

"Thea who?" — The people of Tulsa
"Is Jago in it?" — Margaret, Thea's mother-in-law

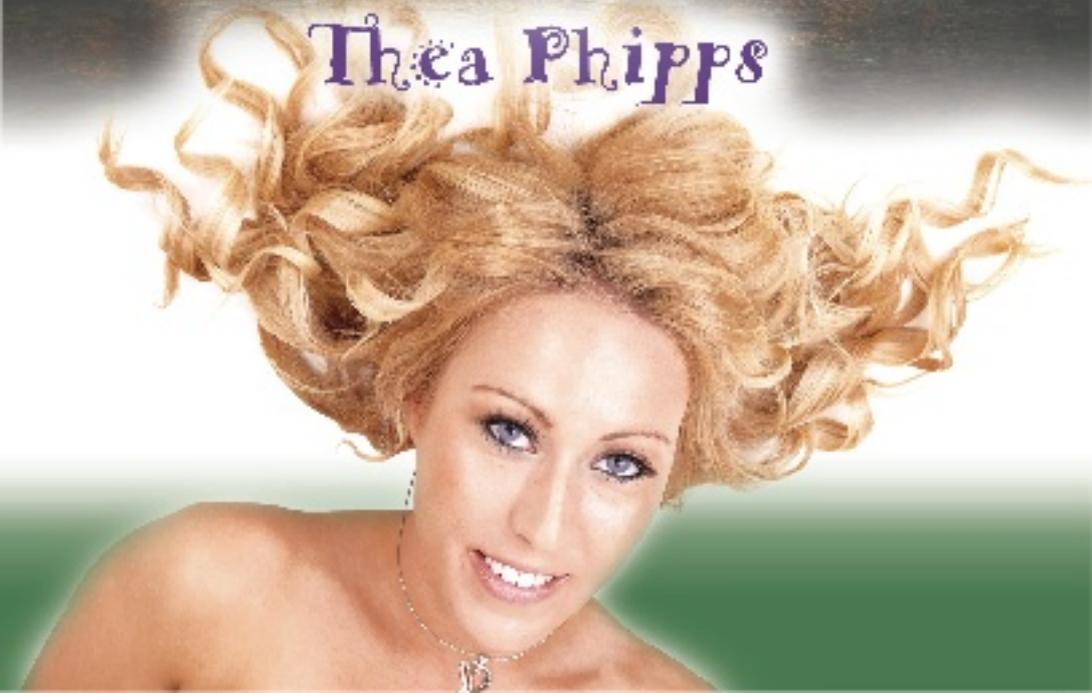
THE



ITALIAN

KEY

Thea Phipps





When Bella is anonymously sent the photograph of a café with the words, 'This is the key,' penned on the back, she travels to Italy to discover why. A key to what? Why is she being shadowed? And, what does it have to do with a dangerous riddle set out during WWII? Follow Bella and her friends on their farcical scramble across Italy to uncover a thrilling secret that had been hidden for centuries.

The Italian Key

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THE ITALIAN KEY

Thea Phipps

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First Edition

To
Randy
And all the Friends...
You know who you are...

Other books in the Bella Wildeve series:

Charades with a Lunatic
The Doll in the Wall

Also featuring Jago d'Este:

Strange Caper

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Even though a few of the historical events written about in this book actually took place in the oh-so-distant past, I refer to them merely to pad the narrative and plot. A few of the historical personages are real as well, but I merely used their names for the same reason. But since these people have been dead for hundreds of years, and according to U.S. law there is no such thing as libeling the dead, I can only assume they will not sue me. (But if a pox-raddled man in hose, peplum, and a neck ruff hands me a writ, I will run away. Who wouldn't?) THE ITALIAN KEY is entirely a work of fiction, and is in no way meant to be taken as fact.

First and foremost, I wish to thank Laura (and anyone else who had given me permission) for allowing me to use Caffè Rivoire in my book. Even though this is a work of fiction, the caffè is very real, with – I am told – the best tiramisu in all of Tuscany. I hope to test that out someday, along with a cup of their famous hot chocolate.

Grazie milli, Caffè Rivoire!

Sei il migliore!

Another 'thank you' goes to Angela Hoy for her kind patience and help. You are the best, Angela. And to Todd Engel, the award-winning graphic design artist who did the cover. I love your work, Todd. You blow me away.

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THE ITALIAN KEY

Thank you for all the times you took me out to dine on fried catfish and dirty martinis so I could talk about writing while you listened. Thank you for reading every word so you could catch those bizarre typos I'd inadvertently left in. And thank you for all the great plot suggestions that had us both laughing in public like idiots until people stared.

Any mistakes, typos or factual, are all my fault, and not the fault of Randy, the Internet, nor anyone else.

So settle in, buckle up, and come with me. I want to take you on a wild ride.

It all started with an anonymous photograph...

CHAPTER ONE

The anonymous photograph came in the post. There were only four Italian words penned on the back.

Questa è la chiave.

‘This is the key.’

The photo may have been small enough to fit in the pocket of my jeans, but, as I was to find out, it was big enough to unleash mayhem, intrigue, and mystery. But, to be honest, I might have been more than a little responsible for the mayhem. Farce pursues me like a Rottweiler. But the rest certainly followed its arrival, along with a healthy dose of romance. One cannot go to Italy and avoid that altogether.

I was at home in Halfmoon, Cornwall, when the photo arrived, enjoying a slab of my homemade biscotti on the terrace of my parents’ inn, the Iron Rose. Perhaps ‘enjoying’ is too strong a word. I was mostly just gnawing on it and trying not to drool on my tee shirt.

The post had been delivered to the front desk, but the inn’s server, Rayvyn, culled the envelope and brought it to me. On her way through the inn’s packed dining room she stubbed her toe on the credenza, let out a howl, and flung it. Throwing the envelope wasn’t what she’d intended, but she had to save herself, and the only way to do that was to grab a guest in lieu of going face down in his stew.

“Blimey!” my older brother Michael exclaimed, affecting a cockney accent. He reared back when the envelope sailed past us to land in a planter.

“Thank you!” I yelled, dropped the biscotto in my coffee to soften it, and fished the envelope out of the dirt.

“Who’s it for, Bella?”

“Me, but there isn’t a return address.”

“Postmark?”

“It’s smudged.” I sat down and used the handle of my jam spoon to slit the flap. “Airmail envelope, so I don’t think it’s from England. Which reminds me, I was just thinking about going to Italy. I want to get a commercial cappuccino machine. Can the funds handle that?”

Michael and I were helping our father open an outdoor café as a seasonal addition to the inn. Even though we were in a tiny fishing village overlooking the English Channel, the tourists flocking to the seaside made the venture worthwhile. The inn’s guests always asked to take their meals outside on the terrace. With the picturesque houses lining the shore below and the fishing boats dotting the water, the view was spectacular. Unfortunately there was no outdoor seating unless one counted the thick balustrades separating them from a lethal drop. And to make the *al fresco* dining experience worse, the only desserts that Peter Lord offered, an Anglophile from Detroit and the inn’s cook, was spotted dick that came in a tin. Only a starving schoolboy would pay to eat that.

Michael was reviewing the budget on his laptop, while I was busy that afternoon planning new terrace décor and the new menu. It meant getting the right cappuccino machine, new vendors, and practical dining furniture. That afternoon we were experimenting with a used bistro table from Penhaligon’s Sweet Shop. Penhaligon’s was best known for its taffy, ices, and the sweaty tourists who weren’t used to Cornwall’s summer heat.

Michael shifted his weight and the seat creaked. Again. I frowned. One flatulent old man sneezing and it would fold up.

“At first guess I would say it’s one of those newsy letters from *Nonna*,” he said, referring to my mother’s mother, “but that envelope doesn’t look very thick.”

Nonna is Italian for grandmother. My mother's family still lived in Italy, but she didn't. My Italian mother married my Irish father in Florence, moved to England, and birthed all six of us kids in London. Not all at once, of course, but over a period of 23 years. I am the next to the youngest, 21 years old, and the only daughter. My heritage makes me Italian enough to drive on the sidewalk when it's expedient, but too Irish to make good biscotti. I fished the chunk from my coffee and catapulted it via jam spoon to the seagulls.

I peered into the envelope. I didn't know what I had expected to see, but it certainly wasn't a single photograph. I pulled it out and turned it over, hoping to see some clue as to the sender. All I saw were four words in Italian.

This is the key.

I flipped it back to study the picture.

It was of a café, obviously European, but with no clue as to its name. The diners were all dressed in a fashion that had died well before the Beatles came on the scene. Fifties? Forties? I had no clear sense of clothing trends that had appeared before the advent of bellbottoms. The shot had been taken from the outside. The building's façade formed the background. Outdoor diners were in the foreground. Tall arched windows, white tablecloths, and architectural embellishments made the picture hauntingly familiar to me. I must have seen the café before, or had eaten at it.

I handed the photo to Michael. "Do you know where this is?"

He frowned, studying the sepia's details.

"You've seen it somewhere, too," I hazarded.

He handed it back. "It looks Italian. Take a look at the person seated on the left."

I did as he asked, studying the young man.

He wore a light, well-made suit. His hair was short on the sides, long on the top, and dark with pomade. The table in front of him held a folded newspaper and a wide-brimmed fedora. A white serviette was draped over one knee. He held an ornate espresso cup in one hand, while pointing with the other. Whatever he was indicating was beyond the photographer's shoulder and out of range. All I could see of the man's eyes were that they were dark, heavily lashed, and oddly familiar.

"I wonder if Nonna sent this for some reason," I said, for the moment ignoring the cryptic sentence on the back. "I know I've seen that face before. Maybe it's an old picture of someone in the family."

I knew it wasn't of *Nonnino*, my Italian grandfather. Nonnino was only five feet, eight inches tall. At five inches shorter than that, I obviously got my lack of height from the Italian side of the family. Even tiny Nonna could kiss his nose if she stood on tiptoe. The man in the picture, though seated, was obviously taller and a little thicker across the shoulders.

For some reason his image disturbed me, which was odd since neither of us had any idea if he was the focal point of the photo. It could have been anyone else in the picture, even the café itself that was 'the key.'

I showed Michael the writing on the back. "I'm going to call Nonna to see if she knows who sent this."

Michael handed me his mobile. I rang the dei Fiori residence, and the line was picked up on the fourth ring.

"Pronto!" a familiar voice greeted me.

"Questa è Bella. Chi e questo?"

This is Bella. Who is this?

I was rewarded with a burst of goodwill fired at me in rapid Italian.

“Bella, beautiful Bella!” Which in Italian is the giddy sounding ‘*Bella, bella Bella!*’ “Little Bella! How are you? This is D’Angelo! Cousin D’Angelo! We are here! Where are you?”

D’Angelo is the son of my mother’s younger sister, Annalisa. *Zia* Annalisa had married her sweetheart, Ettore Rossi, when she was only seventeen and he was a young medical student in Rome. They’d only been married a year when she’d found herself pregnant with triplets. Every day of gestation was fraught with breasts like screaming zeppelins and food cravings that could gag a buzzard. Or so I’d heard from my mother. All this happened three years before I was born. Then, after seven months of incubation, my cousins D’Angelo, David, and Drago erupted from their mother like aliens from a pod.

All that wrangling inside and outside their poor mother’s womb eventually evolved into something more productive when they hit puberty. They began training in gymnastics and dance, and by the time they were eighteen, they had finished their apprenticeship. Now, working as instructors at the *Accademia di Teatro* in Rome, they taught other budding performers how to dance.

“D’Angelo,” I said, speaking English. “How are you? What are you doing at Nonna’s? Is everything okay?”

“Everything, she is good!”

For D’Angelo to state that everything is good meant nothing.

Even though my Rossi cousins are identical, their temperaments couldn’t be more different. D’Angelo is an optimist, while Drago, the youngest, is a pessimist. David, the middle-born, is a philosopher, probably from spending his entire life in the company of the other two. My father once said that Drago sees only the dark side of the clouds, David

sees both sides, and D'Angelo doesn't even see the clouds. He's walking on them.

"Let me speak to Nonna, please," I sighed. I didn't trust D'Angelo's assertion that everything was fine.

My mother came from a hardy, long-lived line of loud, passionate, pancetta-eating Italians. They propagated like mad, had a reverential awe of the arts, and died in their nineties with all their hair and teeth intact. Nonna and Nonnino were starting their seventh decade. Even though they were physically active and in good health, I couldn't get the specter of aging out of my head. If a fall down the stairs didn't do them in, I had the faint worry that 70 years of pasta would.

The triplets' work schedule was too erratic and demanding to visit our grandparents outside of a family reunion. I wondered anew why they were in Florence instead of in Rome where they lived, but didn't ask.

While D'Angelo fetched our grandmother, I looked at the picture again. Michael had gone back to frowning at his computer.

"Bella?" Rayvyn, the server who had tossed the envelope at us, came out of the inn and stood in front of me.

As a cancer survivor, she had only one unsupported breast left. At the moment she was fiddling with it, rhythmically bouncing it off the palm of her hand like the end of a truncheon. I knew she wasn't aware she was doing it, rather like a person who fretfully scratches a flea bite when her mind is elsewhere. At 37 years of age, her remaining breast moved about like a wind sock full of hot taffy.

"Rayvyn, please stop that. You know the old lady in the Picasso room thinks your peasant blouse is possessed. She crosses herself every time you uncork a wine bottle."

Naturally thin to the point of emaciation, double-jointed, and organic up to her big, brown eyeballs, Rayvyn had somehow managed to simultaneously dart and float through life like a butterfly.

“Whatever.” She shrugged, but, thankfully, dropped her mammary. It fell to somewhere around middle-waist.

Michael did not look up. Only a month ago, it had finally dawned on him that the self-proclaimed “Child of the Cosmos” was infatuated with him, and had been for the past three years.

“Liza Weebs is here to see you, Bella.”

“Liza?” I hurriedly handed the phone to Michael, along with the photograph. “What is she doing here?”

Liza Weebs, one of the village’s oldest residents, never came to the Iron Rose. Even though she was still independent enough to toddle to the Moonstone pub and drink her weight in gin, I couldn’t imagine her making it to the inn. The pub above the seawall is close to her cottage. The Iron Rose is nearly two miles of twisty lanes going uphill.

“Did you already seat her?”

“No. She said she’s here to talk trade.”

I spotted her standing among the seated diners, her squat silhouette resembling a beer keg on pegs. Her aging grandson Len, Halfmoon’s only punk rocker, was holding her arm with one hand and a big floral tote with the other. Making eye contact, she ducked her head and toddled out to me, dragging Len behind her like a tattered party balloon.

Rayvyn left us to attend to the diners.

“I tried to sell me goods to Jude,” Liza screeched as she drew closer, “but he weren’t interested. He said to talk to you, gellie.” Liza always refused to use my name, instead calling me ‘girlie.’ Since her hundred-year-old lips sported a ridge of warts, certain words came out distorted. Girlie was one of

them. “Now, that Jude,” she smacked her verrucae, “he sure is a handsome devil, Jude is.”

Jude, another of my brothers, is 27 and the highly amused object of Liza’s affections. She had once told me that if she were twenty years younger, she’d take him home with her, having always favored blonds.

“What goods?” I asked even though I was afraid of the answer.

“These.” She reached into the tote Len was holding and hefted out one of her scones. She dropped it on the table with a thump that rattled my coffee cup and jarred Michael. Jumping up, he fled from the billowing cloud of soda, put his finger to his ear, and began talking into the phone. I tried to listen to his end of the conversation.

“Two pounds each.” Liza’s words recaptured my attention.

At first I thought she was talking about the weight of her scone, which could easily kill a seagull if one’s aim was good enough, then realized that she was giving me her price.

She went on before I could speak. “Our Len heard at the Moonstone that you’re going to posh this place up.”

Frank Lord, the proprietor of the Moonstone pub, was brother to the inn’s cook, Peter.

Liza clawed a piece of scone free and held it out to me. “Taste it.”

I shook my head, covering my mouth.

Only a few weeks ago I had eaten one of her scones right before a long anticipated holiday in Greece. It had resulted in food poisoning so vigorous, I’d lost a tooth’s filling in the plane’s toilet. I’m still not sure which end it came out of.

“What’s the matter, luv?” Len gave me one of his cocky grins.

“Liza,” I removed my hand from my mouth, “that scone you gave me last month made me extremely ill.”

Liza’s eyes narrowed behind the distorting lens of her glasses. “I gave you that scone to give to Jude, girlie.”

“Well, he gave it back to me. My friend and I had it for lunch.” Tamsin Hugo had been with me, and she had gotten nearly as sick as I had.

“He shouldn’t have done that.” Liza shook her head and rocked from side to side. Either she was getting ready to walk away, or preparing to charge me like a rhino. “Ruined the love potion I put in it when he gave it to you. Turned it all backwards. The potion were for him.”

“Love potion?”

“One dung pellet gathered by the light of the first full moon after Yule. I got it from me granny in 1937.”

“The dung pellet?” I was aghast.

“No, you stupid girl. The recipe.” She stopped bobbing and stared at me. “I used me own dung pellet.”

I heard Michael tell our grandparents goodbye and disconnect. He came forward to join our conversation. It was just as well. I was incapable of moving, let alone forming a sentence. I could feel the bits of biscotto I had eaten claw their way to my throat.

“No thank you, Ms. Weebs,” Michael said smoothly, hiding his grin. I continued to swallow convulsively and fixate on one of Liza’s moles. It embellished the center of her forehead like a bullseye. “We won’t be purchasing any village baking just yet. I’m sorry you came up here on a wasted errand. Perhaps we can offer you lunch on the house?”

“Make it a gin, daft boy, and you’re on.”

While he escorted them back into the inn, I swung around to regard the massive scone she’d left on the table. It squatted

there, a lumpy, malevolent, blind toad. Using the hem of my tee shirt like a hazmat glove, I carried the scone to the edge of the terrace and flung it as far as I could. Which wasn't far. It bounced a couple of times before exploding on a pointed rock.

When Michael came back onto the terrace, he found me lost in thought.

Contrary to what any sane person would do, I wasn't brooding anymore over having eaten Liza's love scone. By the time Michael came out, I was brooding over a pair of silver eyes.

If I hadn't eaten her evil scone when I'd left for my holiday in Greece a month ago, I wouldn't have gotten food poisoning. If I hadn't gotten food poisoning the morning of our departure, I would have never ended up on Gavdos. Gavdos – the tiny Greek island where Tamsin and I had promptly gotten embroiled in kidnapping, smuggling, and generally running from rock to rock like headless chickens refusing to die.

But we weren't the only ones involved in the escapade. There'd also been Jago, a man with eyes the silver-blue of Irish crystal. But he wasn't Irish. In fact, I had no idea what, or who, he was. He spoke with a slight French accent, but assured me that he wasn't French. However, not only had he spoken French, he had spoken English and Greek as well.

All I knew was that he was tall enough for the top of my head to miss his chin. That he had deep black hair that threw copper sparks in the Greek sun. That he rode a motorcycle like Jehu in his chariot, taking the jumps and wild hairpin curves with ease. That he was quick, intelligent, and amused at too many things. Many times the only way I knew he was laughing was by the unholy grin that appeared in his eyes.

Half of those grins were directed at me. Or caused by me. I was never quite sure which.

At our first meeting I had literally collided with him, fallen, and skidded on my backside before coming to a halt against a trash bin. During our second encounter I had thrown rocks at him. On our third I had shoved him off my balcony. He had taken to calling me Juliet.

I knew his father's name was Max. And I knew that Max had once worked with friends of ours, Albert and Violet Pengarth, when all three were in MI6 decades earlier. That alone explained the talents and skills Jago had displayed, skills he'd probably inherited from his father. Talents such as the ability to sense when we were close to danger, the skill to melt away, and the tendency to enjoy himself while doing so.

I didn't know where Jago was. He'd disappeared from my life as abruptly as he had entered it. The last I had seen him, we were in Greece. And the last words he'd said to me were a quote from Shakespeare's 'As You Like It.' He'd said it in French. I'd had to wait until I'd met up with my family before finding someone to translate it.

'Nous qui sont les vrais amateurs avez un estrange capres.'

We that are true lovers run into strange capers.

He had given me a necklace with a tiny silver medallion. The name of the play and the date we'd met was engraved on it.

I'd never even gotten to say goodbye. It had upset me at the time. I wasn't sure what I might have done. Although we had waltzed under the olive trees one scary night, he'd never been affectionate or physical in any way. Not that I'd ever done much of that with anyone else. I had never considered dating to be a sport like football or cricket. If I ever gave my

heart away, I didn't want it handed back when the round was over.

Michael swiped a damp dishcloth over the table, obliterating leftover scone dust, then sat down. "Are you all right, *poca?*"

I fingered the medallion under my tee shirt, the one I wore every day since Jago had given it to me. If Michael knew the significance of my gesture, he didn't say anything. I had told my family about Jago, but not about the way my heart would jolt every time his smile went through me.

"I'm fine. How am I going to tell Tamsin what we ate in Liza's scone?"

Tamsin Hugo, the friend who had accompanied me to Greece, lived in the attic flat of the Bunt sisters' boardinghouse. She worked part time in the lending library, but spent most of her free time doing volunteer work with me.

"I have no idea how you're going to break it to her. By the way, Nonna and Nonnino are both well. She said she hadn't sent the picture."

"Michael?"

"Yes?"

"I would like to go to Italy. Maybe take Tamsin with me. Two weeks should be long enough to check out vendors and supplies." I ignored his sudden grin. "She's never been to Florence. And it's been a while since I've seen Nonna and Nonnino."

"Are you sure it has nothing to do with this?" Michael waved the photo at me. "I'm certain this was taken in Italy. Why don't you ask Mum if she recognizes anything?"

"Good idea." I grabbed it. "And quit laughing."

I went in search of my mother and found her in the kitchen preparing dinner.

My mother was making pizza Napoletana from scratch using the dei Fiori family recipe. Huge wheels of rosemary crust topped with sweet basil, crushed tomatoes, garlic, and creamy mozzarella. I knew they would be served with bowls of green salad, her nod toward healthier eating. Not that eating cheese by the udder-load seemed to have hurt any of us. Maybe it was in the genes. Or perhaps it was because my mother used only the purest olive oil. Or I could be wrong, and our bodies were clogging up faster than a school toilet, primed to explode from aneurisms.

Since my father is Irish and my mother Italian, we'd never adhered to the British schedule of teas. We ate like Italians in one boisterous family unit, though three of my brothers didn't live at home with the rest of us, but in a cottage on the edge of the inn's property.

"Ah, you are here, Bella." My mother sprinkled fresh rosemary over the dough. "Would you like to help me? The tomatoes still need seeding."

"Of course."

I washed my hands with antibacterial soap, thinking of the scone, donned an apron, and joined her at the huge wooden table. I pulled the colander of blanched tomatoes toward me and slipped a knife from the block. While I worked, I considered the best way to voice my desire to visit Italy. After a few seconds of companionable silence, I stole a look at my mother working the pizza dough.

At first glance, one would think my mother to be in her late twenties. Her hair is still blonde without artificial help; a shoulder length fluff of silver gilt spirals that make my own curls look as if I'd been dragged backwards through shrubbery. Most didn't see the few threads of true silver in the gilt, and the laugh lines at the corners of her violet eyes.

I look a little like her, but, thanks to my father's Irish genes, not enough. I have been described by friends as a "classy mess," and by my father as a "rosebud plucked from the wild Italian rose" he'd married. I could only hope my father saw me as an unpolished version of my beautiful mother, though I well knew what my friends meant every time I would see my reflection in a shop window – the emphasis being on the second word.

I have my mother's hair, only wilder, longer. I have my mother's eyes, though not as exotic. The rest of my face is my father's. My mouth is typically Irish. I look like I'm grinning even when I'm not. I'm also not as pristine as my mother. I am the unfortunate byproduct of growing up with four older brothers. They taught me many unladylike things, such as how to burp on command by the time I was three. Their cues usually consisted of hand signals. I still have the perverse desire to belch when a traffic cop points at me.

"What is it, *tesoro*?" Mum asked without looking up from her task. "You need to ask something?"

Usually candid with my parents, I suddenly felt uneasy about showing her the photograph. I had a gut feeling that the photo carried something deeper and darker that warranted a fence around me. But I wanted to go to Italy, not only to help my father make the terrace ready for diners, but to figure out why the picture had been sent to me, and by whom. Michael had been correct when he'd teased me about the photograph being one of the reasons I'd wanted to go. And because of that, I was afraid my parents wouldn't let me.

I wouldn't blame them if they refused. My holiday in Greece had been a dangerous fiasco. It didn't help that it had been the first time they'd sent me off on an extended stay somewhere else without them. One thing was clear. They were of mixed emotions about me. I think they were

uncomfortable with the fact that I was more like them than they had thought.

My father had been kicked out of home when he was fifteen. Undaunted, he'd traveled to Paris, and then to Italy, being the artist he'd always intended on being, living off his wits and his talent. While still a teenager, he'd met my mother in Rome and asked if she would be his model. She, along with her liberal parents, had agreed, and for days they would meet in his garret. Then after she'd returned to Fiesole with her family, he'd asked to rent the family apartment in Florence so he could be near her. They agreed, so my father set up his studio there and continued to paint pictures of my mother. I had seen photos of those paintings. The art was spectacular, unforgettable, and those canvasses had catapulted him into the limelight. My parents got married, moved to London, and he continued churning out great works of art while Mum churned out babies.

All this they'd done with confidence in their ability to thrive, but they had carefully raised their children not to follow in their bohemian footsteps. I had been lovingly protected and taught cautious good sense until I was grown. Then, once I was on my own for the first time, the DNA they had been trying to mold into another, more traditional shape burst out and reasserted itself.

I wiped a hand on my apron, fished the photograph from my back pocket, and put it on the table where we could look at it.

“What is this?” She paused, studying it, but made no move to take it with her sticky hands. “Where did you find it?”

“It came in the post. There wasn't a sender's name or address on the envelope. All I know is that it wasn't sent from England, but Nonna doesn't know anything about it.”

She frowned. “I wonder who would send you a picture of Caffè Rivoire. It looks like an old photograph.”

“Rivoire!” I started to slap my forehead then remembered the tomato seeds on my fingers. “That’s where it was taken! I knew it was familiar.”

Caffè Rivoire is one of the oldest caffès in Florence, Italy. Bordering the Piazza della Signorina, the city’s most famous hub, it was within sighting distance of the Uffizi Gallery, the Palazzo Vecchio, and the Fountain of Neptune, not to mention the seventeen foot replica of Michelangelo’s *David*. The caffè is best known for its chocolate and pastries. The last time I’d been there, I had bought a chocolate cake for my grandparents.

I pointed to the man in the photograph. “He looks familiar to me. Is he a relative?”

My mother shook her head. “He is no one I know. I have not seen him before.”

“Do you recognize anyone else in the photograph?”

She shook her head again.

I told her about the three Italian words penned on the back.

My mother sighed, knowing where our conversation was eventually going to lead. “Ask your father, *tesoro*. Perhaps he knows. He is in his studio finishing Gabriel’s portrait.”

“Perhaps,” I said dubiously, deciding to think my plans through before talking to him. “Perhaps tonight.”

CHAPTER TWO

I showed the photograph to my family after dinner. The picture was passed around the table over our dessert of *torta della nonna*, a custard pie of pine nuts and almonds.

The whole family was there, which made thirteen of us with an opinion. Besides my parents, five brothers, and two great-aunts Astrid and Aurora, both who lived with us, there were my paternal grandparents, Bryn and Finghin, and my father's youngest brother, Uncle Liam.

"Which came first, Bella?" Dante, my oldest brother at 32, asked, accepting the cup of tea I handed him. With his black hair and green eyes, he looked the most like our father. "The idea to visit Nonna and Nonnino, or the photograph?"

Of all of my brothers, he was the most prone to worry about me.

"I was already thinking about going to Italy to get a commercial cappuccino machine. I might not even have the chance to check out the photograph once I get there." I got myself a cup of tea from the urn and sat down. "Even though I'd like to. Isn't anyone else curious?"

"You don't need to go all the way to Italy to buy a machine. You can go online," Brandt, my next oldest brother at 31, said. He was looking for a clean fork. Great-aunt Aurora had already taken up the silverware on the table and had toddled off to the kitchen with it.

"Or find Italian coffee machines in London," Michael grinned, reading my mind. He knew I really wanted to go because of the photo. I flicked a pine nut at him when my mother wasn't looking.

"I wouldn't let the lass out of my sight," Grandfather grunted, having seen me nail my brother on the forehead.

Grandfather had been with me in Greece, and had been an unwilling participant in the escapade.

“Don’t stop her, Finghin.” My grandmother handed him his dessert, then looked at her son, my father. “Maybe someone can go with her, Luc.”

Grandfather took the plate of custard, blinked a moment at the pine nuts then set it on the table. “It won’t be me,” he growled. “The girl is a two-nanny job.”

“I’ll go,” my nine-year-old brother, Gabriel, volunteered. “I could protect her.”

“There’s one nanny down,” Jude grinned and leaned his chair back to snatch a handful of clean forks from the sideboard behind him. He took one and passed the rest. “If we can just get one more she’ll be good to go.”

“Perhaps Aurora and I can go with her,” Great-aunt Astrid suggested as her sister toddled back in carrying a spatula. No one had asked for one. I couldn’t even begin to imagine why Aunt Aurora had fetched one from the kitchen when she’d carted off the forks. Perhaps it was the only utensil she could find to eat her dessert with. Gabriel grinned at me when she handed it to Grandfather. He growled under his breath and tossed it onto the table.

Aurora sat down, unperturbed. Michael passed her a fork and a plate of dessert. “Go where?” she asked.

“Nowhere, darlin’.” Uncle Liam grinned at her, raising a bite of torte in a salute. “Be careful with your teeth, Auntie, there are plenty o’ nuts in here.”

“Don’t say it,” Grandmother sang under her breath before my grandfather could open his mouth.

My two great-aunts, sisters to my grandmother, had spent several decades in Peru as missionaries. Years in a primitive environment had taken its toll, and, as a result, their tired hearts could not keep up with their active brains. Oxygenated

blood didn't always make it all the way up. Sometimes as sharp as broken glass, other times as fuzzy as lint, they vacillated between clarity and bewilderment. When Gabriel was six, he'd asked me quite seriously if their wires were loose.

"Does anyone have any ideas as to why the picture was sent to me?" I wanted my father to speak, but his only reaction to my question was a thoughtful smile.

Aunt Aurora poked a pleated beret in the photo. "Mother's neighbor had a hat just like this."

"You're right," my grandmother said. "She'd bought it for Aunt Janine's funeral in the summer of 1939."

"Surely not summer, dear," Aunt Astrid objected. "I seem to remember she wore a coat."

"Spring, perhaps, then." Grandmother shrugged. "You may be right. But I know the funeral was the year the war started."

"What about the rest of the clothes?" I asked eagerly.

"I would assume they are from the same time." Grandmother studied the caffè's patrons a few seconds longer then handed the picture to my mother. "You would know Italian fashions much better than I, dear. What do you think?"

"I think Aunt Aurora is right," she said slowly. "I think this was taken before the war, or perhaps right before the Germans came."

"How do you know?" Jude asked,

"There is too much food," she said simply.

My father finally spoke. "You're right, *mo ghra*." He slipped the photograph from her hand and studied it a moment, turning it over to look at the words penned on the back.

"Dad, I've already worked out my plans," I began hesitantly, waiting until his eyes met mine. I couldn't read

anything in his expression except wary amusement. “We could ride the Eurostar from London to Paris then book an overnight couchette on an Artesia train, and arrive in Florence the next morning.”

A couchette was far cheaper than a sleeper compartment. The only drawback of a couchette was that it slept anywhere from four to six people. If you travelled alone, chances were excellent that you would end up sharing with a small crowd of strangers. Thankfully, I could ask for a ‘female only’ compartment.

“We?”

“I was going to ask Tamsin to go with me. We could take a taxi from the station to Nonna’s and Nonnino’s.”

My grandparents lived on a large estate outside of Florence, its grounds covered in statuary, neglected topiary, and disused fountains. The villa itself is a peeling, leprous ghost of empty rooms, high ceilings, and dissolving murals, but the estate contained an exuberant garden, lush *lemonaia*, or lemon house, and a tiny, fierce couple, Lucia and Abramo Conti, as caretakers. All four of them, my grandparents and the Conti’s, resided amidst the decaying splendor like a cache of antique dolls.

I went on, encouraged by my father’s silence. “We could stay with them, or we could rent a Vespa or two and stay in the flat.”

The family owned a flat on the Via Ghibellina, just meters from the Duomo and the Ponte Vecchio. It was also close to Caffè Rivoire. The last person to have lived in the flat was my father right before he’d married my mother. Since then, various relatives used it whenever they were in Florence. At the moment I knew it to be empty.

“I can also visit the flea markets for dishes, linen, and bistro tables. I could start at the San Lorenzo market to find a good food vendor.”

At least once a year we would visit Nonna and Nonnino in Florence. I was familiar enough with the ancient Tuscan city to find my way around fairly well, and my parents knew that. Even though I’d pleaded my case with only a few sentences, I felt like a barrister putting forth my closing argument. It was time to shut up. Almost.

“Please?”

The plea fell out when I opened my mouth to take a bite of dessert. I put my fork down, waiting for the verdict.

My father smiled. “Michael?”

I knew when my father said my brother’s name that he was going to give me his blessing.

“I’ll go with her.” Michael wiped his mouth and dropped his serviette on the table. “I already knew you were going to ask. I’d have to go anyway since I’m the one signing away the money. I’d already made tentative arrangements with Peter and Rayvyn this afternoon to take the kitchen and dining room for me.”

I had grinned when my father gave his blessing, but at the mention of Peter and Rayvyn the smile slid off my face. “Will that work?” I pushed my dessert away and leaned my elbows on the table. “I know Pete can handle the kitchen, but you know Rayvyn doesn’t listen to him.”

Not listening was merely the tip of the iceberg. Rayvyn and Pete fought like competing stage mothers. Just days earlier Rayvyn had decided to do her performance art next to Pete’s vat of cock-a-leekie soup. Rayvyn’s art consisted of bending her body into horrific double-jointed poses and giving them psychedelic names. She’d called the pose that morning *Rollicking Gumboil*, or something equally

unattractive. Michael had insisted that I'd heard wrong and that she'd called it *Frolic in the Soil*, which was just as off-putting since it called up ecstatic earthworms. Whatever it was, she'd managed to upset the vat of cock-a-leekie when she'd swung her foot over her head. Pete lost it and went after her with a corkscrew.

"I convinced her that it would be in her best interests to cooperate with Pete while I was gone." Michael shrugged. "I told her I had something important to do in Florence, and that I wouldn't be gone long."

"Aurora and I can help here," Astrid interjected. "If we can't go to Italy as Bella's bodyguards, then we can certainly work at the inn."

"You will do no such thing," my mother smiled, leaning over to pat their hands.

Aurora grasped my mother's fingers. "If you're certain, dear, but I can help take some of Bella's work while she's gone. I can at least make the guests' beds and twitch a feather duster when it's needed."

"And I can scrub the loos every night," Astrid said briskly. "All I need is a fistful of Jessamine blossoms. They have wonderful antibacterial properties. Worked a treat on Aurora's leech scars when we were in Pachacamac."

"Pachacamac is a most interesting Peruvian village," Aurora added. "It's powered by guinea pig dung."

Before anyone could think of anything to say, Aurora tut-tutted and raised my mother's hand to her face. "Your wedding ring. The amethyst seems to be loose." She touched the stone. It fell out of its setting and skipped toward the discarded spatula. Brandt captured it before it could skitter into oblivion.

My mother slipped the ring from her finger and held it up. "Luc," she said, dismayed. "A prong is missing. It must have

broken off when I dropped it yesterday. My hands were wet, and the ring slipped off.”

“It will be fine, luv,” my father said. “It will be fit once we take it to a jeweler’s.”

Not a traditional wedding ring, it was made of silver entwined around an amethyst heart. My father had found it in a shop selling Renaissance jewelry on the Ponte Vecchio.

“Since I’m going to Florence, Mum,” I volunteered, “I can take it to the original jeweler’s, and he will fix it for free.”

“Isn’t the original jeweler dead?” Michael murmured, grinning.

“No, *mia figlia*, I do not want you to travel with valuable jewelry,” my mother said, giving me a firm look.

“Michael can.” My father took the amethyst from Brandt and gave it to her. “Just put it back in its box, and he can get it repaired.”

I thought of the Ponte Vecchio where my father had bought the ring. The Ponte Vecchio was a long arched bridge spanning the Arno River. Easily over a thousand years old, the bridge had always been lined with shops. But what had been butcher shops in the early days were now jewelers and art galleries.

My father had sold his first painting of my fifteen-year-old mother through one of those galleries. The same dealer had also sold a small drawing that my father had done of me when I was sixteen. It was a three-quarter profile framed by my berserker hair. I had hated it at the time, hating the unruly curls on my head, but my father had coaxed me out of my protestations, called it *Wilde*, a play on our last name of Wildeve, and packed it off to *signor* Medici’s. I was amazed and slightly perturbed when it sold within a week.

“Don’t worry,” Michael said as my mother tucked the ring with its amethyst in her pocket, “We can take it in when we arrive. There will be plenty of time for it to be repaired before we leave.”

“Speaking of your trip, *poca*,” Jude leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest, “when are you planning to go?”

“I hadn’t gotten that far.” I ate a forkful of dessert, noticing a tiny fingerprint in the custard where Gabriel had stolen an almond. “That’s up to Dad.”

“When can Tamsin leave?” Dante asked. “Or have you spoken to her yet?”

“I haven’t. I need to ring her tonight.”

“Tell the lass I’ll pay her way if she’d like to go,” my father said. “And if it’s fine by her, I’d like you and Michael to leave mid-week when it’s less crowded. It should be easy enough to secure train tickets since it’s nearing the end of the tourist season.”

“You mean day after tomorrow?” Michael raised an eyebrow. “I need to get busy then. I have a lot to do to get everything ready for Pete and Rayvyn.”

“Luc,” my mother stood and began clearing the table. I crammed the last bite of dessert into my mouth and took the stack of saucers from her. “That photograph makes me uneasy. We don’t know who sent it to Bella, or why.”

“I wouldn’t worry, *mo ghrá*. Our girl will be well looked after.”

“I promise I’ll be careful,” I told her.

“At least the lass speaks Italian,” Grandfather growled as if I weren’t there. “Even so, I still say Bella will need minders on the trip.”

I put the stack of dishes on the table beside him, not sure how I was going to address his disgruntled words. My

grandfather tended to regard me as a useless accessory, a garnish, a messy maraschino on top of a perfectly good family of grandsons. He didn't have much use for women even though he seemed to be in love with my grandmother. Maybe she'd bludgeoned her way into his high esteem.

I put my hands on my hips and stared at him. Unperturbed, ignoring me, he ran a finger over the delicate handle of his cup and belched.

Tall and solid in spite of his age, his craggy face was square-jawed and chiseled. Like a handsome gargoyle, I thought, looking at his profile. A pelt of short silver hair hugged his head and was at odds with his fierce black eyebrows. When I was a baby he could make me howl just by standing over my cot. Things weren't much different now that I was an adult.

"Grandfather." I stood behind him and took his head, along with my courage, in my hands. I cupped his skull like I was guessing the weight of a melon. "You should come with me. You could meet my other grandfather. The one who likes me." The last sentence I said in a loud voice, and tilted Grandfather's head back so I could plant a kiss on his forehead.

"Quit acting the maggot!" He pulled his head free, but not before I saw the tug at one corner of his mouth. So brief, so small, I wasn't sure whether it was a smile or a twitch of indigestion. 'Quit acting the maggot' was the Irish way of telling someone not to be an idiot. His favorite phrase when it came to me.

Grinning at Gabriel who gave me a discreet thumbs-up, I picked up the stack of plates and followed my mother into the kitchen.

CHAPTER THREE

Sensitive to the probability of pickpockets roaming the St Pancras station, I kept the mysterious photograph in my purse, right next to the euros. I hugged the leather bag under my arm while waiting for our train to be called. It made goodbye hugs awkward, to say the least. Gabriel managed it by climbing on our stack of suitcases.

“Be very careful,” he said, flinging his arms around my neck and squeezing so tightly I saw stars. He pushed the hair from my face with sweaty little hands, kissed both cheeks, and touched his nose to mine. Green eyes regarded me seriously. “I’m going to miss you, Bella.”

“I’m going to miss you, too, *cucciolo*,” I grinned, willing myself not to cry. “But we’ll only be gone a couple of weeks.”

Michael poked Gabriel’s bony little shoulder. “Isn’t anyone going to miss me?”

Releasing my neck, my little brother launched himself at Michael.

A string of arrivals were announced over the Tannoy. Our train, right on schedule, was listed among them. My parents began fussing. My mother did, at any rate. My father merely stood there, giving me a funny, heart-tugging smile that I couldn’t read. I wondered what was passing through his mind.

“Do you have your ticket ready?” Mum patted my face then leaned past me to take Tamsin’s hand. I could barely hear her over the loudspeakers. “Do you both have your mobile phones? Do you have the dinner I packed?”

We nodded obediently at each question.

“Did you pack the gifts for Mamma and Papa? And the Contis?” She turned to Michael who had Gabriel under one

arm like a bolster. “Michael, *tesoro*, did you remember to get my ring from Rayvyn? I put it in the box with the amethyst. Be careful and do not lose it.”

The day before my mother had gone to the kitchens to give the tiny jeweler’s box to Michael, but he had been at the market running last minute errands. So she’d given the ring to Rayvyn to pass on.

Michael handed Gabriel to my father then cupped my mother’s face in his hands much like my little brother had mine. “Everything will be fine,” he grinned. “Bella will be safe. Tamsin will be safe. And your ring will be fixed.”

“*Ti voglio bene, figlio*. Be careful!” She kissed him, wiped her lipstick from his face, and turned to me to repeat the process. “I love you.”

While she bade Tamsin goodbye as well, my father put Gabriel down and enveloped me in a hug that temporarily blotted out the bustle around me.

“Take care, lass. Please promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I promise, Papa.”

“Hurry, everyone,” Michael said as I pulled back to give my father a kiss. “It’s time to go.”

There was the usual flurry as we sorted our cases and began lugging them through security and passport control. It didn’t take long to pass through, hand our luggage over for storing in our assigned car, and find the correct boarding platform. After a few moments, the announcement was given, and the crowd, most of us burdened down with awkward carry-on luggage, shuffled *en masse* to the train doors. An elderly man ahead of me was pushing his tiny rolling case like a wheelbarrow. My brother helped him lift it onto the train and store it over his seat near the doors.

“Stay close,” Michael warned, working his way through the crush of bodies to find our seats.

It wasn't my first time on the Eurostar. I had ridden a few times with my family. But Tamsin was travelling on the high-speed train for the first time. She was sandwiched between Michael and me, wide-eyed, taking in the car and our fellow travelers as we shouldered our way down the aisle.

German seemed to be the predominant language spoken around us. We'd apparently landed ourselves in the midst of a tour group of Berliners.

I had the giddy desire to shout, "*Ich bin ein Filmstar!*" – the only German phrase I knew – just to see how many would flock to me for an autograph. A young man in leather pants grinned as if he could read my mind. Or maybe he was grinning at me because my shirt was riding up under my knapsack. I tugged at my pullover and ducked behind Tamsin.

We were travelling in the no-frills standard class, which meant that the passengers were to be tucked hip to hip with strangers. As short as I was, I wouldn't be uncomfortable as long as my seatmate wasn't leprous or carried lice. But the cramped seating would certainly cause discomfort to Tamsin. It was going to take over two hours to reach Paris.

Tamsin Hugo is nearly five feet, ten inches of lanky arms and legs, which is tall for a Welsh woman. In spite of her French surname, she looks Celtic with the Viking influence showing in her pale skin. She has dark hair bobbed even with her chin, silky bangs, perfectly round brown eyes, and a triangular face with a small pointed chin. She is painfully neat, tidy, and long, so asking her to wedge herself next to a possibly malodorous stranger would be like asking her to lance someone's boil. She would do it if a person's life depended on it, but she would have nightmares afterward.

Neither was it easy for Michael to travel in cramped seating. Not because he was particularly fastidious, but

because he was tall. If our seatmate was large, he would have nowhere to put his legs unless it was on the luggage rack overhead.

All of which was why care had been taken over the tickets we'd purchased. In each standard class car there are two places with club seating, or two rows of two seats facing each other with a shared table in between. We had booked three of the four seats in one of the clusters. When Michael located our places, no one was in the fourth seat, yet. Tamsin and I squirmed free of the crush, sank into our places, and stowed our purses on the floor by our feet while Michael hoisted his knapsack onto the rack above us.

"I wonder who will be sitting with us," I mused as Michael folded himself into the seat across from me. "I hope he's either antisocial or doesn't speak English." I envisioned three hours of either listening to his love life, or his medical history. Once, my mother and I sat across from a middle-aged man who'd insisted on showing us the skin cancer growing out of his bellybutton. I hadn't the heart for jam-filled pastries after that.

Tamsin shrugged. "We can always go to the restaurant car."

Besides a bar, the restaurant car for travelers in standard class housed tall tables without seats. I enjoyed standing at those small, round, stainless steel counters, eating while the world passed by at nearly 200 miles per hour.

I prodded Michael's leg with my foot. "Once we start rolling, will you get me a Prosecco?"

He nodded, but before he could say anything, a woman stopped by our table and gazed down at us.

"I believe I'm sitting with your little group," she said, her accent American. Her long vowels dripped like honey.

Michael stood, allowing her to slide into her seat by the window. She plopped her satchel and purse onto the table.

“Hello. I’m Kaitlin Melloc. Call me Kate,” she said to no one in particular then extracted a compact from her purse. She clicked it open, smiled into it, clicked it shut, then turned to Michael to get a better look. “My goodness,” she said after a moment, “you don’t look like an Englishman to me.”

I wasn’t sure what she’d meant unless she was commenting on the fortunate fact that he had perfect teeth. She continued.

“And all that thick black hair. Strong lips. Italian, right? With something else.” She laid a manicured fingernail against her chin and continued to study him.

Michael looked back with raised eyebrows. I could tell he was trying to guess where she was going with her unsolicited observations.

“I can’t figure it out,” she said after a moment and rested her fingers on his arm. He politely withdrew it. “You have amazing eyes.”

I could only assume she was commenting on their color since he didn’t have x-ray vision.

The train began to move. I leaned back in my seat as the speed grew. In seconds we were well away from the station. Industrial countryside became a gray blur through the windows.

“Blue eyes. Sapphire. No,” she said, her own hazel eyes narrowing. “Violet, but dark like twilight.”

“I know what color my eyes are,” Michael grinned, “unless they’d changed since I’d looked in the mirror this morning.” He stood. “Tamsin, would you like anything?”

“Water, please?”

Michael nodded and joined the slow bustle of passengers traversing the aisle.

“My goodness,” Kate said, turning so that she could watch him leave. I wasn’t sure if she was referring to his refusal to flirt, or to his backside. I really didn’t want to know.

She fluffed her shoulder length hair and swiveled back to study us. I could tell by the light freckles on her skin that her auburn hair was natural.

I smiled angelically. Tamsin frowned like she was sitting on hedgehogs. We were the duo masks of theatre.

I guessed Kate to be in her early thirties. Dressed in a navy skirt and tailored jacket, she appeared to be on a working trip.

“Who might you two be?” Kate shoved her purse and satchel against the window, clearing the table between us. “I assume ya’ll are traveling together.”

“That was my brother, Michael. I’m Bella and this is Tamsin.”

“Nice to meet you, ladies,” she said automatically. I was fairly certain she didn’t mean it. After a moment of staring at us, she pulled her satchel to the center of the table, unzipped it, and extracted a sleek black computer which she promptly set up as a barrier. I watched as she plugged the notebook into the socket and powered it up.

Kate’s presence seemed to put a damper on Tamsin. I didn’t know how to suggest we leave together for the restaurant car without offending the stranger across from us, so I said nothing. After a moment, Tamsin rested her temple on the window and stared at the world slipping past. Just then the train entered the covered bridge over King’s Cross station, and all the scenery was cut off. Tamsin closed her eyes and sighed.

I smiled at Kate as she pulled a thumb drive from the satchel and plugged it in. “What brings you to England?”

“Cheaper airfare. It’s cheaper to fly into London and just take a train to Tuscany.” She glanced up from her computer screen. “I’m in the hotel business.”

“That’s nice,” Tamsin said listlessly.

I wondered if Tamsin was getting train sick. We were going to be in the tunnel under East London for quite a while. At least we were temporarily out of London’s damp fog. And once we crossed under the English Channel, I knew we would travel the rest of the way under clear skies.

“Are you going to open a hotel in Italy?” I asked.

“Not yet.” Her gaze dropped back to her computer screen. “I’m presently touring restaurants.”

“New menu?” I asked, wondering why I was trying to keep the conversation going.

“Stealing chefs,” she murmured absently and began typing, her long nails clicking on the keyboard.

Itching to get my hands on the Prosecco Michael was bringing, I peered down the aisle, watching for his return. It was at that moment that I realized I was being observed.

It started out as a vague sense of unease that I had, at first, put down to Kate’s presence; a feeling of discomfort that was hardly worth scrutinizing. It didn’t jump into my consciousness until I saw the figure at the head of the car, his hand on the connecting door as if he’d just entered.

In his early thirties, he was dressed in charcoal slacks and a black shirt. He put me in mind of a handsome crow with his aquiline features, silky dark hair falling over his forehead, and piercing black eyes. He was staring straight at me.

I stared back, surprised by the intensity of his gaze. His fierce scrutiny quickly turned into thoughtful assessment. I was the first to shift my eyes, feeling suddenly vulnerable. It was as if I had been efficiently stripped. It was a thoroughly unpleasant sensation. Relief flooded me when I saw Michael

enter the car behind him, edge past, and make his way to our seats.

“Thanks,” I said as my brother handed us our drinks. I knew Michael would have brought something back for our seatmate, Kaitlin, if she hadn’t rhapsodized about the color of his eyeballs.

She ignored us, typing away on her computer.

Tamsin opened her bottle of Evian and downed half before capping it. She took a slow, deep breath then nudged me. “Let’s see that photograph again.”

I had shown it to Tamsin before we’d left for London. Since she’d never been to Florence, it meant nothing to her. Even so, she was as intrigued by it as I was. The ‘key’ – whatever it was – had to be in the picture somewhere.

I pulled the photo from my purse and put it on the table between us.

“That’s the Caffè Rivoire in Florence,” Kate interrupted our musings. “Best chocolate in Italy. May I see it?”

I handed the photograph to her and watched as she studied it with a frown. I couldn’t figure out what had brought that look to her face.

“His cup,” she said a moment later, her frown changing into one of puzzlement. “Why does the man in the foreground have a different cup?”

“A different cup?” I leaned forward to see what she was pointing at.

“This isn’t Caffè Rivoire dishware.”

Michael took the photo from her hand. “I don’t remember their dishware.” He handed it back. “How do you know?”

“Trust me,” she smiled sweetly at him. “I know. I tried to steal their pastry chef. His choux is even better than Antonin’s.”

“She’s in the hotel business,” I clarified, seeing Michael frown. One could all too easily imagine Kate literally stealing a man.

“What do their cups usually look like?” Tamsin asked.

Kate tapped away on her keyboard then turned the computer screen toward us. “Like this.”

The image she’d found showed thick white crockery edged in gold with the caffè’s name on the side in ornate script.

She tapped the cup in our mystery photograph. “This looks like Deruta. It’s hard to see in a black and white photo, but my guess is it’s one of their classic patterns.” She looked at our clueless stares and elaborated. “Deruta is one of Italy’s oldest pottery makers. They started in medieval times in Deruta, Italy, but they didn’t hit their peak until the Renaissance.”

Michael grinned. “Tell us more.”

“Tell me why you want to know,” she countered playfully.

“She received the photograph in the post,” Tamsin intervened, cocking her head toward me. “It came without an explanation. We’re trying to figure out what it means.”

Kate’s eyes slewed from Michael to Tamsin and she frowned. “I don’t understand.”

I leaned across the table and flipped the photograph over. “I assume you read Italian?”

“This is the key,” she translated slowly. “Is this all the information you have about this picture?”

“Wait a minute.” Michael glanced at me then looked back at Kate. “Say that again.”

“This is the key. *Chiave* means ‘key,’ right?”

I groaned, realizing what Michael had caught when Kate read the words. That was the trouble with speaking more than one language. I spoke limited Italian, but thought in English.

“You’re right,” I said softly. “*Chiave* does mean key. A literal key. The kind you use to open locks. I saw the Italian word for key, but I was thinking *leggenda* because it was on the back of a photograph.”

“I think I’m the only one here who doesn’t understand,” Tamsin said.

I turned to her. “When someone hands you a key, and says, ‘This is the key,’ it means something completely different than if they hand you a piece of paper and say, ‘This is the key.’ If an Italian handed you a key, they would say, ‘*Questa è la chiave.*’ If they handed you a clue, or a guide to figure something out, they would say, ‘*Questa è la leggenda.*’ My eyes read ‘key’ but my mind said ‘clue.’”

“So the writing on the back of the photograph is talking about a literal key?” Tamsin frowned. “I feel the same as Kate. What does that mean?”

“Nothing much if we can’t figure out what the photograph is trying to tell us,” Michael said.

“What do you think?” I asked Kate, earning a nudge from Tamsin. I ignored her. In for a penny, in for a pound. Kate already knew about the photograph.

“About this?” She tapped the face of the man in the forefront, the man Michael and I had noticed earlier. “I would wonder why this man is drinking from a different cup than the others.”

I looked at Michael. “We should look up all we can about Deruta.”

“I can show you some stuff, if you’d like.” Kate shrugged. “I have some files. It won’t take but a few minutes.”

“I’m just curious, Kate,” Michael began hesitantly. “How do you know so much about Italian pottery?”

“I studied art in college before I changed my major to business.” She grinned at her computer, not looking up from what she was doing. “I know, I know. But they really weren’t all that different to me. I decided to channel my creativity into food instead of throwing pots. And if I wanted to own my own restaurant, I needed to learn about money. And how to cook.” She finally looked up from her keyboard and sighed. “I did a year at a culinary institute, decided it was too intense, and somehow ended up working for my uncle.”

“Does your uncle own a hotel?” Michael asked.

Kate fished a card from her purse and slid it over the table to him. The ornate logo looked like a family crest. “Vice president of a company that owns a string of them.”

“Impressive,” Michael said.

“Keep it.”

I slipped the card into my purse and downed the last of my Prosecco. “We had an early lunch in the station, but I’m still restless. Would you like a snack?” I asked Kate. “My treat.”

“I’d rather have it from him,” Kate smiled ruefully, hooking a thumb at Michael, “but, yes, if you don’t mind. I would like a strong coffee and something vegetarian. Not vegan. Cheese would be nice. Anything, though. I’m not picky.”

“I’ll go with you.” Tamsin joined me as I stood and slipped the strap of my purse over my head. The train had emerged from the tunnel, and once again the day’s grey light was flooding the car. “The water settled my stomach. A sarnie sounds good.”

I looked over my shoulder at her as we made our way down the aisle. “*Panino*, if you please. We’ll be having breakfast in Italy tomorrow morning.”

“*Panino*, sandwich, sarnie,” she grinned back. “I wonder what it is in French since we will be in Paris this afternoon.”

“You’ll see soon enough.” I stepped into the next car, making my way toward the front of the train. “The menu is in English, French, and Dutch.”

When we reached the restaurant car we found it was crowded with passengers who hadn’t eaten lunch before they’d boarded. We wended our way through backs and shoulders to the stainless steel counter. We read the menu board while awaiting our turn, deciding on a mozzarella and tomato sandwich for Kate, and a chicken salad sandwich and Evian for Tamsin. I added a latte for Kate, hot tea for me, and a blueberry muffin for Michael.

While we waited for the young man behind the counter to put our order together, I became aware of a presence behind me. Even though the car was dense with people jostling us, this presence was different. It loomed. It wasn’t particularly threatening, or invasive, but I noticed it just the same. I clamped my purse under my arm and glanced over my shoulder.

It was the handsome crow. His eyes met mine. Black orbs glittered at me from under straight black brows.

I edged closer to Tamsin even though I knew she wouldn’t be of any help if he threatened us, made a pass, or tried to pick our pockets. My friend tended to panic when anything unpleasant menaced her. She preferred to think of it as a well-developed sense of self preservation. I thought of it as the same knee jerk reaction gazelles get when they see a lion. If the man didn’t back off, he was liable to get a flailing limb in the neck when Tamsin bounded to safety.

He smiled a faint, closed little smile, and I turned away. It was hard to turn my back on him, though I couldn't think why. He hadn't done anything other than stare. He had been careful not to push against me. And though his smile wasn't particularly predatory, it wasn't disarming either.

He wanted something from me, I just didn't know what.

We were given our food, euros changed hands, and we edged away from him and back through the crowd.

The scenery at the windows had disappeared again. Our wait in the restaurant car had been long enough for the train to surface, reach the tunnel taking us below the Thames, and go under again. It was just as well. We were passing under East London's warehouses and that view of England's capital city was my least favorite. I'm not a fan of rude graffiti.

"Did you see that man behind us when we were at the counter?" I asked after we'd entered our own car.

"Which man? There were so many. Was he with someone?"

We stopped at our seats and I plopped the tray of food on the table without ceremony. "He was by himself. Tall, with black hair and dark eyes. Dressed in gray and black."

"Who?" Michael asked, accepting the muffin I handed him. "Thanks, *poca*."

We emerged into daylight, but instead of the steel and stone of London, we found ourselves hurtling through the county of Kent. We were now traveling at over 180 miles per hour.

I let Tamsin slide into her seat first before sitting down. "Some man who keeps staring at me."

"Well, why not, Miss Bella?" Kate drawled, looking up from her screen long enough to run a critical eye over me. I handed her the caprese sandwich and latte. "You'd be gorgeous if you'd only put a little gel on that hair of yours to

keep it out of your face. And maybe a little gloss on those lips. You have great color, but it certainly wouldn't hurt to glam yourself up a bit more."

I thought of the bits of cosmetics in my luggage. Why I rarely used them was a mystery to me, as well as to my mother.

Before I could reply she turned the computer toward us. "Here you go. Here's some research I'd done on Deruta my first year in college." She gave Michael a coy look. "Which wasn't all that long ago, believe it or not."

He smiled, but didn't say anything. I scooted myself into the aisle and knelt, letting Tamsin have my seat. That way, all three of us could read Kate's succinct file.

Deruta, in the Umbrian region of Italy, specialized in *maiolica*, or majolica. *No surprise there*, I thought. Italy is known for her hand-painted dishes and tiles. Those exuberant patterns in yellow, blue, red, and green on the white background graced nearly every Italian household in some form or the other. My mother had a dish from her great-grandmother, a serving platter big enough to sit in.

I knew majolica was an old art, but I had no idea how old. Deruta had been producing pottery since 1440, reaching its peak during the Renaissance when it catered to noblemen. The painters of that time commonly copied the decorations of the great artist Raphael and his master Pietro Vannucci, otherwise known as the Perugino.

Being the artist's daughter that I was, I knew the works of both of those Renaissance painters. Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, known simply as Raphael, was born sometime in the late fifteenth century in Urbino, Italy. According to Kate's research, Urbino was also the birthplace of majolica.

Pietro Vannucci was born a few decades before Raphael in the Umbrian city of Citta' della Pieve, and had apprenticed

as an artist alongside other greats such as Leonardo da Vinci. Most people know Vannucci for his frescoes in the Sistine Chapel.

I couldn't imagine how pottery painting could be influenced by these artists unless it was for the curly arabesque features in their frescoes.

Much of Deruta's production was still carried out as a cottage industry, with the unbaked pottery being brought in by artisans for firing then taken away again to be hand-painted before being brought back in for glazing.

Michael was the first to finish reading. He leant back and looked out of the window. Tamsin and I scooted back into our seats and turned the computer toward us so we could read while Tamsin ate her sandwich.

By the time we'd finished, the train was hurtling over the Medway River high above Kent on the viaduct. To the right of us, several tiny boats were moored against the rich sienna riverbanks. To the left Rochester castle pierced the horizon like a broken fang.

"I wonder what pattern of Deruta ware he's holding," Kate said, tapping the photograph I'd left on the center of the table. "Too bad the train doesn't have Internet access, or I could use my computer. But I could look it up if anyone has a phone. I do, but my battery is low."

"Use mine," Michael said, handing it to her.

I was wondering the same thing Kate was, more specifically what the cup and saucer had to do with a key. Cramming the last of the sandwich into her mouth, Kate brushed her hands together and took the phone. She smiled as if she'd suddenly remembered Michael's presence, though I didn't believe for a moment she'd really forgotten him.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm used to eating on the run. I'm usually more ladylike."

“That’s okay,” Michael said amiably. “I’m used to Bella’s manners.”

I tried kicking his shin under the table, but he’d anticipated me and had moved his legs out of my reach.

“Pardon,” an Italian-accented voice said somewhere above my head. “May I see your photograph?”

I turned and saw the crow towering over me, holding out his hand.

CHAPTER FOUR

My brother rose to his feet, giving the crow a pleasant smile. "Hello. I'm Michael. May I ask about your interest in the picture?"

"*Perdonatemi*," the crow said after a second. "I did not mean to interrupt. You are together?"

"Three of us are."

I twisted all the way around in my seat until I could face him. I couldn't tell if he was perturbed by the fact that Michael was with us. He knew Tamsin and I were together since he'd seen us in the restaurant car. I could only guess that he'd followed us there and was going to approach us, but we'd exited quicker than he'd anticipated. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kate slide the picture under her laptop as the two men squared off. Michael obviously knew he was the man I'd mentioned earlier.

"I am Lorenzo," the crow said, leaving off his last name as Michael had done. "I see the picture. I am a collector of photographs. Vintage photographs. This photo..." Lorenzo motioned toward the table where the picture had lain. He looked mildly confused when he saw that the photograph was no longer there. "This photo, it is from Florence, yes?"

"Is it?" Kate widened her eyes. "We aren't sure where it's from."

"I see you beautiful ladies and come to make myself known. Then I see the photograph. You permit we visit?"

I didn't believe his cautious approach. Italian men aren't known for timidity in approaching women. When an Italian man sees an attractive woman in the street, he usually follows her for blocks, asking her to share his gene pool. The only way to get away from unwanted attention was to ignore the

would-be swain as if he wasn't there. To the average Italian street-Romeo, the words 'Drop dead!' are verbal foreplay.

Lorenzo, almost as if he had read my mind and reconsidered his approach, turned to me. "Perhaps we can go to the restaurant car and I buy you a drink?"

I held up my paper cup of tea. "I already have one, thank you."

"Are you certain you wouldn't like something a little stronger?" He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. It wasn't a friendly gesture. His touch was hot, exerting pressure, and felt far too intimate. I reached up and used his pinkie to peel his hand off. The only sound between us was the crack of his knuckle as I bent his finger backward. I wasn't touch phobic, but something about Lorenzo made me uncomfortable. Either he was predatory, or he was exceptionally inept at reading people. I suspected the former.

"So, Lorenzo," Kate broke in, "where are you from?"

"I was born in Napoli, but I live in London now."

"Where in London do you live? Perhaps I know it."

"I have a flat on Mansell Street." He frowned, his thoughts obviously darting. "I have a flat at the top of the Starling. But many times I stay over my shop."

Kate may not have been familiar with the Starling block of flats, but I was, having lived the first sixteen years of my life in London. If this man lived in one of the larger suites at the top, he definitely had money. And he owned a shop. A shop could sell anything from snacks to designer clothing. I wondered if he sold the vintage photographs he had mentioned earlier, but decided not to ask openly.

"Do you have a card?" Kate smiled pleasantly.

Lorenzo made a show of patting his pockets then produced a fake smile. "Alas, no. I do not have them with me."

But enough about me.” He hitched up his pant legs and squatted next to my seat. “Tell me about yourself.”

I smiled waiting for Kate to enlighten him then did a double-take when I realized his black eyes were centered on my profile. “Me?”

“I noticed you when you boarded.”

“Why? What was I doing?”

“You are beautiful. Surely you are aware of that?”

I blinked, unnerved. It dawned on me that discombobulating me was exactly what he’d wanted to do, and I wondered why. Looking down at my tea, trying to buy time to consider a response, I forced a sip into my mouth. It was lukewarm and tasted like sweat. I nearly spit it back into my cup.

He smiled. “I have a question for you.”

“What is it?” I sneaked a look at my brother. He was watching Lorenzo with a frown.

“There is only one thing I want to know.”

“Ask.”

“Do you have a lover?”

“What?”

“Hold on,” Michael objected.

“Do you have a lover, Bella? A boyfriend?”

“Lorenzo.” Michael started to stand, but stopped when I shook my head.

Taken aback by the man’s blunt question, I put my hand to the silver disc I wore under my shirt. The necklace Jago had given me in Greece. It wasn’t so much an involuntary gesture than a Freudian slip. “I’m fine. I can handle this,” I said to Michael, but Lorenzo misinterpreted my remark.

“Then you do not have a lover? Bella,” Lorenzo’s voice dropped another notch. Any steamier and our eyeballs would fog up. “You did not answer my question. You are a beautiful

woman. Do you want someone to share special moments with?”

“You certainly aren’t shy,” Kate said drily. “You work even faster than I do.”

He ignored her. “Would you like for me to escort you about Florence, Bella? Would you like for me to teach you the pleasures of Italy?”

My skin crawled. *If only Grandfather could see me now*, I thought. I took a sip of my tea and bit down on the bag as it floated to my mouth. When I felt large shred of leaf coat my front teeth, I gave Lorenzo a wide smile.

“What makes you think I’m going to Florence?” I asked, the tea leaf flapping against my lip.

Kate stifled a laugh.

He studied me, not sure if I was rebuffing him, making fun of the situation, or just mentally deficit. “But I know you are going there.”

When I didn’t respond, I felt his fingers stroke my leg under the table. I gave an involuntary gasp and accidentally snorted the tea leaf to the roof of my mouth. I blanched, trying not to inhale it. My eyes started watering. While I fought my gag reflex, Lorenzo attempted to look sexy. His hand touched my leg again. Michael rose from his seat when he saw my second flinch.

I stuck a finger down my throat, gave an unladylike hork, peeled the shred free, examined it as if I didn’t know what it was, or how it had gotten into my mouth, and wiped it on my shirt. “I’ll ask again, what makes you think I’m going to Florence?”

He dropped his hand from my knee. “Perhaps... perhaps, later,” he said, rising from his crouch. “I will see you, then, Bella, in Florence. I will teach you...” He gave up, watching as I twisted my paper serviette into a point.

I began cleaning my teeth. “Yes?”

“I must go. I have an appointment with someone.” He glanced at his watch. “But I will see you again. Trust me on that.”

I wasn’t sure if that was meant to be a reassurance or a threat.

I waved at him even though he was standing right next to me. He looked undecided for a moment, then backed away, careful to avoid contact with Michael, and made his way to the other end of the car. He turned at the connecting door, gave me another look then was gone.

Tamsin burst out laughing and handed me her Evian. I took a swig and washed out my mouth.

“Interesting,” I said, using the clean side of my serviette to blot the tea leaf from my shirt. “He doesn’t even sit in our car. I wonder what he was doing back here with us in the first place. I want to know what he is up to.”

Michael, having watched him exit, turned and sat down. His expression lightened into a mix of exasperation and amusement. “Grandfather’s right. You are a loose cannon on your own.”

“Are my teeth clean?” I widened my lips at him.

“Bella, I’m serious. Be careful. That man is dangerous.”

“Which is exactly why I got rid of him. So what do you suggest we do now?”

Michael shook his head. “I’m not sure.” He looked at Kate. “Why did you hide the photograph?”

“Darlin’, even I could see he was up to no good.” She pulled the picture from under her computer and handed it to him. “All that pawin’ and handling of Bella. He gave me the creeps. You do know that Lorenzo first slipped past when ya’ll were reading my research on Deruta. I saw him slow

down and eye the screen. I didn't see where he went after he passed, but it couldn't have been far."

"When I was returning from the dining car I noticed an unoccupied seat two rows back," Michael remarked. "Perhaps he sat there."

"I wonder if he'd heard us talking." Tamsin peered over the back of her seat. "Bella, go over there and see if you can hear us."

I did as she asked and sat down, smiling apologetically at the woman in the adjoining seat with the toddler on her lap. The voices of Tamsin and Michael drifted back to me. If I strained a bit, I could hear and understand every word.

"Pardon me," I said to my seatmate who was staring at me, a stranger sitting in her son's seat without invitation, "did a man sit here about twenty minutes ago?"

The toddler, a little boy with blond fluff standing straight up on his head, was picking his nose. He grinned and offered me the gooey blob stuck on his fingernail.

The woman spat out a flood of German and hastily pulled a tissue from the purse. The toddler allowed her to swipe it off before going back for seconds.

"Excuse me, Bella, but I speak a little German," Kate said.

Looking up in surprise, I saw her standing over us.

"*Entschuldigen Sie mich, Fräulein,*" she began, and asked a question in the woman's language. The woman answered briefly, jerking her son's hand away before it could connect with my hair. Kate thanked her, and we went back to our seats.

"She said he sat there for a while." Kate shrugged. "She thought he was with us and wondered why he chose to commandeer the seat next to her instead of just joining our

group. She said he'd been hanging around since the train started."

"He must have sat in the little boy's seat right after you brought me the Prosecco," I told Michael, wondering why I hadn't noticed Lorenzo passing. My attention must have been distracted both times he'd traversed the aisle.

"I wonder if Lorenzo had gotten a photograph in the mail, too," Tamsin said. "I think he knows more about it than we do."

"Our meeting certainly wasn't accidental," I said. "I think he was going through the train looking for me. How he knows me, or even knew I was on the train, I have no idea. But I think he already knew I had the photograph."

"I agree," Michael said thoughtfully, "which makes me want to look at the photo again."

"Do you really think the key is the Deruta dishware?" I asked.

Kate shrugged. "It's the only anomaly, darlin'." She handed Michael's phone to me. "I pulled up the Deruta website while you and Lorenzo were talking. I think I found the name of the pattern that's on that cup in the photo. It's a copy of an original pattern first painted in 1524."

I showed Tamsin the image before handing the phone to Michael.

"There's more." Kate took the phone from my brother, somehow managing to trail her fingertips over his skin at the same time. "If I remember my research right, Deruta would take famous patterns and repeat them, producing them over and over." She worked the screen and handed me the phone again. "Check out the name of the man who had first painted this particular design."

"Urbino?" I frowned over the name. "Not the painter Raphael, but another one. Nicola da Urbino."

“He was the most sought after craftsman for Deruta pottery.” Kate grinned. “A dish from him would belong in a museum.”

“Is the cup in the picture one of his?” Tamsin asked, looking at the photo on the table. “How would you know?”

“Not by a picture, that’s for sure,” Kate said drily. “Tests, darlin’, tests. But I don’t really think the dish is real. I just think that Urbino may be your next clue.”

“We’re almost to the Channel,” Michael interrupted, taking the phone and clipping it back to his belt. Tamsin looked out of the window, seeing the Folkestone Eurotunnel terminal for the first time.

Cars and lorries were waiting on the roads and check-in lanes for their turn to board the Eurotunnel car. The manager’s voice came on over the speakers, announcing that we were about to enter the Channel Tunnel and that the yellow safety doors between each pair of coaches will be shut, but not locked. We were still allowed to traverse the train freely if we wished to, something I was grateful for. Nothing makes me have to go to the loo more than knowing I can’t.

We passed through the terminal without slowing down, and entered the tunnel that would take us to France. We began the descent. Daylight was replaced once again with the train’s fluorescent lighting, and the scenery outside of the windows became the inside of a tube. I wasn’t particularly claustrophobic, but this part of the journey made my heart race. I wondered if Tamsin knew that in ten minutes we were going to be 250 feet underwater. I decided not to remark on it.

“Don’t worry, honey.” Kate looked at me shrewdly. Her pink lipstick had turned purple under the fluorescent lights. “We’ll be in France in half an hour.”

“I know. We’ve taken the trip before. But it’s a first for Tamsin.” I looked at my friend. “I’m going to the loo. Want to come?”

“I suppose,” she faltered, letting me drag her out into the aisle.

We made our way to the nearest lavatory, found it was occupied, and moved to the next one. It, too, was occupied. Maybe the thought of all that water above us was activating everyone’s bladders. I knew it had mine. In the end we were forced to turn around and look for a toilet near the head of the train.

We had just exited the café and were stepping into the car beyond it when I saw the back of Lorenzo’s head only two rows up. I shrank back and hid behind the door frame. Tamsin ran into me and grunted. I motioned her to be silent then pointed at the crown of silky black hair. I was about to turn tail and leave when the passenger next to him stood up, climbed over his knees, and stepped into the aisle.

I had one quick glimpse of the man’s face before I whirled and faced the wall. He stepped past us with a murmured, *‘Perdonatemi,’* and went up to the café’s counter to order a drink. Tamsin’s eyes were wide as she stared at the stranger’s profile. I tugged at her elbow and mimed hiding our faces. She turned to the wall with me and pretended to find the veneer fascinating.

We were virtually trapped. One direction would bring us to Lorenzo, the other direction straight into the arms of his companion. I had no doubt he was with Lorenzo. I wondered if they’d come together on the train, or had boarded together, with Lorenzo merely reporting back to him after our encounter.

“You see here how the veneer hides the rivets,” I began after the stranger bought his drink and began walking toward

us. Hopefully his mind was elsewhere than on the two morons examining the wall. Tamsin and I were so close to the panel we could have kissed it. “Can you smell the fruity undertones and the smoky finish?”

Tamsin snorted.

“*Perdonatemi*,” the stranger said, brushing past.

As soon as his back was to us, we scuttled through the café car, not speaking until we were on the other side of the far door, the quest to relieve our bladders completely forgotten.

“Did you see that?” I hissed over my shoulder as we strode down the aisle. “Did you see his face?”

“Yes!” Tamsin was trying to keep up with me in the narrow space. “Bella, he was the man in the photograph. The one holding the Deruta.”



When Bella is anonymously sent the photograph of a café with the words, 'This is the key,' penned on the back, she travels to Italy to discover why. A key to what? Why is she being shadowed? And, what does it have to do with a dangerous riddle set out during WWII? Follow Bella and her friends on their farcical scramble across Italy to uncover a thrilling secret that had been hidden for centuries.

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