept cautiously toward where he thought he had heard the body or creature, or whatever it was, land. His pulse quickened as he stole closer. But when he finally caught a glimpse of the thing, he saw that it wasn't a body or creature at all, but a framed painting. Miraculously, it had barely a scratch on it.

“He put it on its right end and gazed at it for some time awed by the beautiful landscape. He decided right there that God had dropped the painting into his hands and that he would bring it home to his father as a gift. You see, they were very poor, and he wanted to bring something that seemed of value to his family.

“He spent all afternoon hauling the painting home, trudging up one hill and down another through the wood. After a while, it became cumbersome. His arms got tired of carrying it. From time to time he stopped to rest, taking water from the stream to quench his thirst—because it was also a very hot August day. But eventually, he made it home.

“Wanting to surprise his parents, he left the painting behind their barn before running the few meters to his parents’ modest stone dwelling. He entered his house with excitement, only to be met by his mother’s harsh words. She put him to work immediately on evening chores.

“That night, after everyone was in bed, he crept from his house to retrieve the painting. Now, as you have already guessed, the house was quite tiny, so it was no small feat to go out and come back without waking anyone. But he did, and he leaned the painting against a rustic, wooden chair. Then he sneaked back into the tiny bed and fell asleep.

“Some hours later, his mother’s cries startled him from a sound sleep. In alarm, his father leapt from bed also to discover what matter had descended upon them.

“Luciano sat up, rubbed his face, and then rose from bed. ‘I found it,’ he said, as if that should explain it all. ‘God made it fall from the sky into my hands.’

“Marius grabbed his son and told him lying was a sin. But Luciano protested, saying that he wasn’t lying and that the painting *had* fallen from the road overhead of him in the woods—as if God had dropped it into his hands. Then he proceeded to tell them all he had seen and done the day before.

“They listened in disbelief. His mother cupped her cheeks in her hands. Clearly, they could not keep the painting. It must go back to its owner.

“But father, how would we find the owner? Obviously, he didn’t want it, or he would not have thrown it into the ravine.”

“Marius considered his son. This made logical sense. He picked up the painting and took it out to the dawning sun. He could not take his eyes from the beautiful picture, its brilliant color even more stunning in the tawny light of morning. Toward the bottom left corner was a signature. ‘Turner,’ it said, though he couldn’t guess who this most distinguished artist was. A small gold plaque on the frame contained the English words *Jerusalem at Twilight*. Marius could not read the English, but he knew the word Jerusalem. Whoever this Turner was, he had painted the most exquisite likeness of a place the people in the Waldensian valleys had only dreamed of—a place where, someday heaven would descend and the people of God—the Waldensian people in particular—would have the profound privilege to live.”

Jamie drew in a sharp breath.

“‘You have done well,’ Marius told Luciano. ‘We will keep our eyes out for the owner. He may be very sorry for losing it. But we shall enjoy it for now until he returns.’”

“The owner never came for it, and it has been in my family since that day. Over the years, the story has taken on some mythology—like the fisherman whose catch grows in size with each telling of the story. Still, none of my family ever knew *Jerusalem at Twilight’s* true market value until now.”

“Incredible!” Jamie said.

“Yes, but true.” Giovanni turned back toward them. “This is what Alessandro came out of sabbatical to discover. I was going to provide the details this morning, but . . .”

“Now Paolo is dead, and the Turner is missing.” Jamie finished his sentence.

CHAPTER 12

Jamie stood and faced Alessandro. “So what made you think *Jerusalem at Twilight* was an authentic Turner?”

“As I said earlier, I also received an anonymous note; only mine was more forthright. It suggested that the painting on my grandmother’s wall was more valuable than anyone in my family had known. It warned that some unsavory people might try to steal it. That’s when I asked Giovanni to investigate if this could be true.”

“And what I found,” Giovanni said, “astounded me. John Ruskin’s autobiography—a diary really—fills in much of the details.

“In the summer of 1858, Ruskin came to Italy to paint the Alps. He asked his long-time friend and associate Joseph Couffet to accompany him. He also brought a painting he had purchased directly from Turner himself to use as a model for his own endeavors. The diary tells us his personal struggles—his inability to duplicate Turner’s work—it tormented him, until at last he despaired of ever emulating him.

“Since Ruskin had been raised in a strict Presbyterian home, he sought solace in a Waldensian church. But the experience only served to make him more restless. Rather than finding God, he fled Italy, disavowing his Christian faith. However, before leaving the country on a route west through the Cottian Alps, Ruskin took his rage out on his horses and friend.

He drove his English Coupé in a thunderous roar through the beech and chestnut forests, cracking the whip at his horses and

jostling his friend nearly senseless. At last, he stopped his carriage by the side of the road with a jolting halt.

Couttet had no idea what his friend was about, but Ruskin takes great pains to tell us how Couttet became more terrified by the moment. Ruskin describes himself like a man possessed by the devil as he asked Couttet to help him unload the trunks from the carriage. Though his friend tried to stop him, Ruskin belligerently pushed him away and took the Turner from its brown paper packaging. He grabbed the painting between his hands, walked to the edge of the cliff, and then with one final grievous cry, Ruskin hurled the painting.”

“Into the ravine!” Jamie gasped.

She understood something about Ruskin’s anguish. There came a time in her life after Jason’s death when rage had possessed her. After a while, the anger turned to skepticism—skepticism that rendered her void of any faith. What kind of God would have allowed her brother to die in such a gruesome manner and leave her abandoned and alone? Either he had to be extremely cruel or futilely impotent. Whichever, he held no esteem in her eyes.

“Later in England, Ruskin regretted his impetuous actions,” Giovanni continued, “but by then, he believed the painting was lost to him forever. It contributed to his madness.”

“Who would ever have believed such a fantastic story?” Jamie said.

“Somebody did,” Alessandro said. “*Jerusalem at Twilight* is missing.”

Jamie looked from one to the other. “And Paolo discovered it.”

“Yes.” Alessandro said. He met her eyes.

Jamie felt perplexed. “How would Paolo have known about an obscure Turner in an alpine valley west of Turin?”

“Of course, the rumors have been well-known for years.” Giovanni hedged. “He could have stumbled across the information from any number of sources—maybe even somebody who came across Ruskin’s diary.”

Jamie heard Alessandro exhale impatiently behind her. “Paolo wasn’t clean.”

“What do you mean?” Giovanni asked.

“He had more than just a reputation for liking women.” Alessandro said. “He also liked money—lots of it—and I had the unfortunate privilege to be aware of some of his schemes. He could never forgive me for that knowledge.”

Jamie crossed her arms. “That explains his attitude toward you.”

“Yes.” Alessandro guided Jamie forward. “Let’s start heading back to the Villa.”

They took a few steps before Alessandro resumed. “I think it’s time to consider who might have discovered the existence of *Jerusalem at Twilight*.”

“Of course, many disreputable art dealers make it their business to find this kind of information,” said Giovanni. “One could have found out about the Turner.

Alessandro chewed on his cheek. “Yes, that makes sense. Several years ago, Paolo acquired some pieces of art for the Academy and indirectly the Brera as examples of Romantic art. One of them now hangs in the gallery. It is a later Hayez.”

“I know the painting,” said Jamie. “It’s exquisite.”

“Yes, I agree. But I questioned Paolo about the art dealer’s reputation. Things were said between us. I accused him of double-dealing. Then when the artifacts turned out to be authentic, the gallery dropped its concerns. To be honest, however, I never felt I could trust him after that. And Paolo never felt obligated to come clean with me or heal the wounds between us.”

Giovanni rubbed his forehead, which now creased with worry. “I had no idea. When I joined the museum two years ago, no one said anything.”

“The Academy had no reliable proof of any wrong doing,” Alessandro said. “As far as they were concerned, Paolo had been an impeccable employee. His records reflect this.”

“Hmm.” Giovanni frowned. “But the question still remains. How did Paolo find out about the Turner, and who else knew its value?”

The silence grew between them as they took an alley up to the central piazza. They crossed the square, passing a luxury hotel and

upscale café, and then turned right onto the main road that led to the Villa.

“*You must follow the trail, Sis.*” Jason’s voice echoed in Jamie’s ear. She froze. “What?”

The two men stopped beside her. “*Scusi?*” Alessandro’s eyes peered into hers. “You said something?”

She hadn’t realized she spoke. “I” Her mouth moved, but she didn’t know what to say. Should she say, “My brother just spoke to me from the grave?” Surely they would think she was insane. It sounded crazy to her own ears. “I-I said yes. Obviously we need to find the painting before the trail gets cold. But where do we start?”

“I believe you have the answer, *cara mia*,” Giovanni said.

Moments passed.

“The riddle!” Jamie’s thoughts went back to the moment when she’d been accosted on the Passerella. “We need to find the man who gave me that riddle.”

“Yes.” Alessandro exhaled. He lifted a hand to his chin in momentary contemplation. “You should come with me to Bobbio Pellice,” he said at last. “And I think a visit to Torre Pellice is also in order.”

“Torre Pellice?” She shot him a questioning eye.

“Yes, another village close to my grandmother’s home in Bobbio and the headquarters for the Waldensian Church. You would find it interesting, I think.”

Jamie bit her lip. “I would very much like to accompany you, but Investigator Visco—”

“Puh! Don’t worry about Investigator Visco,” Giovanni said, waving a hand in disregard. “He is only posturing. He knows very well he cannot link either of you to Paolo’s murder or substantiate any of his speculations. Your first priority is to find evidence to locate *Jerusalem at Twilight*. It may even lead to Paolo’s assassin.”

“Agreed,” Alessandro said. “We should leave first thing in the morning.”

Jamie nodded her assent, but she knew neither of them could have a clue about what thoughts actually circulated in her mind.

Okay, Jason. I'm following the trail, just as you said I should. Don't abandon me now.

* * * * *

He had followed her as far as he dared without being detected. He thought she saw him on the street in Varenna. Thank God he had been quick to hide. She did not try to look for him after that. So he walked the streets, ending up in the village nightclub.

He could not believe his eyes two hours later through the darkness of the doorway when he saw the three of them ambling down the street together. He noticed her curious peek inside the club, but she did not see him then. His good luck had held. Once again he stalked them down the alleyway and to the Passerella.

He had been smart this time. He brought the girl with him from the nightclub. They'd shared several drinks, and she was more than willing. Alicia was pretty enough, but not really his type—too flighty. But she had agreed to take a walk with him on the Passerella. At one point, when he thought he might be found out, he pulled Alicia into an embrace and kissed her. That had been a mistake, because after that, Alicia wanted him to take her back to his hotel.

Still, they had gotten close enough for him to overhear Alessandro respond to Nonna Luciana's call. That's how he had known for certain that Paolo had been successful at his mission before he'd been killed. The knowledge had sickened him. He told Alicia he would walk her home, and then fabricated some pathetic excuse to leave her at the door. He headed back to the hotel.

Now sitting in the hotel bar, his head wallowed in drink and disgust. Would God forgive him this terrible thing? He doubted it. He deserved hell. He was living in the very pits of a hell of his own making this very moment. He dropped several euros onto the counter and stumbled out of the bar to retreat to his room.

CHAPTER 13

Sir David Chandler held the teacup to his lips and took a sip. Through the window of his office on the seventeenth floor, he watched the Thames slither through the center of London like an oversized serpent. A rugged landscape of masonry, the city basked in the orange and golden glow of the setting sun. He'd always loved this city with all its history, culture, and vivacious lifestyle.

A skirmish of voices jarred David's attention away from his beloved city and toward his closed office door. He clanked his cup on the saucer and placed them on the edge of his enormous desk just as his secretary burst into the office.

"I'm sorry, Lord Chandler," said Mary Dauncey. The normally staid fifty-year old woman appeared indignant. "This man insisted that you would receive him without an appointment." Her stern face and sharp tone bore her disapproval of the man who gazed over her shoulder at David from just beyond the threshold.

Lord Chandler halted in mid-stride and locked his hazel eyes with the dark orbs of the intruder. Unknown to his secretary, a look of recognition passed between them. Of average height, the man's tobacco-colored skin betrayed his Middle-Eastern origin and seemed to permeate the air about him with a veil of darkness.

Sir David frowned, deepening the crease in his forehead. He felt his anger rising. Hadjari. What was *he* doing here?

"Your *Lordship*," the visitor intoned, moving into the room, "please tell your oh-so-well-meaning and, I am quite sure, very efficient secretary, that you will see me—now." Hadjari's command

was spoken in flawless English, alluding to a more highly educated man whose native tongue was not English.

“I told him—,” Mary began.

Sir David nodded to his secretary. “It’s all right, Mary. Thank you.”

He watched with satisfaction as Mary shot a lingering gaze of annoyance over her shoulder at the visitor and stepped aside. She sniffed with derision as the man oozed past her, glared daggers into his back, and withdrew. Then to punctuate her disapproval, she grabbed the door handle, and slammed the panel shut. David could only imagine what she was thinking.

“I don’t think she likes me much.” Hadjari’s lips curled in amusement. He laid his briefcase down on the desk and walked to the floor-to-ceiling bookcases on the other side of the room. There he leisurely studied the leather-bound volumes. “That’s the trouble with the working class—they too quickly forget their place.”

“What do you expect?” David’s eyes seared his visitor with contempt. The black business suit seemed to hang on the man’s five-foot, ten-inch frame. The Albanian wasn’t scrawny, but he was decidedly too thin. His black hair needed a good barber. “Mary Dauncey is more of a woman of class than you will ever be a gentleman.”

Hadjari fingered one of the tomes, ignoring David’s quip. He glanced over his shoulder, and remarked, “Impressive array. You’re not reading Plutarch, are you?”

David crossed his arms. “What do you want, Hadjari?” How much idle chit-chat would the Albanian employ before getting down to the real reason for his presence?

Hadjari turned from the bookshelves and drifted back to the desk, baring teeth with a smile that failed to reach his eyes. He picked up the newspaper on David’s desk and held the paper at arm’s length. “Your picture in *The Observer* does not flatter you. You should demand a reprint. Or at least express your dissatisfaction through a letter to the editor.”

“Have you read the article?”

“It’s of no import.” The Albanian returned the paper to the desk and clasped his hands behind his back.

Hadjari’s confident grin enraged David. “Not important? Don’t you realize my reputation is at stake? People are calling for my resignation from Parliament. These reports will ruin my bid for Prime Minister, and you say it’s not important?”

Hadjari waved a hand in the air. “The winds will blow over soon enough. They always do, and then you can get on with your political aspirations, and we can get on with business.”

David glared at him. He wished he’d never laid eyes on the braggart. “These winds aren’t showing any sign of blowing over, Hadjari. They’re growing into a bloody hurricane. This is not what I bargained for five years ago when I committed £50 million to build a cigarette factory in Albania. I certainly didn’t expect to be facing charges linked to cigarette smuggling operations in Italy. That wasn’t part of the deal.”

Hadjari shrugged. “Save the perch upon the moral high ground for your meetings at Downing Street, Sir David. Besides, who cares what *The Observer* says? Newspapers are notorious for printing unconfirmed and unreliable information. Gossip, David, nothing more. The public will pass it off as yellow journalism.”

“Gossip? They have clear evidence that you are a key figure in the Albanian underworld. Can you deny that?”

“Conjectures are not convictions; speculation is not proof.” The swarthy visitor shrugged dismissively. “If they have ‘clear evidence,’ let them prove it.”

David looked at the paper lying on his desk and fought to regain his composure. The article left little doubt about Hadjari’s real business, and now scrutiny by the media and various government entities had brought British Tobacco into the public eye.

At first David had ignored the truth, preferring to believe Hadjari’s extracurricular activities had nothing to do with him so long as British Tobacco’s hands remained clean. Over time, however, people began to implicate British Tobacco’s international operations. British Tobacco, they said, was guilty by association with an international smuggling ring. For a while, David had been

able to keep the press at bay, but the day had come at last when the papers he had signed five years before took on the yellowed stain of Hadjari's operations.

This latest editorial in *The Observer* had placed David under enormous pressure to sever his association with British Tobacco. Other high-profile people at British Tobacco had already resigned, fearing fallout from the allegations, and it was beginning to appear that even Chandler's title would be inadequate to save him. One of several articles in the day's *Observer* had also encouraged David to resign:

"If other senior politicians have resigned from British Tobacco's board over dealings with a suspected criminal, then perhaps it is time for Sir David Chandler to do the same MP Chandler must make a show of good faith by investigating his own company and taking action against those directors involved."

"No need for such an emotional display." Hadjari said. He moved to the bookcase once again and fingered the legal texts. "Impressive array."

"Excuse me?" David glared.

"The books." He turned and planted himself squarely in front of David.

"You fool!" David muttered. "Don't you realize your coming here compromises everything? We agreed to meet at neutral places and only when it was necessary."

"In fact, Your *Lordship*, I remember this very well. But that's because I naively allowed you to call the shots. The time for that charade is over. Now I'm calling them." Hadjari settled down casually in the brown leather chair in front of the desk. "Oh, do sit down, David," he mocked. "You worry too much."

But David didn't want to sit down. Fury impelled him around the desk, until he was standing above the Albanian. "Have you lost your mind? My political career—my life—hangs in the balance!"

“Relax, David. Everything’s under control.” He laced his fingers and leaned forward. Business will go on as usual. We just have to be more careful.”

“Coming to my office is not being more careful. It’s particularly foolhardy. Don’t you think my secretary knows who you are?” He glowered at the man.

“So what?”

Exasperated, David turned and strode to his desk. After composing himself, he turned to the Albanian and gritted, “She can provide the papers with a connection between us. From here on I want us only to meet privately.”

“She can be neutralized. She is, after all, nearly sixty, no?”

David felt himself go ashen. These were the kinds of people he’d become involved with—and all because he’d gotten too greedy. He’d wanted the prestige of being the CEO who could increase British Tobacco’s profits, provide bigger and better wages and benefits for employees, and set the stage for the next advance in his climb to political prominence. All the while, he ignored what was really driving up all those profits.

When the investigative press first broke the story of black marketing by British Tobacco, he had promised the public that his company dealt only with legitimately licensed distributors. His word was his honor, he had said. “Worldwide there has been a culture of contempt aimed at maligning tobacco companies. But I tell you, when a tobacco company participates in such illegal activities, it damages the reputation of legitimate traders.”

Honor? He knew it was all a lie. Time after time he’d hid the true nature of the company’s sales activities. In fact, more than a third of British Tobacco’s profits—more than a billion pounds a year—had come from smuggling operations in Africa, Latin and South America, China, and Europe. And their market share continued to expand.

“Leave Mary alone. She knows nothing.”

“Tsk, tsk. Don’t worry, David. Elimination is our last resort. I wouldn’t even expunge my wife unless I had no other alternative.”

He laughed. “But then, she understands that good behavior is rewarded and bad behavior is punished.”

David felt the heat rise up his neck. He wanted to wipe that contemptible smile off the face of the insolent smuggler.

“If you and your employees behave as you should, no one will get hurt.” Hadjari’s speech dripped with syrupy sweetness, but left no doubt as to its menacing message.

“Haven’t you done enough to destroy my reputation and this company? I’ve already tried to stop the incessant harassment by the press by giving them what they wanted. I admitted to being involved in a competitive market and turning a blind eye to illegal buyers and how they choose to distribute our products. I apologized for not being more proactive in our sales and distribution.”

“All of this is very good,” Hadjari said.

“I’d like to understand your definition of ‘good.’” David’s voice rose a decibel. “Just today a criminal investigator from Scotland Yard paid me a visit. He told me that an anonymous source from inside the company has provided material evidence of transactions involving Swiss bank accounts and various other hideaways, including the Bahamas and Vietnam—bills of sale and payments—in which the proceeds went back to British Tobacco.”

“This,” the Albanian said in a darkened tone, “is *not* good. Perhaps your Mary Dauncey is not as faithful as you believe.”

“Mary’s clean. She has always been loyal to me.”

“I hope so.” Hadjari dug into his pocket for a Churchill, one of the many brands of cigarettes produced by British Tobacco. He lifted a gold-plated lighter, and then lowered it before lighting the cigarette. “For her sake as well as yours.” He thumbed the lighter aflame, and the cigarette came to life. “But you would do well to find your informant—and before we do.” A wicked smile broke on his lips. “*Ne bëjmë shembuj të tradhtarëve, zotërinë tënde,*” he said. “We make examples of traitors, Your Lordship.”

After snapping the lighter shut and returning it to his pocket, Hadjari blew a ring of smoke into the air before he spoke. “Now down to other business. We have a delicate matter that requires

great discretion beyond our normal business dealings. It will require your company's shipping resources."

"What do you mean 'beyond our normal business dealings'?" David narrowed his eyes. He couldn't believe his ears. "Nothing we've done is within the realm of normal."

"David, David. You must calm yourself. I would hate to think what an elevated blood pressure would do to you."

"I seriously doubt you care about my blood pressure. What do you want from me now?"

"Quite simply, we wish to send an unusual shipment across international borders. We will, of course, use the usual methods for our financial transactions." He dragged on his cigarette, then searched David's desk for an ashtray. There wasn't one available. "Surely you must have an ashtray in this office! Isn't this a cigarette company?"

David stared at him. "You know I don't smoke." He reached into the second drawer of his desk and produced an ashtray, beautifully detailed in bright magenta and made of Italian glass. He shoved it toward Hadjari.

Amusement flashed across Hadjari's face. "Haven't you ever considered the hypocrisy inherent in your position?"

"No."

Hadjari chortled, and then broke off his laughter. "I find your morality fascinating, David. On one hand, you find my smoking offensive. On the other, you are the CEO of a cigarette company. Doesn't that seem—incongruous?"

"Not really. And I really have little interest in what you think of my moral condition." David spoke sharply. He didn't care about how Hadjari viewed his personal values; it irritated him that Hadjari's arrogance presumed some sort of higher moral ground. As far as he was concerned, they both occupied the same filthy mud pit.

"Of course." Hadjari paused, tendering a smile.

David forced his restraint. "I hope you aren't suggesting we ship illegal substances across borders. I never agreed to such an arrangement. You know as well as I do that international smuggling

will bring Interpol into the picture, and perhaps MI5. I won't be involved in that level of risk, Hadjari."

"Relax. I am not planning to ship cocaine or opium through your warehouses."

Hadjari's assurance did little to relieve David's sense of foreboding. "Then why the secrecy? And why do you need my shipping operations?"

The Albanian waxed ponderous. "I suppose I can trust you with a certain amount of information. After all, you are in no position to reveal what you know to anyone." He waved his cigarette in the air. Then he eased back. "It is a painting."

David stared at him incredulously. "A painting? That's what all this is about?"

"Not just any painting, David. An original J. M. W. Turner!" His eyes became bright. "Of Jerusalem. *Allahu të lëvdohet*. May Allah be praised! The Turner, of course, is a rare find. I acquired it for a fair price"

David stopped listening to the Albanian's prattle. He didn't care about the painting. He couldn't have cared less about its value or its rarity. A painting? Hadjari risked David's position for a *painting*? David clenched his teeth.

"Perhaps you are not so much compelled by the measure of the Turner's worth. But I assure you that it must be transported without going through the usual channels."

David jumped up. "This is an outrage! Couldn't you have handled this without calling attention to our association?"

"Perhaps." Hadjari seemed unbothered by David's outburst. "But then I wouldn't have had the extreme pleasure of visiting your offices." He sent David a chilling look. "Sit down, David. Our business is not finished. We still have much to discuss."

The fiery look in Hadjari's eyes cooled David's response. Unfortunately, the man knew David was beaten—beaten by his own greed and arrogance.

Loathing spread through David's gut. Yes, he'd been responsible for his own demise—God help him. If he intended to come out of this situation with any shred of dignity, he'd have to play it through

no matter the cost. And there was much to lose—his job, his attorney’s license, his seat on Parliament, as well as his marriage into one of the richest families in England. It would all vanish. For now, at least, he had no choice but to cooperate with Hadjari.

“Good. I am glad you see it from my perspective.” Hadjari leaned forward to retrieve a document from his briefcase. He was already moving on. “I checked the bank accounts in Geneva only yesterday”

CHAPTER 14

Jamie and Alessandro followed the A4 west and then south toward Turin in Alessandro's 1993 classic Alfa Romeo Spider. The sun warmed Jamie's face with the full convertible top down, and the wind washed over her, blowing her hair around her head. It felt good to let go of the malaise that had descended on them, if only for a brief time.

For much of the morning, Jamie gazed on the North Italian Plain of the Piedmont—a rich agricultural valley that stretched between Milan and Turin. The planted and growing fields of wheat, corn, and rice reminded her of a sweeter time in her life when, in junior high school, she and her family had crossed the central plains of the United States on their way to California. Jason had commented on a tractor, similar to the one that now plowed in the distance. That had been before

Thwack! A vision of Paolo's body lying on the floor of the Villa Cipressi popped up in her mind's eye, and she felt the breath sucked from her.

"Hmm?" Alessandro asked next to her.

"I . . ." She realized she must have groaned. "Paolo's body"

"I see." Alessandro said. His eyes remained on the road, and she thought he would not comment again. "Perhaps we should talk to keep your mind from unpleasant things."

Relief spread across her chest. "Yes, please. I would like that."

“See those buildings in the distance?” Alessandro pointed with his hand resting on the steering wheel. “We’re about to enter more populated territory. Have you been to Turin?”

She shook her head. “I hate to admit it, but no. The only thing I know about Turin is the Shroud.”

He smiled. “That is understandable. Turin is not a top excursion for most tour companies either. They cater to the more romantic heart, yes?”

She felt his scrutiny and blushed.

“Even the Shroud has nothing to offer the ordinary person. You must get special permission to get access to it—only high-level cardinals and scientists.”

Alessandro downshifted abruptly and swerved around a slow-moving sedan. The sudden lane change and acceleration wrenched Jamie about in her seat, and caused her to peer at him with a mixture of wonder and newfound admiration.

“Impressive driving technique, Parnelli,” she quipped. “If I had only known—”

“I keep a helmet in the trunk, if you like.” He snickered.

His unexpected laughter astounded her. “Not necessary.” She grinned. “I’m not a wimp, you know.”

“I’m beginning to see that.” He passed another car, and then spoke again. “Turin has always held an enigma for me, and so I have sought to understand it.”

“What do you mean?” Her interest was piqued, and she turned her full attention on him.

“For example, few people know that Turin is one of the finest baroque cities in all Europe, but one of the most industrialized cities in all of Italy. So while the center is quite old and charming, many modern industries inhabit the outskirts. Over there,” he pointed, “you can see Ferrari. A lot of computer companies exist here as well. Yet the Shroud also suggests that Turin holds a spiritual element. As an artist and a student of history, I am compelled by how Turin brings together many disparate qualities. You understand, yes?”

Yes, Jamie believed she understood. “I suppose you could say it’s like some pieces of art—a DaVinci or Michaelangelo, for example—the complexity of its texture often makes it all the more appealing.”

“Exactly.” He smiled, and held her eyes. “Like a fine wine or an intriguing woman.”

She saw the admiration in his eyes before he turned his attention back to the road. It caught her breath, and she shifted her position forward, feeling a mixture of warmth and disquiet invade her senses. *And you, Alessandro Marianni, surprise at every turn.*

A few minutes later, Alessandro took the road southwest to Pinerolo. All preceding thoughts left as she gazed in awe ahead of them. The Alps loomed against the backdrop of an azure sky, their steep peaks towering with a snow-white crown of majesty. “Spectacular!”

“The gateway to the Waldensian valleys. And there,” Alessandro pointed to a huge peak, “straight ahead is the Castelluzzo, standing as a sentinel to welcome us.”

“It’s magnificent!” A moment later, she heard a small laugh. “What’s so funny?”

“Your face. It is as if you’d never seen a beautiful mountain before,” he said.

She gazed out the window. “I’ve traveled to many places; I suppose some people would expect that a world traveler becomes jaded after a while. But I have never tired of it.”

He seemed pleased with her response. “That is as it should be.”

Alessandro came to a roundabout where a sign indicated nineteen kilometers to Torre Pellice, and Jamie’s stomach did flip-flops. Could he guess her thoughts? Of course, the very idea was silly. She was sure he could not read minds.

“I am anxious for you to become acquainted with these valleys,” he said, the intensity of his enthusiasm beckoning her to participate in the continuing story of the landscape. “Beautiful, yes. But it holds a magic that captures the soul—some say because of the history.”

“Magic, huh?”

“Indeed. But you will have to decide for yourself if these valleys entice your soul.” He looked aslant at her.

Jamie felt her heart race in anticipation of the hours ahead. She didn’t know what to make of the mysterious quality of his voice or of the mythical/historical nature of the region. But she sensed that the fantastic drama she’d become intricately involved in was about to take on epic proportions.

* * * * *

“Alessandro!” Delightful surprise lit the older woman’s face as Alessandro and Jamie entered the executive offices of the Waldensian Museum in Torre Pellice.

“Hello, *Zia* Regina,” he said to his Aunt Regina.

Zia Regina grabbed his face and kissed him on both cheeks. “But you were supposed to be in Albania. Have your parents returned also?” she asked.

Behind them, Jamie noted the stacks of papers and books that lay haphazardly on the desk. Several brochures lay on top of one stack that read *Museo Valdese Torre Pellice*.

“No, *Zia*. They are still in Tropojë,” Alessandro responded in Italian. He turned to introduce the two women. “Aunt Regina is one of the historians of the Waldensian Museum.”

“Welcome.” Regina took her hands. “You are here to learn of our history, yes?”

Jamie immediately warmed to the woman. “Alessandro has told me so much about your people. I wanted to see it all for myself.”

“Ah, our Alessandro. He is well-qualified—maybe more than me—to tell you our history. As a boy, he made frequent visits behind these revered halls.” Regina waved her hand, and then pointed. “I’d see him through those windows come pedaling down the alleyway on his bicycle. Once inside the gates, he would throw down his bicycle on the grass and run up the steps to the doors. Soon, I would hear those feet scampering up the stairway and stopping at the threshold of the history room. ‘Alessandro,’ I would say to him, ‘most boys your age are outside playing

football.” She leaned into Jamie. “You know; soccer.” She continued her story. ‘Alessandro,’ I would say, ‘Why do you not play with the other boys? Go back to Bobbio Pellice where you belong.’ ‘Zia Regina,’ he would say, ‘tell me again how God led the Valdesi back to Bobbio Pellice and Sibaud.’”

Alessandro laughed. “I think you exaggerate, Aunt Regina.”

She touched his cheek. “Ah, but look at you today. I believe the Almighty smiles down on you.”

Jamie watched the interchange between them with a new interest in the Alessandro described by Zia Regina—this man who, as a boy, preferred to study his heritage rather than play outside with the other boys. She cocked her head to one side. There was so much more to this man than she had ever imagined in Cleveland years ago. “Perhaps you should have become a priest,” she said to Alessandro.

“Oh, no.” Dismay sprang up on Regina’s face. “Valdesi preachers are not called priests, and they have always married. Instead of Father, they called them *barba*—uncles—to distinguish their role as evangelists, traveling the roads of Europe. They did not see themselves any different than ordinary men; only that they should dedicate their lives to teaching the true gospel.”

“I can see I have much to learn,” Jamie said.

“Which brings us to why we are here,” said Alessandro. “Zia Regina, may we have access to the rooms? They appear to be locked.”

“Tsk, tsk.” Regina went around her desk and reached into a drawer. “We started cutting back hours last fall. Money, you know. But,” she reached into a desk drawer and handed him the key, “the museum is always open to you, Alessandro.”

“Thank you, Zia Regina.” He smiled at her warmly.

Alessandro led Jamie down a corridor to a locked glass door. After he turned the key, they entered a small reception area. Alessandro snapped on a light. A sparsely stocked gift shop extended to a corridor that led to a set of rooms where they would begin their tour. “I hope you will find your journey,” he said.

They entered the first room where the display began in the twelfth century with the advent of Peter Waldo, a wealthy merchant from Lyons, France. It gave an account of how Waldo had become disenchanted with the Church of Rome, because he felt it had heaved too many burdens on its faithful flock. In response, he took a vow of poverty. Soon he collected a band of followers who also dissented from the Roman Church's teachings.

As Jamie continued through the displays and viewed the dioramas, she became increasingly drawn to the story of the "Poor of Lyon." She marveled at the great longing of Waldensians to return to the practices of the early church fathers unencumbered by the mandated indulgences in exchange for the forgiveness of their sins. Their worship and lifestyle had also become more of a simple devotion to their Savior.

She moved on to the life-size display of a Waldensian man at a rudimentary desk. As a requisite to simple worship, Waldensians claimed they needed a Bible written in the vernacular, so that ordinary people could understand for themselves what God truly required of them. But the Roman Church had outlawed anything but a Latin text, so they were hunted down and persecuted for translating Scripture. Traveling evangelists—roving *barba*—with Bibles in their own language risked their lives to preach the gospel.

"I can see why your history is so important to you," Jamie said in awe. "The tenacity of your ancestors' spirit is woven into the fabric of who you are. I can't even imagine," she said as she studied a painting that portrayed men at the stake, women and children killed with crude weapons, and people forced into a life of secrecy.

"It's hard for me to imagine, too," he said as they moved to the period of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. "What hope my ancestors must have had at the height of the Reformation when they came out of hiding, built churches and structured their theology—this, only to experience Rome's heightened persecution against them once again in the middle of the seventeenth century when they had to choose whether they would deny their faith, face exile in Switzerland or be condemned to die a martyr's death."

Indeed, many fled to Switzerland, she discovered in the next display. But three years later, the Waldensian collective spirit was challenged again in what became known as the “Glorious Return”—a courageous move to return to their alpine valleys during the winter months. Some died crossing the treacherous terrain during fierce tempests, but many persisted to see their homeland once again.

“Can you envision the scene?” A far-off expression crossed Alessandro’s face. “The remaining men, women and children, forging through the mountain pass, and then at the crest, beholding their beloved valleys below them.”

“Like the moving climax of an epic drama,” Jamie said.

“But more real than any fictional tale,” he said, leading her to the next display.

Then ... A lightning bolt shot through Jamie’s body. She thought her knees would buckle.

“Dear God!” she breathed. “It is just as you said. The very same words that are in the riddle.”

She shivered. A surrealistic shadow spread through her body. In front of her, around the Waldensian Emblem—a single candle surrounded by seven stars on a dark background—were the words *Lux Lucet In Tenebre*—Light Shining Out of Darkness.

I’m here, Jason, following the clues. But I still don’t know why I’m supposed to be here.

“That’s why I knew your assailant had to know something of the Waldensian community,” Alessandro said quietly next to her. “Only a Waldensian or a church historian would be aware of Pastor Grosso’s *Lucerna Sacra*—*Sacred Light*—the Waldensian resolve to remain true to the gospel of Christ during a time when repression continued to gain momentum.”

Jamie stared at the words. They represented the ever-present question, storming her mind like a gigantic whirlwind, confusing and vexing her life. Why? What did she have to do with a community of people and their faith that she had never before known? Being here, she felt ill-equipped to speak about things of faith or to understand why it should matter to her.

A quiet tension had always existed between her Protestant father and Roman Catholic mother. But when Jamie was fifteen, the schism of faith between her parents and her grandmother reached a crisis. Eventually they settled back into a sort of truce, but the spiritual wounds had never healed. Several years after Jason died, something inside Jamie snapped. She would be neither Catholic nor Protestant. She resented God for Jason's death, and she blamed the conflict of religious faith for dividing her family.

Alessandro led Jamie down a darkened corridor toward a door where they emerged into the sunlight. "I respect you and your ancestors' spirit," she said finally as they left the museum compound through a wrought iron gate.

"But ... ?" He coaxed her.

"My experience growing up could not have been more drastically different. My father and mother tried to instill values compatible with the church, but they disagreed about where that could best happen. My parents and grandparents fought about it all the time. By the time I became a young adult, I stopped going altogether." She paused, a defiant look spreading across her face. "So, I suppose you would call me a heathen."

He met her eyes, and the compassion in them surprised her.

"No. Only confused," he said.

"You don't condemn me?"

"That's not my job."

"But I thought ... oh, never mind."

She turned, and they ambled forward in silence toward the center of town. After everything Zia Regina had said about him, knowing that he had just spent months at an Albanian mission, she had expected him to censure her decision.

"You thought I'd express my disapproval," Alessandro said.

She looked at him blankly. "So you're not going to try to convince me of my wayward life?"

He laughed. "You seem so disappointed. I could if you would really like—"

“No, thank you,” she said as they stepped between a set of benches and flower pots onto Torre Pellice’s picture-perfect town square. “I think it would spoil how I’m feeling about now.”

“And how is that?”

“Like I would do anything to live right there.” Jamie pointed to a balcony with its flower box hanging on the black railing with its scores of pansies, violets, daisies and geraniums.

Alessandro looked up in an easy and unassuming manner, and then back at her. “You might get bored of the provincial lifestyle here after a while. Torre Pellice is not Milan.”

“Which is a good thing,” she said glad to have moved on from their conversation. She wasn’t prepared yet to talk about things of faith. Still, as she observed two older women like her grandmother, talking incessantly and gestured wildly with their hands, she felt strangely at home. “I think I would like it here very much.”

“I warn you. You might not make a lot of money. We are the Poor of Lyon, remember, and we are known for being frugal. You would have to rely on tourism.”

“I could live on bread and cheese.”

He laughed and opened a door into a small trattoria. “But perhaps for now we’ll have something a little more substantial for lunch, shall we?”

“Now that *is* a good idea!” she said, wondering indeed what it would be like to live among the “Poor of Lyon.”

* * * * *

He hefted his jacket, feeling the cool air swirl through the arched breezeway at the entrance of the Pinacoteca di Brera and headed through the black wrought-iron gate. Just inside the courtyard, he stopped to get his bearings. Visitors passed him as he surveyed his surroundings. Though most of the people around him had come to enjoy the great works of art housed in the Renaissance museum, he had come to Milan for a different purpose. At last he found the stairway that led to his basement destination.

He crossed the courtyard of the fifteenth-century *palazzo* to descend the steps. At the bottom of the stairwell, a sign proclaimed, *Accademia di Belle Arti*, the Academy of Fine Art, where Alessandro typically taught Art History. From here, he needed to follow the instructions he had been given to find the storage room.

As he made his way through the labyrinth of the school, housed in the underbelly of the museum, he thought about what had led him to this moment.

He had hoped the riddle would lead Alessandro and Signorina Holbrooke back to Bobbio Pellice, his hometown. Home! The word warmed his heart. He missed mama and Maria and even his small bed. But he knew he could not return, not now.

Regrettably he had been too late with the note to Signorina Holbrooke, and Alessandro hadn't understood the urgency. Now Paolo was dead, and the painting hid in a box where the art curator had put it here at the Academy.

At one time, he would have simply transferred the painting to Alessandro's office. But that option no longer existed. Paolo's murder taught him to take Zamir and his boss Bashkim Hadjari quite seriously.

Was it really only two nights ago that he had given the riddle to Signorina Holbrooke? He had not meant to scare her. His only objective had been to give her reason to pursue his lead without his identity being discovered.

But from the moment he had stepped off the ferry onto Varenna's ferry dock, he had known he was being followed. Even while he tried to convey his dire concerns to Signorina Holbrooke, he knew someone else lurked in the shadows.

Later that night, Hadjari's enforcer, Zamir, had caught up with him in the alley behind the hotel where he had been staying. He held him against the wall. "Follow our instructions or pay the consequences," had been the assassin's message, and he left him with a bloodied mouth and an abundance of fear.

He had planned to take a morning train to Milan the next day, but at four o'clock in the morning, his cell phone rang. He swallowed hard when he heard Paolo's anxious voice. Something

had gone radically wrong. Benedetto wanted to talk. Paolo wanted him to rent a boat to pick up the mobster at his villa near Tremezzo. They would meet at 7 a.m. by the unused boat dock at the Villa Cipressi.

That was when he had realized Paolo's scheme to play both ends against the middle had backfired. During the meeting, Paolo had played the crime boss with a cool hand—told him not to worry. The painting was practically in Benedetto's possession. "Tomorrow," Paolo had told him, "it will be hanging on your wall."

Benedetto was no fool, though. He'd brandished a gun at Paolo and told the art curator that he had better not have double-crossed him or he would vanish without a trace. Paolo had just grinned and told him to put the gun away. He'd have his painting. Paolo had left to go to his room soon after, leaving him to take the mobster back to his villa.

He hadn't had time to tell Paolo about his encounter with Hadjari's enforcer the previous night or that all their lives were in danger. Paolo might have laughed it off anyway.

Later in the morning, he walked back to the Villa Cipressi. He'd almost reached his destination when he heard police sirens blaring behind him. A sinking feeling had grabbed his gut. He should have fled, but instead he'd felt compelled to find out the bad news, no matter how gruesome it was. He had taken a deep breath and followed the police into the hotel.

While the police had spread out in various directions, he attempted to comb the chaotic mob without calling attention to himself. Had Zamir made good on his word?

"Signore," he had heard from behind the reception desk. He'd ignored it at first, but then the voice had become more insistent.

"Signore," the woman had said, "Investigatore Visco has requested all residents of the hotel to sign in for an interview." She had pointed to a piece of paper and held out a pen.

He'd just stood there like a clod of dirt. Investigator? No way! He couldn't talk to the police.

“I don’t like this any better than you do,” she had said, mistaking his silence for disgruntlement. “But the police” She offered an apologetic look and shoved the pen at him.

“*Scusi*, Signorina.” A worried-looking, middle-aged gentleman pushed his way in front of him. “My wife and I have plans for the day,” he said. “We don’t know anything about any murder. Is this really necessary?”

He had frozen, then, his fears confirmed. In desperation, he scurried away from the lobby and out a side door into the garden.

He had followed the winding path to the lakeshore and smoked a cigarette, pondering his options, pacing back and forth. That was when he had seen Alessandro on the terraces above and knew he had no choice. He had thrown down his cigarette and jumped into an empty dory tied to the Villa’s boat dock.

Now, as he entered the storage room to retrieve the painting, he wished he had never laid eyes on Paolo or the men that held his life in their grasp. He found the box just where he had been told it would be and picked it up. He closed his eyes. “God forgive me.”

CHAPTER 15

Torre Pellice had impressed Jamie as timeless—a place where something of life’s enduring value had persisted through the ages. The road to Bobbio Pellice was no different.

As Alessandro drove through the Pellice Valley, she found herself lost in the grandeur of the alpine peaks and the verdant hillsides, coming alive after the spring snow melt. She watched a shepherd command his Bergamasco shepherding dog to muster the flock across a field. Farther away, dairy cattle grazed on the greening slopes. She doubted much had changed for centuries in these quiet, venerable valleys of northwestern Italy’s Cottian Alps.

Surrounding Bobbio Pellice toward the northwest, mountains loomed majestically over the village—a citadel of snow and stone. The wooden structures of the *borgata*—a small community of simple, clustered mountain homes—perched above the town against the backdrop of the monolithic mountain. The simplicity of the homes and the agrarian landscape spoke of a provincial lifestyle uncomplicated by worldly concerns.

Jamie savored the pastoral character of the town. Yet the internet café in the central village was a reminder that the twenty-first century had invaded the otherwise striking old-world charms of the village. The computer sales center in the next block left no doubt that the village had joined the modern age.

After they had left behind the last town structure, Alessandro turned right, up a steep and narrow dirt road. They passed several

modest homes and farms. At the crest of the hill, the road forked, and he went to the right, past a dairy farm.

Ahead, just before a primitive arched stone bridge, Jamie spied an old gent in a cap coming toward them at a slow but steady pace, using a crooked cane for support. He stopped on the bridge as they passed him, and waved. Jamie responded in kind, speculating. She supposed the old man knew his days were numbered. He would die as he had lived—a man of modest means. And yet, perhaps he was consoled by having lived a quiet and gentle life in this pastoral setting.

Alessandro continued forward around a bend, leaving a trail of dust behind. Moments later, he made a sharp nosedive down a gravel drive in front of an unassuming stone cottage and stopped at the bottom before a bed of flowers.

Jamie gasped in delight. The small dwelling bore little resemblance to her parents' grander home in Cleveland, Ohio, but it didn't need to against the backdrop of its tableau. Beds of flowers surrounded the cottage with their brilliant colors—purple violets, variegated pansies, yellow lilies and scarlet gilia. Mentally she followed the flagstone pathway around to the back of the house where the house rested against a hilly rise.

"I can't believe your grandmother lives all the way up here!" she breathed as they climbed out of the car. "It's magnificent. But how does she do it? How does she get around?"

"We Waldensians are hardy people," he said, leading her past the flowerbed to the rustic wooden door of the cottage. "We had to persevere through the Glorious Return, remember? As you will see, Nonna Luciana may be eighty-two years old, but she is a tough old lady. She walks these dirt roads and into the village every day, even in torrential downpours."

He knocked, and a moment later, the door swung open with a squeak.

"Alessandro!" Nonna Luciana's eyes beamed. Jamie watched as time-weathered hands reached out to grab hold of Alessandro's face and bring it down to her level, so that she could plant kisses on both cheeks.

Jamie mused. The stocky matron met every stereotypical image down to the navy-blue dress and dark stockings. Her heart warmed as she watched grandmother and grandson enjoy a moment of tender reunion.

Alessandro put Nonna Luciana at arm's length. "You are prettier today than when I last saw you, Nonni. Have you done something to your hair?"

She touched her short, gray, curly locks, and then brushed the thought away with her hand. "Oh, go on with you."

"I see that I can still make you blush."

She put her hands on her hips. "How I have missed you, *caro mio*."

He turned to Jamie. "This is Signorina Jamie Holbrooke."

"I am so glad to meet you," Jamie said.

"Ah, Jamie." Nonna Luciana opened her arms, and then kissed Jamie on both cheeks. "It is wonderful to meet you. Alessandro rarely brings home his lady friends. Now come," she said, gathering them inside, "and I will make us some coffee while you tell me all about yourself." She closed the door behind them.

Lady friend? Jamie cocked an eyebrow. Was that a descriptor Alessandro would use to refer to her?

"Nonni, Jamie is the woman I told you about on the phone—a colleague from Milan."

Nonna Luciana looked back over her shoulder with a secretive look in her eye. "I know, *caro mio*."

Jamie and Alessandro exchanged an awkward smile.

A stale, musty odor rushed on Jamie's senses, as she followed Alessandro and his grandmother into the dim interior. She studied the snug living area with a keen awareness of her surroundings. Heavy wooden beams crossed the low ceilings. Worn furnishings suggested a woman of meager means, while the stone fireplace on the perimeter stone wall gave a rudimentary feel to an otherwise well lived-in place. Only a side window allowed indirect light to enter the room.

As they walked past the living room down the central hallway, Jamie considered the empty inside wall above the dilapidated sofa

and frowned. She remained quiet, however, trying not to draw attention to the proverbial elephant in the room by pointing out the Turner's absence.

Still, Nonna Luciana paused. "I must contact Giuseppi about painting that wall," she said with a sniff. "It has been far too long since I updated this old place."

Jamie felt sympathy tug at her heart. Nonna Luciana was obviously keeping up a brave front, she thought, as she followed her down a central hallway to the kitchen.

She watched as Alessandro's grandmother poured distilled water into the bottom of an octagonal coffee brewer and ground coffee beans in a grinder. After placing the ground beans into the brewer, she set it on the stove to brew.

"We will have our coffee on the terrace, shall we?" Nonna Luciana said. "The sun should still warm the deck for a while." She handed a plate of biscotti to Alessandro. "Would you please take these out for me, my grandson?"

"*Si, Nonni. Il piacere è tutto mio,*" he said, indicating his pleasure to help her. He took the plate and walked out the back door to a wooden deck.

"You are a long way from home, yes?" She turned questioning eyes on Jamie. "You are a brave girl to come all this way without family. Do you like living in Milan?" Nonna asked.

"Yes, very much," she said as Alessandro returned and leaned against the threshold.

Nonna Luciana grinned. "But you have been to the region Valdesi before, yes?"

Jamie bit her lip and sent a questioning glance toward Alessandro.

"Jamie knows about the painting, Nonni." He finished for her, and straightened.

"Ah." His grandmother paused, her face darkening. "I don't understand why someone would have done such a thing. It is nothing to anybody outside this valley."

Again Jamie's eyes met Alessandro's. He must not have told Nonni everything about the painting, yet. "Maybe whoever took it didn't realize how much it meant to you and your family."

The woman shrugged as she poured the coffee from the brewer into their cups and placed them on a tray. "Every Valdesi in Bobbio Pellice knows what the painting means to this community. It is part of our history."

Their history, Jamie had begun to realize, meant a great deal to Waldensians. Their lives were shaped by it as if they believed the hand of God had come down to mold it specifically for them. "Alessandro and I are going to do our best to help you find your painting, Nonna Luciana."

She looked up to meet Jamie's eyes with a grateful smile. "Please call me Nonni. And I know you will." She picked up the tray and led Jamie and Alessandro to the terrace where she set the tray on the wrought-iron table with the biscotti.

Jamie returned her smile. It felt good to be accepted like family—something she hadn't felt for a long time.

Once seated, Jamie fixed her eyes on the blooming gardens of blazing color around the deck and up the steep hill rising in front of them. "Nonni, this is like heaven. Did you do all of this yourself?" She watched a butterfly hover over a lily and settle gracefully on a petal.

Nonni smiled sweetly at Jamie. "I tend these flowers as if they were my babies." She poured cream into her cup.

Alessandro shifted in his chair, and Jamie sensed his impatience to move back to the reason that brought them to Bobbio Pellice. "Nonni." He put a hand on his thigh. "We should talk about the painting."

"Of course. Take a sip of your coffee." She sipped her own and wasn't content until he tasted his. With droll flair, Alessandro sipped his coffee. "You like?" she said.

He set his cup down on the saucer. "Yes, it is very good, Nonni, as you very well know."

"Excellent!" She beamed.

Jamie perceived a slight tilt to Nonni's nose and stifled a chuckle. The older lady would have her way, she suspected, at anytime with anybody, and everyone would adore her for it.

"Now, you probably want to know if I have any idea who might have done it." Nonni put her own cup on the table.

Alessandro nodded. "The painting is the reason we are here."

"I think I have a pretty good idea who might be responsible."

"You do?" He leaned forward, his eyes wide. "Who?"

"Nico Charbonnier."

"Nico?" He frowned. "He has never given anyone a day of trouble. Why would you think he had something to do with it?"

She narrowed her eyes. "He came to visit me a couple of months ago. I had not seen him around for a while, so I was very glad to see him. We shared a coffee and some cookies, like we are now. So I asked him, 'Nico, where have you been?' And he said he had been in Milan looking for a job. 'Oh,' I said, 'and have you found one?'"

"He hedged around a bit, and I could see he did not want to talk about it. So I said, 'Nico, if you need money, I can give you some.'"

"'No, Nonna,' he said, 'I do not want your money.'"

"'Nico, I know you men are so proud, so it would just be a loan until you can pay me back,' I said. But he told me not to worry about him. Then he turned away, and I sensed he wanted to take the money, but I did not want to embarrass him. 'Okay, Nico,' I said, 'but I am here.' I could tell there was still something else he could or would not talk about, but he never said what it was."

"His behavior does not sound suspicious to me." Alessandro leaned back and crossed his arms. "He sounds like a man who is searching his way."

"No, I agree, it doesn't. But after we talked a while more, he said he had to leave. On his way out, he stopped by the painting and started asking questions. Of course, he has known the story, just like you, since he was a baby in diapers. So, I felt puzzled. Why did he ask so many questions about something he already knew? 'Nico,' I said, 'you know the story.'"

“‘Yes’ he said, ‘but now that I am in Milan and away from the valleys, I feel a great comfort just to remember them.’ Then he left, and now the painting is gone. And why? What value is it to him?”

Alessandro fixed his eyes on her for a moment. Then he dropped his arms. “This proves nothing. It could have been just as he said.”

“Do you have any other evidence? Something that leads you to believe it would be Nico?” Jamie asked.

Nonni straightened. “No. But all the time he was here, he seemed evasive, like he was hiding something.” She placed her hand over her heart. “I know it in here.” She paused, her expression becoming dispirited. “Oh, Alessandro, you should have seen him. I almost didn’t recognize him when he first came to my door. He looked so shabby, not like he used to be. The brightness in his eyes was gone, as if a shadow had come over them. He looked older—beyond his twenty years. And one more thing. He reeked of cigarette smoke.”

Jamie perked up. Nico—Twenty years old, shabby, and reeking of cigarettes? These words described the man who had accosted her. She leaned forward. “Nonni, do you have a picture of Nico?”

“Well, I ... I believe I do, in an album. Why?”

Jamie shook her head. “The day before yesterday, a man approached me who matches your description. He gave me a riddle and told me I would understand it. Then he disappeared.”

Nonni furrowed her brow. “My dear! You must have been frightened.”

Jamie mused. “At first, but later I just felt perplexed. I didn’t understand anything about the riddle or why he thought I would, but he seemed adamant that he wanted me to have it.”

Nonni became thoughtful. “It is strange”

Alessandro directed his eyes at her. “Nonni, do you think you could find the album?”

“But of course. I keep it in the bureau in the living room.” She rose from her chair, and Jamie and Alessandro followed her inside the cottage to the small living area. She turned on a dim lamp, and then reached into a short bureau. “Here it is.” She brought it out.

Alessandro reached for the album, and then searched the pages until he came to a stop. He turned the album to show Jamie the picture. “Is this the man you saw in Varenna, Jamie?”

She gasped. She could hardly choke out the words. “That’s him—a little younger and more clean-shaven, but it’s him. Yes, I’m sure of it.”

The room felt suddenly cold, and she shivered. *Jason ... are you here? Why does this Nico look like you? What’s happening?* She felt a knot inside her stomach. Tears welled in her eyes.

“Dio mio,” Jamie heard Nonni cry out for her God. The old woman put a hand over her heart. “I knew it in here. But what has happened to our Nico? Why has he turned his back on his family and his community?”

Alessandro pondered a moment. “Who knows why some men turn? Greed, hunger, a sense of futility?”

“Something terrible must have happened to turn him into a thief. He would not have done this horrible thing otherwise.” She put an insistent hand onto Alessandro’s arm. “You must find him, my child, and help him understand what he has done.”

He put a hand over hers. “Yes, Nonni. We will find Nico.” Studying Alessandro’s furrowed brow, Jamie wondered if he had considered the other horrendous possibility—that Nico, this specter of her brother, might also be a murderer.

He glanced up at her and shook his head slightly. Yes, he had thought of it, and he did not want his grandmother to know.

Tears brimmed Nonni’s eyes. “We are the Poor of Lyon, no? We are not supposed to care about material possessions.” She pulled her hand away to retrieve a handkerchief from her apron pocket. Then she blew her nose. “But the painting—it is special. A gift from God.”

Alessandro’s voice caressed Nonni’s anguished soul like a soothing salve. “No one possesses a more giving or compassionate heart, Nonni. You must not concern yourself about what others will think. We will find Nico and the painting and bring them both back, yes? In the meantime, you must tell us if you think of anything else that might help our search.”

She nodded her head and blew her nose a second time. “Of course, but I am not sure what else I can do. It is in God’s hands now. We can only pray he works out his plan.”

Jamie considered Nonni’s words. Her tone held none of the resignation Jamie expected, but rather, a quiet confidence in her God’s sovereignty to work.

Jamie shivered again and encircled herself with her arms. In a way, she envied Nonni’s kind of faith. She had lost it many years ago, if she had ever really had it. The idea that God was in control flew in the face of reason.

“You are cold,” Nonna Luciana said, and stood up.

Jamie nodded, surprised by Nonni’s notice of her in the midst of her own sorrow.

She put an arm through Jamie’s. “Well, we cannot have that.” She turned to her grandson. “Alessandro, please set a fire. Jamie and I are going to start dinner and get to know each other a little better, yes?”

Jamie returned her soft smile. “I would like that.”

“*Buono*. It is time we talked of something not so distressing, yes?”

CHAPTER 16

“My grandmother makes something similar to your *agnolotti* with butter and rosemary sauce in her restaurant. Customers rave about it,” Jamie said.

Nonni’s face sparkled with pleasure as she handed Jamie a frying pan to dry. “I think I would like your Nonna. We would have a beautiful time cooking together.” She paused. “You will have to come back in the fall during truffle season when I have a very special recipe we can make together and share with her.”

“I would like that,” Jamie said. She took the last plate from Nonni’s hand and dried it.

“Good. Now you must join Alessandro while I put things away.” Nonni took the towel from Jamie’s hand. “Go on with you,” she said, before Jamie could protest.

Jamie gave up graciously, and then rounded the wooden column separating the living room and cozy kitchen to where Alessandro was tending the fire across the room. “I can’t tell you the last time I felt so much at home,” she said, as she sat on the settee.

He turned around in his squatting position. “This is good, yes?” He smiled gently.

She laid her head back and closed her eyes. After the last two day’s events, she felt exhausted. But here, in front of the warm fire in Bobbio Pellice with Nonni and Alessandro so far from the ugliness that had assailed her in Varenna, she felt her body relax and drift on a soft billowy cloud. She didn’t know how long she’d

been out. But when she opened her eyes, she found Alessandro staring at her with a coffee in his hand.

“I didn’t mean to wake you. You looked so peaceful.”

She pushed herself up and reached for her demitasse cup. “Where’s Nonni?”

“Here,” Nonni said, coming down the corridor. “I have fixed a room for you. Alessandro, you will have to sleep out here. The sofa is not so comfortable, but...”

“The sofa will be just fine.” Alessandro patted the cushion.

“Good.” Nonni moved to the sofa to sit, taking great pains to sit.

“Oh, but you’re hurting,” Jamie said. “I should not have let you work so hard.”

Nonni put a hand on her knee. “Now do not pay any attention to these poor old bones! I like to cook, and I do not often have such pleasure these days.”

“You see, what did I tell you? Nonni will not coddle herself,” Alessandro said.

“I walk at least four times a week down to the village,” she said, pride beaming from her eyes. “And I will not stop until the good Lord decides it is my time to go home.”

“Which brings me to my next idea,” Alessandro said. “I thought I would take Jamie on an excursion tomorrow before we leave these valleys—maybe explore some of our historical sites. What do you say, Jamie? Shall we put on our hiking boots and tramp about before we head back?”

“I can’t think of anything I’d like more. But ...” She hesitated. “Don’t you want to get back to Varenna first thing to find Nico?”

“It will be a small detour from the road out of these valleys. But a couple of hours won’t make a big difference.”

“There is one thing I am curious about, Alessandro—something you did not say when you talked about the painting earlier. And do not deny it.” Nonni waved a finger. “I read it in your eyes. What was it that you were trying so hard *not* to say?”

He set down his cup. “Nothing flies by you, does it, Nonni?”

She met his eyes with a frank openness.

Alessandro leaned forward with his hands folded between his legs, a ponderous expression on his face before speaking. “Nonni, have you never wondered about where *Jerusalem at Twilight* came from? Has no one in the valley ever wanted to investigate it?”

Incredulity spread across her face. “Investigate? We know the story.”

“Yes, we know how *Jerusalem at Twilight* came to us,” Alessandro said gently. “But what about the painter or the person who disposed of it for Luciano Marianni to find?”

She opened her hands wide. “I suppose it never seemed important. It was always as Luciano Marianni had said—it fell from the sky.”

A soft smile crossed Alessandro’s lips. “Nonni, even you must admit that things do not just fall from the sky. Someone had to hurl the painting into the ravine.”

“Oh, all right.” She looked chagrined. “But what does it matter? Whoever the painting belonged to tossed it aside more than a hundred and sixty years ago. He obviously did not want it. Certainly he never came back for it.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Nonni furrowed her brow. “What do you mean? You know the story—the tradition.”

“Yes, Nonni, I know. And it is a very beautiful tradition. I have spent my life surrounded by our traditions, and they are just as important to me as they are to you. I am first and foremost Waldensian and a Christian.”

“Then why do you question it now?”

“I do not question our tradition or where we came from, Nonni.” He rose and walked to the fireplace, and then leaned against the wall. “All my life, I have sought to live honestly. Mama and Papa taught me that. You once told Papa that if he always sought the truth, the truth would set him free.”

“I was referring to living out the gospel.”

“And so am I.” He pushed himself away from the wall. “You must listen carefully to what I have to tell you. Our painting once belonged to a man—an art critic—named John Ruskin. He was a

Scottish Presbyterian who visited these valleys in the summer of 1858.”

“How do you know this?” she blurted out.

A brief smile crossed his face. “I am an art history professor, Nonni. You might consider I’ve learned a thing or two over the years.”

“Don’t be cheeky.”

“You asked.”

“I did,” she reluctantly admitted.

“To be fair, I did some checking up on our painting. It turns out that records exist in England. Ruskin kept a diary, and in the diary, he writes about his visit to the Italian Alps. He came here seeking to improve his artistic skills, to emulate the style of an artist he very much respected. That artist’s name was J. M. W. Turner.”

“The name on our painting?” Nonni drew back.

“You may also be surprised to learn that *Jerusalem at Twilight* came from a collection of Turner’s paintings—his Bible Lands paintings—though he never actually showed this particular painting in public.”

“Bible Lands paintings! A collection! But are you certain?”

“There is no doubt,” Jamie said, trying to allay Nonni’s confusion. “Ruskin spent a lifetime trying to achieve the same artistic skills the world hailed in Turner. He collected at least three hundred of Turner’s paintings.”

“Three hundred!” Nonna Luciana’s eyes grew wide. “So many!”

“Yes,” Alessandro said. “But eventually, Ruskin’s obsession drove him mad. He bought *Jerusalem at Twilight* from Turner outright, and then brought it here to our valleys to use as a model for his own work. When he exhausted his efforts and realized he could not accomplish what he’d set out to do, he sought solace from God in a Valdesi church.”

“Here in these valleys?”

Alessandro nodded. “But he could not find comfort there—not from those in attendance or from God. He despaired of ever knowing real joy.”

“Oh, my!” Nonni’s face became sorrowful.

Alessandro continued. “Feeling miserable, he tossed the painting into the ravine; the rest is history, as the saying goes. Our Luciano Marianni happened to be in the right place at the right time to observe Ruskin’s breakdown. But Ruskin later regretted his impulsive act. He records his utter disconsolation. And later, though he wanted to retrieve the painting, he didn’t know how to find it. The whole matter shook the foundations of his faith. He spent the end of his days in mental illness, never fully recovering.”

Nonni put a hand over her heart. “Can this be so?”

Jamie’s heart reached out to the old woman as tears now cascaded down her cheeks.

“The Valdesi have never given in to the darkness, even at its bleakest,” Nonni said, wiping the tears. “We always knew the Word of God was our lamp, guiding our footsteps across the highest and steepest mountains. In the days of persecution and martyrdom and when we could not leave during the days of our detainment in these valleys, we looked to the lamp shining in the darkness to keep our ways straight and our eyes fixed upon the One whose lamp would never go out. How could this man Ruskin have lost his way here in these valleys among the Valdesi?”

Alessandro’s eyes softened, and he took Nonni’s hands into his. “I am not sure anyone could have consoled Ruskin. He wanted something he could not have—to own the same talent Turner possessed. When he couldn’t have it—could not produce a painting with the same quality of art—he blamed God for making him a lesser artist. He tried to emulate Turner; nothing else would be acceptable. But he did not see that God had given him a unique talent all his own. So he tossed his belief aside, along with the painting”

Alessandro’s reflections on Ruskin’s life faded into the distance as Jamie heard the young girl inside her of long ago echo Ruskin’s mulish ramblings. Only this afternoon, she had voiced the same questions, fallen into the same logic, and followed a similar path away from God. The skeptic in her knew she could not easily accept that God had the right to give and take away as he pleased

for his own purposes. Why did God seem to remain silent more often than not?

Her attention returned in time for her to hear Alessandro say, “Yes, if Nico had something to do with taking *Jerusalem at Twilight*, he may be in very grave danger. Turner’s painting has become highly prized—worth tens of millions of euros.”

Nonni’s eyes widened again. “Tens of millions? Our painting?” She blew out a puff of air. “Is it really so valuable?”

“It’s one of a very small collection of J. M. W. Turners,” Jamie said. “And, people will try to acquire it just because it’s newly discovered.”

“I see.” Nonni seemed perplexed, as if she was grasping to understand. She turned to Jamie. “Is this why you are here? Does the Brera also want to procure the painting for its collection?”

Jamie turned ashen. “No. I ... You must believe me, Nonni. The museum is not involved in any way. I wouldn’t do anything to harm you or your family.”

“Jamie didn’t know anything about our painting until a couple of days ago. She’s here because she has been dragged into our lives by Nico’s actions, and because she witnessed Paolo’s murder.”

Nonni’s apologetic eyes met Jamie’s. “I did not mean to imply ... it’s all so new, and I am afraid I am not used to the world’s ways.”

Relief flooded Jamie like a bountiful river overrunning its banks. “I’m so glad you believe me. I couldn’t bear it if you thought I’d hurt you that way. Like you, I’ve been brought into this horrible nightmare, and I don’t know why.”

Nonni knitted her brow. “It is curious, isn’t it? It makes no sense. Forgive me for saying this, but you are an American with no connection to these valleys. Why would Nico think you could solve his riddle?”

“I’ve wondered the same thing. I keep coming back to the only thing that makes sense. He must have believed that because I am an art historian I knew something about the painting.”

Nonni raised her eyebrows. “It still begs the question: why? I cannot say, but I am quite certain Nico believed Jamie could solve

the riddle on a greater supposition than her art degree. Only someone with an intimate knowledge of our traditions would have been able to solve such a riddle. And he had to believe she knew something of those traditions.”

“It’s a mystery to me,” Jamie said.

Nonni rose. “I will think on it some more. But for now, I think we should all retire and get a good night sleep.”

A little while later as Jamie settled under the fluffy comforter, she felt ambivalent. “Are you there, Jason?” she voiced into the dark.

Silence.

“I could use your wisdom about now.”

Silence.

“Do you know why Nico thought I could solve his riddle?”

She waited, but again the silence was deafening. Only the distant ticking of a clock responded to her plea.

“Good night, then, Jason,” she said in a small voice into the empty space.

CHAPTER 17

A pleasant aroma wafted to Jamie in her semiconscious state, producing a soft smile. Her eyes fluttered and opened, and she inhaled deeply. Ah! Coffee!

She lifted herself slightly out from underneath the white, fluffy comforter. Ooh, but the air was chilly in the tiny bedroom. She buried herself deeper under the down comforter, allowing only a slit through which she could breathe. Coffee could wait a little longer. She closed her eyes and tried to retreat back into oblivion.

But sleep would not return. At last, Jamie rose from the comfort of the bed and hurriedly slipped on her jeans and sweater. She ran a brush through her hair and joined Alessandro and Nonna in the cozy kitchen. A fire crackled in the living room fireplace, spreading warmth throughout the two small rooms.

“Here you are, *cara mia*.” Nonna handed Jamie a cup of cappuccino.

Jamie sipped the coffee with savory pleasure, closing her eyes, and luxuriating in the warmth that flowed through her slender frame. “You cannot imagine how good this is.”

Nonni grinned. “*Buono*. Now sit down with Alessandro, and we will have cheese and croissants.” She placed the plate on the table, and then sat down.

After Alessandro said a brief prayer of thanks, Jamie reached for a croissant and slathered it with Nonna Luciana’s homemade raspberry jam. She bit into the crispy pastry. She felt fairly certain

that Nonni's jam came as close to heavenly delight on earth as possible.

Nonni put down her croissant and rested her arms on either side of the plate. She looked at Alessandro. "I have been thinking."

Jamie lifted her head and shifted her attention to Nonni, whose deep wrinkles had creased the woman's forehead.

"Last night you indicated that Nico could be in grave danger from bad people," said Nonni. "Would this not also apply to you and Jamie?"

Jamie's gaze transferred to Alessandro. She watched as he picked up his cup, sipped his cappuccino, and then carefully replaced his cup to the saucer—all the while, his expression changed several times as if he struggled with himself.

At last he spoke, meeting Jamie's eyes. "I've been thinking, too. These are treacherous people. They have already demonstrated they will not hesitate to go to extreme measures to get what they want. Perhaps it would be best if I continue on my own—"

"What?" Jamie protested. "You can't do this on your own. I won't let you."

"Jamie," he said shaking his head. "I can't ask you—"

"You're not asking me. I want to—no, need to—see this through. I don't know why, but I'm as much a part of this as you are. I don't intend to let criminals frighten me away."

Alessandro averted his eyes in frustration.

"I see my grandson has found a companion with as much stubbornness as the rest of his family." Nonni scrutinized Alessandro, her message obviously clear.

"I don't know if it's stubbornness or stupidity," Alessandro said wryly.

"My mother always did say I was a willful child," Jamie said with a whimsical twist to her lips.

"But Jamie, are you sure? Perhaps the painting is not so important—"

Jamie put a hand over Nonni's. "It is important to *you*. And it has become important to me, as well."

Nonni turned back to Alessandro. “What will you do if the people who have the painting will not easily give it up?”

“It is most likely they will *not* give up the painting without a fight,” Alessandro said. “But it doesn’t belong to them. We must find a way to convince them of that.”

“I think this is a question you must answer, my grandson.” Nonni set down her knife. “When Luciano claimed he saw the painting fall from the sky, it was as if God had provided a beautiful gift to the community at a time when the men and women of these valleys wondered if they would really ever have religious freedom. It became a symbol of the New Jerusalem—the hope of the home we longed for—where we could worship our Lord in peace without fear of government or foe. And eventually religious freedom came to us. But now a different enemy has invaded our home and stolen God’s gift. How shall we respond to this barbarity?”

Alessandro slowly shook his head. “I honestly don’t know. But it seems we have no choice but to do whatever we can, and then wait on God for our next move. Perhaps this is not a very satisfying answer, but it is the only one I have at present.”

Nonna took a bite of croissant in contemplation. “Perhaps it is not very satisfying, but God is not in the business of satisfying *our* agendas.” She fixed her eyes on Jamie once more. “And I am fairly certain we still have not fully realized what God is doing behind the scenes of our lives.”

* * * * *

After breakfast, Jamie and Alessandro put their belongings in the car and said their goodbyes to Nonna Luciana.

“I look forward to our next meeting,” Nonni said as she kissed Jamie on both cheeks. “Take care of my Alessandro.”

“Of course,” Jamie said. “I hope to see you very soon.”

Jamie and Alessandro set out down the mountain with hiking boots on their feet and raincoats sitting on the back seat, ready to

wear if it should rain. So far, the sky remained crystal clear and blue.

Within minutes, Alessandro turned left off the main road and up another hill past farm houses and green fields. “The Sibaoud Monument is over the next rise,” he said. “Though it is less than a hundred years old, what happened here at this landmark was centuries in the making.”

Jamie bit her lip. Under other circumstances she would have loved to spend days combing these valleys, but she felt a greater urgency to find Nico and the painting. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather head back to Varena?”

He studied her for a moment, and then looked back at the road. He seemed to be weighing what to say. At last he spoke. “Yes. Yet I cannot shake this feeling that it is no mistake we are here now. I feel compelled by another sense of urgency, as if God is nudging me to show you who we are.” He shrugged. “It is what I must do.”

Jamie suddenly smiled. “Then what are we waiting for?”

“Good.” He punctuated his thought with a nod, and continued forward.

They wound their way up a dirt road past a number of farms until it ended in front of a two-story farm house with faded pink stucco siding, cracked and peeling. Stucco, Jamie pondered, that might have once shone brightly pink in the Italian sunshine, now dulled by the passage of time. Was it symbolic of the deterioration of all that the Waldensian faithful held dear?

Alessandro pulled the car to the edge of the gravel drive and shut off the engine. He pushed open the car door. “We’ll get out here.”

“Here?” Jamie said in a tone of surprise. “But this is someone’s working farm.”

“Yes. They are used to visitors to the monument.” When she cast him a questioning glance, he said, “Really, it’s okay.”

Hesitantly, Jamie got out of the car and followed him on a worn path along the house and passed a mountainous pile of firewood before heading to an open field. A hundred or so meters from the

house, a stone obelisk stood on a grassy knoll, meters from the cliff that overlooked the populated valley below.

“We are standing on the exact site where, in 1689, after their long perilous march back from exile, Henri Arnaud led our ancestors in an oath to stand united and faithful to God. To this day during significant gatherings, we sing the hymn that gives tribute to God’s almighty leading in our Glorious Return.”

A quiet wind lifted Jamie’s hair from her forehead as she looked at her companion, suitably awed by the devotion he displayed for the members of his faith. She wanted to say something, to ask any of a hundred questions that flashed into her mind, but felt restrained by the solemnity of the moment.

She remained quiet as she rounded the pillar—a posture that seemed only fitting for the men and women who had risked their lives for what they believed. She may not share their faith, but she admired their great tenacity of spirit that led them home.

The inscription on the top of the pillar read “1689–1880”—the two centuries in which the Waldensians had awaited their freedom to worship. Below that, the Waldensian emblem and the Latin words *Lux Lucet in Tenebris*—Light shining out of darkness—had been inscribed. Then around the four sides at the bottom of the monument were the names of the 15 communities of the Waldensians that had committed their lives to the God who had brought them back to their homeland.

Jamie looked away from the monument over the valley where a community of houses nestled against the hills and imagined what it must have been like to be counted among those called the faithful. Did they similarly look out over virgin hillsides and contemplate that more than 300 years later a community of the faithful would still sing their oath? She believed their resolution of spirit and knew instinctively they would.

Jamie wondered if the man would say more about the shrine or elaborate on why he had brought her here. However, she was disappointed in both regards as he quietly stood next to her.

“Shall we move on?” he said.

In silence they returned to the car, and then descended once again to the main road to continue their journey through the Pellice Valley.

Several kilometers east of Torre Pellice, Alessandro turned left down a road leading through the Angrogna Valley.

Jamie gazed in wonder at the sheer immensity of the steeps that closed in on them. Their enormity made the treacherous nature of the Waldensians' journey and their vow at Sibaoud all the more amazing. How did they do it?

"I'm in awe of your ancestors trekking across these mountains," Jamie said at last, breaking the silence that had held since their arrival at the Sibaoud Monument. "Just the magnitude of them and the craggy precipices would be obstacle enough, not to mention the unpredictable weather or their enemies hunting them down."

"This is what makes our history the more provocative, yes?" Alessandro kept his eyes on the winding road. "How many people today would give their lives for a cause they believe in? Yet my ancestors believed that God had told them they must maintain the purity of his Word at all costs. It did not matter if the Roman Church called them heretics. They were willing to go to the stake or whatever other method their tormentors would use to try to quell them."

"So difficult to imagine," she said. "I wonder if I would go to the stake for a cause I believed in?"

"Somehow, I have very little doubt that you would," Alessandro said without taking his eyes off the road. "You are here with me now, yes?"

She nodded, still unsure.

"In the end, more than one million Waldensians died for their faith throughout the centuries of persecution. Perhaps that is why the Angrogna Valley is called the 'Valley of Groans,' eh?"

Follow the clue to wherever it takes you, Jamie.

Jason! Had he just spoken to her again? Why had Jason come back to her? Did he mean for her to follow the clue—even if it meant her life? She was suddenly struck with a profound sense of something bigger, more substantial than herself, and shivered.

“Are you all right?” Jamie heard Alessandro’s concerned voice next to her.

“Y-yes.” She was quick to respond, wanting to hide her silent ramblings. “I was just thinking about the great cost to your ancestors. It made me shiver.”

“Ah. It *is* bone chilling, no?” He pointed to the right and up a hill. “Up there is a natural cave where as many as 300 Waldensians gathered during times of great persecution to secretly worship and hide away. On at least two occasions after the Waldensians joined with the Reformers in the sixteenth century, the armies of Rome found them and lit fires over the cave to suffocate them.”

As they wound their way further up through the valley, Jamie noticed the mountains closing in. They loomed over them, creating the effect of a formidable fortress. The pass appeared almost as a gate or threshold with only a small opening through which to enter.

“This is the strength of these valleys, no?” Alessandro said. “God must have known when he created these mostly impregnable mountains that his people would use them as a fortress and a craggy line of defense to shield them from their enemies. This gate takes us into the Pra del Tor.” He pointed, as they passed through into a slightly wider mountainous landscape.

Alessandro followed the curvy road a small distance, and then slowed to approach a spot where he parked the car along the side of the road. “The road continues around that bend a bit further, but the trail starts from here,” he said. He craned his neck to look up through the windshield where the clouds had begun to accumulate over the peaks. “Better put on your rain jacket. It may rain before we have finished.”

They began their steep ascent on the rocky slope, following a small stream up the mountainside. The natural trail, Jamie noticed, had at various times, been carved by raging torrents cascading the descent, perhaps even as recently as the latest big snow melt. At this elevation, the chestnut forests had not yet budded out. The air was cool and thin, making the climb somewhat arduous, though it also gave her a heady exhilaration.

A few minutes later, they arrived at a place where the landscape opened into a grand circular valley with a verdant grassy meadow and hillsides dotted with modest dwellings and pasturelands. Cattle and goats ate from the scrawny grasses just coming out of dormancy.

The grandeur overwhelmed Jamie's senses. She felt as if she had entered paradise.

The Church of the Pra del Tor perched on a rocky precipice, which seemed to have been created for the purpose of providing a most splendid platform for the small church. She pivoted around 360 degrees. In this spot, thousands of Waldensians stood over the centuries, using this small citadel surrounded by the lofty crags of Rocciaglie as a defense against their enemies. She imagined they thought they had approached heaven, and in doing so, believed heaven would protect them.

They walked around to the front of the neo-Gothic church and pushed open the stiff wooden doors to the interior. She halted just after entering, stunned by the simple sanctuary of wooden pews, empty white-washed walls, and rustic altar. Only the wall at the front contained a scriptural reference scribed on it:

*La Croce é la potenza di Dio Noi predichiamo Cristo
crocifisso, 1 Corinthians 1:18/23—The Cross is the power of
God, we preach Christ crucified.*

Otherwise, the only other nuance of color came from a bouquet of yellow and white daisies on either side of the altar.

"It's so plain," Jamie breathed.

"As are most Waldensian churches," Alessandro said. "They have always been viewed as purely places of worship and assembly." He allowed her one more moment, and then moved them back outside where the storm clouds had gathered.

"We should not delay," Alessandro said, zipping his rain jacket. "The storm may descend sooner than I thought."

Jamie followed Alessandro some distance up crude stone steps through the bare trees of a chestnut forest. Patches of snow still lay

on a carpet of fallen leaves. At last they reached a clearing where several ancient rudimentary stone buildings stood, tiered up the hillside. Alessandro took her hand to help her up the final steps, where at the top she turned to see the buildings stair-stepping down the hill. A little further down on its own, a simple white-washed caretaker's cottage sat with its shutters closed.

"This was the school of the *barba*, or Bible school for itinerant preachers, during the Middle Ages," Alessandro said. He led her up a set of eroded stairs to one stone building and bent his head to enter through a warped wooden threshold. Jamie did likewise and found herself inside a rough-hewn room in which the cobblestone floors had been mostly worn away to packed earth. The open doorway allowed enough light for her to see a makeshift hutch, which housed plain white stoneware; a dilapidated table had been moved off to the side. A single spent candle rested on the table.

She shivered in the dankness of the cramped space. "I can't imagine spending my winter months here in the cold."

Alessandro dug his hands into coat pockets and stared at the rounded ceiling. "We are spoiled by our modern conveniences, no? Most of us in the western world live in relative luxury. But within these unrefined walls, men of simple means and a passion for God gave up even their small comforts to learn the Scriptures and take them to the four corners of Europe to share it with anyone who would listen."

"You sound as if you envy them."

A whimsical smile formed on Alessandro's lips. "In a way, I do. They were men of integrity and devotion. They were willing to count the cost for what they believed in."

"And what about you?" Jamie spoke the words in the quiet cold.

Alessandro returned her gaze. "Until now, I have not truly been tested for my faith." He moved to the doorway.

They clambered about the exterior of the stone edifices for a few minutes more. The buildings seemed in need of repair after the winter snows, though Jamie imagined these structures had never been truly rain- or snow-worthy. She suspected the *barba* had

always contended with their surroundings in the same way they persevered through persecution.

All at once, an explosive cacophony of what sounded like firecrackers ricocheted across the valley. Jamie whirled around as Alessandro snatched hold of her. "We're being shot at. Follow me!"

She clutched his hand and sped with him toward the stone pathway back down through the chestnut forest.

Another round of shots rang out.

Jamie felt her heart pounding as her panic rose. "Alessandro!"

"Just keep moving!" He told her, tightening his grip on her as they ran.

A flash of lightning chiseled the sky, and a crack of thunder resounded around them as the rains let loose.

Involuntarily, Jamie dropped his hand and dropped to her knees. She covered her ears with her hands, as she screamed in terror.

Alessandro squatted next to her, grabbed her hands away from her head and peered into her eyes. "It's all right, Jamie. It was only thunder this time. But we must move on. Please, take my hand."

She nodded tentatively, and then took his hand once more.

They continued their flight down the waterlogged slope, the rain dripping from their coats, and their hiking boots now soaked. Jamie feared she would slip on the eroded steps. "I don't want to die," she breathed.

A barrage of shots assailed them from the forest to the right. Jamie twisted around. Someone in a green-hooded jacket tracked them down the mountain. Adrenaline kept her moving, concerned now more about the hunter than by falling down the mountainside.

"It will be safer over here," Alessandro said, leading her onto the soggy leaves among the chestnut trees.

They came to the clearing where the residences dotted the pasturelands and the Church of the Pra del Tor rested peacefully on its rocky precipice. Fog hung over the valley below. Jamie stopped to take a breath. Then, she heard shots above them.

"Move!" Alessandro commanded.

They scurried past the church to take the hill down to the car. Sodden by the drenching rains, the small stream had become a torrent of cascading falls, devouring the trail they had earlier ascended. The steep and rocky slope became difficult to navigate, and Alessandro dropped her hand. "It'll be easier for each of us to keep our balance. Keep following my lead."

Jamie picked her way, attempting to get footholds on the protruding rocks, yet knowing one misstep could result in tumbling to the road below. The slow process made them targets for the stalker who followed close behind. Either way, their lives were at risk.

Hope kindled when Jamie saw Alessandro make the road and open the car door. She strove harder to get down, executing a few more carefully calculated steps. Then she took a flying leap, falling to the ground below and rolling several feet. Fighting the pain in her arm, she pushed herself up and jumped into the car. Alessandro peeled the car away from the curb.

Jamie twisted her head to look back at the gunman on the slope. She watched in horror as he aimed his gun and shot. The bullet missed them. He de-cloaked his head, but Jamie could not get a clear view of him other than to notice dark hair and complexion before Alessandro rounded the hairpin turn.

They sat in stunned silence while Alessandro negotiated the road. Jamie shook in the aftershock of cold mixed with fear and relief. He must have noticed how she shivered, and he turned on the heat.

Gradually, the warmed air helped calm her nerves so that she could finally find her voice. "What just happened back there?"

Alessandro gave her a brief look. "It seems that we have come to the point where we must answer Nonni's question."

* * * * *

Zamir watched the car carrying Marianni and the American girl round the corner, disappearing from his sight. He drifted to one of the ancient trees that flanked the trail, slung the weapon over his

shoulder, and leaned against the trunk of the tree. He breathed deeply, reached up, and pulled the hood of his cloak down.

Shielded now from the storm's growing intensity, he reflected on Hadjari's instruction. He had been told to miss the two interlopers. His only job was to scare Marianni and the girl.

"It is not necessary to kill them," Hadjari said. "Use force only if they get in our way."

This deviation from the norm troubled the assassin, whose long experience had imparted a firm commandment: *leave no survivors, no tongue-waggers.*

What was it they had taught him during his days as a sniper? *Never take out your gun unless you're going to use it, and don't put it away until the job is done.*

Zamir pushed from the tree, turned and began the return trek to his car, which he had parked a little further up the road and around a bend from Marianni's. His pace quickened as he went, as if he could flee from a vocation that gave him no pleasure. Again, he thought of his Liliana. Would he never escape from the hold her marriage to Hadjari had over him?

He began to run.

CHAPTER 18

Alessandro kept his eyes on the road. The rhythmic swoosh of the windshield wipers across the rain-drenched window provoked an angry shudder through his body. He clenched his teeth and wished, against his better nature, that he carried a gun. If he had been armed and alone at the Pra, he would have gladly faced their pursuer head on. Who was that blackguard anyway?

“What you said just now about answering Nonni’s question, you mean we need to decide whether we’re willing to count the cost to find the Turner, don’t you?” Jamie said, as they sped down the wet road. “Whether we believe it’s worth the risk?”

“Yes,” he said, between flat lips. The gunman’s mountainside game of cat and mouse had been a wake-up call, a sobering reality that they, too, were not immune to the thugs’ deadly game. “I believe we have to assume the thief knows that we’re on his trail,” Alessandro said, “And he’s going to do everything he can do to stop us—even if it means our lives.”

Jamie paused, as though measuring her words carefully. “It’s rather disturbing,” she muttered, “to think someone wants to kill you.” She glanced at Alessandro, then continued, “I suppose this means I’ve managed to bond with your ancestors.”

“Perhaps too closely.” Alessandro wrinkled his brow. The gunman had just increased the stakes even higher. He felt compelled to keep Jamie out of harm’s way. Finding the Turner was not *her* responsibility. “Nonni was right. I should not have brought you along on this journey.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Alessandro saw Jamie's animated hands gesticulating for emphasis. "Excuse me! I *wanted* to come, and I'm *not* going to be frightened away by some reprobate on a mission. This 'journey,' as you call it, was foisted on me. I could have gone to the police, but—"

"Yes, why didn't you?"

She remained silent for a moment.

Alessandro briefly looked over at her, trying to assay what she was thinking. She seemed to be searching for a way to answer his question.

At last, she said more calmly, "I almost did. But have you ever felt compelled by something beyond yourself—something you couldn't explain but you just knew you couldn't ignore?"

"Yes."

"That's how I've felt ever since Nico pursued me—like I was supposed to see this thing through with you. I have no other explanation. And just for the record," her voice intensified again, "I'd like to have a good look at that creep who just trailed us down the mountain and give him a thwack over his green-hooded head."

Alessandro knew he ought to insist that she bow out gracefully and let him deal with the loathsome goons that had interrupted their lives. Then he chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Her eyes fixed on him.

Briefly he met her gaze. "You are. We almost just got killed on that mountain, and you are fighting for your right to be shot at. That is insane, woman."

Jamie remained silent.

Alessandro caught sight of a curious, almost doomed expression, on her face.

"Maybe I do have a death wish," she uttered softly.

"Or maybe you're just incredibly stubborn, like Nonni said," he said with a wry twist to his lips. "Look, Jamie, I appreciate your wanting to see this through with me, I really do. But this is a dangerous game they're playing, and it's getting more dangerous by the moment. I don't want you to get hurt. Will you not stay in Varena with Giovanni to finish out the exhibition?"

“I can’t.” Jamie shook her head. “I’m in this as deeply as you are, and I’m not going to let those thugs beat me at their own game.”

Alessandro heard the conviction in her voice. He had suspected she would not be dissuaded. In a peculiar way, her desire to remain committed to their cause increased his admiration for her.

At the T junction, Alessandro turned toward Bobbio Pellice instead of left toward Varenna. Jamie’s inquiring glance caused him to give her a whimsical smile. “I am sorry to say this, but you look like something the cat dragged in, as they say.”

She looked down at her rain-soaked, muddied coat and laughed. “I guess a shower *would* be in order.”

“And one of Nonni’s good coffees, yes?”

By now, the rain had diminished to a steady drizzle. “Make it a strong double espresso,” Jamie said. “I think I’m going to need it.”

* * * * *

In spite of Nonni’s insistent protests to get her questions answered after she met the bedraggled souls at her door, Alessandro and Jamie put her on hold. Wet and cold and holding overnight bags in their hands, they said she would get the full story, but not until after they could take hot showers and put on a change of clothes.

Alessandro gave his grandmother a quick peck on the cheek and left the consternated woman at the door, mouth gaping, as he followed Jamie down the tiny hallway toward the back of the cottage. At the end of the hallway, they parted ways, Alessandro into the bedroom and Jamie into the bathroom.

After he closed the bedroom door behind him, Alessandro opened his overnight bag and took out a change of clothes. He lifted his head when he heard the soft sound of the bathroom door closing and the hiss of water as Jamie turned on the shower.

Absentmindedly, he unbuttoned his shirt and replayed the day’s events in his mind. The complications and consequences of their encounter were sobering. His academic mind grappled with the matters of life and death. Fine for him to risk his own life, he

thought, but now others were involved, and the responsibility fell on him like a heavy weight.

The sound of the shower ceased, and Alessandro picked up his clothes. He eased open the door of the bedroom, glanced down the hall to ensure Nonni was not in sight, and drifted to the bathroom. Without thought to his actions, he opened the door.

Immediately he heard an alarmed gasp as Jamie hurriedly covered herself with the purple sweater she had been about to put on. “What are you *doing?*” She whispered, eyes flashing.

“*Scusi!*” he apologized quietly, averting his eyes. “I thought you were already out.”

“Well I’m not. Get out!” She said the words softly and emphatically. Her head poked around him to the open door. “And before Nonni finds us.”

“Of course.” He pulled the door shut again, standing outside the door feeling addled. He really hadn’t meant to intrude on her, nor was he given to spying on naked women. That had never been his way. He had always been a man of propriety. But he had seen enough, and it left no doubt about the physical attraction he felt for her.

Moments later, she opened the door fully dressed. “You *could* have at least waited until I was dressed,” she whispered.

He put his finger to his lips and drew her into the bedroom and closed the door. “I’m sorry. I was distracted. We need to talk about Nonni.”

Jamie studied him a moment and then relaxed her stance.

“We were followed, Jamie. If the gunman followed us to Pra del Tor, he certainly also knows about Nonni—where she lives, her routines, her family... .”

Realization dawned on Jamie’s face. She looked over his shoulder, as though seeing through the door to where Nonni might now be moving about the kitchen, unaware of the danger they’d brought to her house.

“I’m concerned for her safety. I want to persuade her to stay with a friend. She will protest, of course, but perhaps you can help me to encourage her.”

“Of course, I’ll do what I can.” Jamie paused. She seemed distracted.

He watched her eyes rove over his bare chest and realized her regard for him held the same attraction he had for her. The thought pleased him immensely. Their eyes met, and he felt the tension between them become electrified. He didn’t want to break the moment, but he knew he if stayed, he couldn’t be responsible for what would happen next. “I’ll take that shower now,” he said, and opened the door to let himself out.

* * * * *

A short while later, Alessandro and Jamie stood with Nonni on the terrace, drinking coffees and snacking on an assortment of meats and cheese as well as a bounty of red grapes. The sun had returned and now warmed them with its golden rays.

Alessandro noted that Jamie had calmed, her manner more relaxed than after their harrowing experience. He couldn’t stop gazing at her. He didn’t want to. He had always thought she was attractive. But now he felt drawn to her in a new way as he observed her interacting with his grandmother, her supple lips smiling warmly and her brown eyes sparkling affectionately in the sunlight. She also wore the cowl neck sweater, its deep purple hues enhancing her dark hair and olive complexion. She was not only beautiful, but she seemed to fit in.

“Your coffee has once more hit the spot,” Jamie told Nonni.

“*Buono*, good,” the woman said. Nonni clasped her hands together and lifted them toward the sky. “I just thank God you are unharmed.” She brought her hands back down to her chest. “But what are you going to do now, Alessandro?”

“We go back to Varenna to find Nico as planned. It is now more important than ever that we find him.” Alessandro said. He reached for a grape and popped it into his mouth.

“I must tell Nico’s family, of course.” She clucked her tongue. “But I hate to do it. He has misled them to believe he has a good job and is doing well in Milan.”

“Perhaps we should wait until we have found Nico and have some solid information to give them.” Alessandro picked another grape as he contemplated. “I don’t think we should worry Nico’s family prematurely.”

“Maybe you are right.” Nonni wrinkled her brow. “Oh, but you did not see his face or hear his voice, Alessandro. It was as if he had become despair itself—as if he felt he had no other choice. I did not fully understand then, but now ... well, he probably feared for his life.”

“That is consistent with the people he has become involved with—they’re obviously dangerous. Which brings me to something I really feel we must discuss, Nonni.” Alessandro realized this was his opportunity. “I think it’s time we think about your safety.”

She seemed surprised. “Safety? What are you talking about?”

Alessandro and Jamie exchanged a glance. Jamie gave him a pointed look, so directed that he could almost hear her speak the words “*Tell her!*”

“Nonni,” he said, taking her hand, “someone shot at Jamie and me back at the Pra.”

The old woman’s eyes immediately widened, and Alessandro could almost hear the alarm sound as their gaze leapt between him and Jamie.

“Shot at? But who ... ? You don’t think it could have been Nico on the slopes shooting at you?” Nonni asked, as if she was almost afraid to know the answer. “Would he be desperate enough to kill for these people?”

Alessandro would not believe Nico could have stooped so low. He had been born and raised in a Christian community. He had gone to church all his life and been raised with those values. He *knew* right from wrong. “Nico is not a trained killer. More likely our man on the slope and Paolo’s assassin are the same man, but ...” He hesitated to scare her.

“If the assassin followed us to Pra,” Jamie jumped in, “he knows where *you* live. We don’t want to take the chance that he will come after us through you.”

“Would he do that?” Nonni looked at Alessandro.

“You know what evil men can devise. That’s why I think you should stay with one of our friends here in Bobbio.”

“No!” Nonni immediately held up her hands, palms forward. “I will not be forced from my home by criminals.”

“Nonni, be reasonable. Your life could be in danger.”

She lifted her chin defiantly. “Danger or not, I will not be exiled from my home like our ancestors.”

“Nonni, this is not the sixteen hundreds—”

The old woman cut him off with a finger on his chest. “And did they not return to face whatever foes hunted them down like animals?”

“Si, but you are not Arnaud and this is not about upholding our faith.”

“Is it not?” Nonni crossed her arms. “I will not leave, and that’s all there is to it.”

Alessandro drew in a large breath and exhaled. “All right, Nonni. I won’t fight you anymore. But you must let me talk to Investigator Giorgio, allow him to check in on you and patrol the area from time to time.”

“That you can do.” She conceded. “You never know when an old woman might need a helping hand.”

Alessandro nodded in unsettled relief. He stared down at his empty coffee cup, and then turned to Jamie. “Are you ready to face down the guns in Varenna?”

“No.” She put her own coffee cup down. “But I’m not ready to give up on our search for Nico either. I have so many questions, and he’s the only one with the answers.”

“Starting with how the fool allowed himself to get involved with criminals. How could he do such a thing and put the rest of us in danger?” Alessandro pounded his fist into his palm and looked away.

Nonni reached up to touch Alessandro’s cheek and pulled his face back around with a gentle hand. “I know Nico may have done some very bad things. But God has shown me through the years that life is too short and our sense of duty is too long. If what you

suspect is true, Nico will need to know, I think, that we will welcome him back with open arms.”

Alessandro averted his eyes from Nonni’s probing search into his soul. He still felt uneasy about what his fellow Waldensian might have done to become involved with dangerous men and what he might still do to save his own skin.

Nonni released him. “You will need to find a way to forgive him, my grandson—for your sake, if not for his.”

Somewhere down deep, he knew Nonni was right. But Nico still had much to answer for, and there was still much for which Alessandro could not let him off the hook. He would need the answers before he was ready to offer Nico mercy.

CHAPTER 19

They had been heading north on the A9 toward Varenna, when Giovanni buzzed Alessandro on his cell phone. Their conversation gave Jamie an opportunity to reflect on the last several days, especially their frightful experience at Pra del Tor.

Jamie shivered, remembering their terrifying scramble down the rain-washed slopes. No one had ever shot at her before. But obviously the people who had killed Paolo and taken *Jerusalem at Twilight* wanted to send a clear message: *Back off or else!*

She could see that their perilous flight from the gunman had convinced Alessandro to dissuade her from continuing on this journey with him. It was obvious he couldn't understand why she hadn't gone on her merry way when Nico approached her on the lakeshore walk, why she hadn't contacted the police, and later, when Paolo was murdered, why she hadn't begged off for fear of her life.

Alessandro was right. It *would* have been more sensible to scurry off and leave Nico's riddle and Paolo's murder in the hands of people more qualified than her to deal with the situation. What had he said? That she was insane? That she seemed to have a death wish?

Truth be known, she had been scared and believed that the more prudent thing would have been to run the other direction long ago. No, she had no death wish. Only one thing had kept her in the race—Nico.

Nico was the spitting image of her brother, and he had come to her for help, just as Jason would have done years before. She and Jason had been inseparable until his death, and they had made a pact that they would always be there for each other. Now he had come back—in the form of Nico and in her visions and dreams. How could she abandon him? How could she explain that Jason had appeared, compelling her forward, giving her the strength to walk this journey? She didn't know. Even to her own ears, it sounded lame and foolish. Was her life really worth the risk?

In spite of all the terrifying prospects for death, Jamie had felt more in tune with life during the last several days than she had since Jason had died. If Nico had not pursued her on the lakeshore walk, she would never have learned about the beautiful history of the Waldensian people or met Nonna Luciana and her tenacious faith. And she would never have had that moment in the bathroom with Alessandro when the world around her became electrified by their proximity to one another. Every fiber in her now pulsed with a desire to know what would have happened if he had not opened that door to leave.

“Jamie?”

At once she heard Alessandro's insistent voice next to her, and she felt the heat rising to her neck. What would he think if he knew what her thoughts had been just now?

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, I—I'm sorry. What did you say?”

“Visco closed down the exhibition after all. He sent everyone packing two days ago, so Giovanni has returned to Milan.”

“Milan? I'm sure that didn't go over well,” she said, still abashed by her secret thoughts.

“Not at all, as you can imagine. By the way, he wanted me to remind you that the annual gala is this weekend.”

“Not your kind of thing, I take it,” she said, noting the doleful twist to his lips.

“How did you get that idea?”

“Let's just say I know that look. My brother, Jason, used to get the same mischievous shine in his eyes. He hated the fund-raising

galas my mother used to drag us to—all because she was concertmaster for the symphony and was expected to network with the circle of people who supported the arts.”

“She didn’t leave you at home, then?”

“When we were younger she hired babysitters. But as we got older, she insisted that we should become ‘culturally aware,’ and she even threw an occasional extravaganza in our home.”

“Your parents must have a very big house.”

“Well, it’s not palatial, but” She shrugged. How could she explain the distinction of her home to Alessandro, who had grown up as one of the Poor of Lyon? Built by a prominent Cleveland millionaire during the Victorian era at the turn of the twentieth century, the mansion had fallen into disrepair by the 1970s. Her parents had bought it for a fraction of its worth and restored it to the grand house it once was. It was now listed on the registry of historical homes.

“Jason thought some of the elite had their noses just a little too high in the air. So he often made faces behind their backs or played harmless pranks. I played along sometimes, but Mother would get so chagrined, and then punish us later. Of course, it was all part of the game.”

Jamie caught Alessandro’s bright eyes studying her. “Wh-what?”

“This is a side of you I have not seen before. I’m enjoying it.”

“What do you mean?”

“You speak about your childhood with genuine joy and with a rare fondness for your brother. This is good, yes?”

Jamie lowered her eyes. She’d forgotten that she had not yet shared with Alessandro about her brother. She still wasn’t prepared to reveal that part of herself—that part that died when Jason died. Almost immediately, she felt her walls go up again.

She lifted her head. “Well, all that is in the past when we were still children. I’ve become a little more sympathetic toward the people Jason and I once eschewed. Many of the elite are just people guided by a sense of propriety. I think they often appear more disingenuous than they really are. Anyway, regardless of what we may think about them, we need them.”

“You’re right, of course,” he said. “It’s just that I dread the small talk.”

“That’s because it’s not your way or Nonni’s,” she said. “I don’t think Nonni could put on airs if she tried. It’s one of her most endearing qualities.”

She glanced at Alessandro. He had become silent and contemplative, and she wondered what had suddenly made him so serious. She stole another glance at him, and watched him straighten his shoulders as if he had come to a decision. Then his eyes briefly met hers. “Miss Holbrooke, would you allow me to escort you to the gala?”

The question caught her completely off guard. She felt flustered, like a schoolgirl who had just been asked out on her first date, her stomach all tied up in knots. But not wishing to appear as a schoolgirl, she perked up her nose. “Thank you, Dr. Marianni. I believe I would love to go with you.”

A huge grin crossed his face. “Excellent.”

She softly smiled, nodded, and looked out the window at the passing countryside. *Be careful, girl. You are heading into dangerous territory of a different kind.*

Yes, the terrain was new and different, but she felt the excitement bubble up inside her in anticipation of where it would take her. In the meantime, they had a lot to do between now and the gala. She wondered what they would find in Varenna when they got there. Would they be able to track down Nico? Would they uncover the clues that would lead to those responsible for the events of the last few days?

Jamie hoped so. She desperately needed answers to her questions—as much as she wanted to help Alessandro and Nonni apprehend the perpetrators and get answers of their own.

CHAPTER 20

The sunset cast a tawny glow over Lake Como as Alessandro and Jamie neared Varenna on the Via Padre Luigi Mellera—a winding road that hugged the shoreline and provided some of the most spectacular views in Italy.

Alessandro revved the car's engine as he shifted into lower gear around the narrow bend into town, and Jamie felt the chill of evening descend with the long shadows that darkened the narrow passageway along the road between the centuries-old buildings. She pulled her sweater more tightly around her as Alessandro pulled into the parking garage and found a space in the underground structure.

Once outside the car, Alessandro removed their overnight bags from the trunk and handed one to Jamie. She accepted the bag with a small awkward smile, suddenly conscious of the familiarity their bags implied and totally aware of the magnetism between them as they emerged onto the street and ambled down the lane toward the hotel.

At the entrance of the Villa, Jamie repositioned her overnight bag over her shoulder. It was really more of a physical representation of her emotional need to buttress her spirit as she entered the lobby rather than a need to redistribute the weight of her bag. But it gave her the moment she needed to gather her wits.

Thankfully, the hotel seemed to be operating business-as-usual. During their days in the alpine valleys, Jamie had managed to distance herself from Paolo's murder. Even with the gunman

chasing them down the alpine slope in Pra del Tor, she had no time to think about what she had witnessed here. But now . . .

She bit her lip. Staying at the Villa Cipressi meant she would have to face the memories again. Could she traverse the stairs without the image of Paolo's vacant gaze looking up at her?

Are you here, Jason? I need a little support from you right about now.

Alessandro must have felt her stiffen. "Are you sure you're okay with this?"

I'm here, Jamie.

She let out a breath and nodded. "It's easier for us to snoop around if we have rooms here—less conspicuous that way."

"Okay, but if you have any misgivings, you will let me know, yes?"

"I'll be fine." She reassured him. "Let's just get this over with."

Jamie didn't recognize the young woman who welcomed them at the reception desk, nor did the woman seem to acknowledge knowing them. It was just as well, Jamie thought, as the woman handed her a key card. Neither of them needed to relive the events of that awful day in an experiential exchange.

"I'm just down the hall from you on the third floor if you need me. You will call on me if you need anything, yes?" he said.

She nodded. "I promise."

He put a hand under her elbow, and they made their way up the steps to their rooms.

* * * * *

At breakfast the following morning, Alessandro and Jamie mapped out a plan of action. Operating on the assumption that Nico was working with Paolo to steal *Jerusalem at Twilight*, Alessandro believed that Nico probably had knowledge of Paolo's contact. Their first task was to find evidence to prove that Nico had been at the Villa the morning of the murder. If so, he also might have witnessed the murder from afar and knew who had killed Paolo.

While Investigator Visco would have ordered a thorough search of the Villa and gardens for clues about how the assassin was able to get in and out of the building undetected, Alessandro and Jamie needed to concentrate on signs that pointed to Nico's presence.

"Unless the investigative team knew who they were looking for," Jamie said, picking up her cup, "they may not have understood what to look for." She put the cup to her lips and swallowed the last dregs of her cappuccino.

"Agreed," Alessandro said, and wiped his mouth with his napkin. "And since we don't really care about our assassin at the moment, our efforts should also be different. I suggest we start with the gardens." He threw down his napkin. "Shall we?"

Jamie slid her chair back and followed Alessandro out the breakfast room to the lobby. He led her to the glass atrium doors and pushed open the door that led out to a garden patio.

"*Buongiorno*, Miss Holbrooke, Dr. Marianni," said a voice behind them.

Inwardly, Jamie groaned. She could feel the tremor of panic course through her body. She knew the voice. It belonged to the man she had most hoped to avoid. She turned along with Alessandro to face him.

"Hello, Investigatore Visco," Alessandro said, his grim voice saying all he felt. Jamie watched as he met the investigator's eyes with a sweet challenge. "We weren't expecting to see you, especially not this early in the morning."

"Obviously." The inspector studied them. "Imagine my surprise when I learned that you both had left Varenna before we completed our investigation."

"We understood that we were under no compulsion to stay as long as you knew of our whereabouts," said Jamie with a little more bravado than she felt. "And Dr. Gadolfo has informed us that he kept you apprised of where we were at all times."

"That is true," the detective said, "but I wonder what urgency required you to steal away from your prestigious exhibition. Too coincidental, no?"

“My grandmother,” Alessandro said, as if that should explain everything. “As you know, my parents are out of the country, and Bobbio Pellice is only a couple of hours away. I felt obligated to respond to her distress.”

“And you, Signorina Holbrooke? Did you feel the same obligation?”

“I” Jamie linked her arm with Alessandro’s. “Well, to be honest, I wouldn’t have ordinarily left Giovanni stranded alone to represent the museum.”

“But ... ?” the investigator coaxed.

She glanced up at Alessandro with admiration in her eyes and licked her lips. “Few people know of my past association with Dr. Marianni in Cleveland when he came to lecture at the art institute. Dr. Marianni’s passion and expertise is why I came to Italy. So when Nonna Luciana was in trouble, I went along for support. I hoped this would not be my last opportunity to meet her.”

“I see.”

Jamie could see the detective didn’t believe a word she’d spoke. But she hadn’t lied. She just hadn’t told the whole truth.

He turned and fixed his eyes on the white marble staircase for a moment and whirled back around. “Follow me,” he said, leaving for the staircase.

Jamie withdrew her arm from Alessandro’s and sent him an inquiring glance. He shrugged in return before they followed the detective forward.

Visco led them up the staircase to the third floor mezzanine and pointed to a camera near the ceiling. “Do you notice anything interesting about that camera?”

Jamie shook her head as Alessandro moved closer to take a look. She watched him place a hand on his hip paused in thought. Then he turned. “The wires have been cut.”

“Very good, Dr. Marianni. What does that suggest to you?”

“The killer knew to render the camera useless.”

“Right again.” Visco knelt in front of the plant next to the sofa and postured as if he held a gun. “And this?”

Jamie watched Alessandro's face turn ashen. "Where the killer shot from?"

"Right again. One of the housekeeping maids found it soon after the shooting. She heard what she thought was a pop while she was vacuuming, but she ignored it to finish cleaning the room. When she emerged from the room, she heard all the commotion and came here to the mezzanine. That's how she spotted the gun—a semi-automatic—hiding behind the plant."

"Oh, no!" Jamie breathed. She felt devastated for the poor woman.

"Oh, yes." The investigator turned to Jamie. "It traumatized the lady. I understand she hasn't been back to work since."

"Did this semi-automatic lead you to your murderer?" Alessandro asked.

The detective shook his head. "Our killer left no fingerprints, and the serial number was filed off so that the gun is untraceable. But," he finished with suspicion in his eyes, "I imagine you already know all this."

"He was, as I suspected, Investigatore Visco, a hired assassin," Alessandro said, leveling his eyes at the detective. "But surely this must confirm for you that neither Jamie nor I had anything to do with the murder."

"Indeed. There is no doubt that this was a professional killing," Investigator Visco said.

"Then why do you persist in pursuing Jamie and me in this ridiculous notion that we had anything to do with this murder?" Alessandro said with deliberate frankness. "Neither of us has ever been involved in criminal activity, as I'm sure you have already confirmed, and both of us were on the first floor when Paolo was shot, as you very well know. Face it. You have nothing on either of us."

Visco ran a tongue over his two front teeth, making a hissing sound. "You are quite right, of course. I have no evidence that either of you is linked to the murder. But my gut tells me you know something, which is tantamount to an accessory to the crime."

Jamie jerked her head up. *Accessory to the crime?* That took their involvement to a whole new level.

“I would advise you both to think carefully about what you do next.” The detective fixed his eyes on Jamie.

Alessandro became glib. “Think whatever you want, Investigatore Visco. If there is nothing further, then we should be free to go to enjoy the rest of our day. We were about to take a walk in the garden when you detained us.”

Visco waved his hand, indicating his dismissal.

Alessandro gave a brief nod, and then put a hand under Jamie’s elbow and led her away down the stairs.

Half-way down, Jamie heard Investigator Visco’s voice from above. “Signorina Holbrooke!” She looked up to see the detective leaning over the rail. “I am sure you do not want to be deported for withholding evidence in a criminal investigation. Think about it!”

CHAPTER 21

When they reached the lobby, Alessandro led Jamie to the glass atrium doors once again and pushed open the door onto the sunny garden patio.

Jamie strode past an older couple, who were sitting at one of several black wrought-iron tables under a sunshade, drinking their beverages and enjoying the lake view. She found a spot a little further on where she stopped before a row of low-growing bushes. She crossed her arms, glowering across the lake.

“You cannot let Investigatore Visco get to you like that,” Alessandro said next to her.

Jamie dared not look at him, her emotions raw. “That man just threatened to deport me.”

“He is only blowing smoke, Jamie.” He brought her fully around to face him, both hands on her shoulders, eyes sympathetic. “You don’t have to do this, you know. Perhaps—”

“I appreciate your concern, really. It’s just—oh, never mind.” There it was again, the wall she put between herself and the rest of the world. If Alessandro only knew. She couldn’t be deported—not as long as she had this connection with Jason. *Jason?* She whispered his name.

I’m here, Jamie, right beside you. I won’t let anything happen to you.

“What were you saying?”

She looked into Alessandro’s curious eyes. “If I can face down a gunman on a mountainside, I can confront an overzealous detective. Let’s do what we came here for.”

“Of course,” he said and indicated for her to move forward.

The gravel crunched under their feet as they searched the terrace. They looked behind trees, parted bushes and combed the various nooks and crannies. Jamie circled around a concrete, oval fountain with its angel spritzing water into the reservoir, and scoured the fountain for a clue.

Having found nothing, she lifted her head to behold one of the most glorious views she'd ever witnessed. In front of her, an ivy-covered portico with its wrought-iron railing and blooming geraniums framed a shimmering Lake Como and the verdant mountains behind it.

“Breathtaking, yes?” Alessandro said, coming up beside her. She nodded. He gave her a moment and then said, “Come on. There is nothing on this level.”

They walked to the other side of the portico to the railing and down a set of stairs that led to the garden trail. Cypress trees and tree ferns bordered the weaving path to yet another portico with its fragrant wisteria blooming in full color overhead.

A short distance beyond the portico, they came across a part of the trail where the path had been dug up and a small pile of dirt lay off to the side. Jamie carefully picked her way to sidestep the four-foot square mound and spotted a cigarette butt. She squatted.

“What is it?” Alessandro asked.

“A smashed cigarette butt.” Jamie said, looking up at Alessandro's somber face. “Remember, both your grandmother and I smelled the odor of cigarette residue on Nico.”

She picked up the butt and stood to examine it. Enough of the cigarette had been left intact to see the brand. “It's a Marlboro. If this is the brand Nico smokes, then it could place him here at the time of the shooting.” She placed the butt in a small plastic baggie and deposited it into her handbag.

They moved on.

At last, they came to the lowest level of the garden where the narrow footpath ran along the lake. A low rock wall separated the pathway from the lake. Another wall, about ten feet high and

crawling with budding vines, ran along the footpath on the other side of them.

They went a short distance, and then Alessandro halted. Jamie watched him squat. He picked up a small rock on the path and threw it across the wall into the lake.

“Alessandro?”

“I can’t shrug this feeling that something isn’t right.” He slapped his hands together to clear them of dirt, and then stood up. “One moment I’d like to find Nico and shake the stupid fool for getting involved with criminals. The next moment I’m afraid that he might be dead, just like Paolo.”

“I know.” She placed a hand on Alessandro’s arm and gazed into hurting eyes. “I’m worried, too.”

A long moment went by. Alessandro patted her hand, and then let out an exasperated sigh. He pointed down the path. “There is another set of stairs. I believe we can go this way to get back to the top.” He started for the stairs.

Thirty feet down the path, they came across a set of concrete columns with an ornamental wrought-iron gate hanging between them. Jamie stopped. “Wait a minute. There’s a boat landing here. Look.” She held onto the gate with both hands and peered through. A small motorboat could dock on the landing. “It’s another access to the villa.”

“So it is.” Alessandro’s voice brightened. He came around her and fumbled with the large rusty lock. “Except this lock doesn’t look like it’s been opened for months—maybe years.”

“I don’t know. It looks old, but—”

“Wait. See this.” He pointed to what appeared to be scratches in the metal. “It looks like it’s been tampered with.” Alessandro grabbed Jamie’s hand. “Come on. We need to find somebody who might know how much this boat dock is used.”

They went another ninety feet to where the stairs intersected the path and began the ascent. At the top of the first set of stairs, Jamie pointed to the young man descending the stairs ahead of them carefully with several shovels in his hands. “There’s our man.”

They waited.

“*Buongiorno*,” the groundskeeper said when he had come up to them.

He would have passed, but Alessandro stopped him. “May we have a word?”

“Si.” The young man looked at them through blond bangs that hung over his eyes.

“You are one of the groundskeepers, no?” Alessandro said.

“Si.” He hefted the shovels in his arms. Jamie thought he looked burdened under the awkward load. “One of several,” he added.

“We have some questions about the hotel and gardens,” Alessandro said.

“You can inquire at reception. They also have guided tours, if you like.” The groundskeeper said.

Alessandro studied him. “Actually, you’re the man I think we’re looking for.”

The groundskeeper turned and hesitated. Then he held out his arms. “If you take a couple of these, I will try to answer your questions.” Alessandro took two shovels. “Follow me,” the young man said, and led Alessandro back down the path along the high wall.

Jamie followed the men back toward the locked boat landing. The groundskeeper dropped his tools in front of two damaged bushes a few feet away from the locked gate. Funny, she hadn’t seen the broken twigs on their way out, but they were close to where Alessandro had thrown the rock into the lake.

The groundskeeper slapped dirt from his hands, and then placed them on his slim hips. “What can I do for you?”

Jamie guessed him to be about twenty years old. Faded scarring from teenage acne still dotted his face.

“Were you here three mornings ago?” Alessandro said.

The young man shifted his eyes between them. “The day that man was killed?”

“Si. Did you see any unusual activity in the gardens that morning?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Are you *polizija*?”

Jamie stepped forward. "I'm Jamie Holbrooke, and this is Dr. Alessandro Marianni. Paolo was our associate. We're just trying to understand what might have happened that morning, that's all."

The groundskeeper crossed his arms. "What makes you think I would know anything? Why don't you ask the police?"

"Honestly," Alessandro said, "we think the police are grasping at straws, but they have few clues. We think someone else might have seen or heard something to help us."

The groundskeeper licked his lips. "How do I know I can trust you?"

Jamie stepped closer. "You don't" She searched his name tag. "Davide, but you have my word that we are not the police, and we are not criminals. In fact," she tried a different tact, "I was talking to Paolo when I watched him tumble down the stairs. Can you imagine standing next to someone who is murdered before your very eyes? I just want to understand what happened and why I had to witness such a horrible crime."

Davide bit his lip. He seemed to contemplate whether they could be trusted. At last, he said, "Thousands of people come and go through this hotel every year—guests of the hotel and people who want to see the beautiful gardens. I never stop anyone to ask their business. Most of the time, they do not talk to me, except perhaps for an occasional hello or goodbye."

"Most of the time ... ?" Alessandro coaxed. "But not this time."

Davide pointed to the boat landing. "You see that gate? I do not remember when it was last open. It stays locked to keep people from going onto the landing where they can get hurt."

"You mean the gate was open?" Jamie said, meeting Alessandro's eyes. Now they were getting somewhere. "But the lock looks like it hasn't been touched for years."

"Si. I put that one on the other day until I could find a new one."

"So what happened?" Alessandro asked.

"Tuesday morning about quarter past seven, I came out to do routine work. I could see from up there," he pointed to a point above them, "the gate was open. I was surprised, because no one

has opened it for at least two years. But when I got closer, I heard voices. I thought maybe they were my co-workers already here doing work. But when I got closer to the landing, I realized these guys were not anybody I knew. Three of them sat in a small motorboat, and one stood on the landing. One of the men in the boat pointed a gun at the one on the landing. I heard a second one say that he wanted the goods—that he had paid good money for them but he had nothing to show for it. My heart started to pound.” Davide pounded on his chest. “I realized these men were probably criminals. I didn’t know what to do. So I hurried along the wall, trying not to make any noise, and waited for them to leave.”

“How long was it before they left?” Jamie asked.

“Not long. Maybe ten minutes. Longest ten minutes of my life!”

Alessandro brushed a hand through his hair. “Why didn’t you tell the police about this?” Alessandro asked sharply.

Davide took some time to reply. “I was afraid. That guy—Paolo, you said—he was the one on the landing.”

Jamie gasped.

“Would you be able to recognize the other men?” Alessandro went for his inner jacket pocket.

A look of terror crossed Davide’s face. He held up his hand. “No, no trouble!”

Alessandro spoke with a calming voice. “I’m just reaching for a couple of pictures. I have no gun. Look.” He drew out the pictures from his inside pocket.

Relief flooded the groundskeeper’s face. “I am just a little nervous, you know.”

“*Si. Capisco.* I understand. Anyone would be frightened of men with guns. But, see,” Alessandro lifted the photo, “I only want to know if you recognize this man. Was he one of the men in the boat?”

Davide nodded. “Si. He was the third man I saw. His hair was longer and he had what looked like a gash on his cheek. But that’s him.”

Alessandro's grief-stricken eyes met Jamie's confirming that the gardener had identified Nico. He addressed Davide again. "And the others in the boat? Would you be able to recognize them again?"

Davide breathed heavily. "I cannot be sure. But one of them looked like that Mafia guy in the newspapers—you, know, the one they say killed the mayor of Milan two years ago."

"Carlo Benedetto?" Alessandro furrowed his brow.

"Si. That one."

Alessandro's cheeks flexed. He stood riveted in his spot, his eyes frozen as a pond on a winter's day.

Jamie's heart reached out to him.

Davide licked his lips. "Honestly, signore, I cannot tell you anything more. Soon afterward, they left."

Alessandro put a hand on Davide's shoulder "You've been very helpful, Davide. I know how hard it was for you. Thank you."

Davide nodded. "I hope you find what you are looking for, Signore, Signorina." He bent to pick up a tool.

Alessandro guided Jamie away as Davide began to dig the bushes. "This is not good news. If Nico hooked up with a Mafia boss, he is without a doubt in big trouble."

"But Davide wasn't certain that it *was* Carlo Benedetto."

"But it makes sense. Nico, Paolo, Carlo Benedetto." He paused. "We should go to the ferry docks. Maybe someone saw Nico hire a boat." He started forward. But Jamie held back.

He turned. "What's wrong?"

"I ... it's nothing. I'm right with you." She couldn't tell him—didn't want to face the idea—that their worst fears could have already become a reality. What if Nico—the one who looked so much like Jason—was already dead? What would she do? What would Alessandro do? Even more, what would Nonna Luciana do then?

CHAPTER 22

Alessandro and Jamie headed out from the Villa Cipressi to the Passerella and walked toward the wharf. Along the way, they searched for clues—anything, no matter how small, that could lead them to Nico. By the time they reached the area around the ferry dock, it was early afternoon, and a few locals had come out to enjoy the warm spring day during their lunch hour.

Jamie followed Alessandro to the boat slip of the cove where a number of small craft rocked gently in the shallow waters. A narrow pier extended a short distance over the water, where one boatman seemed to be preparing his sailboat for a cruise. She read the sign posted on a board near the pier written in English and Italian that announced, “Boats for Rent.”

“This must be the place,” Jamie said. “I don’t see any other rental place in sight.”

“I agree,” Alessandro said and approached the boatman. “*Buona sera, signore*. Fine day to be out.”

The boatman looked up from checking his lines. “That it is. Looking to rent a boat?”

Alessandro produced the picture of Nico. “Actually, I wanted to know if you happened to rent a boat to this man a few days ago?”

“Who wants to know?” The boatman returned his attention to his lines without glancing at the picture.

“We’re looking for a friend who’s been missing for several days. We’re hoping you might have seen him,” Alessandro said.

“Maybe he doesn’t want to be found,” the boatman responded.

Jamie's eyes met Alessandro's. She didn't blame the boatman for being wary. As they had discovered over the last several days, the word "friend" denoted many things.

"We think he might be in trouble," Jamie said. "If you—"

The boatman glanced up at her. "And you are a wife or girlfriend?"

"Honestly, just a truly concerned friend."

Jamie watched the boatman, but he gave no indication of being moved by her plea as he continued to work through the lines.

Alessandro flicked the photo against his palm and signaled to Jamie with a nod of the head that they should leave. They had begun to walk away when Jamie heard the sailor's voice behind her.

"Wait a minute," he said.

They turned and retraced their steps.

Jamie watched as the boatmen threw down his lines and climbed up out of the boat. "Let me see that photo." He reached out to Alessandro for the picture.

"Si, he was here," the boatman said after a moment. He handed the photo back to Alessandro. "A little rougher around the edges and a bruised cheek. But it was definitely him."

"Did he say what he wanted the boat for?" Alessandro asked.

The boatman shook his head. "No, but he said he needed it early in the morning. I told him I didn't open until eight. When he offered me another twenty-five euros to get it earlier, I said he could have it. He came by at six and took that runabout over there." He pointed.

"Was anyone with him?" Jamie asked.

He shook his head. "He left alone. Came back about three hours later alone as well."

"Did you see where he went after he left the slip?" Jamie was excited now. If Nico had returned the boat three hours later, that meant he was still alive on Tuesday morning.

"Can't say for sure. But I can tell you he stayed at the Albergo Belle Mondo." He pointed across the inlet past the car ferry ramp to a hotel, the color of the Tuscan. "I wish I had more to tell you."

Alessandro shook the boatman's hand. "It is more than we had

before. *Mille grazie.*”

As the boatman turned back to his task, Alessandro put a hand on the small of Jamie’s back and led her up toward the car park near the hotel. “It is well known that Benedetto has a villa across the lake north of Tremezzo. If what Davide told us is true, Nico probably made his way there first to pick up Benedetto and his enforcer,” he said as they rounded a small children’s playground. “This is not a good sign.”

Jamie looked west toward Tremezzo. Certainly it held one of the most glorious visages she’d ever seen, but behind the face of the mountainside, was there also a dark force that held the power to give and take life at will? Was Paolo a victim of that power? And what about Nico?

She frowned. “Something bothers me about Tuesday morning, Alessandro. We know Nico was alone when he rented the boat at six. How long would you say it takes to get across the lake in a small motorboat?”

“Maybe thirty or forty minutes.”

“Okay, that fits. It would have taken Nico an hour or so to collect Benedetto and his enforcer and bring him back to the Villa Cipressi, and we know Benedetto and his enforcer were in the boat at the Villa Cipressi when Davide saw them about seven-fifteen. Davide said they talked for another ten minutes, so they left by seven-thirty.”

“I see where you’re going with this,” Alessandro said. “If Nico was alone when he returned the boat at nine, then we must assume it took him another hour or so to get Benedetto back to Tremezzo and return the boat to the boat slip.”

“Yes. Do you remember what time it was when Paolo was shot?”

“A little before nine. Visco called it eight-forty-eight.”

“Don’t you see? Nico wasn’t at the Villa Cipressi when Paolo was killed. This proves he couldn’t have shot Paolo.”

“True, but we already concluded that Paolo was killed by a hit man, and Investigatore Visco said as much.”

“Yes, but something still doesn’t add up. Davide said he

overheard Benedetto say he didn't yet have the painting and was angry about it. Why was Paolo holding out? And why would Benedetto kill Paolo *before* he had the painting?"

"You have a point." Alessandro thought on it a moment. "Maybe Paolo was playing a game of cat and mouse, and Benedetto got tired of it. Maybe he already had set his hit man on Paolo for that morning, knowing that Nico could lead him to the painting."

"Maybe." Jamie still felt unsettled. "We need to know what Nico did in the hours following the rendezvous with Benedetto. Maybe someone at the hotel can tell us if they saw Nico in the days surrounding Paolo's murder."

"I'm praying it is so," Alessandro said as they walked up to the door of the hotel.

* * * * *

Jamie and Alessandro were not able to get their questions answered at the Albergo Belle Mondo until evening when the restaurant opened for business. The current staff on duty would not talk about their clientele, and the owner, Justina, had business in Como until evening.

At seven o'clock, they returned to the hotel for dinner. It held an old-world charm, and their food was excellent. An hour later when they had finished the last of their tiramisu, Alessandro reluctantly called for the bill.

"You are not hotel patrons," their server said with meager enthusiasm as she waited for payment. She placed one hand on her hip while with the other she pushed her dark-framed glasses up on her nose.

Jamie wondered why the middle-aged woman seemed so out of sorts with them. Meals were open to the public. "We're staying at the Villa Cipressi."

"The Villa Cipressi." The woman sniffed. "We have a more excellent position here on the ferry dock."

"You have a wonderful view of the lake. I thought so the last time I was here."

“Why do you not change your reservation?” the woman demanded.

Jamie did not want a confrontation, but there seemed to be no way of escaping it. “We—”

“We would like to speak to the owner,” Alessandro said with polite restraint as he replaced his wallet into his pocket.

“I am the owner.”

“Ah, I see.” Alessandro gave her a fleeting smile. He paused, a thoughtful furrow creasing his brow. “I wonder if you would give us one more moment of your time?”

The woman’s mouth moved what Jamie thought seemed like bothered hesitation, but then she said, “What can I do for you, signore?”

“We seem to have lost track of a friend of ours who has been traveling in the area. Perhaps you can tell me then, if you recognize this man.” Alessandro laid the picture of Nico down on the table. “Has he possibly enjoyed your very gracious hospitality?”

The woman paused, her eyes locked onto Alessandro’s. “*Polizija?*”

“No, just a professor who has lost his friend. Did he by any chance pass this way?”

Justina relaxed and looked at the picture again. “Si. Your friend stayed here just a few days ago. He was quiet. Paid his bill.”

“Can you remember the exact days he stayed here?” Jamie asked.

“I believe he stayed two nights ... yes, Monday and Tuesday.”

“Was our friend in the company of this man?” Alessandro presented the photo of Carlo Benedetto.

This time, the woman’s eyes widened in alarm. She wrinkled her nose and waved her hand. “No, signore. This man I do not recognize. He never came into my establishment.”

“But are you sure? Couldn’t you just—” Jamie began.

“As a matter of fact, signore, now that I think of it,” she squinched her glasses up on her nose, “This one, he was never here either. I believe I was mistaken. Yes, I am sure of it.” She moved away.

Alessandro met Jamie’s eyes, and they jumped up and followed

the woman to reception.

Jamie appealed to the woman once more, her voice more urgent. “Signora, we’re terribly concerned for our friend. You must understand”

The woman kept her nose down, straightening up the clutter on her desk—or pretending to. She seemed to cogitate in silence. She looked up and around and then back at Jamie. Her eyes pleaded, and she whispered. “Signorina, please. The man in the photograph. *Capo di Mafioso.*”

Jamie’s eyes softened, desperate to show the woman she understood. “Just tell us. Our friend—did he leave alone?”

Justina hesitated. Then with a sympathetic tilt to her head, she nodded. “Milan, I think, but you heard nothing about it from me.”

Jamie laid a grateful hand on top the woman’s. “Thank you, Justina. You can’t know how much we appreciate your help.”

The woman didn’t look up, but waved her hand to warn them away.

Taking the hint, Jamie grabbed Alessandro, and they made their way to the door and out into the night air.

Once outside, Alessandro exhaled long and hard before making for the railing at the end of the wharf.

“Milan is a big city,” Jamie said walking next to him.

“Yes. It will be like hunting for a needle in the proverbial haystack.” He found a spot along the railing and leaned against the metal, remaining silent next to her.

Jamie dug her hands into her pockets, observing the night in silence beside Alessandro. Only a ferry outlined in white lights interrupted the dark expanse in front of them. The calming lap of the water below them gave a respite from the pain of Nico’s choices.

“Virgil once said of Lake Como that it was the ‘greatest lake’ for its unprecedented beauty,” Alessandro said at last. “At times like these, I forget the persistence of evil wanting to invade the peaceful centers of the soul.”

Jamie studied the form beside her. Over the days, Alessandro had surprised her by his poetry and the depth of heart. She

wondered what other mysteries lay beneath the surface of the man. Sympathy compelled her to reach a hand to his arm. "I'm sorry. I know you carry a heavy burden for your grandmother and for Nico."

He looked down at her hand, and then up into her eyes, searching, probing.

There it was again—she didn't know how to navigate the waters. She averted her eyes and dug her hand back into her pocket. "I was engaged once. He broke it off when I decided to come to Italy."

Alessandro stood straight. "Tell me about him," he said, leading her back to the Passarella. "Did you love him?"

"I thought I did." Jamie waxed. "When he said he wouldn't wait for me, I thought the end of my world had arrived. Now I realize that if I'd really loved him, I would never have left Cleveland. So, I guess you could say that we weren't meant to be together."

They walked on in silence for a time, passing the boat slip and cove until they had gone a small distance where Alessandro stopped near a lamplight. "Do you remember our discussion about Sir Charles Barry's fiancée?"

"Yes," Jamie spoke quietly. "I was thinking about Clint."

"I thought perhaps there had been a difficult relationship in your past," he said. "I could see it held a painful memory for you. But I meant what I said. A man waits for the one whom he believes God has designed for him. I think God has not revealed to you yet who that person is. But he is there, Jamie. Do not doubt that."

Jamie caught her breath as she met the intensity in Alessandro's gaze. She could not break the hold of what it spoke to her. She wasn't sure she wanted to, and yet . . .

She tucked her dark hair behind her ears and began to walk again. "So it's on to Milan in the morning to search for Nico."

"And attend a benefit."

"I almost forgot. Tomorrow is Saturday!"

"Indeed, and I believe I have a date with *una bella donna* who I am supposed to escort to the party, yes?"

A tentative smile fled across her lips. He had said she was a lovely lady. Her heart skipped a beat.

CHAPTER 23

Nico downed his latte, and then walked out of the coffee bar into the morning air. He'd been staying in a room near Milan's Central Station, but the money was running out—not that he cared about the abysmal accommodations. At least he had a bed on which to lay his head and a small sink in which to wash his face. He needed a job.

Central Station seemed as a good a place as any to find work. After all, the world-acclaimed architectural phenomenon known to Milanese as the *Stazione Centrale* boasted three hundred thirty thousand train passengers per day, traversing its almost six hundred seventy thousand square meters. If he could get a job as a janitor, he could get lost in its labyrinth of passageways, offices, galleries, and lobbies. No one would be able to find him there. He walked across the Piazza Duca D' Aosta to the front of the elaborate façade and entered the station.

Two hours later, he departed the train station with a pair of zip-up maintenance jumpers draped over his arm. These would do well—for a while. He crossed the piazza and worked his way to a bar. The rest of the afternoon went by in a blur as he consumed a bottle of red wine and smoked two packs of Marlboros. Better to drink the world into oblivion than to face social and emotional banishment from the world you betrayed. He felt certain no one in Bobbio Pellice would ever welcome him back again. He was doomed to a miserable existence.

Jamie grabbed the pole of the subway train as it ground to a halt. It felt good to be back in Milan—so familiar, like home, but not home, not Cleveland. Yet, she had become accustomed to the city’s nuances—the dynamic rhythm of Milan’s ebb and flow of daily living—like knowing to disembark at the metro station near the Piazza del Duomo, and then walk ten minutes to the Brera.

She followed Alessandro off the train and wove with him through the vast underground system of corridors and gates and more corridors—this done without a thought as they maneuvered through the crowds of people. Not until the stairs up to ground level did she feel watched, followed. She pivoted around, but she only saw a sea of people rushing forward. She shrugged. If someone had followed them, he now hid himself well among the people.

They ascended to daylight where they faced the western façade of the Duomo—Milan’s Gothic Cathedral, second in size only to the cathedral in Seville.

“It’s hard to take your eyes from it, no?” Alessandro said, as they walked past the Duomo. “Have you noticed how all roads lead out from or encircle it? That was Rome’s master plan for all of its cities during the centuries of the empire—the cathedral faced the public square and all roads radiated outward from it.”

“All roads lead to Rome?” Jamie said suggestively. She looked up at the tremendous edifice, and then back at Alessandro.

“Ah, the lady is astute,” he teased, taking her elbow and leading her to the north entrance of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II.

The Galleria provided a shortcut to the Piazza della Scala with its statue of Leonardo Di Vinci and the Via A. Manzoni. On other occasions, Jamie had explored the nineteenth-century shopping mall with its prestigious shops and restaurants.

“I found refuge here one cold and rainy day not long after I came to Milan,” she told Alessandro. “It was the day Clint declared he wouldn’t wait for me and called off our engagement.” She thought about the day. Even the vaulted ceiling of iron and glass

couldn't illumine the gloom of darkness that inhabited both the day and her heart. She remembered how the gilded paintings in the octagonal central room lost their glimmer in the dim light. The twenty-four statues of prominent Italians seemed to wear glum faces. "I wandered into the *Savini* and ordered minestrone. That's when I discovered how wonderfully comforting soup is. It warmed my body, if not my soul, anyway."

"Ah, the *Savini* is one of my favorite restaurants, also," Alessandro said, as they once again walked into the open. "But I think you should know it has a reputation for being a clandestine meeting place for Italy's aristocrats and criminals. They say many economic marriages and betrayals over the centuries have been secretly created at the *Savini*."

Jamie cast a skeptical eye at him. "How secretive could it be if everybody knows about it?"

A whimsical smile crossed his face. "True, huh? But I suggest we need only engage in more legitimate enterprises, though perhaps no less mysterious."

Jamie felt her cheeks flush. The idea of forging an enterprise with Alessandro thrilled her senses. Feeling embarrassed, she kept her gaze straight ahead as they trekked forward.

Two minutes later, they entered the Via Brera where young people, sporting backpacks, rode their bicycles past them along the narrow brick street. "It must be a break between classes at the academy," Jamie said.

"It would seem." He paused, and then pointed at the art galleries and prestigious shops along the road. "Did you know that this was all part of the bohemian district in the 1950s and '60s? The Bar Jamaica was the students' hangout—you'd probably call them beatniks. But look at it now, a shopper's paradise. Who would have known, eh?"

The irony was not lost on Jamie as they turned into the Romanesque portal of the late-baroque *palazzo* that now housed both the Brera and the Academy of Fine Art. The original site began as a convent for the Humiliati in the twelfth century. She could imagine the souls of the nuns raising their voices toward

heaven in outcry against the invasion of the bohemian counterculture within their sacrosanct halls. Perhaps the only philosophy the two respective groups had in common in their day was voluntary poverty—and that toward two totally different ends. And now the same street had become a haven for commercial interests. Could either group have born the irreverence of their sacred home?

As they continued through the portal, she bumped shoulders with a man going out the opposite direction. She whirled around, only to see the back of a dark-haired man wearing a green hoodie the same color she had only seen days before. Then he was gone.

She froze.

“Are you all right?” Alessandro asked.

“I think my mind is playing tricks on me.”

“Oh?” He furrowed his brow.

“I thought I saw our gunman from the Pra.”

“Really?” Alessandro hurriedly returned through the entrance with Jamie following behind. He peered up and down the street. “Do you see him anywhere?”

“No.” Her body drooped slightly. “I guess I’m a little jumpy. He was probably just a tourist or maybe a student I mistook for him.”

He looked at her with concern. “We should not take anyone for granted, yes?”

She nodded. “Let’s just find Giovanni.”

As Alessandro led her through the courtyard past the bronze sculpture labeled *Napoleon I as Mars the Peacemaker* and up the staircase past the memorials of artists and contributors to the museum, Jamie noted the assemblage of boxes and folding tables, signs that preparations were underway for the evening’s benefit. On the second floor, they entered the Pinacoteca di Brera through the gift shop and found the director’s offices down the hall beyond.

“You look very hard at work, Analise.” Jamie said to Giovanni’s middle-aged secretary. Analise had been sitting behind the desk in such focused concentration that she had not been aware of their entry.

“Jamie! Dr. Marianni!” The woman beamed, and she jumped up and came around her desk to greet Jamie with kisses. “I am so glad you are back.”

In spite of her earlier unease, Jamie responded in kind, realizing she, too, had missed seeing her office-mate and friend. Analise’s wiry graying hair and glasses made her look older than her forty-eight years, but her perky authenticity made her a breath of fresh air in the office.

“It’s been so *triste*—just dismal around here, since that awful business with Paolo,” Analise continued. “Giovanni is not himself—so grumpy—and the staff!” The woman threw up her hands.

Jamie’s countenance fell. “It’s been hard for everyone, I imagine.”

“Si. I thought we should cancel the benefit, but Giovanni wouldn’t hear of it. The show must go on, he said. Well, maybe it will be good for all of us.”

“Is Giovanni in?” Alessandro asked.

Jamie thought he spoke a little tersely and realized Analise must have noticed his impatience, too, when she answered him.

“Oh yes, you must be anxious to see him” She leaned over to check her desk phone. “He was on a call earlier, but the light is off. Please,” she indicated. “I know he has been looking forward to your return, also.”

“We’ll have lunch soon.” Jamie smiled warmly and hugged Analise before following Alessandro to Giovanni’s door.

“Welcome back, my friends,” Giovanni leapt to his feet with a smile as they walked through the door.

“You are a welcome sight, as well,” Alessandro said, leaving the door ajar behind them.

“But what is this?” Giovanni said, after taking in Jamie’s unnerved expression. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Not a ghost, Giovanni. But perhaps our gunman.” Alessandro said, his eyes fixed on Jamie as they sat.

Incredulity crossed Giovanni’s face. “The gunman! You have found the hit man who killed Paolo?”

“I thought I saw him inside the courtyard.” Jamie rubbed her arm. “But he got lost in the crowd exiting the front gate when we tried to look for him.”

Alessandro took several minutes to explain their experiences of the last several days, including having escaped the gunman at the Pra. He finished with how they had come to find out that Carlo Benedetto was involved. “Sadly, we think Nico is working for Benedetto as well having played an instrumental part in procuring the painting for Paolo.”

“Carlo Benedetto!” Giovanni said. “That is not a name one hears every day.”

“Sadly, we also don’t have a clue where to begin to look for Nico,” Jamie said. “Our most recent information says he’s hiding out somewhere here in Milan.”

“Milan is a sprawling metropolis. He could be anywhere,” Giovanni said.

“Indeed—if he is even still here.” Alessandro put a ponderous finger to his lips. “It has been several days. He could be anywhere by now. But ... we do know of one man who perhaps may very well know where we can find Nico.”

“Who? Benedetto?” Giovanni asked with sarcasm.

“Yes.”

Giovanni’s eyes widened. “You aren’t seriously contemplating what I think you’re—”

“Do we have another choice?”

“It’s brilliant!” Jamie exclaimed, suddenly caught up in the idea. If Nico was working for Benedetto, then, of course, the mobster should know of his whereabouts.

“It is insanel!” Giovanni jumped in, dumbfounded. “You do not just walk up to Carlo Benedetto’s door and ask to see him.”

“Why not?” Jamie said. “The audacity alone would get his attention.”

“Yes, but in what way?” Giovanni said. “His guards will chew you up and spit you out at the front gate. Perhaps it is now time to bring in the police. After all—”

“No. Giovanni. I cannot risk it.” Alessandro leapt up.

Jamie had to admit that Alessandro's plan held certain danger, but it was a chance they would have to take if they wanted to find Nico without wasting a lot of precious time. "He's right, Giovanni. If we bring the police in at this point, it may send Nico further into hiding. Or worse, it could give Benedetto a reason to kill him."

Alessandro placed his hands on the back of the chair. "A reliable source tells me Benedetto dines at Le Terrazza in the Grand Hotel Tremezzo every Saturday evening at eight—"

"I should have known you would find a way to skip out of the benefit," Giovanni said in sardonic humor. "But I am not convinced that putting yourself at the mercy of a mobster is the way to do it."

"Ah, you know me only too well. I will do anything to get out of having to wear a tuxedo." Alessandro bantered in return.

"In all seriousness—"

Alessandro held up a hand. "I am aware of the perilous nature of confronting Benedetto, Giovanni. That is why I booked a table at Le Terrazza. He cannot do anything to me in public. If I do this right, I can be there and back before the benefit concludes."

"Don't you mean *me*?" Jamie rose and crossed her arms, all at once aware of Alessandro's exclusion of her in his plans.

Alessandro let out a quick breath. "I'm sorry, Jamie. You know the dangers as well as I do. I must insist—"

"I thought you would have figured this out by now. I'm not cowering at the first sight of trouble. Besides, you *need* a date! Otherwise, you'll look suspicious dining alone."

Alessandro appeared nonplussed. He put a hand on his hip and addressed Giovanni. "You must convince her, Giovanni."

Giovanni stared at them. "I think you are both crazy! If it were up to me—"

A rap on the door diverted their attention, and Jamie turned to see Analise standing at the threshold a little uneasy.

"*Scusi*. I overheard you talk of Carlo Benedetto, and I thought you should know." Analise walked to Giovanni's desk and handed him a printout.

"What is it, Analise?"

“The guest list for the benefit.”

Giovanni raised a curious brow.

She bent over the desk and with her finger pointed to a name.

“It is here on the list.”

Giovanni’s expression turned to perplexed surprise. “How is this?”

“Let me see that,” Alessandro demanded. He grabbed the list from Giovanni, his eyes growing in astonishment as they found the name.

“It must have something to do with Paolo and the painting.” Jamie mused. “Why else would he care about the Brera—or fine art, for that matter?”

“I don’t know, but you can be sure that this is not just a social call.” Alessandro grabbed the back of the chair. Jamie could sense the wheels turning in his head. He lifted his eyes and looked at her. “It appears I will be escorting you to the benefit after all.”

CHAPTER 24

Alessandro's eyes lingered on Jamie. He found himself continually glancing in her direction across the large rectangular courtyard of the lighted *palazzo*. No one else among the several hundred guests that came and went, eating and drinking and making merry, could have captivated his attention the way she did. She might have been the only person in the courtyard for all he cared.

The balding gentleman next to him, a twenty-year patron of the arts, must have said something humorous, because the others in his present circle chuckled. He smiled politely, and then took a sip from the wine glass in his hand. But it was no use. He couldn't keep his mind and thoughts from straying to Jamie no matter what he did.

He found her again, watching the way her eyes smiled at the city council member. He noticed how her dark hair shone as it draped over her bare shoulders and the way her black gown gathered at the bodice. Frustration ripped at his heart. He was drawn to this woman in a way he'd never been drawn to any woman before. Yet one thing prevented him from declaring his feelings. It was a barrier—no, a chasm—wider than the Atlantic Ocean that could not be overcome unless she willingly surrendered her life to God.

At that moment she turned, and their eyes met. She smiled, and he caught his breath. Could she guess what he had been thinking?

He sipped again from his glass and nodded with little interest at another comment made within his circle. *This is ridiculous*, he

thought, casually glancing toward the neoclassical portal of the main entrance. *I am acting like a schoolboy.* He might as well have been one for all the social *faux pas* he had already committed so far this evening.

At once, out of the corner of his eye, Alessandro caught the shimmering-red gown glint in the lighted court and felt the pulse of the party skip a beat. A murmur coursed through the crowd. He circled around the men so that he could get a better view of the couple who had just passed through the main gate. Dressed in the appropriate tuxedo, Carlo Benedetto sauntered around the courtyard as if he owned the place. On his arm, his voluptuous wife greeted everyone as if she deserved their tribute. Her low-cut gown probably garnered the patricians' scrutiny as much as the arm on which she hung.

So the devil and his wife have arrived! Let the games begin.

"If you will excuse me, gentlemen," Alessandro said with politic. He brushed past the other guests to where Jamie talked with the councilman. "Pardon me, Councilman. May I have a word with my colleague?"

"Of course. It's been a pleasure, signorina." The councilman bowed and moved on.

"Can you believe the hubris?" Jamie said in dismay. "I'm almost embarrassed for them."

"Pride goes before a fall, Proverbs says." Alessandro took her elbow. "Come on. Let us see what Carlo has to say for himself."

They approached Benedetto and his wife just before the couple entered the food queue. "Can I help you find something?" Alessandro stepped in front of Benedetto.

A momentary disgruntled glint flashed through Carlo's eyes, but the man recovered quickly. "I don't think I have had the pleasure—"

"Dr. Alessandro Marianni, professor of art history at the academy, and this is," he turned to Jamie, "Signorina Jamie Holbrooke, one of the curators of the Brera."

“I am genuinely honored and touched,” he said, placing a disingenuous hand over his heart, “to have such noble company recognize a man such as myself.”

“And why should they not?” Vincenza hung off her husband’s arm, her nose slightly lifted into the air. “You are so generous, *mi amore*.” She reached up to caress his goatee, and then looked askance at Jamie and Alessandro. “Carlo has given ten thousand euros to this benefit. He has a great deal of admiration for the arts.”

Jamie raised her eyebrows. “Really? How interesting! But then I am surprised he didn’t give much more, since selling art on the black market can generate a great deal of income.” She smiled through gritted teeth.

“Whatever do you mean, signorina? My husband is a well-respected businessman.” The woman appeared indignant.

Vincenza’s question amused Alessandro. Was she actually so ignorant of her husband’s operations or just incredibly daft? He observed the large diamond on her left hand. “Your husband is a very generous man, Signora Benedetto. You are perfectly correct, of course.”

“Vincenza,” Benedetto said, putting her hand away from his chin, “does not understand how wealth and power often intimidate people.”

“True,” Alessandro said. “Though I think some people use every means to intimidate just because they believe they can.”

“I quite agree with you, Alessandro,” Jamie said, and then met the mobster’s eyes.

Benedetto studied Jamie. “You are bold for a woman, Signorina Holbrooke. I like that. But you should be careful to whom you say these things. Someone might get the wrong idea.”

She smiled sweetly. “But of course, you don’t, do you?” “Well, let us just say nothing much intimidates me. In fact, quite the opposite.”

“And what would that be?” Alessandro asked.

Carlo stepped closer to Alessandro. “Let me be frank, Dr. Marianni. I am sure you are aware that I will not hesitate to use my

influence to get what I want. For example, you don't know if I have men located around the upper *loggia*—” He raised his hand and pointed a finger towards the palace's upper deck, “ready to fire at a moment's notice.”

Alessandro scrutinized the portico. “I doubt that. There is too much security around this *palazzo*. *Carabinieri* are stationed at all the entrances. You would not get far.”

Benedetto grinned and spoke deliberately. “I saw the military police flanking the entrance. But you do not know which is in my employ. Any of your security might be a loyal associate. You see, I pay them very well.”

“But you will not open fire here. It would be bad for ... business?” Alessandro suggested.

“Can we not get something to eat, Carlo? I am starving.” Vincenza's insistent voice finished with a pout.

“In a moment, *cara mia*,” Carlo patted her hand, his voice accommodating. Then he met Alessandro's eyes. “It would be a mistake to presume anything about what I will do at any time, *signore*, or should I say, *Dr. Marianni*. Others have paid dearly for such presumptions.”

Jamie crossed her arms. “Then I will ask straight out. Why are you are really here, Signor Benedetto?”

“*Scusi!*” Vincenza's eyes blazed. “Carlo is a patron of the arts. You have no right to—”

“Vincenza, please get a plate of food for us, eh?” He commanded. “I will join you in a few moments.”

“Gladly!” She stared at Jamie with contempt. “I would rather be in the company of a fish.”

Alessandro watched Vincenza stomp away, her hips swinging in obvious defiance. She seemed an appropriate wife for a mobster. “I wonder if you have ever thought about how your ‘respectable’ business affects your wife.” He turned back to Carlo.

“My wife is not your concern, *Dr. Marianni*.”

“But your business is when it concerns a certain painting that does not belong to you.”

Carlo stepped closer to Alessandro. He slapped the back of his hand into the palm of his other. "I paid good money for that painting."

Alessandro sized him up. "*Jerusalem at Twilight* has belonged to my family for generations. It has never been for sale. *You* do not have any right to it."

Benedetto directed acrimonious eyes at Alessandro. "That's where you are wrong, *mi amici*. When money leaves my hands, I expect my merchandise to be delivered. You would be wise not to cross me."

Jamie couldn't hide her disgust. "Perhaps you would be wise not to cross us."

The mobster stared at her, and then grinned. "I was under the impression that you are as smart as you are beautiful, Signorina Holbrooke. But in these matters you demonstrate a complete lack of understanding. I will only warn you once, because I hate to see that beautiful face scarred. There are people—more ruthless than me—who could not care less about beauty. They want what they want, and they will stop at nothing to get what they want."

"Is that why you put the hit out on Paolo?" She met him equivocally.

Silence.

Alessandro held his breath. Had Jamie crossed the line? If Carlo dared touch her, he did not think he could restrain himself.

Then Carlo shrugged. "I am sorry. I do not know what you are talking about, signorina. But if the man is dead, it is perhaps because he set himself up to be involved in something he should not have been."

"What have you done with our painting, Signor Benedetto?" Alessandro asked with blunt force.

Carlo narrowed his eyes at him. "I do not know what game you and your girlfriend are playing, but I warn you again that I am not a man to be toyed with. You will hand over the painting now!" He demanded.

Jamie glared at Carlo. "It is you who are playing games, Signor Benedetto. What do you think you can accomplish—"

“He does not have it, Jamie.” In one terrible moment, Alessandro felt the blood drain from his face in stunned realization. The mobster was telling the truth. He really did not have the painting. This was the reason for his appearance at the benefit. Carlo Benedetto came to get what he had paid for.

“How can you believe this man?” Jamie turned on Alessandro. “He is trying to displace his responsibility for the theft.”

Alessandro could only respond to Benedetto’s presumption. “We do not have the Turner, Signor Benedetto.”

Carlo’s eyes bore into Alessandro. “Then you will get it and give it to me.”

“That is completely impossible,” Alessandro said.

Carlo grinned, his dimples deep and appallingly evil. “I pride myself as a patient man, Dr. Marianni. But eventually my patience runs out. You will give me the Turner, or we will go to war. It is up to you.”

Alessandro locked eyes with Carlo. He knew what Carlo meant when he said “go to war,” and he knew the organized crime boss meant business. Someone would end up dead. He also knew it would be a mistake to look weak in the mobster’s eyes. “We are as much in the dark as you are. Not only do I not have the painting, I do not know who does. We assumed you had taken it.”

The mobster continued to scrutinize him, his fists clenching and unclenching in anger. Then Alessandro saw the light dawn in the mobster’s eyes. “I can see you are telling me the truth. I have been double-crossed.”

“Yes.” Alessandro said flatly. “We all have been equally duped.”

“The man who has double-crossed me will pay!”

“I think he already has—with his life.” Alessandro wished dearly now that he’d given more attention to Paolo’s banter several days earlier. If he had only known ...

“Paolo Spretti was insignificant, a puny man. You do not know who you are dealing with, Dr. Marianni. You would do well to stay away.”

“I cannot do that, Signor Benedetto. I am not afraid of you or your contemporaries. Regardless of what you or they believe about

your prerogative to own the world, in fact, that privilege belongs only to God. The battle is his. *He* will decide the fate of *Jerusalem at Twilight*.”

“So you think God is on your side, do you?” Carlo spoke with amusement, though the merriment quickly faded from his eyes. He took a step closer. “A word of advice, if you plan to enter this war. Say your prayers and prepare to die.” He backed away. “You will excuse me. I have business to attend to.”

Alessandro watched as Carlo paraded to where his wife munched on a cake.

“I don’t believe it!” Jamie said, as they watched Benedetto tear the plate out of his wife’s hands and drag her toward the entrance. “If Carlo doesn’t have the painting, then who does?”

Alessandro cocked an eye. “That is the million-euro question.”

“Are you sure Carlo wasn’t jerking us around?”

He turned to her and shook his head. “He was much too furious to be deceiving us. Unfortunately, he will not give up the fight for what he believes he deserves, and that means we and the painting are now directly in the middle of what appears to be a clan war. God help us.”

Alessandro dug his hands into his pockets. Indeed, how could they have been so wrong? What were they missing? And who had been after them at the Pra?

They stood together in silence, the gravity of the situation taking root. “Are you two all right?” Giovanni’s concerned voice broke in. “I saw you with Benedetto. He did not look happy when he left.”

“He doesn’t have the painting,” Jamie said flatly.

“No!” Giovanni breathed. “If not Benedetto, then who?”

Alessandro surveyed the people who still milled about the courtyard. Their cordial laughter and casual merriment stood in contrast to his sagging spirit.

“We have to find the missing link.” Jamie said definitively.

“Nico,” Alessandro said. “He is still the only person who can tell us who killed Paolo and took the painting.”

She wrinkled her brow. “But we still don’t know where he is.”

“We’ll tear this city apart, if we have to,” Alessandro said.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Giovanni said as if their next steps were obvious.

When Alessandro saw that Giovanni had just given them the green light to head out, he grabbed Jamie’s hand and started for the gate. “I owe you again, Giovanni.”

“Just find your painting,” Giovanni called out behind them.

CHAPTER 25

Though Carlo rarely conducted “business” in front of Vincenza, this time he ignored his rule. After they piled into his Mercedes limousine, he dialed his cell phone.

“I thought you were going to take care of things, Benni,” he bellowed into his phone. His leg convulsed in nervous jitters. “I said do your spring cleaning, didn’t I? But you left me a pile of dirty rags to clean up!”

“It was the kid,” Benni said on the other end of the phone. “He slipped out on us.”

“Find him, and don’t bungle it this time!” He clapped his phone shut. No one crossed Carlo Benedetto—especially not some would-be *cugine* looking to be made—never mind that he himself had once been a young soldier striving for his position.

He glanced at Vincenza, who pouted on the opposite side of the seat with her arms crossed. He slid over and attempted to put his arm around her.

“You did not let me finish my cake.” She sulked.

“There were more important things.”

“More important things!” She shrugged him away. “There are always more important things. My father always had more important things. It is always the business. You think I do not know what goes on when you are taking care of business. But I am not stupid, Carlo.”

He sighed and reclined back into his spot. “You do not understand. We have to defend the family honor.”

“Defend the family honor? What good is family honor when you are dead?”

He peered out the tinted windows onto the Milan city streets. They moved slowly along the traffic-clogged thoroughfares as rush hour picked up around the Castello Sforzesco. His impatience was getting the best of him.

He turned to Vincenza. “I don’t need to justify myself to you. You are my wife. It is not your place to question or judge what I do, but to support me as your mother supported your father. You owe me your loyalty, Vincenza. Do you understand me?” Carlo popped a mint into his mouth.

Vincenza sank further into the corner of the seat in sullen withdrawal.

Carlo sucked on his mint in furor. He felt in no mood to humor her. He hated himself for hurting her, but she did not understand what was at stake. Her father had spoiled her, as he often pampered her now. But Lorenzo would encourage him to stand firm. She just did not appreciate how his business acumen enabled the endless indulgences she enjoyed. He had to remain shrewd as the boss of the family, instilling fear in the other crime families who would take advantage of any weakness they saw in him. Any show of vulnerability could mean the end of their reign. She had to respect his authority, even if it meant putting her in her place from time to time. Then he felt her hand on his knee, her body curling toward him like a kitten. Her touch always weakened his resolve, but he could not allow her to see it.

“I could never be disloyal to you, Carlo. You know that. I am proud to be called the wife of Carlo Benedetto. That is why I am troubled when outsiders get the wrong idea about you.”

“I am who I am, Vincenza.”

She lifted her head in proud exhortation. “Yes, and you should have stayed to show those elite prigs that Carlo Benedetto is one of them. You can hold your head high, because you are just as smart as they are.”

He chewed on his cheek. She was right, of course. He brought her hand to his lips. "This is what makes me want you so much. Your father would be so proud."

"My father knew how to outwit the system. He knew how to make influential friends and keep up appearances as an upstanding citizen. And you are just like him."

"And I have followed in your father's footsteps, *mia amore*. Do not forget that I learned everything I know from him."

"Then you will also do my father proud."

Carlo gazed into her eyes. Yes, she was a proper boss' wife. He seized her lips in an ardent kiss that promised more to come.

* * * * *

Hadjari opened a packet of tea provided by the hotel and poured hot water into his cup from the electric pot at the mini bar. After steeping the tea, he took a sip from the cup and cringed. How a luxury London hotel such as *The Royal Court* could provide such disdainful sludge for their clientele was beyond his imaginings. However, in every other way, the Royal Suite could not have been more suited to his tastes.

Dressed in robe and slippers, he roamed his room, taking an occasional sip from his cup. The elegant furnishings gave testimony to the refinements to which he had become accustomed. Nothing less than opulent. He had learned how to gratify his senses as often as possible. He deserved it. The business had afforded him that.

Even few Americans could boast his accomplishments—except perhaps Hollywood celebrities. One day, they, along with their kind, would suffer the fate of all infidels. He snickered. How absolutely dull of mind were most of those people! Usually they fell into two camps—the dimwitted, who carried on with their hedonistic lifestyles until they faded into oblivion or the liberal-minded, who were seduced by promises of world peace by multicultural activists. Either way, they would all eventually fall—by complacency or by design—at the hands of the true worshippers of Allah.

There would always have to be casualties of war, but it could not be helped—just as now, Paolo Spretti had determined his own portion. The lyrics of an Albanian folksong ran through his mind:

*“Death happens because you betrayed a host,
when bread is missing to serve the host,
Death happens for the faith renounced...”*

Paolo Spretti had violated the rule of law or canon. The canon—a collection of medieval tribal laws—had been a prevailing force in Albanian mountain communities for centuries. The division among family groups had long solidified the family unit. The idea was easily adapted into the honor code of Albanian organized crime. Persons who defied the honor code were guilty of nothing less than treason to the family.

The fundamental rule of the canon was *besa*—a concept that integrated loyalty and fidelity to the family, dignity, and honor of one’s word. Honor killings, or *gjakmarria*, restored the violated honor. Such vendettas had driven Hadjari’s kinsmen for hundreds of years and now ruled how he conducted his “family business.”

Hadjari knew, of course, that various political entities and organized crime groups outside of Albania had branded Albanian families as the worst threat to the Western world. He did not mind the label. It was to his advantage for outsiders to fear Albanian family brutality and unpredictability. If they believed they could be killed at any moment, so much the better. This ensured solidarity within the family, and it provided security against governments, politicians, judges, as well as other criminal entities outside the family. *Besa* and *gjakmarria* guaranteed success in all business-related endeavors. This was where Paolo had misjudged his own authority. In fact, the art curator had been a “nobody” in the grand scheme of Hadjari’s plans, and therefore he had been expendable.

Most people were expendable unless they belonged to the family.

In Kosovo, where his political authority reigned along with his criminal activities, young men fought for the cause of national

liberation by day and sold heroin by night. Villagers feared Hadjari as much as Milosevic before him. Cross him, and their sisters were likely to end up in a prostitution ring. Stay on his good side, and he might—*might*—give a concession in some tangible terms.

During his last visit to Kosovo, an al-Qaeda operative had approached Hadjari about transporting “certain important individuals” to an undisclosed location. The job had only required supplying a few stolen passports. Hadjari was not a practitioner of Wahabi Islam, as were his al-Qaeda fundamentalist friends. Their extremism was too restrictive for his personal Sunni goals. But he was willing to launder money, provide safe houses, and provide a few passports for a fee. They, in turn, though they did not yet consider him a “proper” Muslim, believed he would come around. Besides, they knew he would accomplish his objectives, no matter the cost. They needed him.

He settled at the desk, opened his laptop, and waited for it to boot. When the computer was ready, he composed yet another secure e-mail to David Chandler—the third in two days. The ex-MP was being obstinate and disagreeable. How droll of him. If Chandler believed Hadjari would acquiesce to being ignored, he was sadly mistaken. By now, he *had* to know Hadjari would not tolerate these worthless games. And if Chandler would not respond to this e-mail, then he would have to pay him another visit—where and when of Hadjari’s choosing.

He closed the lid.

He retrieved his cell phone and punched in a number on his touch screen. The phone on the other end rang, and then he heard a flat voice.

“Përsbëndetje. Hello.”

“Përsbëndetje, Zamir. *Ju keni burrat tona në Milano në vend?*” Hadjari wanted to be certain that his enforcer had assembled men in Milan who would bring his shipment to London.

“Po.”

“*I mirë. Unë nuk dua asgjë që të ndodhë për të dërgesës sime. Përdorni të gjitha burimet në dispozicionin tuaj.*” Assured that Zamir had taken the

necessary precautions, he wanted the enforcer to use all the resources at his disposal to make it happen.

Hadjari clicked off his phone. He reached for his cup and drew on the last of his tea with satisfaction. He knew he could trust Zamir to carry out his instructions with full compliance. The enforcer's loyalty remained secure. After all, his sister Liliana and her children's lives depended on Hadjari's generosity or lack thereof. Zamir understood the consequences and casualties of war.

CHAPTER 26

With more than two million people, Jamie wondered if hunting for Nico in Milan was a little like searching for a nocturnal spring hare in the middle of the African savanna—not impossible, but elusive.

Jamie and Alessandro concentrated their search on the streets near the *Stazione Centrale*—Central Station. This area of Milan would most likely be the easiest place for Nico to hide, since he had little money and few friends. He could find low-rent housing or live on the streets with other homeless wayfarers. Like many European metropolitan centers, the environs surrounding the train station attracted the bizarre, the poor, and the criminal; gypsy bands were known to hang out there to pickpocket unsuspecting tourists.

As they wandered, Alessandro showed Nico's picture to scruffy children, homeless men, elderly ladies in babushkas, chic business people, and dozens of students. No one admitted to having seen him. For two days, Jamie and Alessandro returned to the Brera empty-handed and weary.

On the third evening, Alessandro suggested they have dinner at the Savini. "I think it is time we give ourselves a small break, yes?"

Jamie welcomed the reprieve.

At eight-fifteen, when the waiter showed them to a table in a small alcove of the opulent restaurant, Jamie felt as if she had entered an enchanted world. Unlike the previous time she had stopped for lunch at the Savini, the dinner hour had taken on a

more elegant atmosphere. Men and women wore their finest, and the legion of wait staff lavished great attention on each patron as if they were royalty. The period furniture seemed to give credence to the fact that nobility dined here. Jamie smoothed the skirt of her chiffon cocktail dress as she sat. A glance around reminded her of other similar establishments in which she had been privileged to dine when traveling in elite circles with her parents.

One such occasion occurred at age eight when she and her brother had their first introduction to the world's elite at the *Korso bei der Oper* in Vienna's Hotel Bristol. The luxurious hotel and restaurant catered to Vienna's upper crust, and Jamie's parents had enjoyed a grand suite at the hotel, since her mother was a rare guest soloist of the Vienna State Opera.

That evening they had dined with Baron von Lindemann. Jamie had felt like a princess in a ruched taffeta dress that puffed out at the bottom. She had twirled in front of the mirror as if she was Cinderella going to the ball. Her ten-year-old brother, on the other hand, had lamented over being coerced into wearing a tuxedo—coerced, she remembered, because he'd made a great fuss about having to wear that “monkey suit,” which made him feel “claustrophobic.”

The evening had marched by mostly in a blur of adult chatter. Just about the time she was ready to lay her head down on the table, Jason had leaned into her. “Don't go to sleep yet.” He had formed a fist and pounded the round edge of the spoon. Jamie had watched in astonishment as it flew across the table and into Baron von Lindemann's glass of water. The water had splashed up into the dignified man's face and all over the front of his suit jacket.

A stunned silence had followed.

Baron von Lindemann had reached for a napkin to wipe off his face. Sophie Holbrooke had poured out profuse apologies to the baron and his wife for her son's indiscretion. James Holbrooke, in stern parental tone, had implored his son to apologize. And Jamie had continued to gawk in wide-eyed horror as Jason responded to it all in cavalier humor.

The sound had started as a deep rumble and grew louder and louder until Baron Von Lindemann had spurted out the heartiest chortle Jamie had ever heard. At first, everyone at the table had thought he had lost his mind. Then the entire table had broken out in uproarious laughter, producing a spectacle of riotous tears.

Jamie had stolen a look at her mother. Even at eight, Jamie had perceived that though her mother smiled along with rest, Sophie still seethed underneath the surface. Later, Sophie had meted out a tongue-lashing on Jason that none of them would ever forget. It would be the first of many times over the years Jamie would observe that her mother's concern about image took precedence over her relationship with her children. Still, the event had remained a source for shared merriment between Jamie and Jason until the day of his death.

A common ache stung Jamie behind her eyes. Would she ever remember Jason without this overwhelming pain? In silent agony and resolve, she shifted her focus and directed her attention to the Savini's menu.

After they ordered their food and drink, Jamie settled back in reflection. "Dining at places like this reminds me of my childhood."

He cocked an eyebrow. "First you tell me you lived in a very large house, and now you tell me you ate like kings. What else haven't you said about yourself?" He teased.

She briefly smiled. "Don't worry. We are not royalty—at least I don't think so. It all just comes with having a world-class violinist for a mother."

"Ah, I see." Alessandro studied their surroundings, his hands folded on the table. Then he directed his eyes at her. "It is hard for me to believe how much God has blessed me. My parents could never afford to dine at a place like this. At times, I feel guilty for enjoying the things they could never dream of; sometimes, I am amazed by it."

"But surely they don't resent you for having money."

“No, of course not. They would never harbor those thoughts. They know God called them to a different lifestyle, and they chose to live it. They are happy.”

Jamie felt wistful. In spite of the elite life her mother lived, she had not known the woman to be truly happy. She always wore a façade for the public and even for her family. Thinking on it now, she realized she did not know her mother.

“You are fortunate. I believe they are happy for you, even proud.”

A soft smile curved at Alessandro’s lips. “I believe you are right.”

By the time they finished their sumptuous desserts and paid for their meal, Jamie felt sated. They walked out into the cool evening.

“Tomorrow we will begin looking for Nico again, yes?” Alessandro said as they strolled toward the metro. In the Piazza del Duomo, the street lamps cast their light around the cathedral; its tallest spire lit the sky with the Madonna holding a cross.

“And maybe God will lead us to him,” Jamie said, her own words astonishing her. Did she really mean what she had just said?

She gazed at Alessandro and marveled as he stopped to look up at the spires of the cathedral. “He will not let us down. Of that I am certain.”

CHAPTER 27

So far, Nico had managed to put in three days' work as a janitor at the *Stazione Centrale*. Though not an ideal job, he felt somewhat secure that it gave him a measure of invisibility while he cleaned toilets and mopped floors in his maintenance jumper. Still, touching the scar on his cheek, he knew he remained vulnerable, and to be cautious, he kept one eye on lookout for the nefarious people who wanted vengeance for Paolo's double-cross.

At mid-morning, he took his supply cart with bucket and mop into the men's bathroom. By now he had come up with a system. Replace the large rolls of brown toilet paper in the dispensers first. Give each sink a once-over with an environmentally safe disinfectant and rag. Pick up and empty the trash. Lastly, put out a caution sign at the door to warn people of the wet floors, and then swipe them with the mop, beginning at the far end and moving toward the door. At the door, Nico turned to survey his work with an approving eye, and then pushed his cart into the corridor.

That was when he saw them. He recognized Carlo's men immediately. One of them he knew as Benni, Carlo's loyal enforcer.

Nico took off, running through the crowds of people, knocking over flower baskets at the flower shop and bumping a cart into the way of the enforcer. But Benni relentlessly stayed on his tail through several corridors as he jostled people right and left. Finally, Benni caught up with him, and shoved a Glock into his side. "You got no choice, kid."

Benni kept the gun pointed into Nico's side, coercing him toward a door that led into an alley. There a black Mercedes limousine slowly pulled up. The enforcer wrenched the door open and pushed Nico inside.

Nico attempted to make excuses. "Please, you have to listen—"

"Shut up, *cafone*," Benni roared. "You are the dirty rag in my pile of laundry, and Signor Benedetto is not happy with dirty laundry. So guess what? When the boss is not happy, I am not happy. *Capice?*"

Nico nodded vigorously. He understood. His body shook like an eight-point earthquake.

"So here is what will happen," Benni continued. "We are going to take a ride to Signor Benedetto's villa. Then you are going to tell the boss everything you know about the painting. You will leave nothing out. If you try to deceive him in any way, I will gladly make it very uncomfortable for you until you spill your guts. Is that clear?"

Nico nodded again. He understood what it meant for the enforcer to make it "uncomfortable." He also knew that regardless of any cooperation he might or might not give, he would be lucky to make it out of Benedetto's villa alive.

"So if I were you," Benni said with a little less malice, "I would sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride until we get there." He poured a shot of whiskey from the limousine's mini bar. "Drink this. It will calm your nerves."

Nico accepted the shot and gulped it down. He needed it.

"Good boy. Another?"

Nico nodded. The enforcer handed him another drink, and he downed that one too.

For most of the next hour and a half, Nico lived in an alcohol-induced stupor. The whiskey had done its trick. But as they drove into Benedetto's circular driveway, he could feel his nerves begin to coalesce into quivering bundles once again. They pulled up close to the entrance of the yellow and white stucco villa, passing a Queen Sego palm on the left and a statue of the Madonna adorning the lawn beyond it.

Once the limousine stopped, Benni shoved the gun into Nico's side once more. "Do not try anything. You run, I shoot. Okay?"

Nico nodded. He followed Benni out of the car, his heart pounding in his chest, his tongue in his throat. His mouth went dry. This was it. This was the day he would meet the devil in his fiery pit. He would give anything not to be here.

They entered through the front door where an art niche displayed an ornamental vase currently overflowing with fresh tulips and greenery. A circular staircase met the second floor landing. Moments later, Carlo Benedetto appeared on the landing dressed in black slacks, shirt, and suit coat. Nico watched as the mobster descended with deliberate flair, playing with the cuffs of his shirt under his suit coat. He portrayed the part of an important businessman very well, down to his apparent adroit approach to Nico.

At the bottom of the stairs, Benedetto reached out his arms in greeting. "Nico Charbonnier. So good of you to accept my invitation." The mobster's sadistic smile mocked him.

Nico remained silent. Invitation? As if he'd had any choice about it.

Benedetto noticed the gun pointed at Nico. "Benni, what is this? Put the gun away. We want Nico to feel like he is among family."

Family? Once again, Nico remained silent. He did not feel like family. The foreboding in his stomach told him he was not likely to, either. He would never feel "safe" in this family, not like he'd known back in Bobbio Pellice. Not like he would ever know again.

Benni put the Glock in its holster under his coat. Then Carlo put an arm around Nico's shoulder. "Can I offer you anything, Nico? Beer? Whiskey? Coffee?" He led him down a corridor with Benni following close behind.

Nico shook with fear, too scared to notice the art work on the wood-paneled walls. Right now, the only thing that had his attention as they descended a set of stairs to a lower level was the man who had the power of life and death in his hands. "Maybe just water." He choked out the words.

Carlo dropped his arm from Nico's shoulder and led him into a plain room. Only two chairs and a table occupied the room. "You sure? I mean, we might be here a while. But you know, I have a feeling that if we cooperate with one another," he pointed at Nico, and then back at himself, "we might be able to get a lot done in a short time." He turned to Benni. "Get the kid water—make it a Pellegrino with lime."

Nico couldn't have cared less if the drink was a Pellegrino or water from the lake. He just needed something wet.

Benni left the room.

Carlo pulled a chair out from the table. "Sit down, Nico. Take a load off. How is your family—from Bobbio Pellice, no?"

Nico took a seat, shrugging his shoulders in nervous agitation. When would the devil make his move? "*Non lo so*. I don't know. I have not spoken to them for a while."

"*Che peccato!* It is a shame, no? Family is so important. We are family, eh, Nico? You and me?" He gestured between them. "That's why I've been a little hurt that you have not been in touch with me. I thought we had an understanding."

Benni walked in with the bottle of Pellegrino and a glass with a wedge of lime fixed on the rim. He put it on the table just out of reach across from Nico.

Nico glanced at Benni, and then answered. "I-I've been busy." He reached for the water, but Carlo slammed his hands down on the table between Nico and the bottle. Nico withdrew his hands.

"Busy?" Carlo's steely eyes glared at Nico for one long moment. Then he backed down, standing erect. "Nico, Nico. You should know by now. Nothing stands in the way of family."

"Y-you are right. I-I should have been in touch." He should have left the country, maybe to the highest mountain in Switzerland.

"I'm glad to know you see things my way, Nico." Carlo grabbed Nico's face, and then lightly slapped each cheek. "So maybe now you will have the good sense to tell me what I need to know."

“M-may I have my water, please?” His eyes fixed on the bottle of Pellegrino. Now he wished that he’d asked for something stronger.

“Give him his Pellegrino, Benni.”

Benni moved the bottle and glass in front of Nico.

Nico reached for the bottle, his hand just about to grab it, but Carlo snatched the bottle away like a magician with sleight-of-hand.

“I just want to make sure we understand one another. I’m going to ask you a few questions, and you’re going to tell me what I need to know. You got that?” Carlo said.

“Y-yes.” Nico licked his lips.

Carlo replaced the bottle. Nico hesitated, the sweat beading on his lip. “Go on,” Carlo said. “After all, you and I are family. Your needs are important, too.”

Nico couldn’t help it. His hand trembled as he picked up the bottle and poured the bubbly water into his glass. He hated himself for showing weakness in front of this monster. He *was* weak—an insipid, bumbling coward. He deserved whatever came next. He took a long drink, and then put the glass on the table.

“Did the water satisfy your thirst?” Carlo asked, his hand making circling motions.

Nico nodded.

Carlo grinned. “Good.” He turned away from Nico. Then he whirled back around. “Do you want to know how I feel, Nico?” He didn’t give him the chance to respond, coming down to Nico’s eye level. “Thirsty. Very thirsty, Nico. Do you want to know why?”

Nico met his eyes and nodded.

“Because I paid for a drink on the promise it would be delivered to me, and I never saw the goods.” Carlo stood upright. “You see my problem? So now I wonder, what happened to my drink? Do you know what happened to my drink, Nico?”

Nico tried to move his mouth, but nothing came out. He glanced at Benni, standing against the doorframe with his hands folded in front of him.

“You have something you want to say?” Carlo asked.

Nico's tongue was dry. He reached for his glass, but Carlo knocked it away before he could get to it. Water splattered across the room. The glass hit the wall and shattered. A violent tremor chased through his body.

"I asked you a question!" Carlo bellowed.

"I-I—"

Carlo grabbed Nico by the hair. "I do not think you are taking me very seriously. That's not very family-like."

Nico found his voice. "I-I am, Signor Benedetto. I take you very seriously."

Carlo let go and grinned. "Good. Then I'll ask you again. What happened to my drink?"

"P-Paolo was courting more than one buyer. The other man is an Al-Albanian."

Carlo's eyes narrowed. "An Albanian? Who?"

"A crime boss—a boss of bosses. Bashkim Hadjari."

"Bashkim Hadjari!" Carlo spoke with disdain. He paced the room. "Bashkim Hadjari!"

Nico watched Carlo wander the room, his silent focus now seeming to concentrate on the Albanian rather than wanting to inflict more abuse. For the first time, Nico's nerves calmed down a level. Maybe Carlo wouldn't continue to hurt him after all.

Carlo spun around to face Nico once more. "Where is the painting now?"

"I-I took the painting to a warehouse in Milan nearly a week ago."

"A warehouse? What warehouse?"

Nico flinched. He thought he would pee his pants.

"What warehouse?" the mobster bellowed.

"A shipping depot for Br-British Tobacco."

Benedetto narrowed his eyes. His fingers moved, coaxing more information from Nico.

"H-Hadjari's enforcer, a guy named Zamir. He grabbed me from behind, beat me. That's how I got this." He pointed to his scar. "He said Paolo's assassination was a warning. If I did not take the painting to the warehouse, the same thing would happen to me."

Nico paused. He observed Carlo fuming, his chest heaving. Nico felt compelled to explain on. “I would have gladly brought the painting to you. You have to know that. But I was afraid for my life—”

Benedetto came to stand within a breath of Nico. The mobster flashed him a wicked smile and reached out with both hands to slap both sides of Nico’s face. “Nico, Nico. I am happy to hear you still consider your family.” He straightened. “But fear is a funny thing. It messes with the head, makes us confused.” He turned and paced, then whirled around. “I want you to remember one thing for the future, just one thing you have to remember. I’m the only one you need to fear. Respect that fear, and you will stay alive. Betray me, and you are as good as dead. *Capice?*”

“Sì. I understand, boss.” Nico understood more than the mobster knew. He knew that he was as good as dead no matter what.

“Good.” Benedetto walked to the door and opened it. He directed a knowing look at Benni. “I am finished with this *paisan*. You can take him back to his hole in Milan. And Benni?”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Impress on him the consequences of ignoring our conversation before you leave.” Benedetto walked out without looking back.

Two hours later, Nico lay on his bed in a fetal position, his face bruised and his left eye swollen shut. His head throbbed in pain. He was sure that he had a couple of broken ribs as well as an injured face. It pained him to roll over.

“God, take me now.” He cried out in agony. “I am a half-dead man anyway—*mezzomorte*. What good am I to anyone? Or even to myself? O God, I have betrayed my friends, my family. I have become as wormwood, causing a bitter taste in their mouths and my own. Why did Benedetto not kill me? Why do you not take me now? Where will this all end?”

CHAPTER 28

“Carlo Benedetto, *mi compare*. It has been a while.” Hadjari spoke into his cell phone headset. He sat alone at a table in his posh hotel restaurant, eating filet and enjoying a glass of red wine. “To what do I owe this call?”

“I believe you have something that belongs to me.”

Carlo’s curt voice did nothing to rile Hadjari. “Really? I do not recall.” Hadjari said in stride. He cut a piece of meat and stuck it in his mouth.

“Do not play games with me, Hadjari. We both know what this is about.”

Hadjari nodded at the waiter who filled his water glass. “I do not know what you *think* I have that you *believe* belongs to you. Perhaps you’ll enlighten me as to the nature of this item.” He heard a sigh at the other end.

“I am in no mood to humor you, Hadjari. I paid good money for the Turner. You have it. It belongs to *me*.”

“The Turner?” Hadjari’s surprise was only mild. He put down his fork and knife, and ran his tongue along his teeth. Once his sources had informed him of Paolo’s duplicity, Hadjari had entertained no qualms about eliminating Paolo nor had he cared about the other victims in the curator’s deception. “How much money did you lay down for this painting?”

“Enough!”

Hadjari winced. A look of amusement lit his eyes. He knew his casual posturing was getting the best of the crime boss. It was too

hilarious to stop now. “Perhaps it was too much. I would complain to your broker and get your money back.”

“You also know very well that Paolo Spretti is dead—assassinated by your hands—killed by your enforcer, Zamir. I heard only yesterday that the police plan to call in Interpol before the trail becomes too cold.”

Hadjari snickered, sarcasm dripping from his words. “And should I be afraid of Interpol?” He paused. “But I am interested in how you know Zamir.”

“We used to work together smuggling cigarettes, you and I, before Lorenzo’s vicious murder. It was my business to know every move your men made, and I know why Zamir continues to stay in your employ. How is Liliana, by the way?”

“Fine, thank you. But tell me, how is the cigarette business these days?”

“I did not call to carry on idle chatter, Hadjari. I want the painting. You will hand it over to me.”

“But I cannot do that.”

“Then I have no choice.”

“Are you threatening me?” Hadjari continued to be amused.

“Take it as you wish.”

Hadjari leaned forward on his elbow, his tone more severe. “Are you really ready to engage in battle?”

“I will do what I have to.”

Hadjari’s eyes glinted. “Then I will remind you that I am a ruthless opponent. Others have tried that foolhardy venture. Even the formidable Lorenzo Garibaldi could not prevail against me.”

Silence.

Hadjari knew he had struck a chord. “So I suggest you give up the idea before someone you care about gets hurt.”

“You ordered the hit on Lorenzo.” Carlo’s voice was menacing. “What did he do? Infringe on your drug territory? Or were you just greedy?”

Hadjari pushed his plate away. “You know, up until now, this has been a very entertaining chat, but I am becoming quite bored.”

“Do you think I care about your boredom? Give me the painting!” the Italian mobster demanded on the other end.

Benedetto’s question about his wife gave Hadjari a brilliant comeback. In recent months, he had become more intolerant of Liliana’s insolence, making him lay down tighter restrictions on her activities. His ire toward her behavior had given him cause to consider taking a second wife—a practice allowed by the Koran. Thus, the cavalier suggestion rolled off his tongue with ease. “Perhaps you would be willing to consider a proposition—a marriage between you and me.”

“Marriage? I don’t know what could possibly—”

“It’s quite simple. I give you the painting in exchange for your wife.”

“*Scusi?*”

Benedetto’s outrage did not faze Hadjari. “She is quite lovely to look at, and I have it from reliable resources that she is just as delightful in the bedroom. If she is half as good as what they say, I might even be willing to toss in a few extra euros.”

The phone clicked dead.

Hadjari chortled, caring little for the others in the restaurant who turned in his direction. He knew he had won. Carlo Benedetto might be willing to go to war, but Hadjari would always have the victory.

* * * * *

Carlo’s face flushed in rage. He curled and uncurled his fingers. How dare that *faccia brutta*—that ugly face—make such an outrageous suggestion. It was unconscionable.

He went to the drink cabinet and poured himself a whiskey, downed it, and then poured himself another. This time, he carried his drink to the window where he looked out toward Lake Como. Rain clouds accumulated over the western mountains, while the cypress trees bowed in the wind. The storm would descend in the hour.

He turned back toward the room and paced, his mind roiling like the storm clouds rolling and pitching in the sky. Hadjari! He hated the monstrous man. Oh yes, many brutal men occupied the realms of organized crime in the world, and Carlo had seen his share of their destructive forces at work. Yet most men of honor held to a moral code that established a line they would not cross and protected their women and children.

Not so with Hadjari. His schemes would surpass the devil if that was possible.

Carlo frowned. The grave truth hit him with blowing force. Hadjari had the upper hand; and the Albanian knew it. Carlo had to come up with a plan to beat him at his own game. If only there was a way to use Vincenza

At once, regret wrapped around Carlo's gut. He couldn't believe he had allowed the notion to surface.

Of course, Hadjari's every retort had been meant to goad Carlo. He should not have allowed Hadjari the pleasure of showing his ire; it only provided more ammunition against him. The Albanian hadn't been serious about the exchange of the painting for Vincenza. That had also been a game of cat and mouse to raise Carlo's ire.

Carlo spun around. What if he called the Albanian's bluff? What if he accepted Hadjari's offer? Would Hadjari make good on his proposal? The boor would just as soon sell out his mother as stay true to his word. Still

Carlo sipped his drink. He would have to be convincing, and Vincenza would have to cooperate. The plan would have to be foolproof—but would Vincenza agree to the scheme?

His heart skipped a beat. He hated to think what Hadjari would do to Vincenza if his plan failed. Vincenza might fall prey to Hadjari's sadism. He'd heard rumors—stories of sisters and wives who had disappeared and were never heard from again. Some said they were sold into prostitution; others told tales of more horrific outcomes. It terrified him. What if that happened to Vincenza? Unthinkable!

Still, Carlo hadn't made it to the rank of *capofamiglia* without a shrewd mind and the moxie to navigate the battlefield. He had the skills to devise an infallible scheme that would even have impressed General Giuseppe Garibaldi during his nineteenth-century military and political enterprises to unify Italy.

But would Vincenza agree to take the risk? And even if she did agree, could she carry out the operation with enough confidence without jeopardizing herself and everyone involved?

Perhaps the only way he could be sure Vincenza carried out her role to perfection was if she really *believed* he was making a trade with Hadjari for the painting. So perhaps he should not clue her in to the plan. She might be quite angry, even disgusted with him for a while. But wouldn't she forgive him after she understood the stakes? Surely she would

Either way, *Hadjari* would have to believe the exchange was real. It would, of course, only be a ruse—an elaborate deception to beat the Albanian at his game and humiliate him. The circle of revenge would be complete. Carlo grinned. Indeed, revenge would be sweet. He could taste it.

A wicked grin spread across his face.

CHAPTER 29

When David had made the reservations at one of his favorite upscale London restaurants, he had told the *maître d'* to give them a table out of the way of the mainstream. He had just wanted a pleasant, uninterrupted dinner with his wife and to avoid the public scrutiny and press attention that he and Margot's presence had engendered in recent weeks. God knew he needed it.

His plan had been a good one, except that the tables out of the mainstream meant having to pass by his fellows in Parliament and their wives who also liked to dine at the establishment. To David's chagrin, they could not elude the couples with whom they had socialized for more years than he cared to count. Even worse, he could not miss their icy stares and the whispered comments between the wives. Well, he wasn't going to be intimidated by them. They were supposed to be his friends after all. He would say hello.

"Hello, David," Sir Charles Ford said. "Up for the monkfish are we tonight?"

David noted that while the lord smiled, his eyes did not. "I haven't really decided yet, Charles. You know me. I've got to leave all my options open until I've settled on the right one."

"Yes, always the diplomat, even when you are deciding what to eat for dinner."

David gave him a pleasant smile, and then glanced tentatively at James Farrell, who remained detached. He would have spoken to him, but Elizabeth Farrell spoke first. "Margot, how lovely you

look this evening. Would you call your gown robin's-egg blue? It is so unusual."

"Aqua, in fact," David interjected. He realized too late that his response seemed too terse for the situation. But he hated the games, the hypocrisy. Elizabeth's tone, though friendly enough on the surface, possessed an undercurrent of cattiness. Margot did not deserve the patronizing comments and cool reception. He alone deserved their loathing.

"Thank you, Elizabeth." Margot remained gracious.

David gazed at his wife with admiration. In spite of the snub, she would not forget that she was foremost a lady and would treat people with respect.

"I'm very glad I've bumped into you." Margot continued. "We need to talk about the Royal Botanic Benefit Garden Tour. We should have tea to discuss the luncheon menu."

"Oh, Margot, did I not tell you? Sarah is going to do the menu, aren't you, Sarah?" she turned to the wife of Sir Charles.

"Yes, I found a new caterer with some fresh and wonderful ideas. Doing the same menu year after year can get tiresome, don't you think? I do hope you don't mind, dear."

"Margot?" Elizabeth put in.

"Well, we can always use new suggestions," Margot said tenuously.

David cringed. Though his wife responded with as much grace and ease as she could muster, he knew it must be tearing her up inside.

"Perhaps next year, darling," Elizabeth said.

Margot hesitated. Then she smiled. "Of course."

David put his hand under Margot's elbow. "We should not keep the maître d' waiting, my dear." He indicated his head toward the young man holding the menus.

"Of course."

"Well, then. Goodnight, David, Margot," Sir Charles said.

They proceeded on, David feeling the others' judgmental faces following them all the way to their table. Well, he happened to

know they weren't all as pure as Ivory Soap either. Perhaps someday the old cronies would eat crow of their own.

David and Margo said little as they looked over their menus and ordered their first course. The waiter was nice enough, but David couldn't help feeling like a marked man. What had he been thinking to come out into public scrutiny this way? He really couldn't blame his colleagues—or anyone else, for that matter. Wasn't he responsible for his own disgrace?

Very likely, there would be no way to escape jail time. He hated the idea of wearing prison garb—blue jeans and a striped shirt. He'd probably go into minimum security—classified 'D' for white-collar criminals. Maybe they'd put him in Sudbury, two hours north of London. He'd been through Sudbury before—a pretty village, classic verdant English countryside, lovely meadows—not that he'd be walking the foot trails much. But perhaps just knowing that a place of beauty and serenity existed beyond the walls would give him comfort. Maybe he'd settle there after he'd served his ten years' time. He would still have ten to fifteen good working years left. He'd retire on a modest living, because he knew he'd never be admitted back into the upper crust circles he'd known most of his life.

Perhaps, if he was lucky, he'd have one more chance to eat here before he died, he thought as the waiter set their first courses in front of them.

David lifted his spoon to his lips. He doubted Sudbury would include the kind of cuisine he ate now—a delectable bowl of crab soup and hot French bread with a slab of butter. Instead of the luscious claret in front of him, he might be lucky if they served him grape juice.

David glanced aslant at his wife Margot, who only picked at her lentil salad. He regretted most how all this was affecting her. Margot had always lived a charmed life. The only child of wealthy parents, she'd never known want. She wasn't self-centered and spoiled, though, like the American starlets of Hollywood. No, he compared her more to Queen Elizabeth, dignified and self-contained, cultured and always a lady. He knew the events he'd set

into motion now cast their lives into a shambles and stultified her in a way nothing else could. Shame overwhelmed him, and he pushed his bowl away.

“Something wrong with the soup?” Margot asked.

“Not really.” He sipped his claret. “Just couldn’t stomach it, I guess.”

“You’ve always raved about Maurice’s crab soup.”

He gave her a fleeting smile. “Perhaps I’ve overrated it in the past.”

She pushed her salad plate away. “What are we going to do, David?”

He reached out for her hand. She hesitated, he knew, because social decorum always took first place over personal concerns.

But at last she put her hand into his. “You’re not usually given to public displays of affection,” she said.

“Neither are you.”

“True. I suppose we’re beyond the rules of etiquette now, aren’t we?”

He studied the hand in his, aware of the work it had accomplished over the years—the charity benefits she’d organized, the society galas she’d arranged, the hands she’d shook to ensure his political future. Hers was a graceful hand, a hand that never wearied or gave up, a hand that had always been in his even when there was no physical touch between them. Her hand had been his appendage, and he had neglected to care for it as if it was his very own.

“We will get through this,” he choked out.

“When will you see Alastair?”

“Tomorrow. He believes we can prove Hadjari hid his extralegal activities before and during our association. Of course we had regular contact, because we had business dealings, but that should not conclusively decide my guilt. He will show that perhaps I am guilty by association, but not because I pursued illegal activities of my own accord.”

“But does he really believe you can win?”

David studied the despondent frown on her face before answering. It condemned and saddened him. He wanted to bolster her faith in him. “Alastair is one of the most accomplished barristers in Britain. He believes in my integrity, because he has known me for a long time, and he knows my character. You must trust he will win the case and prove my innocence.”

She directed her gaze at him. “But is any of it true, David? Are you innocent?”

“Yes, *Lord* Chandler, are you really innocent of all the charges levied against you?” Hadjari’s menacing voice broke in.

David tore his hand away from his wife’s and stood up squarely against the man he’d come to hate. “We are having a private discussion. Leave us alone.”

One of Hadjari’s two men—enforcers—started toward David, his intentions obviously to protect Hadjari. But the Albanian mobster waved the man away, and he moved a few feet back with his feet set wide apart, one arm across his chest.

“We have business to discuss—company business.”

“Here?” David felt nonplussed.

“I warned you. If you would not return my calls or answer my e-mails, I would find you at a place of my choosing. We talk now.”

David looked around the restaurant. He saw the waiters keep their distance, though they eyed Hadjari from afar. He observed patrons glancing under cover—the last thing he wanted, especially from his fellows. What they must be thinking! Certainly Hadjari’s presence just confirmed their presumptions.

“As you can see, I am having a quiet dinner with my wife. Please contact me through my lawyers tomorrow.” David sat and gave his attention to Margot, ignoring Hadjari towering above them. He hoped the mobster got his message: go away.

Instead, Hadjari pulled up a chair. “Lawyers are a waste of time, don’t you think? They talk all around a subject and never really get to the point. But I will get to the point very quickly. I have a shipment due on Thursday. I want to make sure nothing prevents its safe arrival and delivery into my hands.”

David turned contemptuous eyes on Hadjari and lowered his voice. “You don’t get it, do you? I don’t care about your shipment. Our association is finished.”

David watched the grin slowly form on Hadjari’s face—a hateful, despicable smirk. He shuddered and swallowed. How could he have let himself get involved with such evil?

“No, Lord Chandler. I do not think *you* get it.” He looked around. Then he said in a low voice, “My shipment is very important to me. If something happens to it, I cannot guarantee what might happen to *you* next.”

“David, what does he mean?” Margot said.

At hearing the small tremble in her voice, David glowered at Hadjari, loathing the man and mortified by his own involvement with him. “Mr. Hadjari wants to badger me into having British Tobacco accept a shipment that has nothing to do with our business. Some ridiculous painting he purchased. He isn’t content to ruin my political aspirations and livelihood with his illegal contraband. He wants to make me into one of his criminal lackeys.”

“No need to be so melodramatic, your lordship.” The man lowered his voice. “And I will warn you only once to remain discreet about the nature of the shipment.”

“Discreet?” David burst out, his sardonic laugh following. He lowered his voice. “There is nothing discreet about hounding me in this public setting. You’ve made your point. Now leave.”

Hadjari rose. “Just make sure my merchandise securely finds its way to my hands.”

“You’ll have your merchandise,” David spit out.

Hadjari acquiesced. “Thursday. Enjoy your meal, Lady Chandler.” He buttoned his suit coat, and then headed toward the front of the restaurant with his men following.

David wanted to vomit.

When he finally got up the nerve to look at his wife, she appeared even greener than he felt. “I’m sorry, Margot. I never meant to get into it this far. I swear I did not know what kind of man Hadjari was.”

She nodded absently. “What painting was Mr. Hadjari talking about?”

“I don’t know. Some J. M. W. Turner recently uncovered in Italy. Somehow it found its way into the black market. He seems to be willing to risk everything for it—including my livelihood and reputation.” He observed her become even paler. “Would you like to go home?”

She met his eyes. “Please, David.”

He called the waiter over for the check.

* * * * *

Margot stayed quiet on their drive home to Kensington. Every now and then, she felt David’s eyes glance her way, but she remained outwardly impassive. Not even the lively nightlife at London’s Piccadilly Circus could attract her attention; inside, she seethed.

The anger rose to her throat, gagging her into silence. How could David have done this to them? To *her*? How could she withstand another day of the kind of humiliation she had endured this evening? Could she ever go out into public again without hearing the whispers and feeling the stares at her back?

What about Elizabeth and Sarah? They had always been good friends. They’d organized charitable events and society parties together for years. They’d spent many hours sharing tea at The Ritz’s Palm Court and shopping at Harrods, scouting out the most fashionable buys. Yet tonight the women had made it clear: she was not welcome in their circle or on their garden party committee now or anytime in the future. Oh, they’d played their part well. But she knew she had become a pariah banished from their midst.

None of it had been her fault, had it? David was culpable. He claimed innocence. What had David said? His lawyer planned to prepare a defense showing how Hadjari had used David and hid his activities from him. Then the wretched man showed up at the restaurant, making his demands of David. She felt the blood drain from her face, knowing their friends observed Hadjari’s presence

and the heated interchange between her husband and his cohort. She had wanted to slide under the table and die. Now she just wanted to slap him.

Hadjari's demands and David's responses at the restaurant tonight had proved David's guilt, hadn't they? What had David been thinking to get involved with an organized crime figure? What made him stoop that low? Was it the money? She had enough money from her inheritance for both of them. They would never have wanted for anything, ever. They would have thrived and prospered. David may even have made Prime Minister one day.

Now their future was in ruins. David had already resigned his position as CEO for British Tobacco effective in a week. The British press, as well as people opposing the party, demanded his resignation from Parliament. How long before *that* humiliation would befall them?

At once, a seemingly impossible notion flashed through her mind and her pulse quickened. Could what she had just envisioned really be as simple as that? She shifted in her seat. Perhaps—just perhaps She deserved it after all, didn't she?

Of course she did!

Now she would save her respectability even if her husband could not deliver on his part. She could make it happen. She just needed to find a way to persuade Hadjari to see things from her perspective

CHAPTER 30

Hadjari finished his vintage red wine with a satisfied smile and deposited the glass with a clank on the bar of his suite in the *Royal Court Hotel*. Of course, Islam forbade alcoholic beverages. Hadjari understood the Islamic prohibition and laws of punishment. He knew very well that in the most conservative Arabic countries he could be publicly disgraced, even lashed, for imbibing.

However, a while back, he had read in the Koran that Allah promised a fountain of drink in paradise as a reward to the true followers of the faith. As far as he was concerned, if Allah would be so generous in paradise, then he could only approve of Hadjari's attachment to this particular vintage of red wine here. Besides, tonight he celebrated his triumph in acquiring and securing the shipment of the Turner. Certainly, Allah had deposited *Jerusalem at Twilight* into Hadjari's hands.

He considered the painting a reward for his shrewdness. He would proudly display the picture of Islam's third-holiest site in the townhouse he recently purchased in Knightsbridge. The townhouse would be his base of operations here in London, where he intended to spend much of his time. Here he also expected to enjoy the companionship of a new wife, while Liliana and their children would remain in Albania.

He thought more on Liliana. She had been more insolent than usual when he last visited Tirana. Her obstinate refusal to abide by his holy and ordained role as husband and head of the family had caused him to take action. After a hard slap across the face and a

tongue lashing, he hired a bodyguard to keep her in line and to ensure his children would not be influenced by her wayward behavior.

On cue, his cell phone went off. "Hallo."

He listened to his wife's bodyguard on the other end. "Liliana slipped away from the house again this afternoon without telling anyone where she was going. It is the second time this week. She has only just returned."

"What about the children?"

"Ariana practiced her piano for nearly an hour, and then she helped Mirlinda with the dinner. Rashim played football with his friends in the park."

Hadjari expelled a quick breath. Liliana had gone off alone yet again—inappropriate behavior for any good Muslim wife, but particularly foolhardy for the wife of a prominent crime boss. She put herself and their family in danger—especially his lovely nine-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son. Why had she continued to defy his authority? Did she have a paramour? His eyes flared.

"What would you like me to do?" The bodyguard asked.

Hadjari considered for a moment. He needed to catch her in the act, and then she would get what any despicable whore deserved. She would be beaten and banished from their home, forbidden from ever seeing her children again. "Nothing for now. Tighten your guard and follow her to her destination the next time she slips out."

"Yes, *Zoti* Hadjari," the guard replied to his master.

Hadjari started for the bedroom, but a knock at hotel suite's door halted his steps. Who would be out at this time of night?

He opened the door with displeasure toward the elegantly-dressed woman he had met only hours before. Margot Chamberlain's black fashion heels brought her to within an inch of his own height. "What are you doing here?"

"May I come in?"

He studied her grim face. "In my country, women—especially married ones—do not call on strange men at any time, and certainly not in their hotel rooms."

Hadjari watched Margot inhale, bolstering herself, demonstrating her fear of him. It gave him a feeling of power over her.

“I must have a word with you. I believe I might be able to offer you something you may not want to refuse.”

He opened the door wider and indicated for her to enter. He closed the door behind her, and then came around to where she stood, just a few feet inside the room. “I am surprised your husband allows you to roam London at this time of night. Is he aware of your whereabouts?”

“I came on my own. David seems ...” She averted her eyes, and then met his again. “... preoccupied with other things.” She opened her handbag to retrieve an eight-by-ten white envelope stuffed thick, he assumed, with money. She replaced the handbag over her shoulder and stood tentatively with the envelope in hand.

His curiosity piqued, he wandered to the mini-bar. “Would you like something to drink—water, coke, a glass of wine?”

He eyed her as she licked full red lips. Indeed she exhibited style and grace, though her behavior suggested a woman of unbridled temperament.

“A white wine, please.”

He took a bottle of chardonnay from the mini-bar, opened it, and poured the contents into a glass. After pouring himself a Scotch, he handed her the glass of wine and held onto his own glass of whiskey. “To what do I owe this visit?” he asked before sipping his drink.

She met his gaze. “I wonder, Mr. Hadjari, if you ever gave any thought to who would be affected by your acquisition of the Turner?”

He cocked an eyebrow. What was this? The audacity of the woman to question him about the Turner! Did she know who he was? He would have burst out in hysterical laughter if it wasn’t for his desire to learn more. “Please—do enlighten me.”

“Did you know, Mr. Hadjari, that J. M. W. Turner had several illegitimate children by a woman who remained his mistress for many years?”

“In my country, such a harlot would have been stoned before she would be allowed to deliver her first bastard child.” He drank from his glass, looking over the rim at her.

Scorn ravished her face. “From my perspective, Mr. Hadjari, Turner deserved that honor. For, you see, in spite of Hannah Danby’s extreme dedication to Turner, he provided no money to her children upon his death—not even a painting that she could sell to make a living for them.” She paused, pacing around the sofa. “By then, she had developed a skin disease that left her beautiful face marred. The disfigurement disgusted him. He discarded her, and she was left to raise her children in poverty.”

He shrugged. “I am unimpressed. It is a fitting end for an infidel.”

“Yet I am one of Hannah’s descendants, Mr. Hadjari.”

He had been about to take another drink, but stopped the glass mid-air to stare at her. This was interesting news indeed. He lowered the glass. “Too bad for you.”

She took her first sip of wine and paced around the sofa again. “One of my later ancestors had the fortune to marry into money, so I have not known Hannah’s poverty. But nonetheless, I believe Hannah’s children should have been afforded at least one of Turner’s paintings. Perhaps one of his *lesser* known paintings.”

Hadjari lifted his head. Now the light had dawned. “You want the Turner.”

She halted. “Yes, Mr. Hadjari. I would like to procure *Jerusalem at Twilight*.”

He placed his glass on the bar, and then took three paces toward her. His face came to within a breath’s distance from hers. For a moment, he considered her lovely features, and then he brought the back of his hand up to caress her. “But are you prepared to offer me enough compensation for giving up a prized possession?”

Margot allowed him only a couple of strokes before moving away. She set her glass down on the coffee table. It still retained most of the wine he had poured her. “I’m not sure what you consider ‘enough,’ Mr. Hadjari. But I am prepared to offer you a great sum of money—even more than what I’ve brought with me.”

“Is that all?”

He observed her swallowing hard. “I-I don’t know what you’re implying.”

“Oh, I think you do.” He grinned, watching the apparent terror grow in her eyes. “You are a very beautiful woman.” He stepped toward her and placed his hand on the back of her head, then brought her lips toward his.

“I—”

Laughter bubbled up from the depths of Hadjari’s chest. He felt the pressure rising until a triumphant howl erupted like a geyser. She struggled to get away, but he grabbed her hair and pulled her head back. At once, his roaring subsided as it had started, and he threw her away from him to the floor. The envelope and her handbag flew out of her hands across the room, landing in two separate spots. “Did you really think you could persuade me by your charms to sell you the Turner? Or did you think your sad tale would move me? You have not enough money, nor I enough compassion, to be swayed by your foolhardy gesture.”

She gawked at him. “I—”

“Go home to your husband, whore—if he’ll have you back.”

She glared up at him, breathing hard and fast. “You are as evil as they say you are.” She rose to her feet, went to where the envelope and her handbag had landed and retrieved each in their spot. Once she had collected them, she put the envelope into her bag, strapped the bag over her shoulder, and made straight for the door without looking at Hadjari. “I hope you rot in hell.”

He watched as she opened and closed the door quietly behind her. Then once again the geyser erupted. He hadn’t had so much entertainment in months—not even the discourse he’d had with Carlo Benedetto had provided him with so much amusement.

He slunk off to the bedroom, his laughter still bursting forth in waves.

CHAPTER 31

The days and nights floated by in what seemed like an endless stream of nightclubs, lounges, wine cellars, cafés and live music bars. Jamie's discouragement grew as her hope of ever finding Nico faded.

Milan's reputation for *la dolce vita*, the sweet life, was no exaggeration. Literally hundreds of such establishments abounded in a variety of atmospheres for all tastes and states of mind. The main centers for clubbing were south of the center, but clubs could be found generally everywhere on every street corner. By the fourth night, Jamie felt ready to give up, daunted by the futile attempt to find Nico among the sea of humanity ebbing and flowing through the revolving doors that catered to the epicurean mindset.

So as Alessandro guided Jamie through the dark, dilapidated entrance of the newest bar, she felt slammed by the stark contrast to what they had come to expect of *la dolce vita*. The stench of the joyless place alone would off put anyone seeking to indulge their sensual pleasures. A conspicuous quiet filled the rundown establishment as they cased the dim, smoke-filled room. Jamie found the atmosphere unsettling and shivered. Death seemed to inhabit the place.

Only a couple of patrons gave casual notice of Jamie and Alessandro as they meandered about the tables. Most seemed strung out on one sort of substance or another. Jamie caught the bartender's suspicious eye while he dried glasses behind the bar.

Desperation settled around her heart. She felt a wave of nausea. What bitter or untenable circumstance of life had brought each of these souls to the point where escaping to this place and finding comfort in a bottle had seemed their only choice?

One old man in a cap lay face down on a table. Alessandro grabbed him by the collar to bring him upright. Jamie gasped when she saw the person wasn't old at all or a man. *She* was in fact a young girl perhaps in her early twenties. She stank of sweat and beer and doubtless knew nothing of their presence as Alessandro let go, and her body flopped forward again with a thump on the table.

Alessandro showed a picture of Nico to the bartender. "Ever see this man in here?" The bartender shook his head and continued his task. "Are you certain? Look again."

The bartender shrugged. "I do not know this man. But then again, most people come here to remain anonymous. Even if he had ever been here, I would respect his privacy."

"Please," Jamie said. "We're friends. Nico is in trouble and needs our help."

The bartender shook his head. "Look around you. Do any of these people look like they are having a good time? Take your pick."

"Forget it," Alessandro said to Jamie. "We are once again wasting our time."

His despondency saddened her. She knew he must feel every bit the same despair she felt. He peered around the establishment once more, seeming to will that one man would step forward. When none did, he turned to leave, heading for the door.

Alessandro had reached for the door when Jamie heard a male voice behind them. "Is Nico really in trouble?"

Jamie whirled around. A younger fellow, who looked like he hadn't seen soap in a week, approached them. His clothes were wrinkled and hung off his body, his beard at least several days old.

Alessandro dropped his hand from the door handle and took two strides. "You know Nico? Do you know where we can find him?"

The fellow leapt backward, his face apprehensive. “You really not *polizia*?”

Jamie stepped forward. “No. We really *are* Nico’s friends. We’re afraid he might have had some trouble from some very bad people.”

The young man averted his eyes and shifted his balance from one foot to the other. “He stay in my flat. I have not seen him for two days.”

“Two days?” Alessandro said.

“Si. I think you are too late. Some guys come around looking for Nico. Ask a lot of questions. Look like plain-clothes agents—like you. But after a while, they show their true colors.”

“What do you mean?” Alessandro’s eyes narrowed.

“The one guy, he always has his hand covering something, like maybe a concealed weapon.” He gestured as if he was reaching inside a suit coat pocket. “The other starts roughing me up a bit and talks about ‘the boss.’ I think they are Mafia enforcers.”

Jamie glanced at Alessandro. “Carlo’s men?”

“Maybe.” He frowned. He focused again on the young man. “You say one of them roughed you up?”

“Si. He twisted my arm, said I would be in real trouble if I did not answer his questions. I did not want to give Nico away. He has been good to me—give me food and a coffee every day. But I was afraid for my life.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I tell him Nico works at the *Stazione Centrale* as a janitor. He drops me and leaves. I have not seen Nico since.”

“Dear God!” Jamie uttered it more as a prayer.

“Can you think of anywhere else Nico might have gone, a place he might have mentioned where he could hide out?” Alessandro asked.

The fellow thought for a moment. “Maybe La Locande. One of the waitresses there reminds him of a girl back home.”

Alessandro put a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Thank you. You’ve been very helpful.”

“When you find Nico, please tell him Antonio did not want to rat him out. I would make amends if I could.”

Alessandro reached into his pocket for a wallet and retrieved twenty euros. “If you really want to make amends, Antonio, turn away from this life. Ask God’s forgiveness, and then go home. I believe your family will welcome you with arms wide open.”

Antonio looked at the euros for a long moment and then into Alessandro’s compassionate eyes. He took the bills, gratitude shining in his face. “*Mille grazie, signore.*”

La Locanda didn’t appear much better than the previous bar, Jamie noted as they entered. A fetid smokiness hung in the air. A two-man band played blues in the corner at the far side of the room. A lone person slunk at a table not far from where Alessandro and Jamie stood. He seemed unaware of their presence as they walked up to the table where he nursed a half-empty bottle of cheap Chianti.

“Hello, Nico,” Alessandro said. The boy startled and attempted to escape. Alessandro caught hold of him and squeezed his arm.

“Ow! Let go of me,” he said through slurred speech.

“I don’t think so.” Alessandro shoved him back into the chair and grabbed another for himself. Jamie joined them.

Nico looked at Jamie.

She gasped. Nico’s lips and left eye were swollen. Even through the bruises she could see the likeness to Jason. Her heart ached.

“Who did this to you?” Alessandro asked. “Was it Carlo’s enforcers?”

“I don’t have to tell you anything.” Nico teetered as he reached for the bottle of Chianti, knocking it over and spilling a good amount on the table.

“Oh, no?” Alessandro bolstered him up.

“You are hurting me.” Nico winced.

“You are going to tell me everything, Nico. Everything—if I have to beat it out of you myself.” Alessandro pulled him up and propelled him toward the door.

Jamie followed them, wondering if Alessandro jostled Nico too much. *Easy, Alessandro. What advice did you just give to Antonio?*

She laid a gentle hand on Nico as they ambled down the darkened alleyway. “I think Nico will talk to us after he’s had a warm bath and a good sleep, won’t you Nico? You just need a nice soft bed and a pillow.”

Nico halted beside them and looked at her. “I knew you would be a kind person from the moment I saw you, signorina,” he said, crumpling next to them.

She helped Alessandro stand him up. “And I knew you wouldn’t harm me in any way. You’re a good man, Nico. You just made some mistakes.”

“Too many mistakes.” Nico met her eyes. “You will help me?”

“Yes, Nico. I will help you.”

“I do not know why you choose to be generous to me, but I believed from the beginning, God had sent you to me.” He leaned on Jamie.

Jamie cast him a tenuous smile. She exchanged glances with Alessandro, ever more bewildered. It seemed, at least on Nico’s last point, Alessandro agreed with Nico.

CHAPTER 32

Jamie hadn't intended to fall asleep, but startling awake, her eyes popped open. She smelled the aroma of coffee, pungent and strong. Momentary confusion gave way to recollection. She and Alessandro had brought Nico back to Alessandro's flat on a side street not far from the Brera to sleep off the alcohol. She threw off the blanket she assumed Alessandro had laid over her, then rose from the sofa and surveyed the living room that last night she had been too exhausted to care much about.

What she found defied her expectations. She had presumed Alessandro's Waldensian heritage would have tempered his lifestyle. Instead, she found a room that was large by Italian standards with a raftered saddle ceiling and architecturally interesting lines. The furnishings were traditional and elegant. Along one wall, white floor-to-ceiling shelves housed numerous books and artifacts. In the center of the shelving, a large space had been left open where he had hung a Caravaggio, a Renaissance painting of a boy playing the harp.

What caught her attention more than the painting, however, was the shiny black, baby grand Steinway in the corner of the room. A Chopin etude lay open on the music rack. She approached the beautiful instrument with delighted perplexity. Alessandro never ceased to astonish her. She bit her lip and gingerly reached out to the keyboard. Did she dare? She hadn't touched a piano since she was fifteen—before Jason died.

“You didn’t know, Jason. I had no life left in me to play.” She breathed.

Play now for me, Sis. I’m listening.

“I don’t—”

At once, the clatter of metal hitting tile and a shout of dismay roused Jamie back to the present, and she snatched her hand away from the keyboard. Her emotions rattled, she scurried away and followed the noise to the kitchen toward the back of the flat.

“Is everything okay?” she asked as she entered the compact space and peered around. The kitchen was similar to others she had seen throughout Italy—small but efficient. At the other end, a door led out onto a terrace. Coffee brewed on the stovetop while Alessandro assembled a tray of breakfast food at the counter.

“It is now.” He flashed a brilliant smile.

She studied him with a skeptical eye, and then said, “The coffee smells wonderful.”

He smiled up at her. “Pour yourself a cup.” He grabbed a white ceramic cup from a cabinet, and then stepped closer.

Alessandro’s proximity to her allowed Jamie to take in the freshness of his aftershave. Its masculine scent instinctively pulled her toward him. She leaned in. Their eyes met, and she thought he would kiss her.

Abruptly he drew back.

Self-conscious, she brushed the loose strands of her hair behind her ears, and then accepted the cup.

“You should not concern yourself. I like your hair that way.”

She felt herself blush and whirled around to retrieve the brewer from the stovetop. “Have you seen Nico this morning?”

“He’s sleeping off his drunken stupor in a bedroom just below us.” He placed cheese onto a tray already filled with various meats. A plastic container of croissants sat off to the side and hadn’t yet been opened.

“I’m feeling a bit of *déjà vu*,” she said, watching him.

“Hmm?” he said, confused. She pointed at the spread. It contained the identical items Nonni had put out several mornings

before. “Oh, I see,” he said chuckling. “I hope it is not too boring. I went out early this morning to peruse the shops.”

She shook her head. “Did you get any sleep?”

“Some.” He grinned, which she deduced meant he hadn’t really. He placed the croissants on another tray. “What about you?”

“Better than I expected. I didn’t mean to fall asleep like that.”

“No worries. I enjoyed watching you.”

“Oh, dear. I hope I didn’t snore.” She sipped from her mug.

He gazed up at her. “You were adorable,” he said, and then placed the last of the croissants on the plate.

Jamie’s heart raced. *Get a hold of yourself, girl.* “I noticed the Steinway. I didn’t know you played.”

“I learned from a friend of the family in Bobbio,” he said, putting the tray aside. “She had such a passion for music. I guess it rubbed off on me.”

“You must have been one of her favorite students.”

He shrugged. “What about you?”

“Being the musician my mother is,” Jamie said wryly, “she insisted I begin studying with a teacher from the Cleveland Institute of Music when I was four. I stayed with Darlene until I ... well, until my last recital. I played Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6.*”

He stared at her. “I’m impressed.”

“Hmm.” She mused. She took a breath. “After that, I couldn’t seem to find the energy to play anymore—to my mother’s great displeasure. Anyway, I probably couldn’t even play *Mary Had a Little Lamb* anymore.”

“I doubt that.” Alessandro flashed another grin. He glanced at the clock on the wall. “Would you mind setting the table on the terrace? I’m going to wake our prodigal son. I think the fresh air would do him good.”

“Of course.”

He left her alone to find the plates and utensils. Once she’d located them, she ventured onto the terrace. She didn’t know what she had expected, but she was once again astonished. Her eyes grew wide as she entered the roof’s garden paradise. Vines grew along the wrought-iron railings and trellises. Red and pink

gardenias grew in strategically-placed flower pots, adorning the patio with color. She walked to the railing and gazed out on a spectacular view of Milan. She pictured herself enjoying a morning of leisure in this setting.

But leisure would not define the morning. She turned when she heard a rustle behind her.

“Good morning, Nico,” she said to the bedraggled figure who stepped onto the terrace.

His battered face appeared only a little better this morning. Otherwise, his clothes and hair were matted to his body. He hadn’t shaved for days.

Alessandro poured coffee for all of them, topping off Jamie’s cup first. Then they sat down at the table with Nico.

“You probably have not seen a decent meal in days,” Alessandro said. “Eat well, and then we will talk.”

Nico filled his plate and ate as if he had not eaten for a week. Then he gulped his coffee down. “Why are you being so nice to me?” he said when he had finished. “I thought you would hate me.”

“Can you think of a reason why I should not hate you?” Alessandro toyed with his cup. When Nico did not speak he continued. “Because of you, our community has lost a legacy of its history. Who knows if we will ever find it again? Because of you, a thief broke into Nonni’s home and violated her life. But more importantly, you grew up as a Waldensian and a Christian. Did any of it mean anything to you? Or have you thrown away truth along with your integrity?”

Nico shifted. “I need a smoke.”

Alessandro hesitated. Jamie thought he would refuse. Then Alessandro waved a hand in disgust. “Why not?”

Nico stood, and then pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. Marlboros.

Jamie gasped and leapt to her feet. “So you *were* in the gardens at the Villa Cipressi the day of Paolo’s murder!”

“How do you know this?” Nico asked, surprised. He walked away from her over to the wrought-iron railing and lit a cigarette

from the crumpled pack. Alessandro followed him to the rail and stood a small distance from him.

"I found a Marlboro crushed on the ground in the gardens. I thought it was an unusual brand for an Italian," Jamie said.

Nico dragged on his cigarette and leaned his body against the railing with his elbows resting on the top before responding. "A habit I picked up from an American, if you can believe that." he said in explanation. "But yes, I was in the gardens."

"Why?" Jamie said.

"Don't you know?"

"Why don't you enlighten us?" Alessandro said.

Nico looked out on the city and then back at them. "I knew about the contract on Paolo's life. I wanted to warn him. I picked the lock of his room and waited for him." He inhaled once more and blew out the smoke quickly. "He never came back."

"Did Paolo suspect his life was in danger?" Alessandro narrowed his eyes.

"Paolo knew—even joked about it. Said he would beat the mobsters at their own game. I do not think he believed they would really kill him."

"That sounds like Paolo," Jamie said.

Nico sputtered a sardonic laugh. "Si. And I naively believed him when he said he had big plans to make me rich."

"How could you forget your Waldensian roots—our vow of poverty?" Alessandro asked.

"As you have done?" Nico made a grand sweep at the environs.

Alessandro crossed his arms. "Every day I examine my motives and my actions to make sure I have not strayed too far afield. I know that it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. What about you?"

Nico stared at the fiery glow of his cigarette butt. "When I went to the Brera to find you, the first time, I found a Turner in the room of nineteenth-century artists. I could not believe my eyes. Paolo happened to be crossing through and noticed me. We talked. That's when I told him I believed the painting in Nonna Luciana's

house was a real Turner. He became animated. He plied me with questions. At first I thought he just wanted to authenticate the Turner. He told me to come back the next day. But when I returned, I discovered his true motive. I told him I could not help him.

But a few weeks later, when I was still out of work, I got desperate. I returned to Bobbio Pellice to visit your grandmother. I asked her many questions about her life and the Turner. When I got back to Milan, I contacted Paolo.”

“And none of this fazed you?” Alessandro asked with perplexity.

Sorrow crossed Nico’s face. “Before long, I regretted what I had done. I wanted to find a way to fix it without the mob finding out it was me who tipped you off. The day before the hit, I picked up Carlo Benedetto from his villa on a small motorboat. He was not happy with Paolo. By then, Benedetto talked to me as if he would reward me for turning over the painting. Said I could be part of the ‘family.’ Did he really think I wanted to be a part of his mob family?”

“We trailed you to the boat slip.” Alessandro said.

Nico directed his eyes at Alessandro. “I hoped you would. As God as my witness, I hoped you would.” He looked away, swallowed hard. “But I was also scared. Benedetto told Paolo that if he did not have the painting in hand by the following day, Paolo would be a dead man. Benedetto did not know there was another bidder vying for the painting—an Albanian.”

“Albanian?”

“Si. He is called the boss of bosses of the Albania mob. Bashkim—”

“Hadjari!” Alessandro finished for him. A grim line formed on his lips.

Jamie had never heard of the man, but she knew by Alessandro’s pained expression that the situation had just gotten worse. “What do you know about Bashkim Hadjari, Alessandro?” she asked.

“Plenty,” he said. “He is one of the most ruthless organized crime figures of our time—well known in Albania and central Europe for terrorizing people and communities.”

“Si. He is an evil monster!” Nico said with disdain.

Jamie felt sickened.

Nico dragged on the cigarette again. He seemed to contemplate his next words. “Later that same day after Benedetto had threatened Paolo, I took dinner in a little pizzeria in the center of Varenna. You should know it—on the Piazza San Giorgio across from the church. The manager is a good guy. I was ready to leave, but then through the window I saw Zamir—one of Hadjari’s soldiers. He waited for me outside the bar. I was afraid to leave, so I ordered a second cup of coffee, joked with the owner about politics, you know—things like that.

“Finally I knew I had stayed long enough. But I had a plan. I chose a time when I knew the ferry would leave Varenna. So, when I left the pizzeria, I knew I would have to make a run for it to escape Zamir and get to the dock. Unfortunately, I wasn’t fast enough. I missed the boat.”

He took a final drag from his cigarette and put it out in a nearby planter. Jamie noted the disgust on Alessandro’s face, but he said nothing.

“Zamir caught up with me and took me down an alley. He said Hadjari was a very unhappy man and that Paolo was as good as dead.”

Jamie watched Nico remove another cigarette from the pack and light it, his hands trembling. He drew on the cigarette before continuing.

“Zamir assured me that nothing would happen to me if I followed all of his instructions.” He drew on his cigarette. “I felt trapped. Both sides wanted the Turner, and both sides were willing to kill for it. I was the linchpin upon which everything hung. But I knew either way, I was a dead man, too.”

“Didn’t you know from the beginning where all this would end?” Jamie felt dismayed.

He blew out a quick puff of smoke. He looked at her. “Not in the beginning, Signorina Holbrooke. In the beginning, I wanted to believe I had found a way out of poverty. I thought Paolo would find a legitimate buyer. But very soon, I realized I had acted

foolishly.” He shook his head. “By that time, there was no way out.”

“You could have called the police,” Alessandro suggested.

Nico spurted a sardonic laugh. “I am a fool, but not as stupid as you think. The Mafia makes five vows. The first is a code of silence. Another is vengeance. Break either of these, and you are a dead man. Both Hadjari and Benedetto would not hesitate to give the order.”

“You could have gone into the witness protection program,” Jamie said.

He looked down at the burning end of his cigarette, and then back up at her. “I am already dead, Signorina Holbrooke. They will kill me even from behind the jail bars.”

“But you sent the notes—the riddles,” Alessandro said. “Why?”

The question had also been on Jamie’s mind. “And why did you involve me?”

Nico threw his cigarette butt to the ground and stepped on it. He turned toward the skyline. Jamie joined him and Alessandro at the rail.

“My stomach ached. I could not sleep. I grieved for my community and my family. I knew I could not go back after what I had done. Who would welcome me home again, eh? I tried to find a way to warn Alessandro before Paolo stole the painting. I might not be able to save myself, but I could save the painting—and along with that, I could save Nonna Luciana and the community from more sorrow.”

“So you sent the note to Albania,” Alessandro said.

“But you did not act on it quickly enough. That’s when I sought out Signorina Holbrooke. I hoped she would understand the grave consequences of what I had done, but I wanted to maintain my anonymity.”

Jamie noted the pain behind Alessandro’s eyes. The pieces were coming together, and she knew him well enough now to know he was blaming himself as well as Nico for the folly.

She hesitated. She didn't want to cause Alessandro more pain, but the whole truth had to come out. "Did *you* steal the painting, Nico?"

Nico put his hand over his heart. "As God as my witness, I did not. Paolo tried to persuade me to do it, but I convinced him that my kinsmen in Bobbio knew me too well. I did not have the stomach for it anyway. Paolo did, though, and bragged about it too. He told me every disgusting detail over beers in a bar.

"He said he'd rented a Fiat service van and waited outside Nonna Luciana's cottage until she left for her day's outing. Then he picked her lock—said it was the easiest lock he'd ever picked, except that the door squeaked. It caused alarm at first, but then he realized it was just the stupid hinges and laughed. But when he turned and saw the painting on the wall, he said, he ogled it, stupefied. It was so beautiful, he said—the intensity of light and color nearly drowning out the reasons that brought him there. He gazed at *Jerusalem at Twilight* for many minutes, amazed at his sheer luck to finally discover that all the rumors were true.

"And then he laughed. He could not believe how fortune had smiled upon him so profoundly. *Jerusalem at Twilight* would garner tens of millions of dollars on the black market, he said, and he would get ten percent for his efforts.

"At that moment, I felt disgusted. He must have noticed, because he elbowed me and told me not to forget that I would get fifty thousand of my own for my efforts. I wanted to walk out. I no longer cared if I got the money. I just wanted out. Once he finished his story, he taunted me. Said I was a coward for not having the guts to do the job myself. I wanted to spit in his face."

Jamie watched Alessandro's Adam's apple move up and down in an attempt to hold back his emotion. At last he said, "We know Benedetto does not have *Jerusalem at Twilight*."

"That is true."

"Does Hadjari have the painting?" Jamie asked. "Did he kill Paolo for it?"

Nico shook his head. "I don't know which of them killed Paolo. They were both angry enough to do it. But I can tell you for certain that Hadjari has *Jerusalem at Twilight*."

"How do you know?" Jamie asked.

"I gave it to him."

Jamie heard Alessandro curse under his breath. She watched as he clenched and unclenched his fists.

She put a hand on Alessandro's arm. "Nico, do you know where the painting is now?"

"I cannot tell you if Hadjari has moved the painting. I can tell you where I was told to take it after Paolo brought it to Milan."

"So the painting was here in Milan?" she asked.

"Yes, but you're not going to like what you're about to hear."

Nico eyed Alessandro.

"It's doubtful things can get much worse," Alessandro said.

"Paolo brought the painting to the Brera the night he stole it from Nonna's house." He paused when he heard Jamie's gasp.

"It's been at the Brera the whole time?" Jamie could barely breathe.

"No. Not the whole time—though as sadistic as Paolo was, he thought hiding it at the Brera was a wonderful joke—said I should imagine the irony of it."

"He was more perverse than I realized." Jamie marveled.

"Perhaps, but the money drove him. Later after he died, they told me to take the painting to a warehouse owned by British Tobacco in Milan—an area around Sesto San Giovanni."

Alessandro swiftly brushed his hair back.

"They told me to keep my mouth shut, and I did exactly as they told me. I didn't want to end up like Paolo. Then I went into hiding." A whimsical look crossed his face. "I guess it was not a very good hiding place. You and Carlo's men found me."

"Do you know where Hadjari is now?" Jamie asked.

"London. I overheard a cell phone call the last time I saw Zamir."

"Of course!" Alessandro said.

Jamie spun around toward him startled. "What do you know?"

“It’s been all over the newspapers. Hadjari’s name is mixed up with a scandal involving an ex-MP and British Tobacco.” He paused, slowly shaking his head. “Who would have guessed their story would intersect ours?”

Silence filled the air.

Nico hung his head. “I am truly sorry, Alessandro. I know I have caused a lot of pain for everyone.” His sorrowful tone and downcast mien showed the contrition Jamie believed he felt, and her heart reached out to him.

Still, Alessandro remained silent.

Jamie laid a hand on Alessandro’s arm, willing him to say something, watching the range of emotions at war as they chased across his face. If he exploded on the boy, she believed Nico was vulnerable enough to turn on himself. She didn’t want to think what that would mean. Yet she’d also seen Alessandro’s compassionate spirit. She believed he could rise above his anger and make a difference in Nico’s life.

She held her breath. Which side would win out?

Then ... Alessandro let out a long breath. His face softened. Jamie’s heart jumped for joy as she witnessed the transformation.

Alessandro placed a hand on Nico’s shoulder. “Now is the time to move forward, eh? No more lies, no more schemes, no more hiding. We find a way to make this right.”

Nico’s shoulders shook as he sobbed. Alessandro grabbed him and held on with the intensity of a man willing for another to take strength from him. Jamie’s tears spilled in streams, and she reached her arms around them both.

When at last Nico’s laments subsided, he drew back and wiped his face. “I did not believe anyone could forgive me, not even God. I don’t deserve it.”

“None of us deserves forgiveness, Nico, but God has not given up on any of us. What does the Scripture say? ‘For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.’ If Jesus could forgive me of my sin, can I do anything less? So, we go on, and we work toward finding those who robbed us of life in one way or another, yes?”

Nico nodded. “But I must tell you one more thing,” he said. “I am very sure Hadjari knows you and Signorina Holbrooke have been searching for him and the painting.”

“How do you know?” Jamie asked.

Nico’s face became hard. “He is like a military general. He does nothing without scrutinizing every situation very carefully. He knows all the players and every move they make in a game of cat and mouse. Watch your back at all times. His soldiers are everywhere.”

“I think we’ve met one of them already,” Jamie said.

Alessandro cocked an eyebrow.

“He wears a green hoodie, looks Middle Eastern,” Jamie said, remembering their experience running down the mountain at the Pra.

“Yes. That would be Zamir,” Nico said. “He’s also known to be Hadjari’s hit man.”

CHAPTER 33

Carlo pushed himself to the brink of exhaustion. Sweat poured from his reddened face as he performed his bench presses with a 150-pound load on the bar. With each press, he thought about how he was going to beat Hadjari to a pulp. This gave him the strength to complete the exercise. After the last press, he dropped the dumbbell onto the rack. He got up from the bench and reached for a towel to wipe the moisture from his face.

“Hey, Boss.”

Carlo spun around toward the gym door where Benni and another enforcer, Angelo, had entered. Angelo hung back while Benni came further into the room. “Benni, just the man I wanted to see.” Carlo slapped Benni’s back. “What do you have for me?”

“You were right, Boss. The painting is still in Milan at British Tobacco’s warehouse. Hadjari is having it shipped to London with a cargo of cigarettes in a couple of days.”

“You did well, my friend.” Carlo smiled and picked up his water bottle. “Pick out a nice gift for your wife—something real sweet.” He turned in dismissal and took a swig from the water bottle, but a sudden thought came to mind. He snapped his fingers to catch Benni’s attention again. “And tell the men to get ready to hit the warehouse on my order. In the meantime, I have a phone call to make.”

“You got it, Boss,” Benni said, and left.

Carlo went to a nearby chair to pick up his robe and thought about his next move. He believed his plan to purloin the Turner

away from Hadjari before it left Italy could work, but he had to get the Albanian mobster back on Italian soil. And he had to use Vincenza to do it. That second part he didn't like, but it played into Hadjari's bluff, and that part he did like.

The best place to make the switch of the painting for Vincenza was at the warehouse in Milan. That would make the job of scoping out the territory and putting his men in place much easier, though he could expect Hadjari would not come unprepared. Hadjari would have his own men organized and distributed judiciously as well. Neither man was stupid. Both could boast a cunning that had put them at the top of their league. Thus, the operation depended entirely upon which one could outwit the other more successfully—and, of course, firepower.

Carlo picked up his cell phone from the chair and made the call, but Hadjari did not pick up. He left a message on the mobster's voice mail. "Hadjari, I've been thinking about your offer, and though it pains me to give up my precious Vincenza, I accept. Call me to negotiate the terms of our arrangement."

There! The deed was done.

Now he had to persuade Vincenza. This last item would be the trickiest. She would no doubt give him some amount of resistance. He would take her out to a special dinner at her favorite restaurant, and then they would come home and he would make passionate love to her; then in the afterglow, he would present her with the idea. If necessary he would order her—the duty of the wife of a Mafia boss.

A momentary sense of guilt surfaced, and a fleeting impression of fear crossed Carlo's face. How would Vincenza react? His face hardened. Her place was not to command him but to obey. He hoped he would not have to resort to arm-twisting tactics.

* * * * *

For nearly ten minutes, Vincenza fired off a series of incendiary charges like a pyrotechnics display. While the violent deaths of her mother and brother had detonated the cries of loud sorrowful

laments, he had never witnessed her anger explode to this degree of fulmination. And yet, even in this explosive temperament, she possessed the beauty of Venus.

“You are the most despicable man I have ever met!” she spit out. “You wine and dine me, make love to me, tell me I am beautiful. Then you tell me you have sold me like merchandise? I am glad my father is not alive to know what kind of pathetic man you are!”

“Enough!” Carlo bellowed. “You have not heard a word I’ve said. It is only a ruse to finally possess what is mine. Your life will not be in jeopardy. You will be protected by my men at all times.”

“But you are willing to put your child’s life in jeopardy for this—this stupid piece of art?” She cupped her abdomen.

“Vincenza it is not—” He stopped. Did she say his *child*?

“And why? Because your ego is so big!” She gestured wildly. “You must possess what belongs to you, eh? What about me? What am I to you? Am I just a possession, too? A piece of art you can exchange at will?”

“Vincenza—”

“I wish now I was *not* carrying your child, who I hope will never become like his father!” She ran out of their bedroom, leaving him to contemplate what she had just revealed.

A child? She carried their child? Why had she not told him before? How long had she known? This changed everything! *My Vincenza*, he thought, and then his eyes clouded over. He had not meant to hurt her.

* * * * *

For the next two days, Carlo did not speak to Vincenza. She would not have meals with him, and she slept in a different room. She seemed to be conspicuously absent whenever he came around. Her rejection tormented him. The shrapnel of her scathing remarks pierced his heart so deeply that he felt a burning in his soul. Regret set in like undigested pasta in his stomach. How could he have

entertained the thought of an exchange for the painting—albeit a fallacious one?

Carlo's agony moved him to scrutinize his life. He knew the Ten Commandments. In his early years, he went to mass every Sunday with his mother. He attended catechism, and his mother proudly watched as he took his first communion. Once a week, he went to confession to receive the priest's absolution of his sins.

Then, at the age of sixteen, Carlo met Lorenzo Garibaldi. Lorenzo became the father he never had and welcomed him into his family. From that time on, Carlo placed the commandments of the Mafia above all else.

He wasn't proud of a lot of things he'd done over the years, but he knew what kind of life he'd chosen when he entered Lorenzo Garibaldi's legion. These things didn't really bother him much, because they had become a part of who he was. But the pain he had inflicted on Vincenza was different. He loved her almost more than life itself. He ached for her. And now she was going to have his child. What would Carlo teach him about love and loyalty and honor? For the first time, he had to look himself in the mirror and face his own avarice. His heart felt ripped from his chest.

Unable to endure the anguish any longer, Carlo drove himself to the local parish church.

For endless minutes, he lay folded over the steering wheel before leaving his Mercedes. It had been a long time since he had entered the doors of the small basilica. The priest knew him, had even suggested once that Carlo should give up his life of crime and become an honest businessman. But the priest had never given him up to the police. That made him a good guy in Carlo's book. He knew he could count on the priest to keep quiet.

Carlo made his way up the concrete steps to the wooden doors of the church. He fussed with his suit and tie before pulling the handle. After entering, it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dimly lit sanctuary. Ahead of him, rows of pews were stationed before a gilded altar and a statue of the Madonna and Child presided over them. On one side of the sanctuary, beyond several concrete columns, candles flickered in a small alcove before a

smaller version of the Madonna. To the other side, beyond another set of concrete columns were two wooden confessionals, situated side by side.

Slowly he walked to one of the confessionals, opened the door, and knelt at the screen inside, crossing himself before speaking. “In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Come, O Holy Ghost, and help me, that I may know my sins, be heartily sorry for them, and confess them sincerely. My last confession was a month ago ... I think.”

The priest responded with a passage from Scripture. “If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Carlo swallowed hard. Better to start with the sins he could confess with ease—a little white lie here, a small selfish act there, things like that. When he came to the end of the list, he inhaled deeply. He could avoid the real issue no longer. “Father, forgive me for I have sinned against all that is holy by putting my wife and my unborn child in danger.”

“What have you done, my son?” The priest responded solemnly.

“Father, you cannot reveal any of what I am about to tell you to anybody—not the *polizia*, not your fellow Christian brothers, not to anyone.”

“Of course, my son. I have never revealed your indiscretions or past sins to any of my brethren or government officials. I am bound to secrecy by my oath of office and before God Almighty, who knows all things before we speak them.”

“Then Father, I am guilty of entertaining an action that could have put my beautiful Vincenza and her unborn child into the hands of a man who would sell her into prostitution and place her unborn child into the hands of ruthless men.”

“Did you know she was pregnant when you devised this plan?”

“No.” He whispered the word, pausing in grief. “By all that is holy, I did not know. Yes, we talked about having a child, but I did not know she actually had become pregnant. And now I am sick unto death for considering this despicable plan to give up my wife

to the very devil himself. I see that there are some things that even I, an avowed criminal, must consider morally bankrupt and a mortal sin.”

“And you have decided to turn away from this action, my son?”

“Upon all that I am as a human being, I am sorry for this and all the sins of my past life.”

“Then I adjure you, upon everything that is holy, to say a prayer as an act of contrition.”

Carlo closed his eyes. He made the sign of the cross, and then poured out the words of the prayer that were part of the confessional.

A few minutes later, Carlo departed the church, feeling the burden of his sin lifted from his shoulders. He had properly performed the act of contrition, and he'd been genuinely sorry. Now it was time to do his act of penance, approach Vincenza with his sorrow, and pray that she would forgive him for all he had planned.

CHAPTER 34

After some debate, Alessandro and Jamie concluded that Nico would be a liability if he came with them to the British Tobacco warehouse in Sesto San Giovanni. If either Hadjari or Benedetto recognized him, his life could be in danger. As it was, Alessandro and Jamie's presence could incite a gun battle.

In the past, Alessandro had little reason to enter the industrial center, since it was mostly home to steel mills and chemical plants. Driving northeast on *Viale Monza* past Central Station, he was impressed with how the industrial complex had been revitalized into a mosaic of service industries and high tech companies. Its contemporary skyline reflected how much financial growth had occurred in recent years, though pockets of an older industrial character still existed.

Alessandro turned off the main road onto a side street and into an alleyway and pulled up to a warehouse complex. Skylights from an older two-story abandoned building reflected light off its multi-angled roofline. Flowering vine covered the adobe exterior, and large square windows stretched across the whole perimeter wall surface. A faded sign half-concealed by the vine, said "*Fonderia*"—foundry.

Looking across the narrow drive, a newer, boxy, one-story building housed British Tobacco's inventory. Workers were unloading large cartons imprinted with British Tobacco's logo from two semis into its interior through an open metal garage door on the side.

Alessandro eyed the blacked-out glass doors at the front of the building. Someone seemed to be going to a lot of trouble to make the place unfriendly. He opened his door to get out and waited for Jamie to come around the front to join him. "The office is this way," he said pointing to a sign. He headed toward the two-story building.

When they had gone a small distance, Alessandro noticed that Jamie wasn't next to him. He stopped and turned. She had slowed her pace and now caught up with him. "You okay?"

She shuddered. "Something's not right. I can't put my finger on it. It's like this place is ... I don't know ... haunted."

"Ghosts?" He frowned.

"I know it sounds crazy" She bit her lip.

His eyes perused the outer building once more. "I don't know about ghosts, but it definitely has the signs of neglect." He put his hand under her elbow. "Come on."

They entered the building through a set of green-painted metal doors into a single large empty room. The timbers and pillars appeared to have been recently painted; the odor still lingered in the air. The glossy concrete floors were spotless. "Let's try downstairs," Alessandro said, leading Jamie to the opposite side of the room. Their footfalls echoed throughout the empty space to the stairwell.

On the lower level, they found the same empty shell of a building, except that directly to their right was an open doorway into a small office. They walked to the open door but found only a sparse room with a metal desk and filing cabinet. "Do you get the feeling that no one is in charge around here?" Alessandro said, turning back to the larger room. He placed his hands on his hips. Something wasn't right.

"It's creepy," Jamie said. "Who could run a big operation like this without office equipment or even a phone? Where's the mess, the furniture, the people?"

"Good question." Alessandro scanned around for one last look. "Let's get out of here."

They retraced their steps to the painted green doors and walked outside into the light. Alessandro breathed a sigh of relief. In spite of the spaciousness, he had felt an air of oppression pressing down on him inside the building.

Then it hit him. The semis were gone. He sprinted to the blacked-out glass doors and jiggled them. Locked! He darted around the metal-framed building to where the garage door had been open wide and met a flat wall of steel.

He banged the door with the palms of his hands. “We’re too late,” he said to Jamie as she came up next to him. He bent over with his hands on his knees. “The painting is gone if it ever was here for any length of time.”

“What do you mean?”

Alessandro stood straight and brushed his hair back. “Hadjari’s been one step ahead of us this whole time. He knew we would come for the painting. That’s why he created this, this—” he waved his hand, “façade.”

“How? I thought David Chandler was CEO of British Tobacco.”

“A few days ago, Chandler announced his resignation, effective June 1. Hadjari still has access through Chandler to British Tobacco’s operations. He set up this sham complex for us.”

“You mean Hadjari sent Nico here with the painting. This is not British Tobacco’s actual warehouse.”

“Exactly. It’s too clean. You said so yourself.”

Alessandro walked to a narrow swath of tall weeds near the building. “This says it all.” He pointed to the rental sign lying flat on the ground.

Alessandro saw the light go on in Jamie’s eyes. “The gunman at the Pra del Tor. The man I saw at the Brera, standing by the gate entrance. Maybe even the bartender. All this time, I thought I was just paranoid, but Hadjari’s been playing us all along.”

“They could have killed us, but that would have been too easy. They preferred to play a game of cat and mouse, just as Nico said. Even at the Pra, the gunman could have killed us. Hadjari’s men are too well-skilled to miss.”

Jamie crossed her arms. “I say it’s time to stop playing their game.”

Alessandro lifted his eyebrows. “Or beat them at their own game.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“If I’m right, *Jerusalem at Twilight* is on its way to London as we speak. Maybe even on one of those semis.” He felt the sting of regret.

“We should follow them.” Jamie started for the car, but Alessandro held her back.

“No. We don’t know which of the semis has the painting or if either of them has it. Besides, what would we do if we did catch up? These men will not hesitate to use their guns.”

“What do you suggest?”

“We fly—tonight. We need to be in London before the painting arrives.”

“And then what?”

“I’m not sure. But I believe Lord David Chandler may be the key. Whatever we do, we must meet that shipment at the warehouse in London.”

CHAPTER 35

Alessandro booked two seats on British Airlines flight 76 from Milan to London—flight time approximately three hours, forty-five minutes. They would get to Heathrow late, but neither of them cared.

Once airborne, Alessandro brought out a European roadmap to calculate the time and distance of the trip for the semis to go from Milan to London. The distance was 600 miles between the warehouse in Sesto San Giovanni and the British Tobacco warehouse in London. They would follow the most direct route north through Lugano, Switzerland, entering France a few miles past Basel. The terrain through Switzerland and into France was mountainous with alpine passes topping 4,000 meters, or 13,000 feet. This part of the trip would be slow going as the trucks lumbered over the mountain passes. They would come down over the lower elevations of the Jura Mountains into Strasbourg. After Strasbourg, the semis could make up time in the flatter regions along the Belgium border heading northwest to Calais.

Once in Calais, the trucks would have to cross the English Channel on a freight carrier to Dover. The sailing, combined with the customs check in Dover, could easily take three hours. Afterward, the trucks would head northwest to London, a distance of eighty miles to the British Tobacco warehouse. Accounting for food and bathroom stops, and the occasional traffic delay, the trip would take approximately twenty hours. That would put the arrival

of *Jerusalem at Twilight* at British Tobacco's warehouse sometime after eleven o'clock the following morning.

"Is this your third or your fourth calculation since this afternoon?" Jamie leaned in next to Alessandro.

Alessandro lifted bloodshot eyes to meet hers and held up a thumb and forefinger. "We were *this* close, Jamie. I do not want to miss it this time. I cannot let the painting slip through our fingers once again."

Jamie reached out with the back of her hand to caress his temple. He closed his eyes, relaxing in her soothing touch. "You are not alone in this, Alessandro. You have me, Nonna, Nico, Giovanni, and ... God. You need to rest."

He caught hold of her hand and brought it to his lips. "Have you believed?" He gazed into her eyes.

She brought their hands down to the armrest. "I know that's very important to you." She hesitated. "It's uncomfortable for me to talk about my past. I never talk about it to anyone."

"You mean Clint?"

"You would think so, wouldn't you?" Her lips formed a whimsical line. She seemed lost for words, as if trying to decide what to say next. Alessandro waited patiently. He did not want to push too hard. She had to know that he would not reject her for any reason. "You remember I told you I had an older brother?" she said at last.

"Yes." He shifted positions so that he could see her better.

"Jason was everything to me. My parents were always so busy—my dad with his research, my mother traveling with the Cleveland Orchestra, both of them weighed down by their schedules. They loved us—gave us everything. They even took us to church when we were younger. We usually sat with Dad while Mom played in the orchestra." She shrugged. "But Mom and Dad had responsibilities, and Jason and I often found ourselves alone throughout the years. So we formed an alliance. When we weren't at my grandparents' restaurant or busy with our music lessons, Jason and I hung out together.

“As younger kids, we were inseparable—for good or for bad. If our parents had known what we were up to most of the time, we would have spent our lives locked in our rooms. Not that it was all bad. We just liked adventure—Jason especially. He was the instigator, though I had my share of moments.”

“Like . . .”

“Like the time I got it into my head that we should ride the Rapid Transit from the university to the Cleveland-Hopkins International Airport—without our parents’ permission, mind you—a forty-five-minute ride one-way. Anyway, I was on a mission to fight terrorists who were coming to Cleveland to set the Cuyahoga River on fire—for a second time.”

“What?” Alessandro snickered. “How old were you?”

“Nine. Sounds crazy, huh? In fact, the river did catch fire in 1969 from an oil slick. It’s part of what gave Cleveland a bad rap. But in my fantasy adventure, terrorists wanted to cause another fire to destroy downtown ports on Lake Erie.”

“You must have done a good job. Cleveland still exists.”

“At the time, I chalked it up to our sleuthing presence at the airport.”

He chuckled again. “I am really impressed.”

“Thanks.” The amusement in her eyes turned contemplative. “We had great times—they were our secrets. Even when Jason became interested in girls, he still had time for me. We still went out on our adventures. Of course, they changed some, but we still lived in our own little world. And when the boys started to tease me in junior high school, he defended me. He was always my knight in shining armor, coming to my rescue. I would have done anything for him.” Her voice cracked, and Alessandro tightened his grip.

She began again, her voice flat at first, and then streaming with emotion. “Then one day in the spring when I was fifteen, we visited my dad on the Case Western Reserve University campus. The campus is split across Euclid Avenue. It’s always been a busy thoroughfare through Cleveland and a major bus route. We waited

at the crosswalk for the light to change, talking, laughing, paying little attention to what was going on around us—”

Jamie stopped short, and Alessandro felt the quiver chase through her body. He wanted her to know he wouldn't judge her. “You don't need to go on if you don't want to.”

She shook her head. “No, I want to tell you.” She gathered herself together again. “Jason must have been standing too close to the curb, because the next thing I knew, he was lying on the sidewalk, blood pooling up around his head.

“I don't remember screaming, but later my father told me no one could calm my hysterics. I vaguely remember the city bus driver apologizing profusely to anyone who would listen, but I don't remember when the ambulance showed up or how I ended up in my father's car. I'm not even sure why we were in the car, because University Hospital is on campus.

“We met my mother in the emergency room. I know my grandparents arrived at some point. Dad joined my mother with the doctors in another room while I waited with my grandparents. I will never forget the wretched piercing scream that came from that room. It frightened me so badly that I wanted to run. But I couldn't. My feet wouldn't move.” Jamie wiped the tears from her eyes.

“I didn't finish out tenth grade. I wouldn't come out of my bedroom for days. I wouldn't eat. My shining knight was gone, and nothing, not even God would bring him back. My insides were torn to shreds.

“And then the nightmares began—dark, terrible nightmares, sometimes macabre. They always started out well—with Jason and me running in the field behind our house or playing some game, like Monopoly. Then we would be on Euclid Avenue, and I'd relive the entire thing all over again in all its gory detail.

“These freakish figures would appear. Sometimes they stood on the street corner. Sometimes they appeared in the University Hospital waiting room. They always pointed accusing fingers at me, telling me that it was my fault the bus killed Jason. I could have saved him, they'd say, but I was too selfish. I'd only wanted to save

my own skin. What right did I have to still be alive when my brother was dead?

“At first I didn’t know what to do. The nightmares frightened me so much. But then I had an idea. Maybe if I died, somehow Jason would come back to life. I know it makes no sense now, but you have to understand how twisted by mind was. So I found some of my mother’s left-over pain pills, grabbed hold of my Ambien, and in one terrifying moment, swallowed them all.

“My mother found me unconscious but still alive in my bathroom. My father called 911—that’s the American equivalent of 118 here in Italy. They got to me in time, but I ended up in the psych clinic at University Hospital.

“I wouldn’t talk about the accident at first, but eventually I began to trust the psychologist enough to work through the trauma. I returned to school in the fall. When I was a senior in high school, Dr. Foster released me from her care. By then, I had made enough progress to take top honors in my high school class. I got scholarships to attend the Cleveland Institute of Art. From all outside appearances, I was doing well. But inside” Jamie licked her lips and paused before continuing.

“That’s when I gave up on God. If he actually existed, he certainly couldn’t have cared about Jason or me enough to stop that bus from killing him. And the pain and the nightmares—why would God have allowed them? Dad asked me to go with him to church a few times, but I never had the time or motivation.” She furrowed her brow. “Funny thing is, I think it tore my father’s heart apart—maybe Mom, too. I don’t know. We’ve rarely talked about it since.”

Alessandro waited. He wanted to be sure Jamie had said everything she wanted to say. His heart ached—for all that she had gone through certainly, but as much for the scars that remained. They stole the true joy she could know if only she would release the pain to the One who had always understood. He wanted to gather her up in his arms, tell her that God had never abandoned her even in the darkest days. And neither would he.

He tightened his grip and directed soulful eyes upon hers. “Do you still blame yourself for Jason’s accident?”

She laid her head against the headrest. “Sometimes.” She went quiet again.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“Over the years, I’ve tried to accept that.” She put her hand over her chest. “But my heart has always desperately wanted my knight back. Sometimes I—”

“We have begun our final descent into London’s Heathrow Airport.” The flight attendant broke in over the intercom. “Please make sure your seat belts are fastened and your electronic equipment is turned off and stowed away. We should be on the ground in just a few minutes.”

Alessandro released Jamie’s hand as the flight attendant came around to collect trash. Regret settled in. Jamie had finally opened up to him, but the opportunity for further exchange was now lost. He silently prayed for another chance to talk. He had to tell her, had to let her know another knight stood close by, waiting to be her protector and savior. For now, he leaned in close to her. “Thank you for telling me about Jason.”

She laid her head on his shoulder. He knew she shed silent tears.

CHAPTER 36

Hadjari lifted the teacup to his lips as he gazed at the empty space on the wall of his townhouse in London. In spite of his cool exterior, he exulted in his triumph. In two hours, the Turner would be his. He laughed. He had beaten them all at the game. He was victor.

He felt particularly satisfied about how he'd duped Marianni and the girl at the sham warehouse. His plan had worked beautifully. Though two semis had appeared to load and off-load cargo, in fact only one semi had actually crossed Europe to its destination.

Hadjari had given specific instructions to the semi's driver to call him when they had met their mile markers. The weather had held out for the most part as the truck successfully traversed the Alps through Switzerland and France. They had crossed the English Channel at Calais by ferry with little to report. A few minutes ago, they cleared customs at Dover and would head on the M20 toward London. They should arrive in two to three hours if they were lucky, longer if traffic delayed their journey.

His cell phone went off. He glanced at his watch—too soon for the driver to call. He set his cup down on the coffee table and answered the phone. "Hallo."

"Good morning, Mr. Hadjari."

Hadjari didn't like the sound of the bodyguard's sober voice. "What is it?"

"Liliana escaped from your villa again this morning."

Hadjari let out a quick breath. “Where were your surveillance teams?”

“She has around the clock surveillance, Mr. Hadjari—three shifts of two men. But she is very clever and climbed out the balcony this time.”

“Then perhaps you need to increase your manpower.”

“Fortunately Zef discovered her in time leaving the grounds. He followed her on foot to the corner bus station where she hailed a taxi. He followed in another right behind her. You’re not going to like where she stopped, Mr. Hadjari.”

“Which was ... ?”

“A Christian church.”

“A church!”

Fury inflamed his senses. What was Liliana doing at a church? How could Liliana associate with the moronic infidels?

Liliana may not know to what extent he was connected to al-Qaeda, but she had received his al-Qaeda-linked friends into their home in Tirana. Though he had not participated in the ethnic cleansings across the border in Kosovo, he approved their activities. As the boss of bosses of the Albanian mob, he’d given his word in exchange for their loyalty. He’d sealed their cooperation at their training camp near Tropojë.

Though now a number of years had passed, he could not allow Liliana’s conduct to compromise his position, weaken his authority. If anyone knew of her conduct, they would question his loyalty to Allah. His children might follow. He would be a laughing stock. She could not be allowed to defy him or the doctrines of their faith.

“And there is more, Mr. Hadjari. She met with a man in his office behind closed doors. Zef could not say what they were doing. But when she left, he said her face beamed with a joy he had not seen on her before.”

Hadjari’s body trembled. He cursed. That whore! She had never expressed emotion, never shown any afterglow in all the years he had bedded her. Only in the hours after she had given birth to their

first child had she ever turned tender eyes upon him. Otherwise, he'd only seen disdain reflected in their brown pools.

His forearm swept across the coffee table, sending the teacup flying across the room. Zamir would hear of this. His sister would pay for her infidelity. She would not forget how she had caused disgrace to fall upon his day of conquest.

“What would you like me to do, Mr. Hadjari?”

“Beat her until she bleeds. Then tell her I have forbidden her to go anywhere again without my permission. She will remain at home at all times under lock and key.”

“Very well, Mr. Hadjari.”

* * * * *

Alessandro pressed the doorbell of the luxury Hyde Park Gardens residence. He and Jamie stood at the top of a set of stairs that led to an immense white door—the home of Sir David Chandler. He studied the grand white columns and rounded roofline of the portico under which they stood—it was nothing short of grace and opulence.

“Sir and Lady Chandler inherited their money, as all nobility do,” said Jamie. “Admittedly the curb appeal is envious, but their situation is not.”

“Another story appeared in this morning’s *Observer*,” Alessandro said. “Lord Chandler will be prosecuted for his part in the British Tobacco scandal. It is such a shame—”

The door opened to expose a man of equal height with Alessandro. His hairline receded to a place where his white hair encircled the rest of his head. Alessandro assumed he was the butler or houseman.

“May I help you?” the butler said.

“We are here to see Sir David Chandler. I’m Dr. Alessandro Marianni and this is Jamie Holbrooke.” Alessandro waved a hand toward Jamie. The butler studied them thoroughly with skeptical eyes. “Lord Chandler and his wife are not receiving guests today. I can inform him of your visit.” He started to close the door.

Alessandro crammed a foot in before the butler could shut them out. "I'm afraid we cannot wait." He glanced aslant at Jamie. "Our business is urgent."

"What sort of business would that be, sir?" The houseman demonstrated no emotion.

Alessandro looked up at the camera just above the doorstep. "Please tell Lord Chandler we have come about a shipment through the British Tobacco warehouse."

"Lord Chandler no longer attends to responsibilities at British Tobacco. Perhaps—"

"Please." Jamie now pleaded. "Lord Chandler arranged for an important shipment to arrive today, and he is the only one who can help us correct a situation before it is too late."

At first Alessandro thought the houseman would refuse. But instead, he opened the door wider to allow them entry into the foyer and led them down a corridor to an inner hall. "Please remain here while I consult with Lord Chandler." He lumbered to the staircase to ascend to the upper floor.

Alessandro leaned into Jamie and spoke quietly. "Not very friendly, wouldn't you say? Why do British servants always appear so placid?"

"In-bred, I suppose."

"Hm."

He turned to examine the room. Two ornamental mirrors hung on opposite walls, reflecting the images in the room. They made the room appear larger than its actual size. At the top of the curved stairway, a floor-to-ceiling stained glass window allowed a prism of light to make rainbows across the tile flooring.

Jamie stood in front of a statue. "Impressive."

"It is, isn't it?" A feminine voice spoke.

Alessandro and Jamie spun around to find Margot Chandler coming in from a side door.

Alessandro had, until now, only seen pictures of Lady Chandler. He'd always imagined her to be much older, but in fact she was barely forty and more attractive than her pictures gave her credit. She wore a casual skirt and blouse, her hair styled in an updo.

“Lady Chandler.” Alessandro held out his hand.

She hesitated and then took his hand lightly. “You are here to see my husband, Mr . . . ?”

“*Dr.* Alessandro Marianni.” He didn’t often emphasize the title, but in this case, he believed it might provide some credibility. “And this is Miss Jamie Holbrooke.”

“You are not reporters here to further besmirch our names, are you?” She glanced at Jamie. “We’ve been through enough.”

“No, Lady Chandler,” Jamie said, stepping closer to the woman. “We haven’t come to inflict more pain on you and Lord Chandler. Believe me when I say I am very sorry for your situation. However, it is imperative we speak to your husband.”

Margot folded her hands in front of her. “My husband is not receiving visitors this morning. He is feeling unwell.” She remained aloof. “Perhaps you could leave your telephone num—”

“My sincerest regrets, Lady Chandler,” Alessandro interrupted with far more impatience than he meant to. “But this matter cannot wait. Events are happening as we speak that require the utmost urgency.”

“I see.” She studied them with dispassionate interest. “What did you say is your business with my husband?”

“As we told your servant—”

“Yes, yes, something about a shipment.” She waved her hand. “But how do I know this isn’t just a ruse to defile my husband’s reputation even further?”

“You must believe, Lady Chandler,” Alessandro said, “that we mean no harm to you or your husband. A shipment for British Tobacco will arrive today before noon and contains cargo that has immense value to my family. We need access to the shipment. We have no more than two hours before it slips out of our hands, perhaps forever.”

Lady Chandler set skeptical eyes on Alessandro. “Rather melodramatic isn’t it, *Dr.* Marianni?”

“I cannot over-emphasize how important this is to us, Lady Chandler.”

“Forgive me, Dr. Marianni, but I need to know if you are associates of Bashkim Hadjari? If you are, you may show yourselves out.”

Margot Chandler’s frankness startled Alessandro. He wondered how much she knew of Chandler’s dealings with Hadjari. “No, we are not. However, if all goes as we hope, it will affect your husband’s legal case.”

“I see.” She hesitated. “In what way do you predict, Dr. Marianni?”

Alessandro spoke directly. “Lady Chandler, Bashkim Hadjari is an evil man. It would do me and many other people great pleasure to see him behind bars for a very long time.”

She moved toward the threshold of the room from which she had originally come, and then turned back around at the doorway. “I am one of those people, Dr. Marianni. I hope they throw away the key.” She swept out of the room.

Seconds passed. Jamie cocked an eye. “Well wasn’t that interesting? I thought for sure she was going to throw us out of the house.”

“She is on our side.” He paced the room, his eyebrows knitted in thought.

“Yes, but will she help us?”

“She obviously hates Hadjari.” He continued to stare at a painting.

“She probably blames him for her husband’s descent into crime.” Jamie shook her head. “But the question still remains. Will Lord Chandler help us?”

Alessandro twisted in his spot to raise an eyebrow. “He might shy away from having anything to do with Hadjari, especially if it means incriminating himself.”

“I’ll be happy to answer that question for you, Miss Holbrooke, Dr. Marianni.”

Alessandro’s head bolted up at the voice of Sir Chandler himself. He had come stealthily into the room. He wore a satin day jacket and a pair of black trousers and appeared older than his years. Alessandro felt pity for the man, in spite of his guilt or innocence.

“Forgive me for not greeting you earlier. My wife and houseman have strict instructions to keep unwanted nuisances away. I have wearied of the endless reporters and hate-mongers. Will you please join me in the drawing room?”

Chandler led them through a doorway and turned down a long corridor that led into a large room. Alessandro compared it to other palatial rooms he had seen in his lifetime—the decor reflecting the French elegance of Louis XV with its cushioned chairs and sofa. A multi-layered glass chandelier hung from gilded scroll work on the high ceiling. Long draperies hung from high windows behind the sofa, and a gilded mirror hung over a green marble fireplace on the far wall. Off to one side, Lady Chandler spoke quietly to a maid.

“We’ll have tea in a few minutes,” Lord Chandler said. He moved toward a sofa and coffee table setting in the middle of the room. “Please have a seat.” He sat down in a wing-backed chair and crossed his legs.

Alessandro hesitated, then took a seat, sitting on the edge of the sofa, joined by Jamie next to him. “Lord Chandler, we really have no time for tea.”

He watched Lady Chandler excuse the maid and come over to join them. She seemed to grace the other wing-backed chair, crossing her sleek legs and extending her neck. He wondered what lay under the cool exterior.

“In less than two hours, you have a shipment arriving at the British Tobacco warehouse. It contains a valuable piece of artwork known, until recently, only to very few. But that artwork will soon be in Bashkim Hardjari’s hands if we don’t arrive at the warehouse before he does.”

Lord Chandler peered at Alessandro, his eyes thoughtful. “And why do you think I have something to do with this shipment? I have many people who work for me—dock supervisors, an international commercial manager, not to mention the hundreds of other lower level employees. Any one of them could have arranged this shipment that you’re talking about.”

“We have a very reliable source,” Jamie said. “We know Hadjari arranged to have the painting shipped through British Tobacco.”

“That still does not mean I know anything about it.” He crossed his arms.

Alessandro heard a loud gasp come from Margot. She rose abruptly. “For heaven’s sake, David. Stop the posturing. If you recall, I was present when that monster had the audacity to show up at the restaurant and humiliate us in front of our friends. I am not stupid, and neither are they. Tell them what they want to know.”

Lord Chandler peered up at his wife, the defeat he felt evident in his eyes. Alessandro recognized the face of a man who knew he was to blame for everything that was painfully disappointing to the woman he loved; he felt pity for them both. Chandler uncrossed his legs, but then he slouched a little into his chair.

His wife walked to the window and parted the sheers.

“It was never supposed to be this way,” Lord Chandler said, distracted by his wife at the window. He turned back. “As God is my witness, I did not enter into a business relationship with Bashkim Hadjari having one thought to illegal intent. But by the time I became aware of his illegal activities, it was too late. I attempted to cover them up to save my career.”

Alessandro shifted. “I can imagine this must be very difficult for you, Lord Chandler. I am sorry for your situation, but right now we must know about the shipment.”

Chandler brushed lint from his trousers. “When Hadjari came to my office, I was furious with him. He started talking about some painting he wanted to ship to London through British Tobacco’s warehouse in Milan. I was dumbfounded. I couldn’t believe he risked my reputation for a piece of artwork. I wanted to strangle him with my bare hands.”

“So you agreed to it?” Jamie asked.

“What choice did I have? Hadjari threatened everything.” He stared hard at the Persian rug. “What does it matter now? It’s all gone. What do I have left?”

Alessandro glanced at Lady Chandler. She dropped the sheer and returned to her chair. “I can do nothing.” She crossed her slender legs, her body twisting away from them.

Alessandro made another plea. “Lord Chandler, Lady Chandler, *Jerusalem at Twilight* is much more than a material possession to me and those I love. It is a symbol—part of our religious legacy. No one in our community even knew it held the slightest bit of material value until recently. None of my dearest friends or family care about the money the painting can bring them. They only want their symbol back.” He paused. “Will you help me?”

Lord Chandler’s demeanor remained somber. “I am very sorry for the loss to your community, but I don’t see how I can do anything to help you even if we do get to the delivery site on time. You can be sure Hadjari has a team of men behind him ready to kill for this painting. It seems we have all been victims of his reign of ruin.”

“Lord Chandler,” Jamie said. She leaned forward. “Don’t you see that you have an opportunity to right a wrong? Look, I’ve been in your shoes. I lost someone a long time ago—someone very important to me. I blamed myself for his death. If only I had acted differently my brother wouldn’t be dead and my parents wouldn’t know the sorrow of losing a son. For months, I wanted to kill myself—almost succeeded, too. But I’m here now to tell you that if I had succeeded, much more would have been lost for my parents than their son. Only recently I’ve understood that I have the power to change things. You have to believe that you have the power to change things, too.”

“But I *could* have prevented this. Now Margot will have to live with the stigma of a husband who is going to prison and God knows what other fallout—all because I was too much of a coward to come forward. I could have stood up to the wretched man.” He turned to his wife. “I wish to God I could spare you the agony of it.”

Margot Chandler remained turned away from them, but from his vantage point, Alessandro could see the tears fall.

“Maybe you could have prevented it, maybe not,” Jamie said. “And yes, you probably will still do prison time. But at least you will know you did not give in to Hadjari’s threats. You’ll be able to say you stood up to him in the end and fought for your dignity and your soul.”

Alessandro felt moisture behind his eyes. His heart swelled. Did she realize how much he wanted to wrap his arms around her and tell her that he was hers, heart and soul?

Lord Chandler rose. “Miss Holbrooke, you have just given me the best reason in the world to help you beat Hadjari at his game.” He turned to his wife and spoke to her back. “Margot, I hope I can somehow redeem myself in your eyes. But even if you never forgive me, at least I will have done something to restore my self-respect.”

Alessandro’s eyes fixed on Lady Chandler. She seemed rooted in her spot. Perhaps anger and pride prevented her from being able to respond to her husband’s heart-felt words. Alessandro almost disparaged of any conciliation, but then she reached across the gap between their two chairs and laid a hand on his arm.

“I cannot promise you anything, David. I have suffered humiliation beyond even what you can know. But I am proud to see glimpses of the man I married, and that is more than I could say an hour ago.”

David patted her hand. “Then that is a start.” His love beamed through the pain behind his eyes. He removed her hand from him, and spoke to Alessandro. “Meet me in the garage. We have no time to lose.”

“Thank you, Lord Chandler.” Alessandro rose and beckoned Jamie to follow.

Before leaving the room, Alessandro observed Lady Chandler accept the tea service from the maid and pour herself a cup of tea with a distant look in her eyes. He wondered what thoughts lay hidden behind the remote gaze.

CHAPTER 37

The British Tobacco warehouse resided in a light industrial area of London. Jamie saw a glimpse of the Tower of London across the Thames as they headed east past Tower Bridge Road. A few minutes later, David pulled his Bentley into the parking lot in front of the two-story concrete block complex. Only a Ford Fiesta sat in the lot.

“That would be Ian James,” David said as they emerged from the car. “I delegated the scheduled meet to him, since I wanted nothing to do with the shipment. We’ll enter through the main doors.” He led them along a walkway lined on either side with waist-high boxwood and then under a black awning to double glass doors just beyond the British Tobacco sign.

David scanned a key card and opened the door for them to proceed through. On the ride over from the Chandler residence, David had provided Alessandro and Jamie with details about the layout of the building and loading docks. The scheme seemed easy enough. Now as they entered the building, Jamie’s pulse raced.

I’ve come this far, Jason, but it’s not like any of the games we played as children. This is real life, and these are real people, playing a very dangerous game. Someone could get hurt or killed. I’m scared.

It’s all right, Jamie. I’m here.

Jamie’s heart warmed to the voice she had become accustomed to over the days, and she felt comforted. What would she do if she never heard that voice again? She didn’t want to think about it. She didn’t want to lose her brother a second time.

“Jamie?” She heard Alessandro’s voice in front of her and saw him looking back at her oddly. “Are you with us?”

“I’m sorry. My mind wandered a bit.”

“David was giving us a sketch of the area around the loading dock.”

“The lorry will pull into the loading dock at the back of the building.” David repeated his earlier thoughts. “Come this way.” He led them through the lobby.

Jamie noted that no one currently occupied the check-in desk, but a telephone and the typical office supplies occupied space on the desk. They progressed through a set of doors into a corridor of offices where they passed furnished rooms and well-used equipment. Family pictures at desks gave evidence of real people participating in regular day-to-day activities of the business. “Well, this a little more like it.”

“What do you mean?” David asked, as they advanced down the corridor.

“Hadjari rented an unused warehouse to put us off track,” she said and told him about what they found at the sham site in Milan.

“I assure you, there are no ghosts here,” David said. “But it doesn’t surprise me that Hadjari would go to those lengths. He is a master of deception.”

They strode through another set of doors and into an immense space filled with burlap-wrapped bales of tobacco stored on open storage racks. Stacks of them filled the chilly room.

“We keep the temperatures and humidity down to maintain the freshness of the product.” David explained. “Otherwise, we’d be fighting molds and insects. As it is, we still fumigate from time to time. We’ve received some flak for that, though—concern about poisons and all. A bit ironic, don’t you think?”

“You obviously don’t smoke yourself,” Alessandro said.

“Nah.” David wrinkled his nose. “Can’t stand the repugnant stuff. I applaud the people who’ve made a commitment to quit.”

“Now that is ironic, especially since it’s your bread and butter, so to speak,” Jamie said.

“Yes, well, it won’t be for long.”

“Perhaps you need a much less controversial career,” Alessandro said.

“My wife would certainly agree with you there. She never did think marketing tobacco was a proper role for an MP. She stayed away from the office as much as possible.”

“Yet she has stood by you,” Jamie said.

“Yes, but she has not forgiven me,” he said. “I have humiliated her beyond her mettle and made her an outcast among those she once counted as friends. She will not pardon the offense easily.” David hung his head. “I have no one to blame but myself.”

“Give her time,” Jamie said. “She may surprise you.”

“Time may be all I have,” David said.

Alessandro glanced at his watch. “And we have much less time. By my calculation, the painting should be here within the hour.”

“Right, then.” David clasped his hands. “The lorry will go to a loading dock on the other side of these stacks. But”

“Yes?” Alessandro coaxed.

“I can’t imagine where Ian is.” David’s forehead creased. “He wasn’t in his office. He doesn’t appear to be here either.”

“Maybe he took a walk,” Jamie suggested.

“Maybe” David hesitated as if he mulled something over in his mind. “It just doesn’t make sense. Well,” he said, seeming to have made up his mind. “Come this way.”

He led Alessandro and Jamie down an aisle between the stacks toward the back of the room. They searched the aisles as they moved down through the room, but still no sign of Ian James. Once at the back, David located a switch panel on the side wall. He pressed several numbers on the computerized panel.

Jamie watched in fascination as the wall in front of her slowly moved horizontally. It grated against the floor until it disappeared between a narrow metal-lined channel to reveal a long narrow room. Four galvanized steel doors lined up across the wall. The heavy-duty guide tracks appeared to be well-constructed for long-term use. On either side of the wall, a separate smaller entry door allowed foot traffic only.

“When the lorry arrives and backs into the bay, it will trigger a sensor that rings a bell. We input another code to open the door. After that, it’s simply a matter of unloading the cargo from the lorry.”

“What do we do until then?” Jamie asked.

“Someone must still greet the lorry,” Alessandro said. “I think that job will be up to you, Lord Chandler. Hadjari probably expects you to be here in any case, and he will most certainly make an appearance when the lorry pulls in.”

“An event I had hoped to avoid, Dr. Marianni.”

“It would seem that unless Ian shows, you will have no other choice. In the meantime, Jamie and I will wait behind the stacks. I don’t want to alert him about our presence too early.”

“From what you’ve told me, Hadjari may already be aware you’re here, don’t you think?” David said.

“Perhaps, but that is a chance we’ll have to take.”

“And you should be prepared for reinforcements and weapons fire,” David added. “Do you have a gun?”

Alessandro puffed his cheeks and blew out a steady stream of air. “No.”

“Right,” David said, directing his gaze at Jamie. “I suppose it is, as the Americans say, showtime.”

Jamie nodded her head, and then followed Alessandro to the stacks.

Showtime, Jason. That’s what Lord Chandler said. I don’t know if I can do this.

Keep your cool, Sis. I am here with you. Remember what I taught you.

But what if I forget? What if someone gets killed?

Remember also what Nonni and Alessandro have taught you. God will not fail you, Sis.

But—

The buzzer sounded. Jamie jolted.

“Showtime!” Alessandro said.

* * * * *

Jamie watched from behind the stack as one of the steel doors opened and the lorry she had seen back in Milan ground its diesel engine backing into the docking bay. The rattle reverberated across the room.

A minute later, the engine stopped and quiet descended.

Then one of the entry doors on the far right slammed shut. Heels clicked across the concrete door toward David.

“Hello, *Lord* Chandler.”

“Hadjari.”

Jamie’s stomach lurched. She met Alessandro’s eyes. He responded with a nod.

“I’m glad you decided to make an appearance. Imagine the disappointment I felt when your employee—Ian James, isn’t it?—greeted me at the front door.”

Jamie gasped. Alessandro put a finger to his lips

“What have you done with Ian?” David said.

“Tsk, tsk, David. You know I get annoyed when things aren’t done the way we agreed. You shouldn’t have involved someone else in our little business arrangement.”

“Is he dead?” David insisted.

“I am touched by your concern for your employees, really I am. But, you know, your concerns would be better spent protecting *our* interests. For example, right now, my investment is in this shipment. I expected to receive it according to my satisfaction. Your obligation was to ensure all went according to plan. Ian James was not part of the plan.”

“Did you kill him?”

Hadjari guffawed, and then stopped cold. “You still don’t get it, do you, David? You will never change plans on me—ever! To do so will always result in dire consequences for you and whoever else you put in my way. So tell me, David, where are your friends?”

Jamie and Alessandro exchanged glances. Of course, Hadjari knew they were there.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Come, come, David. My men have been very busy throughout the morning. Currently they wait outside for my instructions. They

will blow up this building and everything in it if your friends do not give themselves up.”

“You risked everything for your precious painting. You wouldn’t destroy it now.”

“Clearly you have understood nothing, and I am getting tired of explaining it to you. Sometimes things must be done for the expediency of the situation.”

Jamie heard a muffled cry.

Hadjari shouted out. “Time to come out, Miss Holbrooke, Dr. Marianni. I know very well you are hiding somewhere in this room. I have a gun on your friend. You will do what I say if you want to save Lord Chandler’s life.”

“Save yourselves!” David shouted. Jamie heard a resounding thwack and a reactive cry of pain. Her body convulsed. No doubt Hadjari had just whacked David across the face or worse.

Her heart pounded. Giving themselves up would be suicide. But did they really have a choice? This was a no-win situation with Hadjari in control.

She began to move forward, but Alessandro imprisoned her with his arm. He shook his head, and then indicated with his hand for her to stay back. He scurried across the aisle.

Jamie moved further into her stack to a point where she could see David and Hadjari between the bales of tobacco. Hadjari had a handgun pointed at David’s head. David’s mouth was bleeding.

She closed her eyes. *God, I feel like such a hypocrite talking to you. But if you really are who you say you are, then I believe you are the only one who can save us from this.*

“Do you really want to play this game?” She heard Hadjari bellow and opened her eyes. “I know you are in this room. Do you really want to be responsible for Lord Chandler’s death?”

Without warning, Alessandro leapt at Hadjari. Jamie’s eyes widened. The collision bumped David away and sent the two of them crashing to the floor. The gun flew. A scrape ensued. David ran back to the first row of stacks.

Alessandro and Hadjari tussled, each attempting to grab the gun. They rolled on top of one another, pell-mell, Hadjari striking first.

Then Alessandro slammed him to the floor. Hadjari grabbed for the gun, but Alessandro beat him away. The fray seemed to go on endlessly. At one point, Hadjari latched onto the gun and the two of them grappled for control. Jamie couldn't tell who actually had possession. Then

Crack!

Jamie froze.

CHAPTER 38

God, please not Alessandro. Horror gripped Jamie's heart. She clutched her chest.

"Throw the gun away from you, Hadjari!" A female voice commanded.

Jamie's ears perked. It couldn't be!

She shot out from behind the stack and into the open. Margot Chandler aimed a Glock semi-automatic pistol at the two men. They still lay on the floor just a few feet away from her.

"The gun!" Margot demanded. "Throw it away from you!"

"Margot!" David had come out from behind the stack and joined Jamie. She saw how his face had swelled and was contorted in pain. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? This man has destroyed our lives. He needs to pay for what he has done."

Jamie observed the hatred in Hadjari's eyes projected toward Margot. "I do not know what you think you can accomplish with this trick," he said in droll arrogance. "If my men outside do not hear from me in fifteen minutes, they will blow up this building."

"I doubt you would give such an order, Mr. Hadjari. You are much too self-absorbed to put your own life into jeopardy." Margot repositioned the gun straight at him. "My father was an excellent marksman and taught me well. I promise you, I will not miss."

Hadjari hesitated, sneering.

David took a step forward away from Jamie. “She’s not lying. She actually can do it.”

Stunned that Hadjari gave up so easily, Jamie watched him throw the gun off to the side. “Get up! Both of you!” Margot demanded.

Hadjari and Alessandro slowly stood, both keeping their eyes glued on Margot.

“Now slowly reach into your pocket and give your cell phone to Dr. Marianni!”

Hadjari did what she asked. Alessandro took the gun.

“Now I suggest you move next to Miss Holbrooke, Dr. Marianni,” Margot said. “I will not hesitate to use this gun on that demon, and I would not want you to get in the way.”

Alessandro stayed next to Hadjari. “I entirely agree with your assessment of this man, Lady Chandler. He needs to pay for what he has done, but this is not the way to get your revenge. I implore you, give me the gun.” He held out his hand.

Margot remained postured to shoot. Jamie feared she would act impulsively if squeezed too hard. *Listen to Alessandro*, she pleaded silently.

“You will step aside, Dr. Marianni. I cannot guarantee your safety in the crossfire.”

“Go ahead and shoot, Lady Chandler.” Hadjari sneered. “You have already proven yourself to be a whore. Why not add murder to your crimes?”

David bolted toward Hadjari, but Jamie used all her strength to hold him back. “He’s only trying to bait you. Stay calm.”

David wrested himself away from Jamie. “You will not insult my wife that way.” He pointed a finger. “She is more of lady than you will ever know or deserve to know.”

Hadjari smirked. “Then why does she make house calls on strange men in the middle of the night?”

“I can’t imagine what you mean,” David said.

“Why don’t you tell your deluded husband about your recent visit to my hotel room, *Lady Chandler*?” Hadjari taunted.

David knitted his brows. “Margot, what is he talking about?”

Jamie watched the woman turn ashen, her face take on a terrified expression. Then she repositioned her shoulders in dignified defense. “Yes, David. It’s true. I did call on Mr. Hadjari at his hotel room.”

“Were you completely insane, woman?”

Silence descended on the room.

“That night at the restaurant, I felt so completely confounded by Hadjari’s audacity to seek us out in public. He made us a laughing stock among our friends. At first when he mentioned the painting, I felt so furious that he risked our reputation—my self-respect—over a stupid painting. But when I heard that it was a Turner, I knew what I must do.”

“What have you done, Margot?” David’s face became downcast.

“Do you remember I told you I was descended from a famous English painter?”

“You said it didn’t matter, because he was so far removed from your immediate line.”

“That was not wholly true, David. I was too ashamed of my ancestral background to say how much it *did* matter to me.”

“So how did you think a painting could help you gain back your self-respect?”

“Because she is one of Turner’s descendants.” Jamie’s gaze met Margot’s.

“Quite right, Miss Holbrooke. I am fifth generation removed from Turner.”

“*Incredibile!*” Jamie heard Alessandro utter.

“Incredible but true, Dr. Marianni.” All eyes returned to Margot. “Turner was infamous for his affairs and illegitimate children. As a historian, you should know this.”

“Yes, but I never dreamed I would meet a descendent of one of them,” Alessandro said.

“My great-great-great-grandfather developed his legacy as the “painter of light” whose attention to detail told a story and reflected nature and truth. Critics said he depicted the world as it was, as it should be—the world as it was meant to be—bathed in vivid color and light.

“Unfortunately, his personal story holds less to extol than his public persona. Oh, yes, historians have tried to pass off his indifferent and untenable behaviors as simply a man whose appearance and lower class status played havoc with his self-esteem. But those who suffered from those behaviors knew better. He could have left his children at least a handful of his paintings to insure their future. Instead, he was a wretched creature who couldn’t have cared less for his offspring. He left them destitute and their mother in utter despair, leaving them to make their way in a world that was murky and cruel.

“If it hadn’t been for a rare marriage alliance in a later generation, I would have grown up penniless still. My only conciliation has been to know Turner was generous to no one save the nation of Britain. He left all his paintings to the state.”

“Or sold them to men like Ruskin, only to be tossed into a ravine, and then later found by a poor Waldensian boy,” Alessandro said.

“So what did you think you were going to do?” Jamie heard David’s mystified voice bring the current situation back into focus.

“Reclaim what was stolen from me more than a hundred and fifty years ago.”

“By whoring herself to me.” Hadjari’s sardonic voice redirected attention toward him once again. “Your wife came to me with an offer she hoped I would not refuse. But I told her she had nothing to offer me that I wanted.”

Jamie saw David make a fist out to the corner of her eye. “I should take you out myself.”

Hadjari chortled. “Go ahead, Lord Chandler. But I doubt you have the nerve or brawn.”

David glared at Hadjari.

Hadjari only laughed harder.

A shot rang out from Margot’s gun. Hadjari’s laughter ceased. The room went dead quiet.

Jamie observed Margot’s crazed eyes. She took aim at Hadjari. “David may not have what it takes to stop you, but I do. I have nothing left to lose.”

“Margot, don’t do it!” Jamie felt frantic. “If you pull the trigger, you’ll spend the rest of your life in prison. Is that what you want?”

“I want him to pay for all the pain he’s caused.”

“But is revenge worth your life? Think about it, Margot. Is *he* worth it?”

Margot opened, and then closed her fingers around the trigger. “You are a dead man, Hadjari!”

CHAPTER 39

Jamie leapt at Margot.

Alessandro heard Margot's scream. The women fell to the floor. He would have moved between them, but the scuffle gave Hadjari the opportunity to run for his gun.

Alessandro rushed forward and grabbed Hadjari from behind. He spun the mobster around and punched him in the stomach. Hadjari stumbled backward, clutching his abdomen. The blow put him off guard, giving Alessandro one more chance. Thwack! Hadjari hit the floor.

Alessandro breathed hard and fast as he hesitated over the mobster's body. Was Hadjari faking? Alessandro bent over to feel a pulse. The man still breathed, but he was definitely out. Alessandro inhaled deeply. *God, is it really over?* He was almost afraid to believe it. They had won the battle, but they had one more hurdle to cross.

When Alessandro had straightened, David had already helped the women from the floor. Both appeared disheveled and out of breath.

"My dearest, Margot," David said, holding her up. "Are you all right?"

Margot glanced at Hadjari. "Is he dead?"

"No, just unconscious," Alessandro said.

"Too bad." She spoke with regret. "The world would be better off without him."

"Yes, it most likely would. But dearest ..." David took her into his arms. "I couldn't bear it if you ended up in prison, too."

“The painting,” Jamie said. “It’s still in the truck.”

“Yes, but right now we have more important things to worry about. If Hadjari’s men don’t hear from him in—” Alessandro glanced at his watch. “—seven minutes, there will be nothing left to save. You and Margot need to get out of here.”

David pulled away from Margot. “You and Jamie go. I’ll help Dr. Marianni.”

Alessandro hesitated. “Are you sure? You can go with the women.”

David met his eyes. “I’ve been a coward all my life. It’s now or never. Besides, I know this building inside and out.”

Alessandro held Jamie’s gaze. “You know your way out?”

“I can get us out,” Margot said.

“Good. When you’re clear, call the police. Tell them the building is wired to explode.”

Jamie nodded. “Let’s go!” she said to Margot.

Alessandro watched them scurry toward the door, and then turned to David. “We’ve no time to lose.” He spurred forward.

“Wait!” David halted and picked up the Glock. A moment later, he joined Alessandro propelling toward the loading dock entrance. “Just in case”

Passing the two pedestrian powered stackers, on the way, Alessandro noted the keys still rested in the forklifts’ ignitions. He might need those later. He flung the door open. A blast of misty cold air hit his face, as they flew out the door and down the ramp. He looked to the lorry. No one sat in the cab. “Let’s split up.”

“I’ll go this way.” David went right.

Alessandro ran around to the front of the semi. He stopped to peek around the side of it, his clothes brushing against the wet surface. One of Hadjari’s foot soldiers stood watch smoking at the corner of the building. Smoke billowed up as he exhaled. Abruptly he looked in Alessandro’s direction. Alessandro pulled back. How could he distract the man?

He eyed a stack of pallets occupying space on the concrete next to the wall. Yes, that could do it. But how could he get the stacker

out here without being detected? His timing had to be right. He tugged on his jacket collar pulling it up around his neck.

The man's cell phone rang. He put his phone to his ear. Alessandro leaned his head forward to hear.

"Po?" the man said. He threw the cigarette down on the concrete and ground it out with the toe of his shoe. "*Unë nuk kam parë askënd. Unë mendoj se ne jemi të bumbur kohën tonë.*" Alessandro recognized the Albanian language. The man was obviously bored, having just told the person on the other end that they were wasting their time.

Alessandro's ears perked. The man seemed to be relaying important information. "*Ai tha se nëse ne nuk dëgjojmë prej tij në një orë e gjysmë, ne duhet të goditje të ndërtesës. Ne kemi pesë minuta. Po,*" he said. He deposited his cell phone into his shirt pocket and retrieved another cigarette.

Five minutes. That's how much time remained before they blew up the building.

Alessandro bounded up the ramp and threw the door open. He swung himself onto the pedestrian platform of the stacker and found the ignition. The switch worked similar to an electric golf cart with a small turnkey. The machine came to life noiselessly. Using the thumbwheel on the center-mounted handle, he navigated the stacker out the door. The powerful steel machine maneuvered easily and could drive at a decent clip on the heavy-duty dual casters. As he headed down the ramp, the wheels of the stacker swished on the wet surface of the concrete. So much for stealth! At least it would get Hadjari's soldier's attention.

"Hey, what do you do there?" The man met him on the other side of the semi.

Alessandro rotated the thumbwheel to neutral to put on the brake. Sweat beaded above his lip even as the mist covered his hair and shoulders. "I work the loading dock. Who are you?"

"You are not supposed to be here."

Alessandro narrowed his eyes. He could see the soldier's hand moving inside his jacket pocket. Could be a gun. "Yeah, bad luck, isn't it? Had to come in on my day off." He slid his left hand to the

forklift control. The forklift made a whine as he lifted it to the height of the pallets.

“You will stop now!” he shouted. “No one said workers would be here on the weekend. You must leave.”

“No? Well, I’ll just clear away the pallets, and then I’ll go.” His thumb worked the control, and he started forward.

The soldier pulled his gun. “Stop!”

Alessandro felt the adrenalin rush as he rotated the thumbwheel. It was now or never. Pen the guy or die. He steered the stacker forward.

The soldier aimed his gun, but as the stacker came closer, his focus switched to evading its heavy frame. Alessandro observed the man’s terrified face before he turned to run. But the machine was bigger and faster. Within seconds, Alessandro overtook him. The enforcer turned and dropped his gun as the two prongs of the fork surrounded his body. Alessandro continued forward, driving on top of the gun until the prongs wedged between the wooden slats of the empty pallets. The enforcer couldn’t move. His eyes stared ahead.

Alessandro shut down the stacker and jumped off. He made certain the soldier couldn’t get away, and realized the man was in too much shock to be coherent.

Pop! Alessandro heard the gun shot and pivoted around. Where were David and Hadjari’s second man? *Pop! Pop!* Two more consecutive gun shots. He had to find them—now!

CHAPTER 40

With as much stealth as they could muster, Jamie and Margot had skirted the outside walls of the warehouse. But when they reached the front, they encountered another obstacle they hadn't anticipated. Another one of Hadjari's foot soldiers stood guard under the awning with his semi-automatic rifle. They pulled back and crouched away from the corner.

"What do you suggest?" Margot said. "I don't fancy a confrontation with that gun."

Jamie eyed the situation. "I would agree. If we could somehow distract him—" She felt a hand on her shoulder. She would have screamed but saw the look of joy on Margot's face.

"David," Margot whispered. She threw her arms around him, knocking Jamie away.

He withdrew himself again and gestured. He wanted them to follow his lead. He was going to engage the enforcer. They would know when to head for the Bentley.

Margot's terrified expression said it all. She didn't want him to step out and put his life in more danger. Silently she pleaded with him, but it was no good.

David placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder and smiled. Then he straightened. He took a deep breath and stepped out from the side of the building with his gun pointing. He strode toward the enforcer. "Hey, you!" he yelled. Hadjari's man raised his rifle.

"Now!" Jamie whispered.

They slunk on their forearms along the boxwood hedge while David engaged the soldier. Jamie didn't know how long David could keep the man occupied before they would be discovered or a shoot-out would ensue. At the moment, it seemed a no-win situation.

She shivered from the wet clothes clinging to her. Her hair fell in strings around her shoulders. The car seemed miles away.

At last they broke free into the parking lot and ran. A shot rang out. No time to turn around. Margot unlocked the doors of the Bentley with her remote, and they slipped inside.

Observing through the droplets on the window, the imminent danger to David's life seemed magnified. What was he doing? He and the man battled in a dual of words, each one gesturing with their guns. Didn't he know the enforcer would not hesitate to kill him? Jamie was certain Hadjari's man would not miss.

"I must go to him," Margot said ready to open the door.

Jamie bolted to hold her tight. "You can't go out there."

"He will get himself killed."

"Maybe, but so will you."

"I can't just sit by and watch."

"What do you think David would do if you got shot?"

"I don't know."

"He couldn't live with himself, that's what."

"But I have to do something."

"You'll only make matters worse. You need to stay here."

"I have to tell him—"

"I'm calling the police." Jamie dialed the emergency police number on her cell phone.

"They won't make it in time," Margot said with a note of defeat in her voice as Jamie quickly explained their situation. "And he won't know—"

"He knows, Margot." Jamie pushed the off button. "But we've got to have faith—we've got to believe David and Alessandro will survive this."

Jamie knew she exhibited more confidence than she felt, but expressing it gave life to her hope. God knew she needed to convince herself as much as Margot.

Please, God, don't let them die!

All at once, she watched in horror as the soldier aimed his gun at David. David froze. The soldier's gun fired.

Margot screamed.

* * * * *

Alessandro sprinted to the front of the building but stopped short to examine the situation. Jamie and Margot ran toward him while David stood under the black awning, examining the shrubs next to the walkway. Alessandro ambled the rest of the distance, his brow knitted in confusion.

Jamie flew to him. He felt her tremble as he took her in his arms.

"Thank God, you're all right," she said into his chest.

"As you can see," he said. He held onto her tightly for several moments. Then he loosened his grasp, keeping an arm around her as he peered down at the two men sprawled over the boxwood. Hadjari lay face up with a bullet in his chest. His gun lay to the side of him. The other man draped over the shrub face down. "How did this happen?"

David looked up in astonishment, the shock still resounding in his voice. "Hadjari's man took aim at me. I knew I was a dead man. I would have been dead, too, if Hadjari hadn't got in the way."

"It was all so terrifying," Margot said. She held a hand to the base of her throat.

"I almost gave us away," Jamie said.

"To be honest with you," David said, "I couldn't think of any other way to distract him. I threatened him with the gun. I wasn't going to use it, of course, but I hoped to draw his attention long enough to allow the ladies time to get away from the building."

"You could have gotten yourself killed," Alessandro said.

“I very nearly did,” David mused. “We locked in a battle of words. Then when I wouldn’t back down, he took aim. I knew at that point it was over.”

“I thought so, too.” Margot said.

David slipped an arm around her. “It all happened so fast. One second I expected to be dead, the next ... Hadjari came out at precisely the moment his man decided to shoot.

“The glass door opened. I turned my head and Hadjari came out with his gun. I jumped aside. Next thing I knew, Hadjari buckled. Then his gun went off.” He shook his head. “I honestly couldn’t say how he hit the man.”

“I’m not sorry,” Margot said. Tears brimmed her eyes. She put a palm to David’s cheek. “I know it is cruel to say it, but he was an evil man. I don’t know what I would have done if he had killed you.”

David took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. He laid a gentle kiss on it. “But I am alive, as you can see, my dearest. And I’m not going anywhere.”

“It must have been an accident,” Jamie said. She tightened her grip on Alessandro, her fingers bearing down on his flesh. “I’m very sure Hadjari wasn’t even aware of what he did. His fingers just pulled the trigger at the exact right time as he went down. You can’t imagine the shock on the man’s face when the bullet hit him—the dismay he must have felt.” She bit her lip. “Then they both just fell across the boxwood—dead.”

Alessandro swallowed and drew her securely into an embrace. How he wanted to comfort her, remove the anguish she had had to suffer for a third time in her life as she watched two human beings kill each other in front of her! It didn’t seem fair.

She buried her head in his chest. “Oh, Alessandro. It was awful!” She started to cry against him. “I’ll never get used to it. Never! I can’t watch another person die.”

“Shh, cara mia!” He caressed her hair. “It’s over now,” he said. “You will never have to watch another person die. Not if I can help it.” He continued to soothe her, as police sirens blared, and three Scotland Yard police cars screeched into the parking lot.

CHAPTER 41

Six months later . . .

Carlo's eyes beamed at the tiny girl in his arms. She was beautiful—like her mother. He cooed at his daughter with delight until she began to stretch and wriggle. Her tiny mouth sought for the only thing to suckle that would provide satisfaction.

“Are you hungry, my sweet Sonia?” Carlo asked. “Unfortunately, I do not have what you are looking for.” He gently handed the child down to her mother, who lay propped comfortably against the pillows in their luxuriant bed.

Vincenza took Sonia from him and put the infant to her breast. Then she turned her contented face up to Carlo.

The vision of mother and child took his breath away. He felt overwhelmed and thankful they had named the child after Vincenza's mother. “You are lovelier today than ever,” he choked out. “I don't know if I've properly told you how grateful I am that you took me back.”

Vincenza's eyes glistened. “You have proved it over and over again, my love. I have no doubt your heart is sincere.”

“You must believe I will protect you and Sonia with my life, *cara mia*,” he said. “I swear by all that is holy that I will keep you both safe. No harm will ever come to you.”

“I believe you.”

He sat next to her and bent to kiss her full lips. Then he caressed his daughter's head. “I will leave you now, but only for a short

time.” He kissed his finger, and then pressed it to her nose. “See you soon, my darling wife.”

A short while later, Carlo kneeled at the screen in the confessional of the basilica where he had first made confession of his sins against his wife and unborn daughter six months earlier. He crossed himself and then spoke. “In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Come, O Holy Ghost, and help me, that I may know my sins, be heartily sorry for them, and confess them sincerely. My last confession was a month ago.”

“If we say we have no sin,” the priest said, quoting Scripture, “we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

“Father, forgive me for I have sinned by not coming to confession sooner.”

“Why have you not come before now? You know that confession and contrition are important to the Almighty.”

“Yes, Father. But my wife Vincenza delivered our child, and we now have a precious baby girl who takes up much of our time. I would have come otherwise.”

“Ah, that is very good. Children are a blessing from the Lord. You must be very happy.”

“Si. I cannot begin to express my happiness.”

“But there is something else. I can hear it in your voice.”

Carlo hesitated. He knew what he must confess next. “Father, I am guilty of covetousness and anger in my soul.”

“How is this, my son?”

“Do you remember why I returned to the confessional six months ago?”

“You took actions that would put your wife and unborn child in grave danger.”

“Yes. I had paid a great deal of money for a stolen painting on the black market, and I was willing to sell my wife and my soul for it. When I discovered that she was pregnant with our child, I could not go through with what I had planned.”

“And now?”

“I still regret that I do not have the painting, though I have vowed that I would never allow any harm to come to my wife and child, and I will not.”

“Then why do you entertain this painting in your thoughts, my son?”

Carlo shoved his fist into his palm. “I am angry that I was played the fool. The painting should have been mine.”

“But didn’t you say it was stolen?”

“Yes.”

“Then it did not belong to you. Stealing is a sin according to the seventh commandment.”

Carlo remained silent. Stealing contributed to his illegal activities and enabled him to live the lifestyle he enjoyed. He had no real desire to change that. Besides, he had his own code of laws he lived by—commandments of the Mafia that took precedence over any other code.

“Do you have something else you would like to confess, my son?”

“I am glad my opponent is dead. He deserved what came to him.”

“He has received his just reward. You must worry about your own.”

Carlo contemplated again. His just rewards, according to the Catholic Church, meant he had much work to do. But he knew in his heart he could not keep—*would* not keep—the extensive list of dos and don’ts that was required of him in the Church. If getting into heaven was dependent on living according to their rule book, he would never make it. If he was honest with himself, he knew it would take something more compelling to motivate him to redirect his life. At present, he only knew he liked the power, the wealth, and the control his current life afforded him.

“Are you ready to make contrition, Carlo?”

Carlo closed his eyes and made the sign of the cross. “O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell, and because most of all I have offended you who is all good. I

resolve with the help of your grace, to confess my sins, to do penance, and to" He slowed to a stop, his body shaking.

"Go on, my son," the priest coaxed. "Have you forgotten the words?"

"No, Father." He turned his head away from the screen. "I just could not say them. How can I say I will 'amend my life' when I know in my gut that I will not? I am the Don of a crime family. It is who I am. It is the way I choose to live. *You* may not approve; I am not asking for your approval."

The priest remained silent. Then he said, "I am sorry to hear this, Carlo Benedetto. I had hoped that the child would transform your heart and convict you of your sins."

Carlo knitted his brow. "I am sorry to have disappointed you, Father, but I have taken an oath and chosen this life. By all that is holy, I am who I am, and I will do what it takes to fight for my family, whatever it takes—even to death."

"Then I cannot absolve you of your sins nor provide you with an act of contrition."

"I understand, Father." Carlo rose. "You will not reveal what I have spoken behind this screen to anybody."

"I am bound by my oath of office."

"Then I will go my way, Father." He opened the door to the confessional, but the priest halted his steps.

"You are always welcome to return, my son. Do not forget the confessional."

Carlo looked back at the screen, and then closed the door behind him. He did not know if and when he would return.

CHAPTER 42

Zamir kept his body low and used his arms to shield his roulette move to change the soccer ball's direction away from Rashim.

"No fair, Uncle," Rashim shouted. He broke off and changed directions to follow Zamir.

Still the boy couldn't keep up, and Zamir laughed as he took the ball the rest of the way down the grassy area of the park in central Tirana. "All is fair in love and war," he called back. He stopped short of the picnic spot where Liliana and his niece Ariana were setting out food and picked up the ball. Then he waited for Rashim to join him. "Don't look so cross," he said, and tousled the boy's hair.

The boy dodged him. "But it's my birthday; you should let me win."

"I should, should I?" Zamir held the ball next to his body with his arm and thought for a moment. He pointed his head toward the overcast sky. Then pretending to come up with a brilliant plan, he looked at his nephew. "Tell you what. How about we have a little birthday lunch with your mother and sister, then you and I will come back out to the grass, and I'll teach you how to do the move."

Rashim brightened. "You'd do that?"

"Call it a birthday present. If you get the roulette down, I guarantee you'll be the most valued person on your team."

"All right!" Rashim shouted and ran to his mother.

Zamir watched Liliana gaze down at her son with a big grin and halted. He wanted to capture that smile in his mind's eye. He couldn't remember in all the years they had been at Hadjari's mercy when he had known his sister to be so joyous. The change was remarkable.

"You have made your nephew the happiest boy in Albania," Liliana said as Zamir walked up to them.

"Mama, may we play on the playground?" Ariana said.

"I think we have a few minutes," Liliana said, dismissing them.

They ran off as Zamir picked a grape from the bowl on the table. "Rashim is a good football player. He just needs a little coaching," he said, and plopped the grape into his mouth.

"Yes. He was always hoping his father would spend the time with him."

Zamir heard the quiver in her voice and noticed the furrow of her brow. "So what has caused you to frown?" he asked, reaching out to trace her lips. She turned away, but he reached out to bring her chin back around so that he could look into her eyes. The tears he observed spilling over brought on tears of his own. "You are free now Liliana," he choked out.

She nodded, and he let go of her so that she could speak. "He cared nothing for them, you know. They were only pawns for his personal crusade—just means to an end."

"But look at what you have given them in spite of who he was. They are beautiful."

"By God's grace only." She closed her eyes and lifted her head toward the heavens. "I thank God for his protection every day."

Zamir could see that she truly believed what she said by the peace reflected in her countenance. The sun's rays now peeking through the clouds lit her face and made her even more lovely than usual.

"You talk of God's grace as if it was real."

"That's because it is," she said, speaking definitively. "And it is offered to all, even to you, my brother."

He spun away. He could not bear the soft compassion in her eyes. Bitterness and anger were his friends. “Not to all. Not to me. You don’t know what I have done.”

Gently she put out her hands and turned him back around. That’s when he saw the tears cascading down her cheeks once more.

“Do you think I do not know what you have done? Do you think the Almighty—the one who knows everything—does not know what you have done?”

“Then he knows I do not deserve his forgiveness.” Rancor spurted from his mouth.

“But Zamir ...” She brushed her tears away. “He knows and gives it anyway. I know, because I have been where you are. I have known the weight of my shame. I was ready to kill myself, but only the children kept me from doing the unthinkable.”

Zamir slammed his fist into the palm of his hand. “It tore me apart knowing that man hurt you. I wanted to find a way to rescue you away from him, but I felt helpless.”

“You must not blame yourself. Bashkim knew how to use his power to subject everyone to his will. I might have died, if I had not found a torn page from a Bible that blew across my path in the market. I almost threw it away in a trash can without reading it. But then I read the words, and I could not believe the hope that suddenly leapt into my chest. It said that Jesus had come to set the captives free. I thought about those words for many days. I stole out of the villa and found a Christian church. That day, I accepted God’s truth into my heart. I thought, perhaps I am a prisoner in this villa, but my soul will be free.”

“I am not like you.” Zamir choked out. “My soul will never be free.”

“Listen to me, Zamir. That’s why Jesus came—to pay the penalty for our sins. Even while we were yet sinners, the Savior died for us. You only have to believe and ask his forgiveness, and he will give it freely.”

Shame and agony filled his heart. He closed his eyes. “How can this be? I have killed so many; I have hurt hundreds more. Sin

upon sin is heaped upon me, Sister, so that I cannot hardly look at myself in the mirror.”

“Zamir, have you not observed the peace in my soul? Look into the depths of my eyes and tell me you do not want the same thing for yourself.”

Then, what he dared not do for the shame and guilt, he dared do for the hope that his sister knew something he did not. He opened his eyes to gaze upon hers, and what he found astounded him as he looked into the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen—eyes that reflected absolute and perfect love—not of an earthly lover, but of the heavenly lover of his soul.

His body quivered, and he laid bare his soul to the only one he knew could deliver him from the depths of his pain. He didn’t know what would come next. But for now, he knew God had begun the process of healing his wounded heart, and he wanted to remain in the glorious light of his love.

CHAPTER 43

Jamie beamed. She waited with great anticipation now as she sorted through the crowd of passengers emerging through the security doors at London's Heathrow Airport.

At last Nonni waltzed through, and Jamie felt as if she was welcoming a long-lost friend. "It's so good to see you," she told Nonni and kissed her on both cheeks. "You look just as I remember you the first day we met."

Nonni's eyes sparkled. "I knew we would meet again. I just did not know it would be in London, of all places." She reached up to kiss her grandson on both cheeks.

"It's a surprise to all of us, Nonni," Alessandro said, taking her carry-on and ushering her through the terminal.

"When do we see *Jerusalem at Twilight*?" Nonni asked.

Jamie hid her smile. No one could miss the woman's eagerness to see her much beloved painting. "We knew you would not want to wait a moment longer than was necessary—"

"So we arranged an appointment with the museum curator at two o'clock this afternoon," Alessandro interjected.

"So late?"

"It couldn't be helped," Alessandro said. "The Detective Chief Superintendent of the Serious and Organised Crime Unit of Scotland Yard wanted to meet with all of us at the museum when the curator was present."

Nonni smiled sweetly. "The Detective Chief Superintendent? Well, now I feel honored."

“You should. He doesn’t meet with just anybody.” Alessandro teased.

“Oh, get on with you.”

Jamie enjoyed their banter.

Nonni wrinkled her nose. “But which museum has our painting?”

“Tate Britain,” Alessandro said. “Most of the J. M. W. Turner collection within the United Kingdom is held there.”

“Ah, the Tate.” Nonni said. “That is good.”

There was something about the way Nonni tried the museum’s name on her tongue that caught Jamie’s attention, though she couldn’t fathom exactly what was going through the old woman’s mind.

A moment later, Nonni commented with resignation. “Well, it is just as well.” She stopped and looked up at Alessandro. “To be honest, I hoped we could get a coffee somewhere. That watered-down mud they serve on the plane is not fit for a dog.”

Alessandro laughed. “Leave it to Nonni to put coffee ahead of the Turner.”

“I have waited this long. I can wait a few hours more. Besides, I have no choice, yes?”

“Your wish is my command, Nonni.” Alessandro offered his arm. “I know an excellent café bar in central London.”

“*Buono*.” She patted his arm as they headed out of the airport and to the car. “I still cannot believe *Jerusalem at Twilight* sat under everyone’s noses at the Brera for days,” Nonni said as they set out.

“Perplexing, to say the least,” Alessandro said. “To think we had it right within our grasp, and we didn’t know it!”

“And poor Nico.” Nonni clucked her tongue. “To be so duped by a serpent in disguise who promised him the world.”

“I believe he has learned his lesson, Nonni,” Alessandro said.

“At a pretty high cost, no?”

“But I understand you saw Nico before you left Milan.” Alessandro turned a corner.

“Si. I asked Giovanni to bring him to the airport. He looked good. Working at the Brera has done wonders for him.” She broke

off and looked out the window at London's cityscape. "Oh look, there is Harrods!"

Jamie saw Alessandro look aslant at his grandmother. "I can see you don't want to share what you discussed with Nico," he said.

His words had echoed Jamie's thoughts. Why *had* Nonni changed the subject so abruptly?

He turned down a side street off from Knightsbridge, as Nonni started to protest, but he put up a hand. "Don't try to get out of it, Nonni. I know you. And I know you are up to something. So—" he pulled into a parking spot. "I will not push it."

"Thank you, my grandson." She sat back with a satisfied expression and her hands folded on top her handbag. "Okay. Now we go for coffee."

* * * * *

Alessandro brought over their drinks and distributed them before sitting down.

Nonni sipped from her latté, and then turned to Jamie with a sweet smile. "Will you tell me about Jason?"

Stunned, Jamie hesitated. She set her cup down. "I've been hiding behind a veil of pain for so long that I don't even know where to begin."

"Perhaps from the beginning."

Nonni's gentle encouragement spurred Jamie on. She took a deep breath and rehearsed every nuance of the memories she had harbored from the earliest years with Jason, to their various escapades, and then the final moments of his life and her rehabilitation. "Needless to say, we were inseparable. It's why I came to Italy. I didn't want to walk the same streets anymore, knowing he would not be there."

"Did it help—coming to Italy, I mean?" Nonni said.

"In the beginning. I loved working at the Brera, and Giovanni is wonderful. But then Nico grabbed me on the Passerella. I was spooked, because he looked so much like Jason. I couldn't believe it. I even called him Jason."

“Interesting.” Nonna donned the same ponderous expression she’d worn in the car.

“It is, isn’t it?” Jamie mused. “Anyway, that night, I dreamt my brother visited me in my room at the Villa Cipressi—and ... well” She didn’t know how to say it—didn’t have the words. She knew how it would sound.

“What is it, my child?” Nonna put a hand over Jamie’s.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy.”

“I doubt that very much.”

Jamie eyed her with skepticism, but Nonni coaxed her with the same sweet demeanor. “Go on, child.”

Jamie took another big breath. “I’ve been having regular conversations with Jason since that night.”

“I see.” Nonni said with a lilt. She sipped her drink thoughtfully.

“You mean you *imagine* conversing with him,” Alessandro insisted.

“I told you you’d think I’m crazy. But I’m not. I know when I was in the rehab hospital I used to have hallucinations—sometimes nightmares. I heard voices and—”

“I don’t think you are crazy at all. And you,” she elbowed her grandson, “need to be quiet.” She leaned forward and spoke with an excited voice. “What kinds of things does he say?”

“Mostly encouraging things, like urging me to follow the clues in the riddle, assuring me that he’d stand by me. When we encountered Hadjari and his men at the British Tobacco warehouse, he told me to remember what you had taught me about the faith of your fathers.”

“And did you?” Nonna’s eyes were bright.

“It was the strangest thing. All during our ordeal at the warehouse, I knew a strong hand guided me. I was never sure if it was Jason’s or God’s, but somehow I knew everything was going to be all right.”

Nonni clasped her hands. “Cara mia, do you know how much God has blessed you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your decision to come to Italy to work at the Brera; your encounter with Nico; the theft of our painting; meeting Alessandro—all these things did not happen by accident. What was the last thing your Jason said to you before the events at the warehouse occurred?”

“That I had come here at this exact time for a reason.”

“And then when it looked like Hadjari would have the upper hand, to whom did you go for help—Jason or God?”

“God.” Jamie marveled. A shiver traveled her spine. She had done exactly what Jason had told her to do. She had grabbed hold of God to save them, not him—not her brother. “Perhaps my apparition never was Jason; maybe it was God after all.”

“Oh, in a sense, I do believe you talked to Jason,” Nonni said, a far off gaze entering her eyes. “But God’s plans are always bigger than any of us can ever imagine.”

Alessandro studied his grandmother. “You are speaking of more than just Jamie’s apparition, aren’t you?”

Nonni shrugged. “That is all I can say for now, my grandson.” She finished off her cappuccino. “Shall we proceed to the Tate? I am anxious to see our painting again.”

CHAPTER 44

The afternoon turned sunny and warm, and as Alessandro drove around the back of Buckingham Palace and Gardens on Grosvenor Place to Victoria Street, Nonni couldn't stop commenting over the size and beauty of the place. Jamie enjoyed watching her gawk at everything, like a child experiencing her first taste of chocolate. A short while later, Alessandro turned onto Millbank and found a parking space along the street where the Tate Britain made its picturesque home along the Thames River.

They strolled the short distance to the stairs in front of the Romanesque façade where Nonni made a sudden stop and wavered.

Jamie laid a hand on Nonna's arm. "Are you all right? Would you like to sit a minute?"

Nonni patted her hand. "No, no. I feel just a little overwhelmed. Here we are about to see our beloved *Jerusalem at Twilight*, and I wonder if I am--how do you say in America--up for it."

"It's a lot to take in all at once," Alessandro said.

"That must be it." She inhaled deeply. "I think I'm ready to go on."

"Would you like an arm?"

"Thank you, Alessandro. I think I will." She linked her arm in his and proceeded up the steps and through the entrance.

Beyond the entrance, Jamie felt dwarfed by the lofty rotunda. As they made their way through the grand halls of artwork to the

Clore Gallery where they found the elevator to the second floor, she thought she would like to explore the labyrinth one day.

“Do you think they are ready for us?” Nonni asked in a small voice as they ascended.

Alessandro glanced at his watch. “The Detective Chief Superintendent should be here by now. They’re probably waiting for us as we speak,” he said as the doors opened, and they stepped into a long and narrow darkened room where two men waited to greet them.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Marianni,” Detective Jonathon Cook said to Nonni. “We appreciate your willingness to come all the way to London for this momentous event.”

“I’m honored. It isn’t every day an old woman from the Waldensian valleys meets with the likes of Scotland Yard.”

He smiled. “Your sentiment is well taken, Mrs. Marianni, but I assure you I’m just an ordinary person such as yourself.” His eyes swept the rest of the group. “I’d like to assure you all that my official capacity is to represent Scotland Yard and ensure the proper closure on the transfer of the Turner to its appropriate owner.” He indicated the man next to him. “Director Graham Davis will provide you with all the details regarding your painting.”

“I shall be glad to do that,” Graham said. He led them down one of two rows of desks, some of them illuminating artwork with overhead incandescent lighting.

“What are all these paintings?” Nonni said with curiosity as they passed.

“Good question, Mrs. Marianni. As you might guess, the Tate has too many works in our possession to display on the walls at any one time, and too much exposure to light dulls their beauty and destroys the quality. So we rotate our works in and out and allow access for research and study to those works not on current display. As you can see, we keep the lighting down and use the individual incandescent lighting to show off the pieces to their greatest advantage.” He snapped on the light.

Next to her, Jamie heard a gasp.

“*Jerusalem at Twilight!* It is even more beautiful here than I remember it at home,” Nonni said. Her eyes twinkled in delight.

Knowing a little about Turner, Jamie had expected the watercolor to be a fine specimen of his work, but she had not expected the 24 X 16 framed piece to be so stunning. She felt drawn in, mesmerized.

“Yes, as you see, using the correct lighting can enhance the spectrum of light,” Graham said. “Perhaps that is why you see the painting in such radiant color, Mrs. Marianni. Natural light can give us a good idea of the painting’s brilliance, but it doesn’t always show it off to its best advantage.”

“Then I am glad to have seen it this way,” she said.

“I have to ask,” Graham said. “Where has this painting been hanging all these years?”

A sweet smile crossed Nonni’s face, and her eyes gleamed. “In my small cottage above Bobbio Pellice. Why do you ask?”

“The Turner has been very well preserved for its age, Mrs. Marianni. Not all watercolor paintings survive through almost two centuries in such good condition. You must have had the right environment for it.”

“I’ve seen where the painting hung,” Jamie said. She looked up from the work. “There’s no direct light into the room, and the house is generally cool in summer and winter, so it makes sense it would endure the passage of time.”

“You must know; I am rather envious of your family, Mrs. Marianni. You have had the distinguished honor to appreciate the Turner for more than a century,” Graham said.

“It is for certain then, that this is an authentic Turner?” Alessandro asked.

“Oh, yes indeed. There is no doubt. This is one of his more delightful pieces.”

Jamie leaned in to study the picture for herself as Graham continued.

“You can see here,” he pointed, “the way in which he uses clear light and bright color. Throughout his career, Turner was particularly devoted to the study of sunlight and its effects on the

landscape. Here you can see the fluidity of the landscape, the sonority of color, the pure brilliance of the use of red at twilight—it all speaks of Turner’s amazing ability to evoke the quality of the real world with a poetic splendor that translates into his landscapes. Yes, this is Turner at his best.”

Jamie understood Graham Davis’ passion. It would catch the eye of even the uneducated person about art. “I see why this painting is so coveted.”

“Yes. It is, without a doubt, worth tens of millions of dollars.” Graham said.

“And yet, to me, *Jerusalem at Twilight*’s intrinsic value has nothing to do with what someone would pay for it,” Nonni said.

Everyone turned to Nonni.

Jamie stared at the old woman. Her eyes seemed to radiate a resplendence unmatched even by Turner’s work. “You mean how it came to be a part of your family?”

“No—well, yes—but that is not what I was referring to.” Nonni bent over the painting. Then to Jamie’s astonishment, she picked it up.

Jamie watched as Graham began to fidget. “Mrs. Marianni, please—”

“I presume that the painting is still mine until I relinquish it.” She shot back at him.

“Of course, Mrs. Marianni.” He backed away. “I didn’t mean to dismiss your ownership. I am a creature of habit and tend to guard valuable pieces of artwork with a bit of delicacy.”

“Thank you, Mr. Davis. I think I know how to take care of my painting with delicacy.” She lifted the painting and set it on the desk with the back facing them.

Jamie eyed Graham. He rested an elbow on the arm across his chest, and gnawed on a finger nervously. As an art curator, she understood his fervent concern for the painting’s longevity. As an admirer of Nonni’s faith, she felt drawn to her eternal perspective of the universe. The value of the painting did not fit into her worldview. She would handle the painting as it suited her and not to anyone else’s satisfaction.

“I know you all are excited about finding a rare piece of art by such a magnificent artist. Yet you can’t know what lies underneath the dust cover.”

Graham stared at her. “Under the dust cover? It looks perfectly intact, Mrs. Marianni.”

“Of course it looks perfectly intact, Mr. Davis,” Nonni said. “Isn’t that what it *should* look like if one is trying to keep something hidden underneath it?” She reached into her handbag and retrieved a metal utensil, similar to a mail opener. Carefully, she inserted the blunt edge of the utensil between the heavy-weight, brown paper dust cover and the frame at the bottom and lifted. The dust cover popped up, and she slid the metal utensil a little further under the backing to give leverage. She put the utensil down, and then with fastidious preciseness, lifted the cover a little further with her fingers. At last, she reached underneath the dust cover and removed a yellowed and stained woolen-covered package tied with twine.

“Oh, my!” The director breathed with astonishment.

“Nonni?” Jamie observed Alessandro’s brow crease. “What is this?”

“This, my grandson, is the most treasured heirloom to have passed down through the generations of our community.” She handled the package like she would a newborn, and then laid it next to the painting.

“Heirloom?” Graham concentrated on the package.

“Yes, Director, a very precious heirloom.”

Then with what seemed to Jamie to be a painstaking effort, Nonni worked at the knot until it came apart and removed the twine from around the package. She unwrapped the woolen covering from around the item to reveal a mottled brown, leather sheath with a flap folded over along the horizontal side—its exterior worn but still supple. It was also closed around the middle with leather ties.

Jamie heard an impatient breath escape the director’s mouth. It seemed to echo how all of them felt as the woman hesitated. “My dear Mrs. Marianni—”

“It is in here,” she said without looking up. She drew in a quick breath. “I cannot believe after all this time” She picked up the leather envelope and worked once again at the knot.

Jamie stole a glance at Alessandro. He seemed agitated, his hands dug in his pockets, his body rocking back and forth. A look at Graham mimicked the sentiment as both arms were crossed, his index finger tapping his upper arm.

Moments later, the ties loosened from around the leather, and Nonni opened the flap. The arms of both Alessandro and Graham came down next to their bodies as they leaned closer to Nonni. “Gentlemen, breathing room,” she said. At once, both responded to her command as if they were small boys being reprimanded by their mothers.

With careful dexterity, Nonna reached into the envelope and drew out another bundle. This time, the bundle consisted of a thinner compiling of two linen-covered boards also entwined. She laid them on top of the leather envelope and again unloosened the twine. Then placing her hands to the side of the bundle, she carefully removed the top board.

Total silence descended among the gathering, a reverent awe, Jamie thought, only reserved for the most prodigious event. In front of them laid a yellowed parchment, its edges worn and fragile, the text faded, but some of it still readable.

“How old is it?” Graham asked at last.

“Very old, Mr. Davis. Perhaps you would even say ancient. But do not once again misappropriate the value of it.”

Jamie felt breathless. What had been misappropriated after all this time?

“Where did it come from?” Alessandro’s countenance still reflected his incredulity.

The same sweet smile Jamie had come to know now broke across Nonni’s face as she poured out her heart before all of them. “I have known for most of my life that *Jerusalem at Twilight* is more than a beautiful painting or an exaggerated legend. As Alessandro so recently pointed out, paintings do not just fall from the sky, though the story provides great drama. Of course, I did not know

our painting had been produced by one of the most illustrious artists of all time and worth so much on the world market. But I have known for many years that the painting carried a very powerful truth more valuable than the work of art itself.”

“Can you be more specific?” Graham said, rubbing his forehead. “What truth are you talking about?”

“I am getting there, Mr. Davis. You are not a very patient man, are you?”

A smile sprang to Jamie’s lips. Nonni never minced words.

“But first I should—”

“May I come in?” All eyes went to the woman who stood hesitantly in the doorway.

“And you are . . . ?” Graham said.

“Margot Chandler. Jamie—Miss Holbrooke—invited me.” Jamie noted that Lady Chandler had dropped her title. Whether by design or not, she exuded every bit the elegance her title afforded her.

“You’re a little late,” Graham Davis said.

Margot bit her lip. “I meant to be here earlier, but my husband’s arraignment went longer than we expected. He’s been retained, but I was finally able to break away.”

Jamie scurried to her side with Detective Cook following on her tail. “I’m so glad you could join us, Lady Chandler. I wasn’t sure if you would accept my invitation.”

“May I see your identification?” Detective Cook asked. “It’s just a formality.”

“Of course.” Margot reached inside her handbag and retrieved her wallet. She handed him her license. “I wanted to come. I’m just sorry I couldn’t be here earlier.”

“You haven’t missed anything,” Jamie assured her as Detective Cook returned her license. “Please,” Jamie said, taking her arm to bring her into the circle.

After quick introductions, and a welcome from Nonni, Graham asked her to continue.

“Some of you know our Waldensian history—how we fought the abuses of the Church of Rome for centuries. Most history books say we started from a band of Christian reformers who

followed Peter Waldo of Lyon, France in the twelfth century. It is true. We did join Waldo and took a vow of poverty and pled with the Roman Church to allow us to worship according to the early church fathers. But there is much more.”

“Nonni, are you sure this is the time?” Alessandro seemed concerned.

“It is exactly the time, Alessandro. For centuries, Valdese origins have been in dispute, but it is time to put that dispute to rest. Though some say we only coalesced into a group in the late twelfth century with the advent of Peter Waldo—”

“That has been the official church position for more than a hundred years,” Alessandro said. “Comba—”

“But this cannot be so,” she stated emphatically. “I know what the official position of the church is and what the history books claim. They have their reasons for maintaining that position. But there are other facts that cannot be denied.”

“And those would be ... ?” Graham cocked an eyebrow.

She pointed to the fragile paper and drew in a breath. “This missive not only confirms our apostolic origins, but gives credibility to what the early church fathers taught. It is a second-century copy of a letter written by Polycarp to Irenaeus.”

“You mean the Apostle John’s disciple? That Polycarp?” Graham’s mouth was watering.

“Is there any other?” Nonni declared. “This letter has passed down through our descendants over the two millennia. It encourages believers to stand firm in the faith—even in the face of opposition, persecution, and worldly pursuits.”

“A letter,” Margot said in a ponderous tone.

“Heavenly Father.” Alessandro breathed the words more as a prayer than an oath. “Nonni, may I see that document?”

“You may, but you must handle it very carefully, my grandson.”

Alessandro placed his hands around the bottom board and lifted it from the pedestal. Nonni continued speaking, fixating on the document in his hand while he examined it.

“It is true that this is not the original letter. After a while, the original parchment did not hold up well. Perhaps it was

mishandled; I am not certain. In any case, in the sixth century, the letter was copied and placed in a wooden box specifically made for safekeeping.”

“Are you saying you hold a copy of a document from the second century?” Jamie heard Graham sputter

“I will explain it all, but you must be patient, Mr. Davis.” She paused. “I suppose to help validate what I am about to tell you, I must tell you just a bit more history.

“In the last decades of the first century, the Apostle John made his home in Ephesus, a city in what we know today as Turkey. He wrote the Gospel of John there and died around 100 A.D. Polycarp became a student of John’s there, and then later became bishop of Smyrna where he was martyred in 155 A.D. Unfortunately, the only known work that survives from him is a letter he wrote to the Philippians.

“Sometime after 130 A.D., Irenaeus, a Greek born into a Christian family from Smyrna, became a pupil of Polycarp. He associated with those who knew Christ and his apostles, and thus had a second-hand account of Jesus’ life and teachings. This gave him ecclesiastical authority to refute those who tried to disseminate heretical Gnostic teachings such as we hear today.

“This is where the history of our Waldensian apostolic tradition begins, because Irenaeus later went to Gaul as a presbyter in the times of the persecutions under Marcus Aurelius. He became bishop of Lyon during one of the greatest times of persecution and martyrdom Christians had endured to date under the Roman emperors. Christians scattered throughout the land, some of them retreating to the Cottian Alps. These people came to be known as the Vaudois or Valley Dwellers.

“The final proof of the relationship of the Vaudois to those apostolic Christians is found in the records of Vigilantius, a Gaul from Aquitania in the fourth century. Vigilantius strongly opposed the Church of Rome’s position on various points of doctrine. Twice he appealed to Jerome, expressing great concern about how far the Church had strayed from its apostolic teachings and had adopted various heretical practices. He went so far as to write of

his great admiration of the Vaudois, because they had maintained a tradition based on apostolic authority, which they had passed down through the generations. But Jerome venomously refuted his claims and accused him of imposing his own heresies on the Christians of the Cottian Alps.”

Nonni took a breath and smiled at them. “You must forgive me. This has been a long journey, but ... it has been an even longer time that I have held this secret inside.”

“I still don’t understand. How did this letter come to you?” Jamie stepped forward in bewilderment.

“So little has survived at all from the first millennium,” Graham added. “It should be analyzed for its authenticity.”

“Analyze away, Mr. Davis,” Nonni said. “As far as the rest of the world knows, only Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians survives. But I am here to tell you a second missive from Polycarp exists in the form a sixth century copy—a letter to Irenaeus that became an encouragement to Christian believers to persevere in their toughest hour. Later it came down through the generations of the Vaudois by way of Irenaeus—physical evidence of who we are and where we came from.”

From out of the corner of her eye, Jamie saw Detective Cook approach Alessandro. “May I see the document?”

“Of course.” Alessandro carefully handed the letter to the detective.

While Detective Cook studied the letter, Nonni directed her eyes at Graham. “It is true, Mr. Davis, that earlier generations did not have the technology we have today. But they were not stupid. After the original fell apart, my ancestors in the sixth century recognized the importance of preserving the letter as a testimony to future generations. They constructed a wooden box made from dried oak and lined it with velvet. Then they wrapped the letter in linen and placed it in the box.”

“How extraordinary!” Jamie said. As an art curator, the notion was fascinating.

“Yes, rather clever, wouldn’t you say?” Nonni said. “The box was handed down from father to son through the generations and

traveled wherever persecution pushed them into fleeing and exile, during the second millennium.”

“But what happened to the box?” Graham insisted.

“War, Mr. Davis.” Her lips went flat. “When my father was conscripted at the beginning of World War Two, he had very little time to prepare. The box became a receptacle for his important papers and memorabilia he took with him. Unfortunately the box did not come back to us with the rest of his things after he was killed. My mother made inquiries, but”

“What about the letter?” Jamie asked. “How did it end up behind the dust cover?”

“That begins my little part in history. The bundled letter remained in a bureau for a time, but my mother became obsessed by the idea that if enemy forces came through our village and entered our cottage, they might discover the letter and steal or destroy it. So in a desperate effort to hide the letter, we opened the back of the painting and slid the document inside. This is the first I’ve seen it since that day.”

Jamie watched as Detective Cook handed the letter back to Nonni. “Mrs. Marianni, I cannot tell you what you should do. However, the document is rightfully yours, and you are under no obligation to leave it with the Tate Museum or any other institution for examination. If you do decide to leave this document in the hands of the Tate Museum for further research, you must understand you would be relinquishing possession for a time specified by the museum until it has received a full rendering of its antiquity. Do you wish to leave the alleged letter from Polycarp for further research and examination?”

“I understand, Detective.” She thought for a moment, then turned to Graham. “The Tate Museum may examine it for its authenticity, though I have every confidence it will prove to be exactly what I claim it to be. But even if the letter proves to be a false document, it will not change my faith or what I believe.”

“But how can you say that?”

Everyone turned to Margot who had now stepped forward.

Jamie had almost forgotten she was there and had heard everything that had transpired.

Nonni spun around. “Because, Lady Chandler, I know what the early church fathers taught is true. My faith doesn’t depend on a letter or a legacy.”

She turned to Alessandro. “Which is why, Alessandro, I have decided that *Jerusalem at Twilight* must now go to its rightful home here at the Tate Museum along with Polycarp’s letter.”

CHAPTER 45

Jamie couldn't believe what she had just heard. "Nonni, do you know what you're doing?" She didn't mean to question Nonni, but did the woman really understand the implications?

Nonni searched around for a chair. "I think I will sit down now." She looked up at Jamie with her sweet smile. "Yes, my child, I know what I am doing."

Jamie met her gaze. Yes, Nonni knew. The sincerity in her eyes and the confidence in her demeanor convinced Jamie that she had thoroughly thought this decision through. It was what she had planned from the moment she had stepped off the plane at Heathrow.

Alessandro brought a chair over from the nearby desk to sit next to his grandmother. He took her hand. "What about our heritage, Nonni? Luciano Marianni's story? You know, just because *Jerusalem at Twilight* has turned out to be a valuable piece of art does not mean you must give it away for the sake of a vow. Maybe you should rethink that idea before you do something impulsive."

"I don't think your grandmother is doing something impulsive, Dr. Marianni."

Alessandro spun around at hearing Margot's voice.

"Have you not heard what she said?" Margot turned a serious gaze at Nonni. "Though I don't know you, I can see you have discovered something you believe is more valuable than any painting could ever be, haven't you, Mrs. Marianni?"

"You are very astute, Lady Chandler," Nonni said.

Margot bowed her head before speaking again. “I hate to admit it—ashamed to admit it. I almost threw my life away for that painting. But I think now I would like to understand more about this faith of yours.”

“It is never too late, Lady Chandler.” Nonni rose and took Margot’s hand. “I would be honored to tell you about what has enriched my soul more than any painting by Turner ever could.” Then she directed soft eyes at her grandson, and gently placed a palm against his cheek. “I had already determined I would do this while I was still in Italy, caro mio. I just needed to come to retrieve Polycarp’s letter and admire the painting one last time.”

“But Nonni—”

“*Jerusalem at Twilight* was never supposed to belong to our community. When you were in Bobbio Pellice, you reminded me of a very important lesson we all must learn. Thankfully, an old woman’s heart is not too old to learn a thing or two.” Nonni stopped, the words caught in her throat. She went on.

“You were right. If you seek the truth, the truth sets you free. Our ancestors never knew the truth or seriously considered discovering it. When Ruskin thrust this painting into the ravine for Luciano Marianni to find, he committed an impulsive act. He regretted what he had done, and he paid for it with his spiritual and mental well-being.

“The painting has served our community for a season, providing a repository of safekeeping for Polycarp’s letter. But even Marius Marianni told Luciano that if the rightful owner ever came to light, then we would have to return it.”

“This is true, yes, but—”

“Don’t you see? We have taken great joy in the story for a hundred and sixty years. But *Jerusalem at Twilight* has been hidden away in a cottage in the Cottian Alps. It is time to return the painting to the world and delight in the treasure we hold here.” She pointed to her heart. “It is our real inheritance, the light that shines from our hearts.”

The room became very still. Jamie could read the struggle on Alessandro’s face.

At last, he relaxed, and the tension disappeared from his face. “You are right, Nonni. I had forgotten.” Alessandro stood to face Graham Davis. “It looks like we will be donating *Jerusalem at Twilight* to the Tate Museum.”

Graham’s eyes danced with delight. “This is wonderful! You will not regret this decision. Of course, your family will receive the usual acknowledgments on the placard.”

“Just make sure that you take good care of our painting,” Nonni said.

“You can be sure of it.”

“Well, I guess this signals the closure of these events,” Detective Cook said. “All is well that ends well, as they say. If you don’t mind, Dr. Marianni, Mrs. Marianni, Miss Holbrooke—I will take my leave and send my report to Scotland Yard.”

“Of course, Detective, and thank you for everything,” Alessandro said, shaking his hand.

The detective turned to Graham. “I’d like just a few moments.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll be right with you.” Graham turned to Alessandro. “You can spend as much time here as you wish. Please stop by my office to sign the appropriate paperwork.”

* * * * *

“We still have one more piece of business we need to attend to,” Nonni announced to the remaining three after the two men left.

“I don’t understand,” Jamie said. “*Jerusalem at Twilight* is safely in its rightful place. Polycarp’s letter proves your Waldensian heritage. Everyone involved has received their just reward or has been exonerated. Lord Chandler will most likely receive a lighter sentence. What else is there?”

Nonni reached into her handbag and pulled out an envelope. “After you and Alessandro left Bobbio Pellice, I began to wonder. Why *did* Nico pursue you, a stranger to the Waldensian Valleys? Why would he think you would understand his riddle?” She pulled the document from the envelope. “None of it made sense until one

night when I could not sleep, I remembered you had told me that your maternal grandparents' surname was Ciabonero."

"That's right," Jamie said. "They originally came from northern Italy—around Milan."

"And, of course, that would make sense." She bit her lip.

"Why be so mysterious, Nonni? Just tell us what this is all about," Alessandro said.

"Have you been taking your cues from Mr. Davis, my grandson?" she said dryly.

"Don't be cheeky."

"All right, then. Be patient and listen." She looked at Jamie. "You said you mistook Nico for your dead brother at first, yes?"

"I thought I'd seen a ghost."

"And you even called him Jason, yes?"

"He could have been his twin; I thought I was going crazy."

"You weren't going crazy, cara mia; far from it."

"What do you mean?"

"Nico is not a twin, but a cousin—a cousin several times removed," she pronounced.

Jamie's jaw dropped. "I don't understand."

"Nico did. That's why I asked Giovanni to bring him to the airport before I left Italy. As naive as Nico was, he was smart enough to do his research. Your maternal grandparents' surname—Ciabonero. It is a common name in the Waldensian valleys. Only most of the Waldensians who have stayed in the valleys have retained the French spelling and pronunciation—Charbonnier."

"Nico's name!" Jamie announced.

"Sì, cara mia. The Charbonnier who lived in our valleys and moved to other parts of Italy often changed their names to the Italian to be more easily integrated into society. There is no doubt. You are a Charbonnier. This genealogy proves it." She handed the document to Jamie.

Jamie studied the paper. At first, she felt disbelief. How could this be? Why had her grandparents never told her family? Then the light dawned, and the truth struck. "I am a Waldensian descendant."

“Yes, my child. Don’t you see? It’s all very clear. God used the memories of your brother to guide you back to your ancient roots. He didn’t want you to remain crippled by guilt and a painful past. He wanted you to know that you are free, *cara mia*—free to live life unbounded by the lie you have been harboring in your heart for so long.”

Jamie remained still for a moment. Then all at once, an overwhelming sense of joy unleashed and erupted to the surface. Jamie began to laugh—an exuberant and uncontrollable release of everything that had crushed her spirit for years. Tears filled her eyes and spilled unchecked down her cheeks.

“She’s lost her mind,” Margot said. “She’s done gone crackers!”

Nonni’s face scrunched at the phrase.

“It means, she’s gone crazy,” Alessandro said.

“Oh, I see,” Nonna said, a whimsical smile touching her face. “But no, Margot, she has not lost her mind. Jamie just cannot contain the rejoicing in her heart. God has turned her great sorrows into joy, and her darkness into light. Isn’t this so, *cara mia*?”

“Light Shining out of Darkness,” Alessandro mused.

Jamie nodded and tried to stop, but her emotion would not be pent up any longer. Then she heard Alessandro join in her uproar. She looked at him through her tears, and then Margot and Nonna gave in to the merriment.

Sometime later, walking hand-in-hand with Alessandro out of the Tate Museum with Nonni and Margot, Jamie knew a renewed hope and whispered a prayer for her future, because she had stepped out of the darkness into the light.

Acknowledgments

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journey to visit Valdese. For further information about this historic settlement, see www.visitvaldese.com.

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Light Out Of Darkness

I am sure that my list of people is not exhaustive. There have been so many who've encouraged me along the way. Thank you to each and every one.

Readers' Study Guide

1. What general themes do you find running through *Light Out of Darkness*?
2. What do you think is Jamie's biggest fear? Why?
3. Jamie fled Cleveland to live in Italy, hoping to put distance between herself and her painful memories. Can we ever really escape the hard things in our lives? Why or why not?
4. How was Jamie able to reconcile her past?
5. Zamir also experienced a painful past. How did he try to flee his past, and what was the result?
6. What laid at the center of Zamir's inability to forgive himself? What changed?
7. Nico believed that no one would ever accept him back into his community. Why? Was his concern legitimate? How did Nonni respond? Alessandro? Jamie?
8. What is at the root of Paolo's actions in this story? What is the result?
9. What is at the root of Hadjari's desire to possess the painting? What is the result?
10. In the middle of the novel, Carlo's heart seems to change. Is the change real? What makes him turn back?
11. The Waldensian emblem *Lux Lucet In Tenebris* means "light out of darkness," which comes from 2 Corinthians 4:6 in the Bible. In the context of the passage, what or who is the light?

12. Have you ever experienced a dark time in your life when you could not see where you were going? How did you feel? What brought you out of that dark time?
13. In the last chapter, Margot says Nonni has discovered something more valuable than a prized painting worth tens of millions of dollars. What had Nonni discovered that outshone the “painter of light?”
14. Also in the last chapter, Alessandro tried to convince Nonni that she should not give the painting away. What lesson did Alessandro learn that he’d forgotten?
15. Why does Jamie laugh at the end of the last chapter?

About the Author

Donna discovered her true passion for writing at the United World College of the Atlantic in Wales, where she pursued the International Baccalaureate degree and focused on English Literature. There, her love of the classics by such authors as Jane Austin, Charles Dickens, and Victor Hugo, among others, awakened a desire to write books that touched the human spirit.

At Atlantic College, Donna wrote a thesis on Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and visited the Brontë parsonage in Haworth, England. Walking the heather-dressed moors on a drizzly day remains etched in her mind, as she happened upon an old man with a cap and a cane whose ancestors knew the Brontës. Emily's poem, *No Coward Soul is Mine*, re-ignited Donna's faith at a time of personal struggle.

Donna took classes in English Literature at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. She holds a master's in Mass Communications/Journalism from San Jose State University and worked in community and employee relations for ten years.

While raising her daughter Stephanie, Donna continued to pursue her dream of writing. She wrote and directed dramas at her local church and contributed to a small group curriculum, and she authored several personal essays, articles and short stories for various inspirational publications. She wrote a video skit for Rick Warren's *40 Days of Purpose Resource CD* and contributed devotionals to *A Cup of Comfort Devotional for Mothers and Daughters*. Donna completed the Apprentice and Journeyman levels of the Christian Writers Guild fiction writing curriculum. She now writes novels and screenplays full time.

Donna and Jim have been married for thirty years and live in Fort Collins, Colorado. Stephanie, now married, lives close by. They are active in youth ministry at their local church. Donna also volunteers for a homeless ministry in Fort Collins.

Travel is one of Donna's passions. She feels fortunate to have visited many countries throughout the world and has a particular

love for Italy, its culture and history, which led her to write the Waldensian series.

Donna and Jim have biked several Rails to Trails in the United States. They also kayak whenever they have opportunity in places such as Norway, Alaska and Maine.

For more information about Donna and upcoming books, visit her website at www.donnawichelman.com.

Historical Notes

Joseph Mallord William Turner, John Ruskin, and Sir Charles Barry

The Finden Brothers and John Murray¹ commissioned Joseph Mallord William Turner to paint a series of water colors known as the *Bible Lands* collection. These would be published in a book of Holy Land illustrations called *Landscape Illustrations of the Bible*. Turner had never been to the Holy Land, but he used the penciled drawings of a number of individuals, including Sir Charles Barry, architect of the Houses of Parliament. Turner painted 26 water colors for the book, fourteen that came from Barry's drawings.

Though Barry is best known for his architectural achievements, most notably for his Italian gardens across Britain, his Holy Lands drawings are among the most superb of the nineteenth century. During his Grand Tour of Europe in August 1818², Barry met Cambridge archaeologist David Baillie in Italy. Impressed with Barry's drawings, Baillie offered him two hundred pounds sterling to accompany him to Egypt, Syria, and the Holy Land to sketch the architecture and landscape of those countries. Thus Barry's works opened a window to a land that, until then, held much mystery and intrigue.

Around 1840, a minor studio fire destroyed some of Turner's uncatalogued works. It is not known if any of those were attempts at the *Bible Lands* paintings. However, one might postulate that there *could have been* at least one attempt at a *Bible Lands* painting among them.

Turner was known as the "painter of light"³ for his unique ability to bring color and light to a painting. Many have tried to emulate him and failed. Though he has an illustrious history as an artist, his personal life⁴ was less so. He did father children whom he did not claim.

History also documents that nineteenth century art critic John Ruskin⁵ was an ardent admirer of Turner, acquiring more than 300

of Turner's paintings by the time of his death in 1903. He tried desperately to emulate Turner, but he never could get it right—a deficiency that haunted him and was partly responsible for his eccentricity toward the end of his life.

Ruskin made a trip to Italy in the summer of 1858⁶ with his friend, Joseph Cottet. He intended to paint the Cottian Alps, using one of Turner's paintings as his model. In his personal diary, he records that he had become intensely discouraged, because he could not paint with Turner's brilliance of light and color. On one Sunday, he attended a Waldensian Church, attempting to find solace. However, the visit was disastrous to his faith. Unable to find God there, he left the church disheartened and disavowed his Scottish Presbyterian upbringing. Later in life he returned to his Christian roots, but it took on a more social reformist pose. He died a defeated and brokenhearted man.

This true story about Ruskin and Turner is the inspiration for how, in the fictional tale, *Jerusalem at Twilight* came to be on Nonni's wall.

The Waldensian Church

*Foxe's Book of Martyrs*⁷ dedicates less than a page to the Waldensians of the Cottian Alps west of Turin. Yet, this relatively obscure people had a great impact on Christian Europe during the second millennium and helped set the stage for the Reformation in the sixteenth century.

Over the last two centuries, scholars have disputed the origins of these Valley Dwellers, also called the *Vaudois*.⁸

Theological historians fall into two camps on the origins of the Waldensians. The official Waldensian position⁹ claims that the Waldensian "Movement" began around A.D. 1170 in Lyons, France, when a rich merchant named Peter Waldo converted to Christianity and took a vow to lead a life of poverty. Greatly concerned about what he perceived as abuses by the Roman

Church on its faithful, he sought to bring a peaceful return of the Church to what he contended were the pure teachings of Christ. He gathered a band of people, who sympathized with him, and took on the name “The Poor Men of Lyons.”

Though the Poor Men of Lyons did not want to secede from the Roman Church, they hoped to sway the papacy to cease practices they deemed contrary to true biblical tenets. They wanted to be able to read the Bible in the vernacular and asked the Church to forego indulgences for the forgiveness of sins. They also sought various reforms, such as allowing clergy to marry.

Unfortunately, the Roman Church saw the Waldensians as a threat to their power and wealth and called them heretics. Thus began centuries of persecution that helped set the stage for the Reformation in the sixteenth century.

In 1655, a great persecution broke out known as the “Spring of Blood” or “Piedmontese Easter.” The Roman Church martyred hundreds of Waldensian faithful. By 1685, the Waldensians were forced from their homes and fled over the mountains to Switzerland. But homesick for their Alpine valleys, they set out in August 1689 to cross back over the mountains in their “Glorious Return.” Though they fought militia battles, endured the harsh Alpine winter and lost several of their numbers along the way, they succeeded in seeing their beloved valleys again.¹⁰

Waldensians lived in their ghetto valleys west of Turin for more than a hundred and fifty years, where they continued to experience persecution until the Italian government gave the Protestant church its freedom to worship and assemble with the Declaration of Emancipation on February 17, 1848. Local Waldensian assemblies across the world and Italy still light bonfires in celebration of their civil freedoms on the night of February 16th each year.¹¹

While these later events remain undisputed, some theological historians¹² make a compelling argument for a much earlier presence of the Waldensians, claiming they existed long before Peter Waldo’s advent in history. This perspective advocates a Valley people who knew the second century church fathers and who maintained a strict adherence to apostolic traditions. It was

only in 1170 when they joined with Peter Waldo that their existence became well-known.

Intrigued by the suspense surrounding the idea of an earlier history for the Waldensians, this author took fictional license to entertain such a scenario. Though the particular circumstance is a work of fiction, the question of the origins of the *Vaudois* still remains open.

¹ Dr. Mordechai Omer, *Turner and the Bible*, Exhibition Catalog, The Israel Museum (Tel Aviv, United Artists), 15

² Kathleen and Leen Ritmeyer, *Divergent Visions of the Holy Land*, *Biblical Archaeology Review* (July/August 2002) 52 – 55

³ www.nationalgaller.org National Gallery, Trafalgar Square, London

⁴ Louisa Buck, *Turner's Late Bloom*, *The Telegraph*, Sept. 12, 2014

⁵ Charles Riley, II, *JMW Turner's Most Passionate Defender*, *Antiques & Fine Art Magazine*, www.antiquesandfineart.com

⁶ John Ruskin, *Praeterita*, Volume iii 353 - 461

⁷ John Foxe and Harold Chadwick, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, (New Jersey, Bridge-Logos Publishers 1997), 57

⁸ Henry Arnaud, Hugh Dyke Acland, Albert Meynier, *The Glorious Recovery By The Vaudois of Their Valleys*, (London, John Murray Publishers 1827, 1988) xi – xxv

⁹ Giorgio Tourn, *Guide to the Exhibition From Waldo of Lyons to the Waldensian Church*, (Torre Pellice, Waldensian Cultural Centre Foundation) 1 – 2

¹⁰ Arnaud, 1 – 203

¹¹ Guide, 8 – 9

¹² J. A. Wylie, LL.D, *The History of Protestantism*, (London, Cassell & Company, Ltd.) 28 – 32