

Author's Note on
The Italian Girl

I originally wrote the story of Rosanna and Roberto seventeen years ago and it was published as *Aria* in 1996, under my old 'pen' name, Lucinda Edmonds. Last year, some of my publishers asked me about my backlist. I told them all the books were currently out of print, but they asked for some copies. Into my cellar I ventured, and pulled out the eight books I'd written all those years ago. They were covered in mouse-droppings and spiders' webs and smelt of damp, but I sent them off, explaining that I had been very young then and I completely understood if they wanted to bin them then and there. To my surprise, the reaction was incredibly positive and they asked me whether I would like to re-publish them.

This meant that I had to begin reading them too, and as any writer who looks back on their work from the past, I opened the first page of *Aria* with trepidation. It was a bizarre experience, because I couldn't remember much of the story, so I became involved just as a reader does, turning the pages faster and faster to find out what happens next. I felt the book needed some updating and re-editing, but the story and the characters were all there. So I set to work for a few weeks and the finished result is *The Italian Girl*. I hope you enjoy it.

Lucinda Riley, January 2014

The
Italian Girl

LUCINDA RILEY

writing as

LUCINDA EDMONDS

MACMILLAN

*The Metropolitan Opera House,
New York*

My Dearest Nico,

It is strange to sit down to relate a story of great complexity knowing you may never read it. Whether writing about the events of the past few years will be a catharsis for me, or for your benefit, darling, I'm not sure, but I feel driven to do it.

So I sit here in my dressing room wondering where I should begin. Much of what I will write happened before you were born – a chain of events that began when I was younger than you are now. So maybe that is the place I should start. In Naples, the city where I was born . . .

I remember Mamma hanging out the washing on a line that reached across to the apartment on the other side of the street. Walking down the narrow alleyways of the Piedigrotta, it looked as though the residents were in a state of perpetual celebration, with the different-coloured clothes on washing lines strung high above our heads. And the noise – always the noise – that evokes those early years; even at night it was never quiet. People singing, laughing, babies crying . . . Italians, as you know, are vocal, emotional people, and families in the Piedigrotta shared their joy and sadness every day as they sat on

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their doorsteps, turning as brown as berries in the blazing sun. The heat was unbearable, especially in high summer, when the pavements burnt the soles of your feet and mosquitoes took full advantage of your exposed flesh to stealthily attack. I can still smell the myriad scents that wafted through my open bedroom window: the drains, which on occasion were enough to turn your stomach, but more often the enticing aroma of freshly baked pizza from Papa's kitchen.

When I was young we were poor, but by the time I took my First Communion Papa and Mamma had made quite a success of 'Marco's', their small café. They worked night and day, serving spicy pizza slices made to Papa's secret recipe, which over the years had become famous in the Piedigrotta. In the summer months, the café became even busier with the influx of tourists, and the cramped interior was jammed with wooden tables until it was almost impossible to walk between them.

Our family lived in a small apartment above the café. We had our own bathroom; there was food on the table and shoes on our feet. Papa was proud that he'd risen from nothing to provide for his family in such a way. I was happy too, my dreams stretching little further than the following sunset.

Then, one hot August night, when I was eleven years old, something happened that changed my life. It seems impossible to believe that a girl not yet in her teens could fall in love, but I remember so vividly the moment I first laid eyes on him . . .

1

Naples, Italy, August 1966

Rosanna Antonia Menici held on to the washbasin and stood on her tiptoes to look in the mirror. She had to lean a little to the left because there was a crack in it that distorted her facial features. This meant she could see only half of her right eye and cheekbone and none of her chin; she was still too short to see that, even standing on her toes.

‘Rosanna! Will you come out of the bathroom!’

Sighing, Rosanna let go of the basin, walked across the black linoleum floor and unlocked the door. The handle turned immediately, the door opened and Carlotta brushed roughly past her.

‘Why do you lock the door, you silly child! What have you to hide?’ Carlotta turned on the bath taps, then pinned her long, dark, curly hair expertly on top of her head.

Rosanna shrugged sheepishly, wishing that God had made her as lovely as her older sister. Mamma had told her that God gave everyone a different gift and Carlotta’s was her beauty. She watched humbly as Carlotta removed her bathrobe, revealing her perfect body with its lush creamy skin,

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full breasts and long, tapered legs. Everyone who came into the café praised Mamma and Papa's beautiful daughter, and said how she would one day make a good match for a rich man.

Steam began to rise in the small bathroom as Carlotta turned off the taps and climbed into the water.

Rosanna perched herself on the edge of the bath. 'Is Giulio coming tonight?' she asked her sister.

'Yes. He will be there.'

'Will you marry him, do you think?'

Carlotta began to soap herself. 'No, Rosanna, I will not marry him.'

'But I thought you liked him?'

'I do like him, but I don't . . . oh, you are too young to understand.'

'Papa likes him.'

'Yes, I know Papa likes him. He's from a rich family.' Carlotta raised an eyebrow and sighed dramatically. 'But he bores me. Papa would have me walking down the aisle with him tomorrow if he could, but I want to have some fun first, enjoy myself.'

'But I thought being married was fun?' persisted Rosanna. 'You can wear a pretty wedding dress and get lots of presents and your own apartment and—'

'A brood of screaming children and a thickening waistline,' finished Carlotta, idly tracing the slender contours of her own body with the soap as she spoke. Her dark eyes flickered in Rosanna's direction. 'What are you staring at? Go away, Rosanna, and let me have ten minutes' peace. Mamma needs your help downstairs. And close the door behind you!'

Without replying, Rosanna left the bathroom and walked

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down the steep wooden stairs. She opened the door at the bottom of the stairs and entered the café. The walls had recently been whitewashed and a painting of the Madonna hung next to a poster of Frank Sinatra over the bar at the back of the room. The dark wooden tables were polished to a sheen and candles had been placed in empty wine bottles on top of each one.

‘There you are! Where have you been? I’ve called and called you. Come and help me hang this banner.’ Antonia Menici was standing on a chair, holding one end of the brightly coloured material. The chair was wobbling precariously under her considerable weight.

‘Yes, Mamma.’ Rosanna pulled another wooden chair out from under one of the tables and dragged it across to the arch in the centre of the café.

‘Hurry up, child! God gave you legs to run, not to crawl like a snail!’

Rosanna took hold of the other end of the banner, then stood on the chair.

‘Put that loop on the nail,’ instructed Antonia.

Rosanna did so.

‘Now, come help your mamma down so we can see if we have it straight.’

Rosanna descended from her own chair, then hurried to help Antonia safely to the ground. Her mamma’s palms were wet, and Rosanna could see beads of sweat on her forehead.

‘*Bene, bene.*’ Antonia stared up at the banner with satisfaction.

Rosanna read the words out loud: “Happy Thirtieth Anniversary – Maria and Massimo!”

Antonia put her arms round her daughter and gave her a

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rare hug. ‘Oh, it will be such a surprise! They think they are coming here for supper with just your papa and me. I want to watch their faces when they see all their friends and relatives.’ Her round face beamed with pleasure. She let go of Rosanna, sat down on the chair and wiped her forehead with a handkerchief. Then she leant forward and beckoned Rosanna towards her. ‘Rosanna, I shall tell you a secret. I have written to Roberto. He’s coming to the party, all the way from Milan. He will sing for his mamma and papa, right here in Marco’s! Tomorrow, we will be the talk of the Piedigrotta!’

‘Yes, Mamma. He is a crooner, isn’t he?’

‘Crooner? What blasphemous words you speak! Roberto Rossini is not a crooner, he is a student at the *scuola di musica* of La Scala in Milan. One day he will be a great opera singer and perform on the stage of La Scala itself.’

Antonia clasped her hands to her bosom and looked, to Rosanna, exactly as she did when she was praying at Mass in church.

‘Now, go and help Papa and Luca in the kitchen. There’s still much to do before the party and I’m going to Signora Barezi’s to have my hair set.’

‘Will Carlotta come and help me too?’ asked Rosanna.

‘No. She’s coming to Signora Barezi’s with me. We must both look our best for this evening.’

‘What shall I wear, Mamma?’

‘You have your pink church dress, Rosanna.’

‘But it’s too small. I’ll look silly,’ she said, pouting.

‘You will not! Vanity is a sin, Rosanna. God will come in the night and pull out all your hair if he hears your vain thoughts. You’ll wake up in the morning bald, just as Signora

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Verni did when she left her husband for a younger man! Now, get along with you to the kitchen.'

Rosanna nodded and walked off towards the kitchen wondering why Carlotta hadn't yet lost all her hair. The intense heat assailed her as she opened the door. Marco, her papa, was preparing dough for the pizzas at the long wooden table. Marco was thin and wiry, the polar opposite to his wife, his bald head glistening with sweat as he worked. Luca, her tall, dark-eyed older brother, was stirring an enormous, steaming pan on top of the stove. Rosanna watched for a moment, mesmerised, as Papa expertly twirled the dough on his fingertips above his head, then slapped it down on the table in a perfectly formed circle.

'Mamma sent me in to help.'

'Dry those plates on the drainer and stack them on the table.' Marco did not pause in his task as he rapped out the order.

Rosanna looked at the mountain of plates and, nodding resignedly, pulled a clean cloth out of a drawer.

'How do I look?'

Carlotta paused dramatically by the door as the rest of her family stared at her in admiration. She was wearing a new dress made from a soft lemon satin, with a plunging bodice and a skirt which tapered tightly over her thighs, stopping just above her knees. Her thick black hair had been set, and hung in ebullient, glossy curls to her shoulders.

'*Bella, bella!*' Marco held out his hand to Carlotta as he walked across the café. She took it as she stepped down onto the floor.

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‘Giulio, does my daughter not look beautiful?’ asked Marco.

The young man rose from the table and smiled shyly, his boyish features seemingly at odds with his well-muscled frame.

‘Yes,’ Giulio agreed. ‘She is as lovely as Sophia Loren in *Arabesque*.’

Carlotta walked towards her boyfriend and planted a light kiss on his tanned cheek. ‘Thank you, Giulio.’

‘And doesn’t Rosanna look pretty too?’ said Luca, smiling at his sister.

‘Of course she does,’ said Antonia briskly.

Rosanna knew Mamma was lying. The pink dress, which had once looked so well on Carlotta, made her own skin seem sallow, and her tightly plaited hair made her ears look larger than ever.

‘We shall have a drink before the guests arrive,’ Marco said, brandishing a bottle of jewel-bright Aperol liqueur. He opened it with a flourish and poured out six small glasses.

‘Even me, Papa?’ Rosanna asked.

‘Even you.’ Marco nodded to her as he handed everyone a glass. ‘May God keep us all together, protect us from the evil eye and make this day special for our best friends, Maria and Massimo.’ Marco lifted his glass and drained it in one go.

Rosanna took a small sip and almost choked as the fiery, bitter-orange liquid hit the back of her throat.

‘Are you all right, *piccolina*?’ asked Luca, patting her on the back.

She smiled up at him. ‘Yes, Luca.’

Her brother took her hand in his and bent down to whis-

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per in her ear. 'One day, you will be far more beautiful than our sister.'

Rosanna shook her head vehemently. 'No, Luca, I won't. But I don't mind. Mamma says I have other gifts.'

'Of course you do.' Luca wrapped his arms round his sister's thin body and hugged her to him.

'*Mamma mia!* Here are the first guests. Marco, bring in the Prosecco. Luca, go check the food, quickly!' Antonia straightened her dress and advanced towards the door.

Rosanna sat at a corner table and watched as the café began to fill up with friends and relatives of the guests of honour. Carlotta was smiling and tossing her hair as she stood at the centre of a group of young men. Giulio looked on jealously from a seat in the corner.

Then a hush fell over the café and every head turned towards the figure in the doorway.

He stood, towering over Antonia, then bent to kiss her on both cheeks. Rosanna stared at him. She had never thought to describe a man as beautiful before, but could summon no other word for him. He was very tall and broad-shouldered, his physical strength evident in the muscles of his forearms, which were clearly visible beneath the short sleeves of his shirt. His hair was as sleek and black as a raven's wing, combed back from his forehead to emphasise the finely chiselled planes of his face. Rosanna could not see what colour his eyes were, but they were large and liquid and his lips were full, yet firm and masculine in contrast to his skin, which was unusually pale for a Neapolitan.

Rosanna experienced a strange sensation in the pit of her stomach, the same fluttering feeling she had before a spelling

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test at school. She glanced across at Carlotta. She too was staring at the figure at the door.

‘Roberto, welcome.’ Marco signalled for Carlotta to follow him as he pushed through the crowd towards the door. He kissed Roberto on both cheeks. ‘I am so happy you have honoured us by coming here tonight. This is Carlotta, my daughter. I think she has grown up since last you saw her.’

Roberto looked Carlotta up and down. ‘Yes, Carlotta, you have grown up,’ he agreed.

He spoke in a deep, musical voice that caused Rosanna’s butterflies to flutter round her stomach once again.

‘And what of Luca, and . . . er . . . ?’

‘Rosanna?’ answered Papa.

‘Of course, Rosanna. She was only a few months old when I last saw her.’

‘They’re both well and . . .’ Marco stopped as he glanced beyond Roberto to two figures making their way up the cobbled street. ‘Hush, everybody, it’s Maria and Massimo!’

The assembled company immediately became silent, and a few seconds later, the door opened. Maria and Massimo stood at the entrance to the café, staring in surprise at the sea of familiar faces in front of them.

‘Mamma! Papa!’ Roberto stepped forward and embraced his parents. ‘Happy anniversary!’

‘Roberto!’ Maria’s eyes brimmed with tears as she hugged her son to her. ‘I cannot believe it, I cannot believe it,’ she repeated over and over.

‘More Prosecco for everyone!’ said Marco, grinning from ear to ear at the coup they had managed to pull off.

Rosanna helped Luca and Carlotta pass round the sparkling wine until everyone had a glass.

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‘A little quiet, please.’ Marco clapped his hands. ‘Roberto wishes to speak.’

Roberto climbed onto a chair and smiled down at the guests. ‘Today is a very special occasion. My beloved mamma and papa are celebrating their thirtieth wedding anniversary. As everyone knows, they have lived here in the Piedigrotta all their lives, making a success of their bakery and amassing a multitude of good friends. They’re known as much for their kindness as they are for their wonderful bread. Anyone with a problem knows they will always find a sympathetic ear and sound advice behind the counter of Massimo’s. They’ve been the most loving parents I could have wished for . . .’ Roberto’s own eyes were moist as he watched his mamma wipe away a further tear. ‘They sacrificed much to send me away to the best music school in Milan so I could train to become an opera singer. Well, my dream is beginning to come true. I hope it won’t be long before I am singing at La Scala itself. And it’s all thanks to them. Let us toast to their continued happiness and good health.’ Roberto raised his glass. ‘To Mamma and Papa – Maria and Massimo.’

‘To Maria and Massimo!’ chorused the guests.

Roberto stepped down from the chair and fell into his mother’s arms amid much cheering.

‘Rosanna, come. We must help Papa serve the food,’ Antonia said, and ushered Rosanna out of the room and towards the kitchen.

Later, Rosanna watched Roberto as he talked to Carlotta, and then, when Marco had put records on the gramophone brought downstairs from their apartment, she saw how

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Roberto's arms slipped naturally around Carlotta's narrow waist as they danced together.

'They make a handsome pair,' whispered Luca, echoing Rosanna's thoughts. 'Giulio doesn't look pleased, does he?'

Rosanna followed her brother's gaze and saw Giulio still sitting in the corner, watching morosely as his girlfriend laughed happily in Roberto's arms. 'No, he doesn't,' she agreed.

'You would like to dance, *piccolina*?' Luca asked.

Rosanna shook her head, 'No, thank you. I can't dance.'

'Of course you can.' Luca pulled her from her chair and into the crowd of guests who were dancing too.

'Sing for me, Roberto, please,' Rosanna heard Maria ask her son when the record stopped.

'Yes, sing for us, sing for us,' chanted the guests.

Roberto wiped his brow and shrugged his shoulders. 'I will do my best, but it's hard without accompaniment. I shall sing "*Nessun dorma*".'

Silence descended as he began to sing.

Rosanna stood spellbound and listened to the magical sound of Roberto's voice. As it ascended towards the climax and he stretched out his hands, he looked as if he were reaching towards her.

And that was the moment she knew she loved him.

There was thunderous applause, but Rosanna could not clap. She was too busy searching for her handkerchief to wipe away the involuntary tears that had trickled down her face.

'Encore! Encore!' everyone cried.

Roberto shrugged his shoulders and smiled. 'Forgive me, ladies and gentlemen, but I must save my voice.' There was a

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murmur of disappointment in the room as he resumed his place by Carlotta's side.

'Then Rosanna shall sing "*Ave Maria*",' said Luca. 'Come, *piccolina*.'

Rosanna shook her head violently and remained rooted to the spot, a look of horror on her face.

'Yes!' Maria clapped her hands. 'Rosanna has such a sweet voice, and it would mean much to me to hear her sing my favourite prayer.'

'No, please, I . . .' But Rosanna was swept up in Luca's arms and placed on a chair.

'Sing as you always do for me,' whispered Luca gently to her.

Rosanna looked at the sea of faces smiling indulgently up at her. She took a deep breath and automatically opened her mouth. At first, her voice was small, barely more than a whisper; but as she began to forget her nervousness and lose herself in the music, her voice grew stronger.

Roberto, whose eyes had been preoccupied with Carlotta's ample cleavage, heard the voice and looked up in disbelief. Surely such a pure, perfect sound could not be coming from the skinny little girl in the dreadful pink dress? But as he watched Rosanna, he no longer saw her sallow skin, or the way she seemed to be all arms and legs. Instead, he saw her huge, expressive brown eyes and noticed a hint of colour appear in her cheeks as her exquisite voice soared to a crescendo.

Roberto knew he was not listening to a schoolgirl perform her party piece. The ease with which she assailed the notes, her natural control and her obvious musicality were gifts that couldn't be taught.

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‘Excuse me,’ he whispered to Carlotta, as applause rang round the room. He crossed the café to Rosanna, who had just emerged from Maria’s enthusiastic embrace.

‘Rosanna, come and sit over here with me. I wish to talk to you.’ He led her to a chair, then sat down opposite her and took her small hands in his.

‘*Bravissima*, little one. You sang that beautiful prayer perfectly. Are you taking lessons?’

Too overwhelmed to look at him, Rosanna stared at the floor and shook her head.

‘Then you should be. It’s never too early to start. Why, if I had begun earlier, then . . .’ Roberto shrugged. ‘I shall talk to your papa. There’s a teacher here in Naples who used to give me singing lessons. He is one of the best. You must go to him immediately.’

Rosanna raised her eyes sharply and met his gaze for the first time. She saw now that his eyes were a deep, dark blue and full of warmth. ‘You think I have a good voice?’ she whispered incredulously.

‘Yes, little one, better than good. And with lessons, your gift can be encouraged and nurtured. Then one day I can say proudly it was Roberto Rossini who discovered you.’ He smiled at her, then kissed her hand.

Rosanna felt as if she might faint with pleasure.

‘Her voice is so sweet, is it not, Roberto?’ said Maria, appearing behind Rosanna and placing her hand on her shoulder.

‘It’s more than sweet, Mamma, it . . .’ Roberto waved his hands expressively. ‘It is a gift from God, like my own.’

‘Thank you, Signor Rossini,’ was all Rosanna could manage.

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‘Now,’ said Roberto, ‘I shall go and find your papa.’

Rosanna glanced up and saw that several guests were looking at her with the same warmth and admiration usually reserved for Carlotta.

A glow spread through her body. It was the first time in her life that anyone had told her she was special.

At half past ten, the party was still in full swing.

‘Rosanna, it’s time you went to your bed.’ Her mother appeared by her side. ‘Go say goodnight to Maria and Massimo.’

‘Yes, Mamma.’ Rosanna weaved her way carefully through the dancers. ‘Goodnight, Maria.’ Rosanna kissed her on both cheeks.

‘Thank you for singing for me, Rosanna. Roberto is still talking about your voice.’

‘Indeed I am.’ Roberto appeared behind Rosanna. ‘I’ve given the name and address of the singing teacher to both your papa and Luca. Luigi Vincenzi used to coach at La Scala and a few years ago he retired here to Naples. He’s one of the best teachers in Italy and still takes talented pupils. When you see him, say that I sent you.’

‘Thank you, Roberto.’ Rosanna blushed under his gaze.

‘You have a very special gift, Rosanna. You must take care to cherish it. *Ciao*, little one.’ Roberto took her hand to his mouth and kissed it. ‘We will meet again one day, I am sure of it.’

Upstairs in the bedroom she shared with Carlotta, Rosanna pulled her nightgown over her head, then reached under her mattress and pulled out her diary. Finding the pencil she kept

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in her underwear drawer, she climbed onto the bed and, brow furrowed in concentration, began to write.

'16th August. Massimo and Maria's party . . .'

Rosanna chewed the end of her pencil as she tried to remember the exact words Roberto had spoken to her. After carefully writing them down, she smiled in pleasure and closed the diary. Then she lay back on her pillow, listening to the sounds of music and laughter from downstairs.

A few minutes later, unable to sleep, she sat up. And, reopening her diary, picked up her pencil and added another sentence.

'One day, I will marry Roberto Rossini.'

2

Rosanna awoke with a start, opened her eyes and saw it was almost light. She heard the rumbling of the dustcart approaching on its dawn round, then turned over and saw Carlotta sitting on the edge of her bed. Her sister was still wearing her lemon dress, but it was badly crumpled and her hair was hanging dishevelled around her shoulders.

‘What time is it?’ she asked Carlotta.

‘Shh, Rosanna! Go back to sleep. It’s still early and you’ll wake Mamma and Papa.’ Carlotta took off her shoes and unzipped her dress.

‘Where have you been?’

‘Nowhere,’ she shrugged.

‘But you must have been *somewhere*, because you’re just getting into bed and it’s almost morning,’ persisted Rosanna.

‘Will you hush!’ Carlotta looked angry and frightened as she threw her dress onto a chair, then pulled her nightgown down over her head. ‘If you tell Mamma and Papa I was in so late, I shall never speak to you again. You must promise me you won’t.’

‘Only if you tell me where you were.’

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‘All right!’ Carlotta tiptoed across to Rosanna’s bed and sat down. ‘I was with Roberto.’

‘Oh.’ Rosanna was puzzled. ‘What were you doing?’

‘We were . . . walking, just walking.’

‘Why did you go for a walk in the middle of the night?’

‘You’ll understand when you get older, Rosanna,’ Carlotta answered abruptly as she moved back to her own bed and climbed under the sheet. ‘Now, I’ve told you. Be quiet and go back to sleep.’

Everyone in the Menici household overslept. When Rosanna arrived downstairs for breakfast, Marco was nursing a terrible hangover at the kitchen table and Antonia was struggling to clear up the mess in the café.

‘Come and help, Rosanna, or we shall never be ready to open,’ Antonia demanded, as her daughter stood surveying the debris.

‘Can I have some breakfast?’

‘When we’ve tidied the café. Here, take this box of rubbish out to the backyard.’

‘Yes, Mamma.’ Rosanna took the box and carried it through to the kitchen, where her father, looking grey, was rolling pizza dough.

‘Papa, did Roberto talk to you about my singing lessons?’ she asked him. ‘He said he would.’

‘Yes, he did.’ Marco nodded wearily. ‘But Rosanna, he was only being kind. And if he thinks we have the money to send you to a singing teacher on the other side of Naples, then he is deluded.’

‘But Papa, he thought . . . I mean, he said I had a gift.’

‘Rosanna, you’re a little girl who’ll grow up to make a

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husband a good wife one day. You must learn the gifts of cooking and home-making, not waste your time on fantasy.'

'But . . .' Rosanna's bottom lip trembled. 'I want to be a singer like Roberto.'

'Roberto is a man, Rosanna. He must work. One day, your sweet little voice will help soothe your babies to sleep. That is enough. Now, get that rubbish outside, then come back and help Luca wash the glasses.'

As Rosanna took the box to the dustbins in the yard behind the kitchen, a small tear rolled down her cheek. Nothing had changed. Everything was the same. Yesterday, the best day of her life – when she was somebody special – might as well not have happened.

'Rosanna!' Marco's voice roared from the kitchen. 'Hurry up!'

She wiped her nose on the back of her hand and went back inside, leaving her dreams in the yard with the rubbish.

Later that day, as Rosanna was slowly climbing the stairs to bed, exhausted by long hours of waiting on tables, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

'Why do you look so glum tonight, *piccolina*?'

Rosanna turned and looked at Luca. 'Maybe I'm just tired,' she shrugged.

'But Rosanna, you should be very happy. It's not every young girl that reduces a room of people to tears when she sings.'

'But Luca, I . . .' Rosanna sat down abruptly at the top of the narrow stairs and her brother squeezed in next to her.

'Tell me what it is, Rosanna.'

'I asked Papa about the singing lessons this morning and

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he said Roberto was only being kind, that he didn't really believe I could be a singer.'

'Atch!' Luca swore under his breath. 'That isn't true. Roberto told everyone what a beautiful voice you have. You must go to singing lessons with this teacher he suggested.'

'I cannot, Luca. Papa says he hasn't got the money for me to go. I think singing lessons must be very expensive.'

'Oh *piccolina*.' Luca put his arms round his sister's shoulders. 'Why is Papa so blind when it comes to you? Now, if that had been Carlotta, well . . .' Luca sighed. 'Listen, Rosanna, please don't give up hope. Look.' He fumbled in his trouser pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper. 'Roberto gave me the name and address of this teacher too. Never mind what Papa says. *We* will go and see him together, yes?'

'But we have no money to pay, Luca, so there's no point.'

'Don't worry about that yet. Leave it to your big brother.' Luca kissed her on the forehead. 'Sleep well, Rosanna.'

'Goodnight, Luca.'

As Luca made his way down the stairs and through the café, he sighed at the thought of another long night in the kitchen. He knew he should only be grateful he had a more secure future than other young men in Naples, but he found little pleasure in his work. Entering the kitchen, he went over to the table and began chopping a pile of onions, his eyes stinging from the pungent fumes. As he scraped them into the frying pan, he thought about his father's refusal to countenance singing lessons for his little sister. Rosanna had a gift and Luca would be damned if he was going to let her throw it away.

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On Luca's next afternoon off from the café, he and Rosanna took a bus up to the exclusive neighbourhood of Posillipo, perched on a hill overlooking the bay of Naples.

'Luca, it's beautiful here! There's so much space! Such cool air!' exclaimed Rosanna as they stepped off the bus. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

'Yes, it's very lovely,' agreed Luca, as he paused to gaze out across the bay. The shimmering azure water was dotted with boats, some plying a trade, others resting in their moorings close to shore. Looking straight ahead, the island of Capri floated like a dream on the horizon. Following the curve of the bay to the left, he could see Mount Vesuvius brooding in the distance on the skyline.

'This is really where Signor Vincenzi lives?' Rosanna turned and looked up at the elegant white villas nestled on the hillside above them. 'My goodness, he must be rich,' she added as they started walking up the winding road.

'I believe his house is one of these,' Luca said as they walked past several grand entrances. He finally stopped in front of the last one.

'Here we are – the Villa Torini. Come, Rosanna.' Luca took his sister's hand and led her up the drive to the bougainvillea-covered porch which housed the front door. Hesitating out of nervousness for a few seconds, he finally rang the bell.

The door eventually opened and a middle-aged maid peered out at them.

'*Sì? Cosa vuoi?* What do you want?'

'We have come to see Signor Vincenzi, signora. This is Rosanna Menici and I am her brother, Luca.'

'Do you have an appointment?'

'No, I . . . but Roberto Rossini—'

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‘Well, Signor Vincenzi sees no one without an appointment. Goodbye.’ The door was closed firmly in their faces.

‘Come, Luca, let’s go home.’ Rosanna pulled nervously at her brother’s arm. ‘We don’t belong here.’

From somewhere inside the villa, the sound of a piano drifted through the air. ‘No! We’ve come all this way and we won’t return without Signor Vincenzi hearing you sing. Follow me.’ Luca pulled his sister away from the front door.

‘Where are we going, Luca? I want to go home,’ she pleaded.

‘No, Rosanna. Please, trust me.’ Luca firmly took hold of Rosanna’s arm and followed the sound of the music, which led them around the side of the villa. They found themselves on the corner of a gracious terrace decorated with large clay pots filled with dusty-pink geraniums and deep-purple periwinkles.

‘Stay there,’ whispered Luca. He crouched down and crawled along the terrace until he came to a pair of French windows, which hung open to let in the afternoon breeze. He peered tentatively inside, then ducked back out of sight.

‘He’s in there,’ Luca whispered as he returned to Rosanna’s side. ‘Now, sing, Rosanna, sing!’

She stared at him in confusion. ‘What do you mean, Luca?’

‘Sing “*Ave Maria*” – quickly!’

‘I . . .’

‘Do it!’ he urged her.

Rosanna had never seen her gentle brother so adamant. So, she opened her mouth where she stood and did as he had asked.

*

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Luigi Vincenzi had just picked up his pipe and was about to take his afternoon stroll in the gardens when he heard the voice. He shut his eyes and listened for a few seconds. Then slowly, unable to contain his curiosity, he walked across the room and out onto the terrace. In the corner of it stood a child of no more than ten or eleven, wearing a washed-out cotton dress.

The child stopped singing as soon as she saw him, fear crossing her face. A young man, obviously a relative of the child judging by his resemblance to her, was standing next to her.

Luigi Vincenzi put his hands together and clapped slowly.

‘Thank you, my dear, for that charming serenade. But may I ask what the two of you are doing trespassing on my terrace?’

Rosanna slid slowly behind her brother.

‘Excuse me, signor, but your maid would not let us in,’ Luca explained. ‘I tried to tell her that Roberto Rossini asked my sister to call, but she closed the door on us.’

‘I see. May I know your names?’

‘This is Rosanna Menici, and I am her brother, Luca.’

‘Well, you’d better come inside,’ said Luigi.

‘Thank you, signor.’

Luca and Rosanna followed him in through the French windows. The spacious room was dominated by a white grand piano positioned in the centre of a gleaming grey marble floor. Bookshelves lined the walls, stuffed untidily with piles of sheet music. On the mantelpiece over the fireplace were numerous framed black-and-white photographs of Luigi in evening dress, his arms round the shoulders of people whose faces looked familiar from newspapers and magazines.

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Luigi Vincenzi sat down on the piano stool. ‘So, why did Roberto Rossini send you to see me, Rosanna Menici?’

‘Because . . . because . . .’

‘Because he thought my sister should have proper singing lessons with you,’ answered Luca for her.

‘What other songs do you know, Signorina Menici?’ Luigi asked her.

‘I . . . not many. Mostly hymns I sing in church,’ Rosanna stuttered.

‘Why don’t we try “*Ave Maria*” again? You seem to know that very well.’ Luigi smiled, sitting down at the piano. ‘Come closer, child. I won’t bite, you know.’

Rosanna moved towards him and she saw that, although his moustache and curly grey hair made him seem very stern, his eyes sparkled warmly under his thick eyebrows.

‘So, you sing.’ Luigi sat down and began to play the opening chords of the hymn on the grand piano. The sound was so different from any other piano she’d ever heard that Rosanna forgot to come in at the right moment.

‘Have you a problem, Rosanna Menici?’

‘No, signor, I was just listening to the beautiful sound your piano makes.’

‘I see. Well, please concentrate this time.’

And, inspired by the grand piano, Rosanna sang as she’d never sung before. Luca, standing nearby, thought his heart might burst with pride. He knew it had been right to bring Rosanna here.

‘Good, good, Signorina Menici. Now, we shall try some scales. Follow me as I play.’

Luigi led Rosanna up and down the keys, testing her range. He was not normally given to superlatives, but he had

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to admit that the child had the greatest potential he'd come across in all his years of coaching. Her voice was remarkable.

'So! I have heard enough.'

'Will you teach her, Signor Vincenzi?' asked Luca. 'I have money to pay.'

'Yes, I will teach her. Signorina Menici' – Luigi turned to Rosanna – 'you will come here every other Tuesday at four o'clock. I will charge four thousand lire for one hour.' It was half of what he usually charged, but the brother looked proud, if penniless.

Rosanna's face lit up. 'Thank you, Signor Vincenzi, thank you.'

'And on the days you're not with me, you'll practise for two hours at least. You will work hard and never miss a lesson unless there is a death in the family. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Signor Vincenzi.'

'Good. Then I shall see you on Tuesday, yes? And now you shall leave by the front entrance.' Luigi led Rosanna and Luca through the house to the front door. 'Ciao, Rosanna Menici.'

The two of them said goodbye, then walked sedately down the drive until they were out of the front gate. Then Luca picked Rosanna up in his arms and gleefully swung her round.

'I knew it! I knew it! He just had to hear your voice. I'm so very proud of you, *piccolina*. You know this must be our secret, don't you? Mamma and Papa might not approve, Rosanna. You mustn't even tell Carlotta.'

'I won't, I promise. But Luca, can you afford the lessons?'

'Yes, of course I can.' Luca thought of the cash he'd been

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saving for two years to buy a scooter, which would provide the first step towards his much longed-for freedom. ‘Of course I can.’

As they saw the bus approaching, Rosanna gave her brother an instinctive hug. ‘Thank you, Luca. I promise I’ll work as hard as I can. And one day I will repay you for this kindness.’

‘I know you will, *piccolina*, I know you will.’

3

‘Take care, Rosanna. The bus driver knows where to let you off, in case you don’t remember.’

Rosanna smiled down at her brother from the steps of the bus. ‘Luca, you’ve already told me a hundred times. I’m not a baby. It’s only a short journey.’

‘I know, I know.’ Luca kissed his sister on both cheeks as the bus driver started the engine. ‘You have the money safe?’

‘Yes, Luca! I’ll be fine. Please don’t worry.’

Rosanna made her way to a seat at the front of the bus, sat down and waved to Luca through the grimy window as the driver pulled out of the bus station. The journey was pleasant, taking her out of the bustle of the city and up into the freshness of the hills. Rosanna’s heart beat a little faster as she left the bus at the correct stop and walked up towards the villa. She rang the bell cautiously, remembering the previous frosty reception, but this time when the door was opened Rosanna was greeted with a smile by the maid.

‘Please come in, Signorina Menici. My name is Signora Rinaldi and I’m Signor Vincenzi’s housekeeper. He’s waiting for you in the music room.’ The woman led Rosanna along a corridor to the back of the villa and knocked on a door.

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‘Rosanna Menici, welcome. Please sit down.’ Luigi indicated a chair by a table, on which a jug of iced lemonade was standing. ‘You must be thirsty after your journey. Would you like a drink?’

‘Thank you, signor.’

‘Please, if we’re to work together, you must call me Luigi.’ He poured them both a glass of lemonade and Rosanna drank thirstily.

‘This weather is most uncomfortable.’ Luigi mopped his brow with a large checked handkerchief.

‘But it’s cool in this room,’ ventured Rosanna. ‘Yesterday, in the kitchen, Papa said it was over one hundred and twenty degrees.’

‘Really? That kind of temperature is only for Bedouins and camels. What does your papa do for a living?’

‘He and Mamma have a café in the Piedigrotta. We live above it,’ Rosanna explained.

‘The Piedigrotta is one of the most ancient quarters of Naples, as I’m sure you know. Your papa was born there?’

‘All our family were.’

‘Then you are true Neapolitans. Me, I’m from Milan. I only borrow your lovely city.’

‘I think it’s much nicer up here than down there, especially with all the tourists.’

‘You work in the café?’

‘Yes, when I’m not at school.’ Rosanna pulled a face. ‘I don’t enjoy it.’

‘Well, Rosanna Menici, if you cannot enjoy it, you must learn from it. I’m sure you have many English visiting your café during the summer.’

‘Yes,’ Rosanna agreed. ‘Many.’

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‘Then you must listen to them and try to learn some English. You’ll need it in the future. You also learn French at school?’

‘I’m top of my class,’ she replied proudly.

‘Some of the great operas are written in French. If you begin to speak these languages now, it will be easier for you in the future. So, what do your mamma and papa think of their daughter’s voice?’

‘I don’t know. I . . . they have no idea I’m taking lessons. Roberto Rossini told Papa I should come and see you, but Papa said we didn’t have the money.’

‘So, your brother is paying?’

‘Yes.’ Rosanna took some lire notes out of the pocket of her dress and placed them on the table. ‘Here is enough for the next three lessons. Luca wanted to pay in advance.’

Luigi took the money with a gracious nod of acceptance. ‘Now, Rosanna, I wish to know if you enjoy singing.’

Rosanna thought of how special she’d felt after she’d sung at Maria and Massimo’s party. ‘I love it very much. I’m in a different world when I sing.’

‘Well, that at least is a good start. Now, I must warn you that you are very young, too young for me to be sure whether your voice will develop in the right way. We must not strain your vocal cords – we must nurture them carefully, learn how they work and the best way to care for them. I teach a school of singing called *Bel Canto*. This involves a series of increasingly difficult voice exercises, each designed to learn a specific aspect of singing. When you have mastered these, you’ll have studied every possible potential vocal problem before it arises in the music. Callas herself learnt this way. She was not much

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older than you when she began. You're prepared for this kind of hard work?'

'Yes, Luigi.'

'I must stress that there will be no singing the great arias until you are much older. We'll first become familiar with the stories of the great operas and try to understand the characters. The finest performers are those who not only have wonderful voices, but are magnificent actors too. And don't think that two lessons a month with me will be enough to improve your voice,' he cautioned. 'You must practise the exercises I give you every day, without fail.'

Luigi broke off as he looked at Rosanna's wide eyes and chuckled suddenly. 'And you, Rosanna, must sometimes remind me that you're still a child. Please accept my apologies for frightening you. The beauty of your youth is that we have so much time. Now, we begin.' Luigi stood up and walked over to the piano stool. He patted the space on the seat next to him. 'Come, we will learn which notes are which on the piano.'

An hour later, Rosanna left the Villa Torini feeling deflated. She hadn't sung one single note during her entire lesson.

When she arrived home, exhausted from the heat on the bus and the tension of the afternoon, she headed straight up to her bedroom. Luca, his hands covered with flour, followed her upstairs.

'You found your way back then?'

'I'm here, aren't I, Luca?' She smiled at his concerned face.

'How was it, Rosanna?'

'It was wonderful, Luca. Luigi is very kind.'

'Good. I—'

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'Luca!' Marco roared his son's name from the kitchen below.

'I must go. We're very busy.' Luca kissed Rosanna on the cheek and hurried downstairs.

Rosanna lay on her bed, reached for her diary from under her mattress, and began to write. A few seconds later, Carlotta entered the room.

'Where have you been? Mamma wanted you to help but we couldn't find you. I had to wait on tables all afternoon.'

'I've been out . . . with a friend. I'm hungry. Is there anything to eat?'

'I don't know. Go ask Mamma. I'm going out.'

'Who with?'

'Oh, just Giulio,' Carlotta answered, looking bored.

'I thought you liked Giulio? I thought he was your boyfriend?'

'He was . . . I mean, he is . . . Oh, stop asking questions, Rosanna! I'm going for a bath.'

When Carlotta had left the bedroom, Rosanna finished writing her diary and returned it to its usual hiding place. Once she'd done that, she wandered into the kitchenette and poured herself a glass of water from the fridge. She knew that if she went downstairs to find something to eat, Mamma and Papa would find her a job to do. And she was very tired. Creeping along the landing, she opened the door to the iron staircase which led from the apartment to the street below. It was a place she often went when she needed time by herself, even though it looked over the dustbins at the back. Sitting on the top step, she sipped her water and relived every moment of her lesson with Luigi. Even if the hour had been spent learning to read the black notes on the music, not

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singing them, Rosanna loved Luigi's tranquil home. And the fact that she finally had a secret of her own thrilled her.

She went back into her bedroom and changed into her nightdress. Carlotta was wrapping a shawl round her shoulders, almost ready to leave.

'Have a nice evening,' said Rosanna.

'Thank you.' Carlotta gave her what seemed more of a grimace than a smile and left the room, leaving the smell of her perfume hanging in the air behind her.

Rosanna climbed into bed, pondering how she was going to escape to Luigi's villa every other Tuesday afternoon without being missed. Eventually, she decided she'd make up an imaginary friend. She would call her Isabella and make her parents quite wealthy, as that would impress Papa. She could then visit Isabella every other Tuesday without getting into trouble. As for the practising, she'd have to try to get up an hour earlier every morning and slip into church before Mass began.

Solutions found, Rosanna fell fast asleep.

It was late September. The café had quietened down, the summer tourists had left the city and the stifling heat had mellowed to a pleasant warmth. Luca went outside into the yard and lit up a cigarette, enjoying the balmy evening. Carlotta appeared behind him at the kitchen door.

'Luca, can you spare me a few minutes tonight before the café gets busy? I . . . have to talk to you.'

Luca looked at Carlotta's unusually pale face.

'What's the matter, Carlotta? Are you ill?'

She hovered in the doorway, opened her mouth to reply, then heard Antonia's heavy footsteps coming down the stairs.

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‘Not here,’ she whispered. ‘Meet me in Renato’s on the Via Caracciolo at seven. Please, Luca. Be there.’

‘I’ll be there.’

Carlotta returned a wan smile, then left.

A few days later, Rosanna walked through the café and opened the door leading up to their apartment. As she climbed the stairs, she heard Papa shouting in the sitting room. Concerned he might have discovered her secret, Rosanna stopped at the top of the stairs and listened.

‘How could you? How could you?’ Marco was repeating over and over.

Rosanna heard Carlotta’s loud sobbing.

‘Can’t you see you’re making things worse, Marco?’ Antonia sounded near to tears too. ‘Shouting and screaming at our daughter will not help her! *Mamma mia*, we must try to calm down and think what to do for the best. I’ll go and get us all a drink.’

The sitting room door opened and Antonia appeared, her usual high colour drained from her face.

‘Mamma, what is it? Is Carlotta sick?’ Rosanna asked, following her along the corridor to the kitchenette.

‘No, she isn’t sick. Go downstairs to your brother, Rosanna. He’ll make you some supper.’ Antonia’s voice was strained and she was breathing heavily.

‘But Mamma, please, tell me what’s happened.’

Antonia took a bottle of brandy from a cupboard in the kitchen, then turned round and gave her daughter a rare kiss on the top of her head.

‘No one is sick, everyone is fine. We’ll tell you all about it a little later. Now, off you go and tell Luca that Papa will be

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down in a few minutes.’ Antonia forced a smile and disappeared back into the sitting room.

Rosanna walked through the empty café and into the main kitchen, where Luca was standing at the back door smoking a cigarette.

‘Luca, what’s happened? Papa’s shouting, Carlotta’s crying and Mamma looks as if she’s seen a ghost.’

Luca took a long pull on his cigarette and exhaled slowly through his nose. Then he stubbed it out with his foot and turned back into the kitchen. ‘Would you like some lasagne? There’s one just ready.’ He walked across the kitchen and opened the oven door.

‘No! I want to know what’s happened. Papa never shouts at Carlotta. She must have done something very bad.’

Luca served the lasagne in silence. He put two full plates on the kitchen table and sat down, indicating that Rosanna do the same.

‘*Piccolina*, there are some things you’re just too young to understand. Carlotta has made a bad mistake, and that’s why Papa’s so angry with her. But don’t worry. The three of them will sort it out and all will be well, I promise. Now, eat your lasagne and tell me about your lesson with Signor Vincenzi.’

Knowing she was not going to acquire any further information, Rosanna sighed and picked up a fork.

Rosanna was awoken by the sound of soft sobbing. She sat up in bed, blinking in the grey light of the approaching dawn.

‘Carlotta? Carlotta, what’s wrong?’ she whispered.

There was no reply. Rosanna climbed out of bed and went across to her sister. Carlotta had a pillow over her head

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in an attempt to drown out the sound of her crying. Rosanna put a tentative arm on her shoulder and an agonised face appeared from under the pillow.

‘Please don’t cry. It can’t be all that bad,’ Rosanna soothed.

‘Oh . . . it *is*, it *is*. I . . .’ Carlotta wiped her streaming nose on the back of her hand. ‘I have to marry . . . I have to marry Giulio!’

‘But why?’

‘Because of something I’ve done. But . . . oh Rosanna, I don’t love him, I don’t love him!’

‘Then why must you marry him?’

‘Papa says I must and it’s all I can do. I’ve lied to him about the . . . oh . . .’ Carlotta sobbed again and Rosanna put her arms round her sister’s shoulders.

‘Don’t cry, please. Giulio is a nice man. I like him. He’s rich and you’ll have a big apartment and you won’t have to work in the café anymore.’

Carlotta looked up at her sister and smiled weakly through her tears. ‘You have a kind heart, Rosanna. Maybe when I’m married, Mamma and Papa will notice you more.’

‘I don’t mind. We can’t all be beautiful – I understand that,’ Rosanna answered quietly.

‘Well, just look where my beauty has got me! Maybe you’re better off without it. Oh Rosanna, I shall miss you when I leave.’

‘And I you. Will you be getting married soon?’

‘Yes. Papa will go to see Giulio’s father tomorrow. I think we’ll be married within a month. Everyone will guess, of course.’

‘Guess what?’ asked Rosanna.

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Carlotta stroked her sister's hair. 'There really are some things you can't understand until you're older. Stay young for as long as possible, little sister. Growing up isn't as much fun as it looks. Now, go back to your bed and sleep.'

'Okay.'

'And Rosanna?'

'Yes?'

'Thank you. You're a good sister and I hope we'll always be friends.'

Rosanna climbed back into bed with a sigh, still understanding nothing.

Four weeks later, Rosanna stood behind Carlotta in a blue satin bridesmaid's dress as her sister made her marriage vows to Giulio.

There was a party afterwards at the café. Although Rosanna knew that this should be the happiest day of Carlotta's life, her sister looked pale and tense, and Antonia not much happier. Marco seemed cheerful enough, breaking open bottle after bottle of sparkling wine and telling his guests of the lovely apartment with two bedrooms that the young couple would live in.

A few weeks after the wedding, Rosanna went to visit Carlotta in her new apartment near the Via Roma. Rosanna stared in awe at the television set in the corner of the sitting room.

'Giulio must have lots of money to have one of those,' Rosanna exclaimed as Carlotta brought in some coffee and they sat together on the sofa.

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‘Yes, he has money,’ Carlotta agreed.

Rosanna sipped her coffee, wondering why her sister seemed so subdued.

‘How is Giulio?’

‘I hardly see him. He leaves at eight to go to his office and doesn’t arrive home until after half past seven.’

‘He must have an important position,’ Rosanna encouraged.

Carlotta ignored her sister’s comment. ‘I make supper and then I go to bed. I feel so tired at the moment.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I’m having a baby,’ Carlotta replied wearily. ‘You will soon be a *zia* – Auntie Rosanna.’

‘Oh, congratulations!’ Rosanna leant over and kissed her sister on the cheek. ‘Are you happy?’

‘Yes, of course I’m happy,’ Carlotta replied morosely.

‘Giulio must be very pleased that he’s to be a papa.’

‘Yes, of course he is. So, how are things at home?’

Rosanna shrugged. ‘Papa’s drinking a lot of brandy and being bad-tempered and always shouting at me and Luca. Mamma is tired all the time and keeps having to lie down.’

‘So not much is different then, Rosanna.’ Carlotta managed a smile.

‘Except I think Mamma and Papa miss you.’

‘And I miss them, I . . .’ Tears came into Carlotta’s eyes. ‘Sorry, it’s being pregnant. It makes me emotional. Luca still has no girlfriend then?’

‘No. But he has no time to have one. He’s in the kitchen at eight in the morning and he doesn’t finish until very late.’

‘I don’t understand why he puts up with it. Papa’s so rude

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to him and pays him so little. If I were Luca, I'd go away and start a new life somewhere else.'

Rosanna was horrified. 'You don't think Luca will leave, do you?'

'No, Rosanna. Luckily for you, and unfortunately for him, I don't think he will,' Carlotta replied slowly. 'Our brother's a very special man. I hope one day he finds the happiness he deserves.'

At the end of May, Carlotta gave birth to a baby girl. Rosanna went to the hospital to see her new niece.

'Oh, she's so beautiful, and so tiny. May I hold her?' asked Rosanna.

Carlotta nodded. 'Of course. Here.'

Rosanna took the baby from her sister and cradled her in her arms. She stared into the baby's dark eyes.

'She doesn't look like you, Carlotta.'

'Oh. Who do you think she does look like? Giulio? Mamma? Papa?'

Rosanna studied the baby. 'I don't know. Have you thought of a name?'

'Yes. She will be called Ella Maria.'

'It's a lovely name. You are so clever, Carlotta.'

'Yes, isn't she?'

The two sisters turned as Giulio came into the room.

'How are you, *cara*?' Giulio kissed his wife.

'I'm well, Giulio.'

'Good.' Giulio sat down on the edge of the bed and reached for his wife's hand.

Carlotta moved her arm swiftly away. 'Why don't you give your daughter a cuddle?' she suggested.

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‘Of course.’ Giulio stood up and, as she passed the baby to him, Rosanna saw the hurt in his dark eyes.

Once her visitors had left, Carlotta lay back and stared at the ceiling. What she had done had been the right thing, she was sure of it. She had a successful husband, a lovely daughter, and had managed to avoid bringing disgrace on herself and her family.

Carlotta turned her head and looked down into the cradle. Ella’s dark eyes were wide open, her perfect white skin in contrast to the shock of black hair on the top of her head.

She knew she would have to live with her deceit for the rest of her life.