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Prologue

Florence, spring 1946

WE HAVE TO walk the last part of the hill. The departing Germans booby-trapped the road so now there's a small crater surrounded by rubble that we have to pick our way across. One of the stone dragons that used to guard the castle's towering iron gates has been lost to the explosion. The other was beheaded and now its stone stump points towards the space where its missing mate stood.

I was warned, of course, about the damage, but nothing really prepares you for the wanton desecration of war.

Inside the great hallway there is a smell of damp and neglect. One of the panes of glass in the doors that lead out to the courtyard is cracked and I shiver when I spot rat droppings on the stone flags.

In the *salone* I stop still with my hand over my mouth at the sight of the bare whitewashed walls where once every inch was taken up with paintings. But now, on closer look, I see the walls are not quite bare. In places there is writing – the running scores of a game of some sort, what looks to be a poem or a song in German and, at the far end, over the

fireplace, a portrait badly done in pen and finished off with a crudely drawn frame.

The leather sofa on which Roberto liked to sprawl is pocked with cigarette burns through which the stuffing emerges in tufts, while the low table at which Evelyn would pour tea has been replaced by an upturned crate.

Only the view is unchanged. I turn my back on the devastated room and gaze across the forecourt and the sloping hillside pitted with olive groves and cypresses, with rough-hewn farmhouses and the occasional terracotta roof, to where the molten city lies bathed in a soft sunlight that hides the damage from enemy bombs, the far-off Duomo lit up like a cauldron of fire.

And now the memories come.

In my mind the pre-dusk hour rings with the low hum of crickets and the irritable chatter of Cecily's cockatoo in its cage in the back garden and the pealing of church bells from the village of Settignano down below and the bigger town of Fiesole high up on a neighbouring hill. Somewhere in the distance a boy calls to his oxen. Wild herbs scent the air – thyme and lavender and sweet bay – while from the kitchen fireplace wafts the smell of olive wood burning in the grate where Renata is roasting a chicken on the mechanical spit.

As long as I don't turn around, I can imagine that the castle is once again peopled with all the ghosts of my life. William, Evelyn, Roberto, James, Alina. Nora with her terrible, beloved one-eyed doll, Matilda. Even Millie, who never saw Italy but would have loved it so.

I close my eyes now because memories can be sharp as

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Murder Under the Tuscan Sun

glass and I have been cut too often. But still I hear them whispering behind me in the ruined room. *Where have you been?* And over the top the question that now snaps my eyes back open. Wide.

What did you do?

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1

Pinner, March 1927

Invalid's companion sought for English household near Florence, Italy. Must have patience and a tolerable reading voice. Would suit mature lady with an adventurous spirit. Knowledge of Italian an advantage.

THE ADVERTISEMENT, YELLOWING now and crumpled, lay between us on the ugly mahogany side table with the twisted legs that Walter's aunt, who never liked him, had given us as a wedding present.

'But you can't be serious.'

James would be surprised, I thought, if he knew just how many sentences he began with the word 'but'. He would also be surprised to learn that when he was exercised about something a vein popped up on his forehead like a small worm and he looked exactly like his father. His late father.

'I never expected to get it, you see. I answered the advertisement almost on a whim. I was flicking through *The Lady* and there it was in the Classified section, Italy, of all places!'

It was true I'd had no thought of actually procuring the position. Here was a pretty daydream to give a warm glow to the cold, dull February days. Moreover, after I'd posted my letter of enquiry, I'd felt the stirrings of something I hadn't immediately been able to place but finally had identified as agency. This was something I'd done without consulting another person. The novelty of it had quickened my blood.

'When the letter arrived this morning saying I had the job, you could have knocked me down with a feather.'

I reached for my bag to show it to him but thought better of it, remembering the violet ink and uneven hand.

'But Mother, this is completely preposterous,' James said. 'This is grief talking, nothing more.'

'James, darling, your father has been dead nearly a year now, so I don't think . . .'

'Exactly! Not even a year a widow. No wonder your thinking is muddled. You don't need to look for paid work. Father left you quite well provided for, and then there's the money I bring home, which is not inconsiderable. As long as you're careful, you can live out the remainder of your life without ever needing to move from this house.'

We were sitting in the chilly, damp-smelling sitting room in Pinner that Walter had insisted on papering in a dark green print so that one felt pressed in on all sides by giant walls of moss. Across from us the fireplace yawned black and cold. The week before, I'd asked Mrs Hancock if she might think about laying a fire to warm things up, but her raised eyebrows and incredulous 'In the middle of the day?' meant I hadn't asked again. A carpet in shades of brown lay on the floor, while an oil portrait of Walter's grandfather glared

down in silent fury. There was a musty smell – a mixture of the polish Mrs Hancock used on the heavy brass candlesticks on the mantelpiece and the stale air caught between the folds of the wine-red velvet drapes.

‘But don’t you see, James, it isn’t to do with money. What they’re offering is very little, really. I *want* to do something. I’m only forty-nine years old.’

‘Exactly! Nearly fifty!’

‘Darling, I know that might seem ancient to you, but I haven’t yet got one foot in the grave and I would like to feel useful again. And the Norths are a very well-regarded family. William North is clearly a frail old man now, but he was a very highly respected art connoisseur before his misfortune. And his late wife was a Chisholm.’

‘The railway Chisholms?’

‘Exactly! And his niece, Evelyn Manetti, Chisholm as was – she’s the one who posted the advertisement – lives in the house with her husband and daughter, so it’s all perfectly respectable.’

I was aware of talking too much and too fast, as I did when I was nervous or excited. It’s at this point where Walter would have fixed on a point over my shoulder with his fierce grey eyes and said something like: ‘I’m just looking out for the other runners, my dear. I assume it’s some sort of race that has you rushing like this.’ Strange to think it was his sense of humour that had drawn me to him during the three months we were courting. It was only once we married that I realized he had but the one joke. And that joke was me.

‘But what will people think?’

‘About what, dear?’

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‘About my mother taking up paid employment?’

‘Well, it’s not—’

‘I’ll tell you what they’ll think. They’ll think Father left you destitute and I’m an abject failure of a son who lets his mother take in laundry and scrub kitchen floors.’

‘Oh, really, James, now you’re being silly. Who are these people, anyway, whose opinion matters so much?’

‘It doesn’t matter who the people are, Mother. What matters is what they think.’

I shouldn’t have laughed. James was so easily hurt. Even as a child he hadn’t been able to bear being teased, or being put on the spot or challenged. Had he always taken himself so seriously? I found more and more I struggled to remember the Before James, the little quirks that made me love him so. His softness towards anything smaller or weaker, his capacity to find beauty in small things – the vibrant red of a leaf in autumn, the moment of stillness before the crashing notes of a piano concerto – the giggles that would escape him at the most unexpected times. It was the war that stopped that, or rather the guilt that came with the war that ended five days before he turned eighteen, so many of his schoolmates already lost. It was the guilt that squished down all those extra bits of who he was until he fitted into a mould of his father. Or rather it was the guilt that began that process, and it was losing Millie that completed it.

My late daughter.

Time, people say, is a great healer. However, my experience was that the pain was just as great five years on as on the first day, I’d only learned to hide it better. I suspect we were all the same, my generation of grieving women. When we passed each other in the street or the park or smiled at

one another in the post office queue, we took it for granted that we were each enduring our own individual tragedies.

‘Mother, please tell me this is some sort of joke.’

James looked so young, sitting there in his Fair Isle jumper and flannel trousers, like the schoolboy he’d been not so very long ago, that I couldn’t help but jump up and cross over to him. But when I made to throw my arms around him, he shrank back.

‘Darling boy, please try to see things from my point of view. The last few years have been so dreadfully sad – first Millie, then your father. I feel I should so love to grab a little bit of life before it passes me by.’

I watched as James’s fears wrote themselves across the planes of his soft, pale face. *Have some faith*, I wanted to tell him. *Trust that most people are good*. But it was 1927, not even a decade after the end of the war, and we both remembered only too well what people were capable of.

‘I shouldn’t think it’ll be for long,’ I said. ‘When she offered me the position, Mrs Manetti – that’s Evelyn Chisholm as was, Cecily North’s niece – told me that her uncle suffered his apoplectic attack just over a month ago but has been recovering inordinately well. Oh, and darling, guess what?’

James’s expression reminded me that he’d never liked this kind of game, had always been nervous of surprises.

‘The Norths live in a *castle*! An actual real-life castle. Can you imagine?’

I knew instantly it was the wrong thing to say. The fantastical detail of the address to which I’d sent my letter of application – Castello di Roccia Nera – only made the entire business seem more outlandish, more suspect.

‘You do know, don’t you, Mother, that they are under

fascist rule, the Italians? Is that what you want? A load of black-shirted dictators ordering you around?’

‘Of course not, but—’

‘Why can’t you be content with what you have? Why can’t you be content here? With me? Oh, I know I’m not Millie. I know *that*.’

The bitterness in his voice shocked me.

‘No, James, my darling. You mustn’t think that. You’re you. You’re perfectly enough.’

This was the point at which I would normally give in, had always given in when it was Walter sitting there, determined as I was to shy away from confrontation.

I pressed my nails into the palms of my hand. The silence stretched on until I felt as if it would snap.

2

AFTER ALL MY enthusing to James over the past weeks, my spirits strained from having to be always pointing out the positives, I felt – as the train pulled out of Victoria Station and James’s pinched face grew smaller – a distinct sagging. This inner slump was made all the more curious for being accompanied by a simultaneous twisting and knotting of my nerves, as if being tightly wound around a pair of crochet hooks.

Throughout the journey to Dover and the fraught ferry crossing to Calais, during which the sky never raised itself above a pewter grey and the waves were as turbulent as my thoughts, I tried to recapture that excitement I’d felt when the companion position had been merely a thrilling but abstract notion, nothing more.

But now, with thirty-six hours of travelling ahead of me, I couldn’t avoid reflecting on how little I knew about the post I had so impulsively applied for or the family with whom I would be living.

Mrs Manetti – I imagined her a quiet, devoted type, sacrificing her own independence to care for her infirm relative – had said ‘light duties’ stressing that any ‘heavy

lifting' could be managed by the servants. I'd thought that an odd phrase, as if her ailing uncle were a lump of rock or a pianoforte to be hauled and shifted and shuffled around. I wondered if I'd oversold myself. I'd told Evelyn Manetti that I'd assisted in hospitals during the war, and that was true, but only in the most basic capacity, emptying bedpans, changing dressings, holding the hands of boys and men who could have been my son or my husband as they writhed in pain or called out for their mothers. Even that much had had to be fought for, the amateur nursing positions with the Voluntary Aid Detachment limited to single women only. Us married women – *Comforteers*, they called us, for goodness' sake – were expected to sit at home knitting socks and scarves with only the occasional trip out to visit the wounded on the wards. I'd had to expand my remit by stealth, staying longer, taking on more responsibility, but still it fell well short of being properly trained.

By the time I arrived in Calais, where a porter in a blue overall and battered cap transferred my cases from the steamer to the waiting train without once disturbing the cigarette that hung from his lower lip, I had half convinced myself James was right and I'd made a terrible mistake. All through the journey to Paris and my wait at Gare de Lyon for the Rome Express, my mind turned on me in a way it hadn't done since Millie died.

Then I'd been pierced with regret for all the evenings I hadn't let her stay up late to see me dressed up for a party or a particularly splendid yellow moon, for fear she would get over-tired, and all the iced buns I said she couldn't eat in case the sugar went to her head. What harm would it have done in the end for my dear, darling girl to have gone to bed

at ten or midnight or two in the morning or have eaten all the buns she desired? If I'd known she wouldn't even see her twentieth birthday I should have given her the world and not bothered if Walter said it would spoil her. She should have had those pale, buttery-yellow leather gloves she admired, even if they were bound to be ruined after a few wears. She should have gone dancing with the Jameson boy, even if his brother had been court-martialled for desertion. Sometimes you were so busy fretting about the small things you forgot to consider the big things until it was too late.

My spirits were improved by the excellent dinner we were served when we'd scarce pulled out of the station in Paris. Food has always lifted my mood. I make no apology for that. From my narrow berth in the sleeper compartment that smelled like old leather and black tobacco and freshly laundered sheets, I could see my travelling clothes laid out over my cases – my new tweed skirt and simple blouse. I'd had half an idea to have the dressmaker run me up one of the tennis-style outfits the younger women were all wearing, a knee-length sleeveless jersey dress with a loose dropped waist in a pretty colour – apple green or rose pink. But the girls I saw wearing the kind of dresses I yearned for had neat figures that ran straight up and down. I'd looked down at the rounded shelf of my bosom, the curve of my stomach, and heard Walter's voice in my ear – *'Do you really think that's suitable, Constance?'* – and gone for the tweed. Seeing the stylish women getting on the train earlier at Paris in their fur wrap coats and their ankle-strap shoes, their slim calves showcased in sheer silk stockings, I regretted those uncommissioned dresses.

In the morning when voices broke me to the fact we

were in a station, I rushed to the little window and pulled up the blind to find myself greeted by the most wonderful sight – the rose-gold residue of the sunrise reflecting off snow-dusted mountain peaks. A steward, bringing an early-morning pot of tea, confirmed that we were in Modane, on the Italian border. Italy. I rolled the word around on my tongue.

I'd never travelled beyond France. And France only once, when Walter and I honeymooned in Nice, both of us realizing with a heavy, sinking feeling that the person we thought we'd married wasn't the person sitting opposite us across the hotel breakfast table. I was still reeling from a broken heart courtesy of a friend of my brother with whom I fell wholeheartedly, foolishly, joyously in love, only for him to become engaged to someone else just days after we'd made love for the first and only time. I'd plunged into marriage with Walter because, love having let me down so badly, I'd decided the absence of it might provide a sturdier foundation for a relationship. Walter's own motivation was less easy to fathom. 'I thought we nicely complemented one another,' he'd said, the one time I'd pushed him on it. And I'd imagined us then as a set of leather suitcases or a sturdy wool hat and matching gloves.

The train continued to Turin and then the Apennines, where the hillsides were carpeted with grass and trees and veined by tiny streams tumbling down from the mountains, and from there the steady descent towards the ocean and the bustling port of Genoa.

I gazed out of the window at the people disembarking and embarking, kissing and waving, carrying cases and hat boxes, and one black-clad lady with a tiny dog in a basket

hooked over her arm. *This is real*, I told myself. *This is happening.*

Off we went again, clinging to the coast with the train periodically plunging into the black tunnels that ran under the cliffs only to burst out into a world made blinding by the preceding darkness. As I became accustomed to the dazzle, I caught snatches of colour – pink-blossomed Judas trees reaching into an azure sky, ripe oranges peeping through shiny green leaves. Lilac wisteria. When finally the train headed inland at Viareggio my mouth became dry, my heart beating so fast that were it not for the steward pointing through the opposite window as we drew into Pisa I should have entirely missed seeing the famous tower listing perilously to the side or the magnificent cathedral.

At Pisa, the cars travelling on to Florence detached from the rest of the train and it was now that the crochet hooks that held my nerves tightly wound began to pull and twist in earnest. A young man with one leg of his trousers pinned up behind him progressed down the platform, the remaining leg swinging on a crutch; another wore a patch over his eye. I was used to such sights back home, but somehow I hadn't expected it here, though of course Italy suffered terribly during that war, so I ought not to have been surprised. Several passengers joined my carriage, among them a man of around my own age, short and stocky with oiled black hair and plump lips beneath a luxuriant moustache, who sat in the seat almost facing me.

He took out a newspaper, but I could sense him darting glances at me over the top. Initially I worried that I had broken some unspoken rule. Sitting in the wrong place, heading the wrong direction. The more he looked, the more

flustered I became. I patted my hair to see if it had come loose – it was much longer than the younger women were wearing theirs and tended to wildness. Under the cover of a yawn, I checked my teeth to see if something from my breakfast had become stuck there.

It gradually dawned on me that the looks he was giving me were not of disapproval but, on the contrary, of appreciation. It had been so long since a man had looked at me that way that at first I was rigid with embarrassment, staring out of the window, not daring to turn my head. But slowly a warmth crept over me from my toes up through my knees and thighs and abdomen, waking up the various parts of me as it went, until my whole body burned with life. I snatched a glance and the man smiled; it wasn't a lewd smile but seemed rather to be a collusion. *Here we are, two strangers on a train on this beautiful day, enjoying each other.* And though he was by no means a handsome fellow, his eyes were lively and kind and, to my amazement, I felt deep within me, like the plucking of cello strings, the long-dormant stirrings of sexual desire.

A stylish Italian woman who had joined my carriage at Viareggio began talking to me in heavily accented English. Was it my first time in Italy? When she discovered it was, she grew excitable, listing the places I would need to visit in Florence. 'It is the jewel in all of Italy,' she told me solemnly. 'No, not Italy,' she contradicted herself angrily, 'the jewel in all of Europe.'

Everything in Florence was simply the best, it turned out. The food, the climate, the architecture. The artworks, it went without saying were unparalleled anywhere in the world.

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Only when she found out where I would be staying did my new friend's hyperbole desert her. 'Castello di Roccia Nera. Yes, I know of it.' She looked over at me and – did I imagine that her smile was slightly less wide, her tone slightly less friendly?

'I'm to be a companion for the old gentleman.'

'The old gentleman?'

'Si,' I tried hesitantly. 'William North.'

My companion blinked.

'Have you been there?' I asked, changing tack. 'To the castle?'

She shook her head vigorously and I was fascinated by the way her plum-coloured beret remained affixed to her luxuriant dark hair.

'No. But—'

Whatever she was about to say was lost in a screaming of brakes, and a commotion in the corridors alerted us to the fact that we had arrived.

The woman jumped up to leave, while I anxiously gathered together my things. My new cloche hat, my good wool coat, both far too warm for the climate, I could already tell. The man with the moustache and oiled hair tucked his newspaper under his arm and raised a hand in farewell.

'Firenze!' called the steward.

I adjusted my hat and stepped out on to the narrow ladder staircase and into the rest of my life.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'd expected from my arrival at the station in Florence. A grand carriage sent from the castle emblazoned with a shiny coat of arms, perhaps. A liveried servant. What I hadn't expected was a rake-thin young woman in a loose printed blouse and grubby skirt that hung just below her knees and had five smear marks down each side where she must have habitually wiped her hands. Her legs were bare and on her feet was a pair of men's leather boots from which her bony calves rose up like two saplings planted in a sea of soil.

'I am Alina,' she said in a musical Italian accent, approaching where I stood sweltering in my too-warm coat, surrounded by bags. Close up, I saw she was striking. Her face too gaunt to be considered pretty, her nose too dominant. Her fine brown eyes large and expressive, but a fraction too close together over the narrow bridge of her nose. Yet there was such sparkiness about her, such a keen light of animation in her eyes.

For a few long seconds we stared at each other, then something of my exhaustion and trepidation must have shown in my face and she smiled, instantly transforming her angular face into something softer.

It was clear from the woman's dress that she must be some sort of servant, so I was shocked when she led me to a dusty motor car instead of the fly I'd expected. And judging by the expressions of passers-by, the idea of this poorly dressed young woman taking the wheel of this large motor car seemed equally unfeasible to Italians too.

'Are you really going to drive this thing?'

I knew a couple of women back in England who drove, both much younger than me, but the idea of a maid or a housekeeper behind a steering wheel seemed preposterous.

She laughed, a startling sound that seemed to rip straight from her throat.

'Don't worry. I'm quite good. Rupert taught me. That's Mr North's son.'

She was smiling, but there was a tightness to her words, as if they were threaded through with wire.

'And did Rupert North also teach you English?'

'He didn't need to. We learned it together. My mother was housekeeper at the castle so I grew up speaking as much English as Italian.'

'Well, I look forward to telling Mr Rupert North that he did a very excellent job as a driving instructor.'

A shadow passed over the woman's face. 'Sadly, that won't be possible. He died in 1922. He had an injury to his lung in the war and he never completely recovered.'

'I'm so sorry. And Mrs North?'

It was an automatic response now, whenever I learned of a young person's death, for my thoughts to pass directly to the mother.

'She died four months after of a broken heart.'

I was quiet then. Before Millie died, I would have said

such a thing was impossible, but now I knew better. There had been nights I too thought I might die from sorrow, when I wished I could detach my heart from my body and shut it away in a drawer so I couldn't feel any more.

I gazed through the open window. Ours was one of only a few cars on the roads. Otherwise, the traffic consisted of bicycles, trams and small, nippy flies that darted around the more sedate carts pulled by solid, lumbering horses. Through the side streets I caught a glimpse of buildings bathed in the late-afternoon light so that they appeared pink and terracotta and apricot and peach, and the famous dome glowing orange in the sun.

Flags hung from windows, flashes of red, white and green with a small square in the middle, red with a white cross. We passed a building where the word 'DUCE' had been daubed on the wall in towering white letters and I stiffened, remembering James's diatribe about the fascist leader, Mussolini.

At a crossroads, a group of black-shirted men stood around smoking, their baggy trousers tucked into black knee-high boots. As the car passed they broke off from their chatter and turned to stare. Alina muttered something under her breath, and her knuckles grew white against the dark brown leather of the steering wheel.

Leaving the city behind, a hillside rose up ahead, cool and green. As we climbed, the road narrowed, banked by high stone walls on one side and trees on the other. The houses here were larger, set back from the road on the slope either side behind tall metal or wooden gates. The motor car did not seem to like what was being asked of it. And neither did its driver, who was grumbling to herself as the engine coughed and sputtered up the ever-steepening incline.

‘Since Mr North has been ill, the car is forgotten.’

By this time anxiety had formed a ball in my stomach that bounced uncomfortably every time we went over a bump in the road or a stone, or around one of the alarming hairpin bends. We were passing through woodland now, tall, bushy trees growing up on each side of the narrow road, their branches forming a canopy overhead. Later, I would learn that these were ilex trees, but at the time I mistook them for English oak. To my right, at the bottom of a gully, I caught sight of a deep green pool, surrounded by rocks and reeds and low-hanging leaves, formed at a bend of a gentle stream. A stately heron stood motionless on the far bank, as if keeping guard.

I was a very long way from Pinner.

The protesting motor car was still ascending, zigging and zagging, and Alina’s muttering grew louder and more elaborate. Every now and then she would shout out a place name – *Setignano! Fiesole!* – and gesture to the left or to the right, but my attention was solely on the car, willing it forwards. Just when I thought the engine could not possibly withstand a second more of such punishment, we rounded a bend.

‘Il Castello,’ Alina said needlessly, for there was no mistaking the imposing stone building with the central turret and the arched entrance guarded by tall cypresses that dominated the skyline at the peak of the hill.

The sun was now behind us and the dense foliage over our heads ensured we remained plunged into shadow. From this vantage point side on, the castle appeared black against the deepening sky and I experienced a sensation akin to a blade of frosty grass brushing down the back of my neck. Then the

car turned another bend and we emerged into the light and the castle was revealed to be grey, not black at all, with a patina of amber from the reflection of the just-setting sun.

‘It’s beautiful,’ I said, taking in the castellated wall at the top and the formally laid-out gardens to the sides below which the land fell away in terraces down to the valley and a second wooded peak, hidden at first, rising up darkly behind the castle.

‘Yes, it’s very beautiful,’ Alina agreed, unsmiling.

The last part of the road was a straight, narrow avenue stretching almost vertically, and flanked on both sides by a row of cypress trees, culminating in the most enormous iron gates I’d ever seen, the gate posts topped by stone dragons, tongues reaching towards each other across the open gateway.

By now the car was groaning non-stop so it was a relief when we passed through the gates and the land levelled out into a gravel forecourt.

‘We are here,’ said Alina, as we came to a halt in front of the central turret. Close up, the imposing arched entrance was revealed to be framing a pair of colossal wooden doors.

Fear knotted inside me. What if the Norths were expecting someone younger or more educated or more qualified?

As I climbed out of the car and brushed down my coat, my legs felt wobbly. *You have survived the very worst*, I reminded myself. *Nothing again will ever come close.*

Still, as I glanced up to where the tower loomed against the deepening sky and found myself staring into the hideous face of a stone gargoyle shaped like a screaming monkey protruding from the upper wall, I wondered what in heaven’s name I’d done.

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THE DOORS OPENED on to a vast flagstoned hallway housing a stone staircase that cut through the centre and rose to the upper level. Intricate wrought-iron railings topped by balustrades of polished wood lent it a touch of elegance, while access was guarded by a pair of monstrous carved stone lions sitting sentry on the newel posts at either side of the bottom step. On the far wall, behind the staircase, was another arched doorway, mirroring the entrance, although its doors were made of clear glass, through which I could see what looked to be a large courtyard garden, studded with fruit trees and boasting a lawned area in the middle and around it an overgrown path, its terracotta bricks padded out with herbs and wildflowers.

Now I could see what I'd missed before, that the castle was actually a quadrangle with four sides – completely equal, with the exception of the turret in which I stood – surrounding an enclosed central courtyard.

I followed Alina to the right, through yet another double set of tall wooden doors, which gave out into the most beautiful room I had ever seen. Double aspect, with enormous windows that looked out from the side towards the

neighbouring hills, draped in blankets of lush greenery, while at the front, the gravel forecourt dropped away into a sky that was now tinged with amber and rose gold, the lights of Florence just visible at the bottom.

The ceilings soared high overhead, made of carved wood in the deepest mahogany brown, while a pair of immense stone fireplaces, each taller than a man's head and carved with a coat of arms, monopolized either end of the room. The floor was polished grey flagstones, scattered with luxurious oriental-style rugs, while an eclectic mix of velvet-upholstered sofas and chaises longues and leather armchairs were clustered here and there about the place, seemingly without any order whatsoever.

But it was the walls which drew my attention, hung as they were with multitudes of paintings of different sizes, different styles, some oils, some watercolours, some in small black wooden frames, others in ornate gilt ones decorated with cherubs and leaves and flowers of gold, until there was hardly an inch of painted wall visible. There were even a couple of artfully shot photographs hanging slightly separate from the rest of the collection, one of a woman with a wide-brimmed hat pulled down so that her face was completely in shadow, the other of a gnarled olive tree silhouetted against a dramatic sky – both extravagantly framed but jarring in the context of the rest of the art.

‘Mrs Manetti and her husband are visiting friends, but I think they will be home very soon,’ said Alina. ‘I will bring you tea.’

She disappeared through a set of lofty doors at the far end of the great room and I was left alone. Awkwardly, I started examining the paintings on the wall in that self-conscious

way of someone whose mind is on the things around them rather than the thing right in front of their eyes.

One in particular drew my attention and, as I stepped in front of it, I found myself suddenly cold, the fine hairs on my arms and the back of my neck standing to attention as if I were in a draught, even though the windows were closed. I stepped to the side and was instantly warm again. Then back. Cold.

It was a portrait in oils, medium-sized, around three feet high and two wide. The subject was a man in early middle age, wearing clothing that placed him firmly back in the annals of history, a dark cloak over a jerkin, a white collar above which a pale, bearded moon of a face appeared to be floating. The man's long, narrow nose overhung a small mouth, the fleshy lower lip almost obscuring the upper, but it was the expression in his intense brown eyes that stopped me in my tracks. He was staring rigidly into the middle distance, at some point past the artist's left shoulder, as if he could see something alarming, something that made him fearful.

I turned my head slowly, as if I might see there what the man in the painting had been looking at all those centuries ago.

'Foolish woman,' I muttered under my breath, seeing only empty air.

There came a sound of a car engine roaring up the hillside at the front, the progress far smoother than my own arrival. Through the front window I watched as first a shiny chrome grille topped by a chrome mascot in the shape of an angel and then a forest-green bonnet appeared through the gates.

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A young man jumped out of the driver's seat, holding a boxy black camera in one hand. He was wearing a loose shirt that showed off his broad shoulders and his head was bare, revealing a shock of black, curly hair that he flicked impatiently out of his eyes. As he did so, he must have caught sight of me in the window, and he stopped still, shading his eyes to stare into the house. Feeling like an interloper standing there on my own in their living room, I raised my hand weakly and he broke into a smile, waving his free arm vigorously.

He turned to say something, and now the passenger door opened and out stepped the most glamorous woman I'd ever seen outside of a cinema. Petite, with blonde hair cut into a shingled bob, she was wearing a powder-blue jersey dress that stopped at the knee with a matching cardigan thrown loosely over her shoulders and high Cuban-heeled shoes. She looked directly over to the window and, as soon as she saw me, she practically skipped with excitement, as if I was quite the most welcome sight.

'Oh, my dear Mrs Bowen, I feel just dreadful not being here when you arrived. Please forgive me.'

She'd flown into the room like a tiny blue bird and was holding one of my hands – which suddenly felt big as shovels – captive in both of her own. Up close her eyes were the blue of those first winter irises that bloom vibrant and defiant against the February frost and she wore a scent of vanilla mixed with lemon.

'I am Evelyn Chisholm. Oh, bother, that's a fat lie, isn't it? I'm Evelyn Manetti, as I must keep reminding myself. Look!'

She held up her doll-like left hand to show me the gleaming wedding band that sat on her fourth finger.