

## Italy's Valpolicella District

November 4, 1943

*It is done, and I am more afraid than ever. Roberto and I will take tonight's train from my beloved home. It is safest that way. Nobody else knows what happened last night.... We will take the secret to our graves. Whether that be sooner or later, it is in God's hands.*

*May He bless this land and my mother. May she forgive me for running and never discover what we have done. And may God forgive us for the sin we have committed.*

Standing on the little bench, Isa carefully put the worn, leather-bound journal back in its hiding place high in the rafters of the barn's loft and climbed down the ladder. With her satchel in hand, she walked to their meeting place, the olive tree near the west field. When Roberto arrived in silence, she turned back to take one more look at the house, the barn, and the fields of grape vines. She knelt by the fresh pile of dirt and wept for her loss. She knew that once she left, she would never return. She prayed that her mother would forgive her for leaving and that she and Roberto would depart from Italy alive.

## Chapter One

Alex wiped the tear from her cheek and wished that her memories could be wiped away as easily. The grey sky and the scent of the coming rain perfectly matched her mood as she hopped on her bike and headed to work. ‘Work’ was anything but; at least as far as Alex was concerned, but even so, she was not looking forward to it today.

Alex rode her bike to the small house just outside of Little Italy in the heart of Baltimore. In spite of the impending showers, the sound of baby birds, chirping for food, filled the air. It had been a cold and wet spring, and Alex hoped that the weather would begin to warm soon, especially since she had no car and relied on her bicycle to get her to work and class. The smart thing would have been to take a taxi this morning, with the forecast as it was, but Alex didn't care if she got wet. She was in a foul mood and intended to stay that way, though it would be hard once she was in the presence of Signora Isabella Fonticelli. Though Signora had lived in America since just before the end of the war, never World War II or the War in Europe, but just “The War,” Signora had never been called Mrs. Fonticelli. She was always Signora.

At eighty-seven years old, Signora had a sharp mind and humorous wit, and Alex loved her dearly. From the moment Alex saw the scrawled writing on the formal stationery pinned to the bulletin board in the campus student center, she had the unmistakable feeling that she was meant to take the job. Not that Alex had any experience with elderly people or as a caregiver. She just felt compelled to call the number, as if the writing was a musical composition meant only for Alex to play. It called to her, a melodious tune that entranced her and had her taking the paper down and putting it in her pocket without even realizing she had done it.

Almost a year later, Alex was Signora's most trusted companion, and Alex had the grandmother she always longed for. Aside from making sure Signora ate and took her medicine, Alex learned to play bridge and read aloud every book she could find from the classic, *Rebecca*, Alex's favorite, to *Dante's Inferno*, at Signora's insistence. What she did most, however, was practice her music on Signora's piano. It wasn't a baby grand or a Steinway, but it was in tune, and Signora loved to be carried away by Alex's playing.

Alex parked her bike inside the gated alley next to the house and used her key to enter the kitchen door on the side of the little abode. The faint aroma of last night's dinner still hung in the air, a pesto sauce over shrimp and pasta, the strong scent of garlic clinging to the room. She took off her coat and shivered. The house was much too cold for the elderly woman, and Alex worried that the faint, musty smell indicated the possibility of mold hiding within the walls or carpeting of the old house.

“Signora,” Alex called as she wandered through the kitchen to the thermostat in the tiny hallway and adjusted the temperature by a couple degrees. “I'm here. Are you awake?” Hearing no answer, Alex walked upstairs.

When Alex walked into the bedroom, Signora was sitting on the side of the perfectly made-up bed, already dressed and wearing her finest jewelry. A stranger might have thought that she had somewhere to go, but Alex knew that this was just the way Signora always looked.

“I keep telling you that I will make the bed and help you get dressed. You never listen to me,” Alex scolded, bending over to give Signora a peck on each cheek.

“You're late,” Signora said, faking an air of superiority.

“I am not, and you know it,” Alex smiled. “I got here the same time I arrive every morning.”

“You're late every morning,” Signora replied, but her smile and twinkling eyes gave her away. She was just an old tease, and Alex loved her for it. “An old woman could die waiting for breakfast with you looking after her.”

“I might be worried if there was an old woman here.” Alex put her arm around Signora and smiled, her bad mood already giving way to the lightheartedness that only Signora could bring out in her on this rotten day. “Ready?” Alex asked before helping the older woman up and out into the hallway.

“I don't know why you won't let someone put in a stair lift or help move your bed and personal items downstairs,” Alex said, not for the first time, as they descended slowly to the first floor.

“Because I can still get up and down the steps just fine,” Signora told her. “And when I can't, I might as well be dead.” Alex didn't reply. It was an argument she was used to losing.

They made their way to the cozy little kitchen, and Alex helped Signora sit down at the table, the same one her dear husband had made for her as a wedding present seventy years ago when Signora was just seventeen and trying to make a new home in the New World.

“Now make me breakfast,” Signora prodded, “and then tell me why you were up half the night crying.”

Standing at the counter with her back to the older woman, Alex closed her eyes and braced herself on the Formica. “Is it really that obvious?”

“Patrick?” Signora asked. Alex nodded, trying to hold back the tears. “I told you not to trust an Irish boy.”

Alex smiled. Had anyone else said that, she would have been offended. After all, she was an O'Donnell herself. But she knew that Signora only had her best interest at heart. Alex busied herself with putting on a cup of coffee and making breakfast. Following a recipe Signora had taught her early on, Alex made a hole in the middle of two pieces of fresh, Italian bread. She poured a little olive oil in a pan and browned one side of the slices. After flipping them, she cracked an egg into each hole and let them cook, flipping the toast and eggs once more to cook the eggs all the way through. While they cooked, she sliced a red pepper to go with the eggs and poured two glasses of orange juice and two cups of coffee. Signora patiently sipped her coffee and waited for Alex to finish cooking as the scent of eggs, toast, and coffee filled the tiny kitchen.

Once they were both seated and Alex had taken a sip of her coffee, she took a deep breath.

“We broke up,” she began. “I suspected he might be cheating on me, but I never imagined it was with my own roommate.” She shook her head, but no tears came to the surface.

“Sandra?”

Alex nodded. “I caught them. That's all I'm going to say. I won't rehash it because it was horrible, but now it's over. I should have let him go a long time ago.”

Signora shook her head. “The little hussy.”

Alex laughed. “I hate the thought of going back to that townhouse, but graduation will be here soon enough.”

“At least you discovered the real person he is before it was too late. And I'm sure you will find somewhere else to live.” Signora placed her hand over Alex's and squeezed it.

Alex smiled at the older woman. “What would I do without you?”

“Have a real social life, go out and enjoy yourself on a Friday night, meet a nice man.”

Alex laughed at the thought of a social life. Growing up, she had always had a boyfriend, but nothing ever seemed to last. She preferred being alone - reading, playing piano, painting, or going outside to take pictures.

“That wasn’t my life before I met you, and it wouldn’t be my life if I didn’t have you. I don’t need a social life or a man.”

“Oh my dear Alexandra, life is so much more wonderful when you have someone to share it with.” Signora looked across the room to the framed photo of her and Roberto on their wedding day. There was no white dress, no veil, not even any guests, but Roberto was a handsome man with a beard and slight smile, and Signora was beautiful with long, black hair and dark eyes. Alex often wondered what that day was like, but it was one of many things Signora refused to talk about. All she ever said was that she and Roberto were deeply in love and fleeing the War, and that it was the one of the most frightening days of her life. Alex could see the fear in their eyes, and she guessed that the War made everyone afraid, even on their wedding day. Still, Alex was always curious about the day, the couple, and their lives during and after the War, but Signora was quiet about it all.

“Love is all that matters,” Signora said, turning back to the younger woman. “Life brings hardship, and pain, and more loss than you think you can survive, but in the end, love will carry you through the agony and restore the breath you need to keep living. You must have love, or you have nothing.”

“Maybe someday,” Alex told her, “but for now, I have you, and you’re all I need.”

Alex stood and cleared the table. *Maybe there is someone out there for me, but I sure as heck haven’t found him yet.*



Signora watched Alex and thought about her life at that age. By twenty-two, she had seen things that no human being should have to witness. She had already lived two lives, suffered unimaginable losses, escaped the War, overcome the stigma of being a refugee, gotten married, and learned that most things in life never turn out the way you imagine them when you’re young and in love. But she was stronger and wiser for what she had seen and learned, and she knew that Alex would be, too. Their lives were so much more alike than Alex knew, and Signora firmly believed that the right person and the right life were out there waiting for the young woman. Alex just needed to find the confidence in herself to follow her dreams. The time was almost at hand; Signora could feel it. She hoped that Alex was ready for what was to lie ahead.



That night, Alex arrived at the welcoming little house just after 9:00. She let herself in and hurried to the living room where she usually found Signora reading or already asleep in her cushioned armchair. Alex stopped abruptly at the door when she saw Signora, her eyes closed, the book open on her lap. *She looks so peaceful*, Alex thought before her heart skipped a beat. There was something about her, something about the look on her face, the way her body rested in the chair.

“No,” Alex cried as she rushed to Signora’s side. She felt for a pulse as she reached for the phone in her pocket. “Please, no,” Alex pleaded through tears while she waited for the dispatcher to answer. “You’re all I have. What will I do without you?”

“911. What is the nature of your emergency?”

Alex was barely able to answer. The lump in her throat grew as she tried to gather her thoughts and speak the words she had been dreading for the past year. Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath through her nose, she calmly relayed the emergency and then waited for the ambulance while her world fell apart.



Monday morning came much too fast. The sun shone bright, and the birds were singing as Alex opened the door. She supposed that it made sense; that it would rain on the day Signora died and be sunny on the day Alex would officially tell her goodbye. Signora would have liked the poetry in that. She would have said that the angels were crying at her death but rejoicing in having her home.

As Signora had requested, a funeral Mass was celebrated at the small church that Signora had attended since coming to America in 1944. Alex sat in the front pew, the only ‘family’ member present. The home healthcare nurse who visited Signora every afternoon was also there, as were a few of the families from the parish who wished to pay their respects. Alex noticed an older man, perhaps in his sixties, whom she did not recognize. After the burial in the small cemetery behind the church, the man approached Alex.

“Ms. O’Donnell?” he asked once Alex had a chance to say a tearful goodbye to Signora at the gravesite. She looked at the man and tried to place him.

“Yes?” she answered in a questioning voice. The man reached out his hand.

“My name is Peter Owen. I’ve heard a lot about you.” His grip was firm, and his eyes were both kind and sad. He was tall with a solid build and a shiny, bald head that gave him quite a distinguished air. His aftershave smelled expensive but not offensive. Alex raised an eyebrow in question.

“I am with the law firm of Kennedy, Owen, and Warren. Signora Fonticelli was a client of mine for many years, and she was very fond of you,” he said.

With her hand still in his, Alex smiled faintly. “And I of her,” she said quietly.

Peter smiled back and let go of her hand. “I have some business to discuss with you. It’s not urgent, but I would like to get it taken care of at your earliest convenience. We could go to lunch, or you could tell me when a better time would be to meet.”

“Lunch would be nice,” she smiled. Peter’s smile grew as he suggested a place and led Alex to his car.

Lunch at Da Mimmo, a favorite of the Baltimore business crowd, was very nice, and Alex enjoyed sharing stories about Signora with Peter. He was fit and trim and looked darn good for his age, not that Alex knew what that was. She was never good at guessing ages. He was charming and kind, and Alex couldn’t help but wonder why all men couldn’t be like him. Their coffee had just arrived when Peter opened his briefcase and took out a manila folder.

“I would like to go over the contents of Signora Fonticelli’s will,” Peter said as he opened the folder.

Alex wasn’t sure how to react. She picked up her napkin from her lap and wiped her mouth. “Okay,” she said hesitantly. “I’m not sure how that affects me.”

Peter put on a pair of reading glasses, glanced at the file, and then looked over the lenses at Alex. “I assume Signora Fonticelli never mentioned anything to you about her will.”

Alex shook her head. “Nothing.”

Peter took off his glasses and closed the folder. “This may come as a shock to you.” He put down the file and folded his hands on the table.

Alex held her breath as he leveled his gaze on her. Everyone else in the restaurant seemed to fade away as she waited for him to go on.

“Alex, do you know anything about Signora Fonticelli’s estate and holdings?”

Alex shook her head, unable to speak.

“Of course, there is the house in Baltimore,” Peter paused, and Alex nodded. It would be just like Signora to leave Alex her home knowing that Alex was weeks away from graduation and would need to be thinking about her future. Peter went on, “In addition, there is the vineyard and villa,”

“Excuse me,” Alex stopped him. “Vineyard? Villa?” Her head began to spin. She had no idea where this was heading.

“Yes, just outside of Verona in the Valpolicella district.” He paused for a second and smiled at Alex. “My Italian is not that good, but Signora insisted I learn to at least pronounce that correctly.” Alex smiled and motioned for him to go on though her mind was yelling for him to stop. Alex didn’t know what was coming, but she had a growing feeling that it was going to be earth shattering, at least for her.

Peter picked up the folder again, opened it, removed a document, and replaced his reading glasses. He cleared his throat. “I, Isabella Abelli Fonticelli, being of sound mind and body, do hereby bequeath the following:

To Alexandra O’Donnell, my dearest companion and caregiver, my house at 117 Trinity Street and all of its contents, to be done with as she wishes (though I recommend selling it all and taking the money – you’ll need it to pay off your college loans).” Peter looked at Alex and smiled.

“She always did like to give me advice on how to run my life,” Alex said quietly as tears formed in her eyes. As she suspected, the house. That wasn’t such a big deal after all. “That was very sweet of her.”

“There’s more,” Peter said, and Alex gasped in surprise as Peter looked back down at the document. “.... I also leave Alexandra one half of my family’s vineyard, Belle Uve, to be shared with my great-nephew, Nicolas Giordano.”

Alex placed her hands on the table to steady herself as the earth shattering commenced. She wished she had not had that glass of wine with her lunch. It suddenly left a sour taste in her mouth, and the Italian cuisine that had smelled so wonderful just a few minutes before, now seemed strong and overpowering. “Bell... what?”

“Belle Uve, which until last week, Signora Fonticelli shared with her great-nephew who inherited his grandfather’s half of the estate. The name means ‘beautiful grapes.’ Signora Fonticelli stipulates that you and her great-nephew, Nicolas, are to share the estate and run the winery together. I have papers and pictures for you with all of the details about the estate. I’m afraid that it’s not as glamorous as it sounds. The winery doesn’t seem to be as profitable as it once was.” Peter began to pull more documents and photographs out of the folder, but his words seemed to be coming from the other end of a distant tunnel. Alex felt dizzy. “Signora Fonticelli and her great-nephew already had a contract that dealt with how they maintained their shares and profits. Those conditions will remain unchanged. You will simply inherit her shares and assume her profits.”

“No, please, stop,” Alex shook her head in confusion. “I don’t understand. I don’t live in Italy. I know nothing about wine or vineyards or estates. I know that Signora grew up on a vineyard, but I’ve never heard of Nicolas Geor, whatever his name was. Talk about shares and profits is something I’ve never tried to understand. This must be a mistake.”

Peter took off his glasses and looked at Alex with sincere compassion. “I’m afraid I didn’t do a very good job preparing you for this. I did say it would be a shock.”

“To say the least,” Alex said as she buried her face in her hands. She looked up and shook her head. “I don’t know what to say. What do I do?”

"I'm afraid I can't answer that," Peter said. "If you wish, I can continue to handle the affairs of the vineyard, putting the profits, if there ever are any, into a portfolio for you. You wouldn't have to do anything except perhaps hire an accountant to look over my shoulder, which is the smart thing to do these days. Would you like to take the papers and photographs with you and go through them?"

Alex nodded, her mouth agape, as she reached a shaky hand for her cup. "Yes, I guess so..." she whispered before she gulped down the lukewarm, now bitter-tasting coffee she had ordered after finishing her wine and tried to figure out what just happened.

"Do you have a passport?"

Alex looked at Peter and blinked. "Uh, no. I never needed one."

"If you decide to go to Italy, even just to see the estate, you will need a passport. I can tell you how to expedite the process if you want to go any time soon. In addition, if you decide to stay..."

Peter continued talking, and the phrases 'work visa' and 'dual citizenship' floated between them like the scent of the coffee, but Alex became lost in her own thoughts. She spent her entire life dreaming of going to Italy, seeing the famed Uffizi Gallery in Florence, riding in a gondola on the Gran Canal of Venice, visiting the Vatican. But never in her wildest dreams had she ever imagined that something like this would be the catalyst to take her there. She had a lot to think about, but one thought ran through her mind over and over as she stared unseeing at Peter putting together the stack of papers – with no family to speak of, no boyfriend, and no job tying her down, what did she have to lose?



Nicolas ripped up the letter from the Office of Peter Owen in Baltimore, Maryland.

"Che cosa?" Maria asked.

Nicolas let out a string of expletives in Italian and threw the pieces of paper at Maria. "Prozia Isa's share of the vineyard. She left it to some American."

Maria was stunned. "I do not understand. An American? Perhaps he will sell it to you?"

"Non lo so," Nicolas said, shaking his head. "But it is not a 'he.' The American is a woman."

"What will you do?" Maria asked.

Nicolas paced the floor in the winery. His face was red, and he felt like he could punch someone. He had been working at the vineyard almost his entire life and had been running it since he graduated from college. This was his business, his home, and he was not going to share it with anyone.