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Lazarus in Heels

by

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PRRSUS003

A dissertation re-submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
M.A. in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2013

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signed by candidate

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1st February 2013

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All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another.

Anatole France (1844-1924)

PROLOGUE

October 29th 2012

‘She died as he wanted.’

It was a simple epitaph. And one that gave her immense pleasure.

Satisfied, Madelina forgot her circumstances and tried to stretch out along the length of the narrow bed. Although no stranger to medical procedures, she had never guessed at the level of agony that she would be forced to greet daily. With the silent moves of a seasoned intruder the sickness had invaded her body. Sometimes she would find her cheeks wet with tears of despair that she didn’t know she’d cried. Sometimes she would lose consciousness and wake feeling light, blessedly euphoric. Touched by God. Then she would remember that she didn’t believe and know that her drip had been infused with a substance she assumed was akin to a religious experience.

This was, despite her long and extraordinary life, only her second extended stay at a medical facility. And it would appear to be her last. So really, she was extremely fortunate. The first time, she had died and risen again. This time resurrection was not on offer but she wasn’t sorry.

When her body had allowed, each day on rising she would balance for one minute on one foot. And just to show how evenly balanced she really was, she would alternate which foot she started with. It was proof. She’d heard somewhere that as long as you could keep your balance, you could keep your wits.

Her thoughts might be clear, but her senses, she'd discovered, were functioning just enough to remind her of their uselessness. Her hearing was ruled by two whistling pieces of moulded plastic that blasted all the world's frustrations and troubles into her Eustachian tubes. When she switched them off, her own world was one of solitude, withdrawal and reflection. And she could no longer see anything more than shapes. Sadly, her sense of smell had not diminished, and if the post-nasal kick of disinfectant had not pervaded the hospice hallways, she might have been able to guess whether it was pureed chicken or fish under the sweaty metal dome for lunch.

Breathing hard through the pain, she turned her head through ninety degrees and back again one hundred and eighty degrees. There she left it, although the sunlight curving through the top loops of the curtains made her eyes water. She had a nice room really. A shared wingback visitors' chair anchored the back wall in her sight line, while Luisa's chatter spilled out of the bed to the right of her and the window filled her vision to the left.

She was lucky that she had the window even if she couldn't see out of it. Sometimes she felt sorry for her colleague-in-impending-mortality. Luisa, at least ten years younger and with greater access to her senses, didn't have much to look at other than Madelina or the door to their room, which remained pulled to for the major part of the day.

The first time Carlo had peered round the door he had obviously expected death to be visible in residence above her bed. She'd confounded his expectations and was animated, if immobile. She'd been waiting for his visit with impatience and had much to discuss with him aside from her state of health. But eighty-three years of reflection takes its toll. Following her initial outpouring, exhaustion had

rolled in like a sea mist, fast and thick, settling around the bed. Holding hands, the two old friends had searched for something to lighten the mood and she'd grumbled with good humour about the heavy 1960s Op Art drapery in browns and oranges. They not only offended her with their brashness, but reminded her of the flaking wallpaper in the cupboard-sized room where she had spent childhood days locked in for her sins against God. Carlo teased her gently in return.

“You should be grateful that it's a nice big pattern that you can see! And your lock-ins weren't so bad. We used to shout up at your window. By God your mama would get cross, chasing us with the broom! But at least she brought you food. We all went through it for one reason or another. You remember Gianni's mama locked him up for three days with not even a glass of water when she caught him masturbating? I swear that's why he's been married four times now. And Luca? His papa gave him the belt and three days in the coal hole when he got caught stealing from Carlucci's. All he'd taken was some gum! Every one of us got thrashed for our misdemeanours. Come now. Admit it my dear friend! Your punishments were quite mild given the nature of your sins...”

Madelina snorted half-heartedly at his dismissive tone but knew he was right. She did remember that Mama always used to slip her supper. On reflection, it hadn't been so bad. Much like this really – plenty of time to think and work things out.

Since that first visit, Carlo had come daily. Sometimes with news. Sometimes without. She could tell when he was coming without because he would pick up her hand straight off, with his hat and coat still on. She knew then that it would be a short visit. She didn't take it personally; Carlo was limited in his health and she was grateful for all the time that he did give her.

That day's visit had been important for both of them. Taking advantage of Luisa's absence for her weekly bath, Carlo had used the rare privacy to express his deep gratitude for their extraordinary lifelong friendship and for all the time that Madelina had given him. Madelina had been lightly dismissive.

"We all make choices dear Carlo. I have never been sorry for mine. And neither should you."

After he left she had lain considering the questions and consequences of truth and love, friendship and passion, deceit and trickery. And there, in the search for answers, was her epitaph. She double-blessed Carlo.

How long had it been now? Was there an appropriate length of time for a hospice stay before death? Maybe a month? Too much time spent dying and one might be preventing someone more needy coming in. It had certainly been some weeks already.

In addition to the galling lack of sensory function, her short-term memory wasn't what it was, so she had resorted to one of the practices so common in prison culture that had kept her sane during her lengthy incarceration in San Vittore. Marking off time served. Except that, fifty-six years later, her body was paralysed and she had limited movement in her hands, so she had asked Carlo to scratch an almost imperceptible nick with his Victorinox on her bed frame when he came to see her each day. In the night, she would slide her clawed fingers along the bar, tracing over the lines and counting quietly to herself. *Uno, due, tre, quattro...* She was up to *trentatré*. Thirty-three scratches.

February 25th 2012: 7.50 a.m: Cape Town

It was an unseasonably cold Capetonian late summer morning and the two hundred and fifty-third in a row that Liz had woken up too early. Time was not treating her kindly.

They hadn't all been cold mornings. Some had been glorious and light, with sunshine easing effortlessly around the edges of the blackout blinds (bought in the first days of early waking in a vain attempt to stymie the overly eager body-clock). Some had been dark and snuggly. But they had all been too early.

She knew it was the two hundred and fifty-third in a row because she'd spent the two hundred and fifty-second morning figuring out how many mornings she'd woken before she was required. And when she'd worked out how many-- which frankly was a bit of a shock--she'd decided that the two hundred and fifty-third would be well spent working out why.

Liz rolled over, farted and stretched. At 49 years old and with two adult-children under her belt, she felt entitled to let her basest bodily functions loose on an unkind morning. Her husband of twenty-seven years lay snoring next to her. They'd slept in separate beds pretty much since the day they met, but Liz knew that to occupy separate rooms was the single most flagrantly public display of the failure of a marriage. So with each house move, they cable-tied together the two single metal bed frames with memory foam mattresses, and she wore ear plugs every night.

"Best investment we ever made, these beds," mumbled her husband on a regular basis as they manoeuvred their forty-something weary bodies towards sleep. But then what would he know? His financial woes had been many and

varied but all his investments had shared the same adjectives: best, awesome, sure-fire, done deal, winner, 'the one.' There wasn't a Thesaurus in print that would do justice to the potential of his investments.

The phone rang, sucking her out of the miserable vortex in which she lay, a willing captive. Five, six, seven, eight rings and the control freak in her slapped her cheeks and forced her to jump up and run to the phone. It was too early on a Saturday morning for anything ordinary. That meant it would either be a wrong number, or important. It might be about Carlo. On an outside chance, it might even be some good news.

In the event, it was the estate agent booking a short notice viewing for that day. Their house in Constantia had been on the market for over a year now due to the extremely straitened financial circumstances in which they found themselves, along with a few million other people. They had no assets. Carlo had helped and could have helped even more had Stefano not been so proud (for proud, read arrogant, thought Liz as her husband roughly turned down his father's offers of assistance down for the fourth time). They were bonded up to their ears, but no further, as cruel justice made sure that they should still be able to *see* what a bloody mess they were in. And every day the cleaner scrubbed the floors and made the beds to within an inch of their Oxford stripe, while Liz brought fresh flowers in from the garden and guided the spiders from the bottom of the bath to the plug hole before sending them on the water slide ride of a lifetime, just in case The Buyer pitched.

So far, they'd probably had about forty sets of people round. Most loved it, but stopped short of loving it enough. Liz wasn't surprised, as she and Stef had planned the house precisely for themselves. It was so infused with how they lived,

loved, fought, hoped and despaired, that Liz would have been amazed if any prospective purchaser would have been able to enter past the tidal wave of emotions that weighted their front door shut.

'Noon. Viewing,' Liz scrawled across the diary with a sense of portent. She dimly noted that the cleaner had written in 'HOLIDAY' over the two weeks to come and wondered what had happened to the 'I'm sorry but it's just not convenient this month' discussion. Life seemed a little like that at the moment. Just not convenient. But continuing regardless.

Diaries confounded her. They didn't seem to do what they were supposed to do. They were supposed to keep order. But often recorded only disorder. They were supposed to provide a prompt of past or future time and events. But time and events are rarely the things that matter. What night was it that she was weeping with inadequacy because she couldn't breastfeed her first child? What date did she stop being in love with her husband? When was the day she realised she was lost? None of these moments were recorded in any diary. For a while, she had given up trying to figure out where she'd gone. The real Liz. The one that used to inhabit her body. The proper 'old Liz'.

A few years ago she'd taken down the mirror by the front door and replaced it with a framed poster from the Royal Academy Exhibition of Matisse, July 1987. All the reflection had been showing her was a victim, a nagging bitch, an aging wife. Stef had said she'd lost her sense of humour. Forgotten how to laugh. Held herself tighter than a priest's arse. She knew he was right. With every day that passed, her dissatisfaction grew. Her children never behaved well enough. Stef never did well enough to make either of them happy and he took it out on her on a daily basis. Her friends never liked her as much as she needed

them to. She no longer had satisfying work to do. The coat of martyrdom fitted snugly across the shoulders and she wore it without dignity, with desperation, the weight of her assumed responsibilities bearing down on her and starting to put a soft curve into her spine. Last year she'd won a small victory by kicking smoking, showing the world how strong she was; strong enough to break a twenty-five-year habit--cold turkey. This year, the satisfaction had turned to shame when she'd lost her pride somewhere in the folds of surplus skin that had mysteriously found its way around her previously slim frame. Who the hell was this now? She was nearly fifty. Surely by now, by now she should know. If she didn't know now, how would she ever?

In the bedroom, Stefano snored on. She'd known about his strident sinuses when they married, but she'd felt sorry for him and they were in love. In the early days, he'd even offered to have some procedure which would help put an end to the Nocturnal Snorata. But as early days turned to later days, so love and passion turned to 'getting through the day without bickering' and the subject of snoring had become as relevant to the success of their marriage as to whether they should have soup or salad for supper.

Making her way to the shower, Liz slipped out of her slightly musty smelling dressing-gown, making a mental note to pop it in the laundry basket later, and stood under the warm rainstorm. She enjoyed her showers. New skin, new water, new day. It felt like an opportunity to start fresh. She stretched her hamstrings - always tight. While she was stretching, she did her daily sweep of her body from neck to feet. Her beloved belly piercing had lain closed since her first pregnancy, and the patch of eczema on her left leg had grown exponentially

along with their financial misery. The scar from the twins' cesarean used to be quite taut, but was now overhung by a small ledge of excess flesh.

Picking up the bottle of shampoo from the line-up, she squeezed the bottle, put the cap back and placed it in its position in the row. Shampoo Liz. Conditioner Liz. Communal shower gel in the middle. Conditioner Stefano. Shampoo Stefano. With all the deliberation of a rebellious teenager throwing a v-sign at the niceties of convention, she picked up two of the bottles and switched them round.

University of Cape Town

15th June 1941: Milan

Anna knew it had all been so wrong, the moment of Mika's birth. She had been so tired and it had been so relentless, the hours of screaming and pushing and pain and pushing and pushing and pushing. Her body had been sore with the inexorable rigour of birthing.. Even now, ten years on, she could still feel the stitches pull when she stretched a sweater over her head. She remembered how she had turned her head away from her husband's concern, answering with as much cheer as she could find in her empty heart. Yes, of course she was happy. The baby was healthy. Five fingers, five toes, two eyes, one nose. All perfect. All present and correct. All-knowing, all-seeing and with every newborn's strange gift of stopping time for those in its orbit.

All present and all correct save for one base error. It was supposed to be a girl. It was supposed to be a girl. The cards had said that she would have another girl.

Why else did you do the cards, if not to tell you what you needed to know? With her first born, she had screamed and shaken on the day that the cards had told her that she would lose her tiny daughter to sickness. Silvano had held her and for six days the two of them were bound by nothing other than the grief of what was to come. Then on the seventh day, they had mutually agreed to set grief aside to crouch in waiting behind their love for what they had been granted and make the most of the time they had been given. Two years later, it had come to pass and her daughter was taken into the arms of the Lord. That was why you did

the cards. So you would know. So you could prepare yourself. So you could be content with what was to come, for it was written.

And this one should have been a girl. That was what had been in the cards. She didn't understand. All she remembered was the anger and disappointment that had flowed through the milk that gave Mika his first feed.

Looking out of the window now, she saw her boy playing in the street. Mika had one flap of his shirt outside his shorts from where Carlo and Luca had snatched at him before he had outrun them. *Gesù*, but her boy was fast! He had the speed and nimbleness of a gazelle. She had seen him on the field with his class, throwing the oval ball from right to left. Even at ten he was showing promise in the small school rugby team, and Signor Galetti had promised Mika a place in the Under 13s by next year if he continued to apply himself. The more liberal parents (Anna included) had noted that the sports master had a habit of populating his teams with the more delicately featured, finer boned of his younger students, to the detriment, perhaps, of the school's league performance. It would not be long before Signor Galetti moved to Santa Augusta della Souria, the girls' convent school in the adjoining district.

Mika jumped on the back of the much bigger and stronger Carlo, riding him like a mule. The two boys had been friends for over three years, since Carlo's

family had arrived in Via Marcetti. The unusually blonde, tall youngster seemed to enjoy the role of Mika's sidekick and protector. They were good for each other. Both were only children and had taken on brotherhood as a natural right, so the daytimes were filled with shouts and knuckle fives and the camaraderie of street and school. Loneliness came to Mika at night, when the moon slid across the attic ceiling lighting the emptiness of the second bed to the far left of the room. Once Mika had said to Mama that perhaps a sister or a brother would be fun. But only the once.

Carlo was the next best thing to a real brother. He was a head taller and broader, his smile broader still. His parents had lost most of their material belongings in the bombings and had to work hard to catch up, so were not quite as well-to-do as Mika's, though undeniably of good hearts. Carlo's mama had to work and was a stenographer at Lenti's Furniture Manufacturers. With the regularity of a clock-on, clock-off worker, at 5 p.m. every evening her steel heel-savers would pre-announce her arrival. Tick-tacking along the cobbles, metal to stone, metal to stone, as if typing a letter with no full stops. The boys could tell whether supper would be scratch by the speed of the clicks; an easy day gave energy to her steps, so maybe veal Milanese and fried potatoes. A busy day and the pace was slower; it would be cold boiled eggs, cheese and bread on the table.

Carlo's papa was a watch mender at the local department store. Carlo treated the store as his second home, but for Mika it was a wonderful place to visit, a traditional old building with three floors of panelled oak and high ceilings. Deep red carpets hushed the boys' awed voices, and the bell boy would let them press the brass buttons and pull the shiny lever to start and stop the lift on the right floor. Mika loved these visits. It felt grand. It smelled rich. Whenever Carlo was

off delivering a message to his father, Mika would visit his most favourite place in the world, the fabrics floor. Sliding between the elegant signorinas fingering taffeta and silk for dream wedding dresses, squeezing through the smaller spaces left between the tables and racks of furnishing fabrics favoured by the older, better upholstered signoras, and finding his spot among the velvets, hastily stroking each roll, searching for the softest of them all. Carlo would know to find him there, nestled by the aqua or aubergine crushed Florentine velvet, and would punch him hard, unsure of what to say. But Carlo liked cold tea and being strangled until he nearly passed out, which was also strange, so they said nothing and grew taller together. Carlo just did that bit rather faster than Mika.

Anna was no stranger to grief. It had walked by her side for most of her life in the form of absence. And once she had given birth and had a child of her own, she understood that feeling nothing was the greatest signifier of the absence of something. In this case, her sister.

Paola had been four and fearless, without knowledge of consequences but with all the desire to fly. In hindsight, the ending had been almost inevitable. An extra big push on the swing in the park from Anna, a flying fall, a small rock protruding from the grass, a bloodied forehead. Paola died in minutes and Anna bore it for a lifetime with containment. But the scales of guilt and grief tipped almost to their maximum when her daughter too had died.

The neighbours had talked in hushed tones of who had been up latest last evening to see Anna dancing tirelessly, her skirts lifting too high as she whirled

and abandoned herself in the small front room that shone like a beacon in the dark street. First the talk was of concern, then, as the months passed and Anna laughed too loudly, drank too much and played music that spun the soul into a frenzy, the concern turned to disapproval and to compassion for Silvano. It was enough now. Everyone knows a mourner is entitled to mourn. Indeed it must be so for the living soul to heal. But only for just so long.

Eleven years had passed since Anna had last danced herself to crazed exhaustion, and, although every now and again the bitterness would rise like bile, she had learned to keep her anger held close. Life had been kind enough to give her a good man who loved her beyond any love she had the right to expect. And she had her son. Her Mika.

Anna stood at the bottom of the stairs with her hand on the banister. She wore her church hat and coat – the sun was out but she knew it would be cooler in the church.

“Mika. Church. Hurry up please.”

“Mama, I’m so tired. Please can I just sleep a little more? I’ll go to Evensong with Papa.”

She raised her eyes at Silvano and received an acquiescent shrug in return. She didn’t reply to Mika. Silence was her display of disapproval, for they all had much to repent for and double that to give thanks for.

The communion wafer tasted sweet and the wine bitter. But the sermon was lively and short: Father Benedetti was on vacation, and there was a substitute priest who clearly felt that a break from fire and brimstone might be welcomed in

his absence. Anna bobbed before the altar, crossed herself and gave a quick prayer of thanks for the speed of the service. Her washing had mounted up and the sun was shining – it was a good drying day and this gave her time to do an extra basin-full.

When she got home, Mika was up. She could hear the record player – a little too loud for her liking. The washing was in the bedroom laundry basket, silk stockings to one side so they wouldn't catch on the rough weave of the raffia. She'd get the washing and change at the same time, out of the constraints of her Sunday best.

The music grew louder as she climbed the stairs. Her bedroom door was open and in front of the long swing mirror stood Mika., She stopped, stunned, seeing only detail. A cut from a rugby boot stud on his shin. A large bruise on his upper left arm. A longer skirt and chiffon top with sequins laid out on the bed. Slender boy-child vertebrae rising above the scoop of her low-backed black net dress . Toes thrust over the end of purple silk mules with the pompoms on the front.

Around his neck was the Hermes scarf that Silvano had given her for Christmas last year. She could see his face in the mirror. He had oiled his hair back with pomade and used her lipstick and rouge with a restraint and delicacy that shocked her. He was holding his arms out sideways, twisting at the waist with one knee turned inwards in a film-star pose.

His eyes met hers in the mirror and that moment defined them both until memory no longer existed for either.

February 26th 2012: 9.45 a.m: Cape Town

It was time for a spring clean.

Mind, body and soul. Especially soul.

The soul was rather too ephemeral and didn't smell of sweaty summer nights, while the bed linen was crying out for a change, so pragmatically Liz started with the bedrooms. Once the beds lay bare of sheets, she turned her attention to her clothes cupboard.

She was a lot less fussy than her husband about how things were hung or folded, but the Virgoan in her did like the right clothes in the right pile. Flicking through her coats and jackets section, she huffed. It seemed Stef's love of manly sports permeated nearly every corner of the house one way or another, and indeed even in her own closet. Taking out the offending sports jacket which sidled next to her vintage denim, she walked across the small dressing room, feeling in the pockets as she went. Nothing there. It would have been a classic if she'd found a lover's note, or a receipt for something out of the ordinary, but Stef was even less smart than that. Yesterday, he'd left his computer on while he popped out for a short meeting and she'd taken the opportunity to go through his emails. She'd never wanted to be that person, the one who was suspicious or snooping. But he'd made her that way. And by now she felt no shame or guilt. Only a sad sense of righteousness when she'd come across a note from one of his sales girls, . with the seemingly potent mix of big boobs and a big crush on her husband.

'Hope you'll be at the Cavendish bash tonight. I've dusted off my best frock and even shaved my legs...'

Now that was gross. Couldn't he at least find someone with some finesse? Someone worth having an affair with? Liz mentally checked the last time she had shaved her legs. Somewhere around three weeks ago. Hell.

This wasn't the first time there had been a massive question mark over Stefano's fidelity. Nor the second. But it was only the third. That she knew of.

How serious was this one? Was it finally time for the unthinkable? No-one would argue with the fact that their sex life had died a slow and painful death. So was this it now, the tit-for-tat riposte?

Liz swung both ways. Always had done, always would. She'd just swung one way more frequently than the other and had mostly chosen to share her bed with the opposite sex. Liz's first (and only) foray into a same-sex relationship, rather than just same sex, had lasted for one year and two months and concluded less than amicably a couple of years before she met and married Stefano.

But it had been an experience. There were several dozen cats involved. Some manic depression (thankfully not hers). A few marches. Some cookery and a lot of Joni Mitchell. That about summed it up. Nonetheless, Liz had always been very fond of 'wimmin' and Stefano had found her undefined sexuality very attractive. What straight man wouldn't? He'd been on at her for years to 'take a mistress', as the thought of his wife in bed with another woman (and the vague possibility of being allowed to watch), had, in the early years, spiced up their sex life. But given that , Liz couldn't actually pinpoint the last time that they'd had sex, maybe now was the time?

Cup of decaf in one hand and a useless damp cloth in the other, she moved from the clothes cupboard through to the living room. She absent-mindedly stood by the bookcase, looking, but not seeing. The spines of her beloved book

collection implored her to notice them, touch them, stroke them and love them as she used to. But Liz was impervious. She was way too busy musing upon her status. Household manager, redundant mother, (cuckolded?) sexless wife, all near-worthy, if slightly sad positions. Yes, there were friends. There were even some very good friends. But for the last ten years since his (somewhat unexpected but extremely welcome) arrival in Cape Town, her ally and rock had been her father-in-law, Carlo Ciancento. Carlo was gentle, humorous, generous and mischievous, very dear indeed. For a decade, he had been a wonderful Oupapa to the twins, served admirably as the father that she had never had, and unfortunately threw into sharp definition the man she had always hoped her husband would have become.

Art books. She must dust the Art books. They were the ones least opened these days, standing in near isolated dust-bound splendor. And they had far greater import to her than the content. The art had been a conduit through which she had reached the here and now. It was how she'd first met Carlo, and Stef... Her father-in-law-to-be was an artist of some note who did irreverent portraits of people who took themselves far too seriously. Hacked off royalty, church and state in equal measure, according to the yellowed 1986 dated press cuttings slipped in between the leaves of his catalogues. She'd been up for some cultural anarchy in those days so she'd put on an inordinate amount of kohl eyeliner, thrown on her leather jacket, and gone to see what all the fuss was about..

In the end it hadn't been the art that had grabbed her attention but the artist and his son. What a duo. In fact, looking back on it in the harsh but honest early morning light of a twenty-five year-marriage, Liz had probably fallen for the pair of them. The package. They had both been tall and surprisingly blond. One

mature, physically very well built, with Italian flair, and the other young, slimmer, eager, more serious than his father but still excited about the potential that life had for him. She'd liked them both. And when Stefano had invited her to lunch the next day, she'd accepted – as much to spend time with two glamorous Italians as with any ideas of a romance with Stef. The three had met at The Orangery in Hyde Park. The sun shone, and they had filled the glass house with lighthearted banter, laughter and caustic discourse.

Lost in the memory of a London summer, she carelessly flicked the cloth over an out of print volume of Egon Schiele's works, Carlo had returned to Milan the next day but Stef had pursued her purposefully.. She wouldn't have put herself down as his type. Or vice-versa. But she did manage to get quite carried away with being the girlfriend of a famous artist's son, even if the son was working at Deloitte as a junior Management Consultant.

Ah yes. The glorious benefit of hindsight. Still, here she was. Twice as wise, half as shallow and paying for her desires. Twentytwotootoo many years, two grown children, too many wrong turnings and a sack full of regrets.

And now Carlo was dying. The stay of execution that he had enjoyed for so long was over.

The twins had been four, no – five, when Carlo had first called to tell them of his early diagnosis of localized bone cancer. Much to her surprise and without any consultation between them, Stef had pulled out all the stops to persuade his father to move to Cape Town. And given that the father-son relationship had never been particularly close, she'd been equally astonished that Carlo had agreed.

The Cape Town weather had improved Carlo's general state of health over the last ten years, although emotional restitution had not been entirely successful.

But it had given Carlo and Liz the opportunity to form a deep bond and now threatened by the insidious disease which had woken, marching relentlessly through his aging frame, drawing Carlo back to his native homeland where he could communicate in his first language with doctors, walk the streets that he had known as a boy and be surrounded by the familiarity of his beloved Milan.

“I have maybe a year Stefano,” he’d said. “*Uno. Tuto. E finito.* And you won’t come with me or help me? I need to go back to Milano my son. What’s to discuss?”

“Papa – treatment here is better and cheaper. There is no good reason to leave. I have a business. I have a life here,” Stef insisted. “We can’t just pack up and go with you to Milan for an indefinite period.”

“Your business? Ha! You have no business. You have no money! I have money. I have business. I have unfinished business that needs to be finished”.

Neither would yield, and so they fought on. Eight months now they had fought, and Carlo was tiring. With luck, there might be another eight months. And then he would be gone. The old man was dying. And selfishly, with him would go her hope that she was not lost. She would be on her own, without her ally, without the one person who reminded her on a daily basis that redemption was still a real possibility.

Where had she gone wrong? Where had the path forked and she'd mistakenly taken the road that had led to this life? It wasn't a bad life: nice house in Cape Town, , two occasionally appearing adult twins that masqueraded as her kids, housekeeper, Golf GTI, requisite dog and cat. There was even an escaped aged hamster on the loose in the garage somewhere. But what had happened to Lizzie, the streetwise wild-child rock chick that walked the streets of London with

her shaved head and oversized leather biker's jacket without giving a shit what people thought? Where was Lizandra, the topless hostess who nightly seduced lonely businessmen into buying bottle after bottle of champagne in the dark recesses of a Mayfair gentlemen's club? Who the hell had stolen Liz, the snake and ferret handler at the local city farm? She used to be something, someone. A someone different from anyone else that she knew in her today-life and certainly different from the no-one that took up a little more room inside her each morning when she woke too early.

A faint whiff of damp reminded her that she held a cloth intended for wiping and she spat-flicked the green square viciously at the biography bookshelf, directing her attention away from the emotion, away from the art. There were twenty-four cubicles for different sized spines of books: tall ones for coffee table glossies on best hotels, design and architecture, a random shaped one for her poetry books, a regular one for the hard back biographies that seemed to please Stef on the rare occasions that he read, a tiny one just for the iPod, and numerous paperback racks. They'd had the unit made to measure with the house. It had been Liz's dream to have a library wall. But instead of a rolling broad ladder on castors, they'd got a thin metal bunk bed ladder to lean against the shelves. Mean. Nasty. Wrong. She flicked the cloth again. Shit. There it was. 'Stefano 1986'. She shouldn't have looked. Stefano 1986 was a dull tattered thin Moleskine, in one of the smaller cubicles. Ordinarily it was lost between the brighter spines. Ordinarily she had little reason to reach that low. But this was no ordinary day. It was the two hundred and fifty-third day she had woken too early.

She approached her husband's journal as if it were a wild animal--slowly, quietly and without taking her eyes off it for a second. One hand rested on the

cover. The other continued wiping the shelf as if autonomous. 1986 had been the year that they met. He'd let her read 1986 in 1988 just after he had proposed, and when she'd finished reading how deeply in love with her he was, she'd slapped him flirtatiously before pulling her top over her head and pushing his hand between her legs. She hadn't re-read it since.

She opened the cover. A torn folded piece of paper fell to the floor. Liz looked at it lying on the flagstone and saw her writing covering the upturned half. Reaching for the spare reading glasses that sat on the third shelf up, Liz saw the underlined title come into focus.

22nd September 1986

Things to do before I am 40.

1. *Perform on stage in front of a paying audience*
2. *Fly to New York on Concorde*
3. *Create a beautiful structure*
4. *Ride a white horse at dawn on a beach, bareback and naked*
(chafing? unhygienic?)
5. *Be an artist's muse*
6. *Find love where I least expect it*
7. *Make peace with myself*

Liz felt short of breath. Momentarily, she was embarrassed at the gauche, purple intensity of her twenty-three-year-old self, then diverted by the missing number 8. Clearly 7 had been so huge that she hadn't managed to get any further than that.

She felt dizzy and sat down heavily on the faux suede sofa.

Some hours passed. Or perhaps it was minutes.

She looked again at the slip of paper and without even glancing at the pages of the journal, closed it and put it back on the shelf. She returned to the sofa still holding the list.

Was this it? Was this what was missing? Had she simply not done what she was supposed to do? Where did it say;

Get married

Have two children (at the same time)

Move to South Africa

Embrace the 'character-forming' cut and thrust of financial ruination

Wake up early each morning wondering if you can cope with the day ahead

Put up with repeat infidelity (either real or imagined)

Celebrate the anarchist within by moving a shampoo bottle from its usual position

Stand by watching your beloved father in law die where he didn't want to

Nope. None of those things were on that monumental twenty-five-year-old, rough-edged piece of A5 paper.

She sat there a long time. The dishwasher interrupted her thoughts by announcing that it had finished its cycle but for once her instinct to jump up and unload was suppressed by the weight of her introspection. Instead, she rose slowly. Finally, she knew where she needed to go in order to be able to stay where she was. The list, although undoubtedly cute in its naivety at twenty-three, had

become mocking at forty-nine. What had not changed was her need to do something with her life. Something that was 'other' than this, here, now.

Screwing up the slip of paper and chucking it carelessly into the nearest wastepaper basket, she went to the bedroom, pulled down a sports bag from the top of the cupboard and packed. Not much: a few pairs of pants, some jeans, t-shirts and her favourite jumper. One dress, two pairs of shoes (both flat) and a washbag. Blackberry charger, dope box, iPod, and the picture that sat on the bedside table of her husband and children taken eight years ago on the beach in Mauritius. They looked happy. She was absent. She wondered abstractly if the two conditions were related.

University of Cape Town

August 1944: Lake Como, Italy

Four months before his thirteenth birthday, and summer was spent on the borders of Lake Como. It wasn't far by train from Milan, but for a city child, it was as distant from routine as the rocky shores of the Sicilian coast. Although Como was normally warmer than any other Italian lake in summer, that year the air had been unusually moist. The grass was greener than any Mika had ever seen in the square near their fourth-floor apartment, and the birds were more grateful for their crumbs of toast in the mornings, singing increasingly complex arias in their gratitude.

He came to the Lake only every other year; the intermittent one would be spent with mama's sisters and cousins in Romania, where the language was strange and the people had a different kind of spirit. Neither odd nor even years usually found greater favour with any of them, but that year they had been glad it was a Como year. Papa was tired from his job--a new *Direttore* had been appointed at the bank some months before and, though he'd kept his employment, poor Papa now had twice the workload.

Unlike the journey to Romania, which was many miles, the journey from Milan took around two hours in total and they usually had the carriage to themselves thanks to Mama's obsession with avoiding foreign germs. It had to be pouring with rain for the windows around them to remain closed, and she would remain impervious to the glares of her fellow passengers, who gradually retired to an adjacent coach with more temperate conditions. By the time they arrived at the

station Mika was cold and distinctly miserable. Why wouldn't Mama just let him wrap himself in her cashmere cardigan? He loved the softness. And she knew he was cold. He'd asked but she'd play slapped him and hissed "Bambina" at him. Then, at the first glimpse of flat water out of the train window, she'd turned away from him to gaze at the Lake. He'd stuck his tongue out at her from behind the seat and had been angry with her for one whole minute.

The holiday camp fronted onto the North shore of the Lake and the taxi dropped them at the top entrance where a tricky path of rough loose stones and alpine leaves took the bearer of heavy bags down a steep drop to summer heaven. The site stretched across and behind the rocky beach of a modest promontory on the warm water side of the lake. To one side of the beach stood a small thicket of pine trees bordered by a meadow which in turn gave way to rocky terrain. Mika had always thought those trees were there by mistake, like unwanted offspring abandoned and left to fend for themselves by the much larger parent forest some kilometres hence.

The accommodation was a mix of chalets and family-sized tents containing a scattering of Northern Italian dialects and temperaments from differing backgrounds and pockets, adhering to an invisible and undefined hierarchy. More than three or four people at any amenity, and a queue would form, an organic shape-shifting group, chatting and gesticulating, masquerading as friends picking over the latest gossip. But Mama chose to remain apart from this melee of feigned friendships; she had all she needed in Mika, Silvano, her books and her music.

She had brought a little wind-up gramophone and, on a wind-free afternoon, she would twist the handle thirty or forty times before running with

ballerina-pump-clad steps to the fishing hammock strung from the trees near their chalet. And, while the needle jumped and bumped gently over the brittle black plastic disc, she would swing and hum in cadence with Caruso singing La Boheme, God Speeding rich romance over the campsite, onto the Lake and far into the mountains, knowing that all who heard His Masters Voice would hear His Passion.

Mika was sure that he heard the other mamas talking about her. They thought she was wild, whispered that she was “a dreamer”. But Mama laughed so much that holiday, and Mika understood that she did it to raise Papa’s spirits. “Come Silvano, the water is so warm. I’ll race you to the jetty!” she’d cry, and she’d run to the edge of the water, her hair out of its usual scarf and dancing freely, syncopating with her windmill limbs. Some of the other mamas would watch, lips pruning, once with disapproval and once more with envy, as she ran into the lake fully clothed. Her shorts would go dark and then her cotton top would cling to her torso, pushing out her breasts. If she knew she was being watched, she made no sign. It was all about Papa. On the tenth day, no-one was quite sure what happened, but it became all about Mika. And on the tenth day, she stopped laughing.

At the lake, Mika missed Carlo and Luca’s familiar rough and tumble but enjoyed the ragbag of summer children at the camp. Some were newcomers, others he knew from previous years, and they’d greet each other with quick fists and quicker smiles. The biggest of the smiles Mika reserved for Gina, a six-

summers-long friend; they'd known each other since they'd lost their milk teeth and gone through at least two growth spurts each. Mika was never sure why she liked him, but she chose to spend her time with him above all the others.

Gina was without doubt the most wonderful of the returning children at the campsite. Her hair was unusually fair for a Milanese child, and her eyes were pale green like the flank scales of the freshwater perch that Papa caught from the Lake on a lucky fishing day. Last summer, he had seen the blonde down become more visible on her legs, he'd watched her budding breasts rubbing against her white vest. This summer she'd lost some weight and gained some inches. She wore a soft cotton bra under her shirts and fiddled with the straps that sat slightly too tightly on her shoulders, leaving ridges when she moved them slightly aside for comfort. Mika knew the ridges were there because he would spend at least an hour a day brushing Gina's long fair hair and sweeping it up to expose her neck, with varying degrees of success.

Mika and Gina were strangely and happily kindred. They both took pleasure in odd holiday activities and spoke of this and that while the rhythmic brushing and strange hair-twisting rituals continued daily. They watched the comings and goings at the campsite, laughing at the ineptitude of the first time campers' tent pegging techniques. When the twosome took a real dislike to some poor unfortunate, they'd choose their moment carefully and turn off the hot water burner, waiting with climactic pleasure for the shout of anguish and expletives from the communal shower.

Mama (for it was always she) would watch their high jinks with a lightly raised eyebrows and a flicker of a smile. She knew better than anyone that spirits, however high, should be encouraged and nurtured rather than reined in. Besides,

she was pleased that Mika should have a girlfriend. It was good. It was more than time.

Some two years had passed since she had found him, arms akimbo, posing in front of the bedroom mirror. He had not said a word. In fact, none of them had ever spoken of it. Anna had cried while Silvano silently ripped aside the three layers of netting under the dress that sheathed Mika's slim frame and had taken the belt to him with excessive force. Mama understood that it had pained Silvano beyond any level of understanding to see his son dressed as perhaps his daughter might have been, so the beating contained ten years of confusion and anger at his own loss and grief. The day after, he had been marched in silence to Father Benedetti who had listened to Anna with a grave face and given Absolution to them all. Papa had remained silent throughout the process. But none of the three had ever spoken of it since. No recriminations. No explanations. And thankfully, no encore.

Mika had recovered from his beating quickly and, in the subsequent couple of years, had performed well in school, made captain of the school rugby team despite his fly-weight, rough-housed with Carlo, Luca *e tutti* in the street, and was generally showing all the signs of incipient manhood. Friendly fumbling discovery with Gina would be just perfect, Mama thought. Her smile broadened and she waved approvingly in their general direction.

When they tired of their mischievous pursuits, Gina and Mika would run round flailing and pulling at each other's clothes, trying to drag the weaker to the ground. Then, sated, they'd drop breathless and giggling to the ground to continue their murmurings, mostly about how to navigate their world. They talked about the merits and demerits of their respective schools, parents, friends, enemies and

siblings. They talked about growing, about changing. Mika showed her his penis again. Last time, Gina had batted it from palm to palm, and then bounced it up and down while she laughed, saying that her brother had a little worm too. This year, Gina didn't think it was so funny and was oddly reluctant to look, saying she'd seen it before and anyway, what made him think she was interested? So he slid his semi-soft penis sideways into his shorts, feeling her indifference as slight disgrace and noting this as an unexpected point of difference between them.

On that tenth morning, Mika went down early to the Lake for a swim, but stopped about 100 feet from the shore. Gina was in the secret shallow round the corner from the main family area, ten feet out, a small pile of clothes lying by 'their' log. From behind one of the pine trees near the edge of the water, he watched her swimming strongly. It probably would have been more fun just to run into the water and surprise her, but there was something private in the way she was swimming--it was her world, her water, her calm. He saw her turn lazily on her back and graze the water with angel arms. Then she floated backwards toward the shore with her head half under the water; he could just hear the splashing and a hummed tune which he didn't recognise. She put her feet to the bottom of the Lake and gave a small cry of pain. She must have hurt herself, on a small rock or piece of rubbish thrown in by a careless fisherman. He would go and help her. He must go and help her.

But Gina was coming out of the water now, droplets falling from her arms, shoulders, running down the furrows left by the straps of her soft brassiere,

peaking at her tiny pale nipples and holding there for a moment before falling back. He watched and stood as rooted to the ground as the sixty-year-old pine he was using as his cover. He could smell the resin. He leant in harder and rubbed his face against the rough bark, scratching his skin raw. If he was hurt too, then he could be forgiven for not helping her.

Unconscious of anyone watching, she waded towards the shallows, rivulets running past her belly button and around the curve of her hips. Another step towards the shore and some of the water seemed to hesitate as it met slight resistance from the light hair showing just above the negative space between her legs. Mika held his breath. That a body could be so perfect, so complete, so undeniably what a body should look like. That water would embrace the form, the curves, the deltas and promontories with such complicity. That the 'she' was a state of such enviable grace. He had borne witness to beauty and he was absolutely clear was that it was meant for him.

Mika felt sharp pain twice in his heart. One brought the fire-hot knife of understanding and the second followed fast, in the shape of disgrace at his own shame. In the summers when his legs went nut brown from the sun, he could still see the faint white lines of his father's belt across the back of his thighs. But please God Mama would understand. Mama would be there to brush the curls away from his neck and twist his hair into a top-knot. Mama would help him close little shell buttons on the back of his dress and, if he wished hard enough, his stupid, stupid penis would shrink and fall off. Mama always told him that if he wanted something enough and worked hard enough to make it happen, then it would come to pass. That's what Mama said. So that's what he would do.

Gina was long gone, but Mika stayed on the ground by the pine tree, sweating and breathing heavily. Inside he was on fire, and outside the blood tracks on his cheeks had congealed into dark brown scabs. He felt sick to his stomach with joy.

When he didn't arrive for lunch, they started calling for him. Mama found him lying quietly curled on his side, bloody-faced and silent. He didn't seem in pain. When she asked if he had been hurt or attacked by someone, he shook his head and smiled. She felt his feverish forehead and ordered Silvano to carry him to bed. She met with no resistance; in fact, Mika didn't leave their cabin for the remainder of the holiday, choosing to lie with his face turned to the wall in silent contemplation. Gina knocked on the window, but he turned to the uncomplicated grain of the veneered cabin wall.

Mama fussed over him for a while, but, by the end of the second day, when she was satisfied that he was not sick enough to go back to Milan, or indeed even visit *dal dottore*, she became angry with him instead. His Master's Voice no longer rang out over the snow-covered peaks, the cards remained in their packs, and she tossed her head at Silvano when he suggested that she should take a break to play bridge. She was tired of being the mother of a son who was clearly not 'right'. Tired of the pitying looks and whispers. Tired of holding herself erect under the weight of gossip. Meanwhile, Mika's grazes healed and the scabs fell, leaving silver trails like stretch marks across his face.

On the fifteenth day they left. Papa complained at having to make three journeys to pack up the taxi, and the weather, all the way home, was not kind.

February 25th 2012: 3.17 p.m: Cape Town

Liz watched Carlo carefully, looking for signs. A fly settled on a crease in his neck and he flapped his cap in its general direction. Two elderly gentlemen stepped in through the sliding door, nodding, laughing with derision about something but she didn't know what. Her Italian was restricted to everyday courtesies. Bumping the corner of the table with a curled-edged music satchel, the smaller of the two men turned with a shrug which extended from apologetic hunched shoulders to become outstretched palms turned upwards. With chin tucked into chest, he greeted Carlo with typical Italian demeanour: "Ciao Carlo!"

Liz couldn't help smiling – this small cafe was a piece of Italian heaven in Cape Town. Pictures of Lambos and Ferraris fought for wall space with FC Milan and the Lavazza logo, and steam from the Gaggia reached crescendo point at the same time as the owner's wife screeched across the space for someone – anyone – to please, *madre mia*, serve table *treis*.

Carlo looked at home. More at home here than in that hospital waiting room. The air-con had been fierce there, but he'd wiped the sweat off his forehead with his hanky, while Liz wished that she'd brought a top to put over her too tight t-shirt. To be fair, the room was not unpleasant. It followed the current interior design trend for putting in a couple of older ethnic pieces of furniture mixed with the standard fabric-covered tub chairs, and the artwork was a cut above. But it was still the waiting room of an oncologist.

The reception desk was so high that the receptionist was not visible. A disembodied efficient voice made sympathetic clucking noises, organised diaries

with an air of efficiency, all the while clicking on a keyboard. The magazines were piled high. Always so old and a bit grubby-looking. Some reflecting the interests of the oncologists no doubt, otherwise how would several copies of 'SEA RESCUE' (*Trawlers run aground! Yacht Crew Saved From Stormy Seas!*) have made it inland to the Medical Centre. Carlo had looked strong when he came out of the consultant's room. So strong that Liz wondered what they were doing there. But it seemed that MRIs do not lie and '*un brutto male*' would be in control of Carlo's destiny from here on in.

Even today, eight months in, she couldn't see it. But it was there. It was there when he was tired. And because it was there, he tired easily. She was constantly reminded of it for days after each treatment by the plastic bowl next to his bed or by the special badge on the nursing uniforms at hospital unit where he went for treatment. And now she even saw it in others. Indeed, she found herself noticing more sick people more of the time. Yesterday, the woman buying a lottery ticket at the cigarette counter in SPAR was wearing a cross between a headscarf and a hat, with wispy strands of hair escaping at the side. One hand was swollen. Almost certainly lymphoma, thought Liz. You don't hang out in oncology units for six months without learning a thing or two, that's for sure. Lottery Woman shared the dull look that filled the eyes of so many with cancer. It wasn't the illness so much, another patient had said to Liz while waiting for Carlo's chemo to come to an end. It was the community of illness that got them down so. And Liz knew exactly what he had meant. Once every three weeks Liz had walked Carlo the length of the ward, past the rows of those in various stages of treatment, each hoping that they were being intravenously fed with extra minutes, hours, days, months of life.

Abandon all hope most of ye who enter here.

But others would strike it lucky.

Remission.

Remission.

Remission, a mantra that would carry them along the hospital corridors, out of the double doors and into the sunlight full of smiles, plans, and even in some cases, futures. But no sunshine for Carlo, just a long, wet winter in Cape Town with the South Easter rattling the window shutters against the outside walls until Liz thought she would go quite mad and forced a bad-tempered Stefano, under protest, to spend a weekend repairing the hooks that had come loose or rusted solid.

Across the table from him, reminded of her purpose, Liz touched Carlo's hand to get his attention.

"Carlo – I've always been so grateful to have you here that I've never really dared to ask you anything really personal. I've never wanted to seem intrusive. But if I've ever needed guidance, understanding and knowledge, this is the moment."

With one eyebrow slightly raised, he waited for her to continue.

"I've never really asked you why you came here, to South Africa. To us. Why you left Milan, stopped painting, stopped producing your amazing work. Why you let Stef bully you..." She stopped, afraid that she had gone too far.

"Is simple. I was given cancer. It took away my desire to make art and drove me to want to make a bond with my son. In the process, I have found a wonderful daughter and watched my two grandchildren grow into confident, capable adults. What's not to like?"

“Carlo, there’s more, isn’t there? I’ve been with you for ten years. I know when you’re trying to avoid talking about something important. Please. Tell me. What did you ever do to Stef that makes it OK for him to be as disrespectful to you as he is?”

“Cara, it’s difficult. Times were different. It’s hard for me to say.”

“Why? Because there were so many different reasons? No one thing you can pinpoint?”

“No. It’s hard for me to say because it is only one thing. And because it is the truth which is so painful. My son did not grow up with me because I did not like him and I did not want him. That is the guilt that I carry. That is what I am trying to fix with my clumsy English and my dinner every night with you all and my silly jokes which no-one except you finds funny.”

Liz was silent. This wasn’t what she had expected.

“When my wife died, Stef was just eight. I was still young man, I had set aside my work while I was looking after Alessa, so when the funeral was done, I let my art drown everything else out. I painted out my grief. And people were asking to show my work everywhere--New York, Paris, Stockholm. It was exciting. Much more exciting than being a father to a small boy. So it was easier just to leave him where he was - with Alessa’s parents... By the time I came to know him again, his manners and his ways were formal and cold. Of course, now I know that was because he was hurting – the poor *bambino* had lost his mama and his father would rather be painting in a studio than playing football in the park. But this is only things you learn with years passing.

“As he got older and I began to understand what I had done to him, I tried a little here and there to be friends, if not father and son. We saw each other

sometimes in Europe. I invite him to all big exhibitions. And sometimes we have good times together – like the time we met you. But when I find cancer, it make me think. It make me look at more than what is just about me. Something change in me. So I think perhaps I am older and wiser, and I can use what I know to make things better between us.”

“And? Do you think it has?”

“You are clever woman Liz. You tell me.”

Their eyes met for a long moment, and she shrugged.

“OK Carlo. I’m sorry. I really am. But I’m not sorry that you came here. You’ve been amazing with the kids. And look at what you’ve done for me. You’ve made my journey to this point so much easier.”

“Ah yes. Your journey. So now we talk about you. We have dinner together, we go to exhibitions. We go to the beach or the gardens. You come with me every week to the hospital. We walk. We sit. We talk about this and that. But I do not think that we talk about what is important. Where are you in this life, *cara?*”

As he took her hand, she felt the first involuntary tear slide. There were many to come. Sitting just below the surface, ready for every occasion. Births, marriages, deaths, barmitzvahs, movies with sad endings, movies with happy endings, her children’s school performances... Liz cursed her inability to remain dry-eyed and reached in her bag for a pack of tissues. Out came the Kleenex and a piece of folded A4.

“No, it’s not time to talk about me yet. There’s more I need to know first. I need to know why you have not gone back to Milan. I see you and Stef fighting all the time and it looks like you’re asking his permission to leave. He says no,

and you stay. But you're not a prisoner here. You could leave if you really wanted to."

"Yes. Yes I could. But when I found out I have cancer, I make myself a promise – that I will do everything I can to put things right between us and that means not leaving him again."

"Are you serious?" Liz began, but was interrupted by her phone, which buzzed and pulsed light on the table top. As if on cue, it was a message from Stef.

OFFER OF 3.2M ON HOUSE. HAVE ACCEPTED. S X

Three point two million Rand for her home. Her life. Her future. Yes, they needed to sell. But a low offer taken without any discussion? Her husband didn't know it yet, but he was making this easy for her.

"Carlo. I have something for you. It'll probably either make you laugh or cry. I'm hoping you might cry so I won't feel such an idiot crying on my own." And with that, she slid the folded sheet paper towards him.

"What is this my dear? Why would I want to cry? What are you giving me? I don't see this so good. Please, it just look like type to me. Read. Read it to me."

"Before I read, you need to know that we don't have to do this. In fact, I'm probably as crazy as Stef always says and I'm definitely not sure what I'm doing. But this bit of paper is a plane ticket. To Milan. For tonight. In fact, there are two. One for you and the other is for me, if you'll have me along for the ride. And if you feel you need to come back here for Stef, then just think about it as a holiday. How many times have we promised ourselves another family trip? Well, this is my version of a family trip. Just without the rest of the family."

“Is single or return?”

“Does it matter?”

“Not so much for me, but of course for you. If you wanna come back?”

“Of course I want to come back. Probably. Look, I don’t know. I do think it’ll be good for us all to have a break. Stefano’s your son and my husband. We both love him in our different ways. But I’m nearly fifty for god’s sake. Look at me. My children have left home, I don’t work, my friends are pleasant but not particularly challenging, and I’m beginning to feel that no-one knows the real me – least of all me! I may have reached a point where marriage to Stef isn’t enough for me. I need to find out if that’s true or not before it’s too late. And Stef’s in some weird place in his life at the moment, where money and an above average silicone blob-job seem to be more important to him than his wife or his family.... Oh dear god, would you listen to me? He hasn’t got a chance has he?”

And the two of them sat blowing at the froth on their lattes, laughing intermittently, though an onlooker might have noticed the tears in both their eyes. Carlo was silent, struggling with his decision. Liz’s tears might have been mistaken for tears of laughter, but, as she rubbed her cheeks with the backs of her hands, all she could think about was that Stef had sold their home without so much as a phone call to chat it through. Just how much more insignificant could he make her feel? She wondered if he’d even noticed the space that her shampoo had left.

May 26th 1959: Milan

The two best friends sat in the park, an incongruous pair. Carlo, the former scrum half, dwarfed his friend, the fastest, slimmest winger their school had ever fielded, as they sat eating their salami sandwiches and catching up. Earlier that morning Alessa had smiled and silently made double of Mika's favourite filling when Carlo had mentioned he was to see his friend at lunchtime. They had met well away from Carlo's work at the gallery, for even though the art world was for the most part liberal, Mika did not want to put his friend's fast rising prominence amongst wealthy patrons into jeopardy.

Carlo's choice of career had been a surprise to everybody. He'd started drawing at school, mostly during history, which bored him. In order to keep himself focused (or risk a lash from his father's belt when he flunked his tests at the end of term) he would doodle caricatures of whichever historical figures were the topic of the day. Genghis Kahn, Alexander the Great, even Mussolini were all subject to his pen, and, as he became more practiced and his hobby more widely known, he was commissioned by the older boys for portraits lampooning particularly vile school masters or even occasionally a loathsome student. It seemed that the promising league rugby player had been concealing an even more talented artist with a unique perspective on portraiture.

When he left school, he had packaged up his holiday work experience with his father at the department store with nascent artistic talent and good looks, and achieved some status early in his working life by starting in the coveted position of sales assistant in the art shop between Borsalino's and the rare books and

antiquities shop in the world famous Galleria Vittorio Emanuele. Over the intervening years, he had listened, watched, learned, and spent much of his wages on oils and canvas. He was busy and working hard but the two friends made sure to meet for dinner at least once a week.

“C’mon Carlo – what are you doing this week that makes you too busy to meet twice?” Mika teased, knowing full well the time-honoured answer.

Carlo would smile mysteriously and reply: “Becoming.”

Thankfully, in between ‘becoming’ as an artist, he also found time and inclination to become engaged to the art shop owner’s daughter Alessa.

It was unsurprising that he had fallen in love with her. Many had done already. Small of body and almost perfectly formed, her neat frame seemed to lose its containment towards the upper reaches with a shocking blast of unruly Titian hair. No matter how she would pin it down or up, it would escape into a halo of copper fire which would set the sky around her head alight. And, as Carlo had told Mika, she was gutsy. “I love a woman that can stand up for herself,” Carlo had said. “It makes me feel like I have a chance in life – that there’s two of us going forward in the boat with one oar each, travelling twice as far as any poor husband that has to take up two oars and carry the dead weight of a wife that expects him to row them both to shore.”

Astonishingly, Carlo’s good fortune was Mika’s too. As he grew to know her, Mika found Alessa delightful. Kind but never subjugated, embracing but never needy, and of the sweetest nature when unprovoked but with fire in her veins when piqued--a very fine match for the gentle giant who kept his arm protectively around her shoulders for fear she might float away were he not there to ground her.

After months of dinners with the couple, and a growing intimacy with Alessa, Mika dared to hope that she would not judge him for his choices. And, indeed, she did not. Mika even started to allow her to help him with his make-up and wardrobe. She taught him seamstress tricks to fit panels into the dresses which would otherwise have been unwearable, and persuaded some of her broader and wealthier friends to part with the odd blouse or a pair of last season's slacks. Indeed, she became a veritable mine of feminine assistance. As Mika grew into his womanhood with Alessa, his dream of his mama guiding him through the intricacies of womanhood receded and was replaced with a warmth towards Alessa akin to sisterhood.

The threesome was a happy one and particularly so as it was about to become a foursome. For Alessa was pregnant with her first child and rapidly changing from flame-haired temptress to a Botticelli maiden with bulging, glowing skin and flowing tresses. She spent less time at the art store and more time making a home for them all. She and Carlo even offered Mika a room and board for when winter came and the streets were cold.

"You're most generous," he'd replied. "But please, let's all be honest with each other. I know you love me and I love you both equally! But you have a new soul here that needs to find its way of being with you both. Besides, I like my two rooms. Yes, sometimes it's cold and sometimes the mattress feels a little hard, but I owe no-one and because it's an empty building I take no space from anyone. And a collar dove has built its nest on my roof so I'm looking forward to hearing some chicks scratching on the tin!

"It's sad to see so many of these factories and apartment blocks empty and bombed. Left for dead, when just a few years ago they were full of noise and

machines and hard-working souls working for all our futures. Now what is left for us to see in our crystal ball? I just consider I'm keeping things alive until people are ready to occupy them again." He broke off. Was silent. And then roused himself from memory. He would not allow the sadness to descend.

"But really, I'm happy. I spend most of my days in the centre of town working, and I come home to what I know and where I am known."

"Working? You call what you do working?" teased Carlo. This was an old joke between them, but Carlo never missed an opportunity.

"I earn good money Carlo! Just because I choose to save it and not spend it on wasteful luxuries! Besides, honestly, who would actually employ me? Look at me! I may be gorgeous, raven haired, and dressed to kill at night times, but I still have to shave twice a day and I still have to stuff my bra every night with the paper towels from the *bagno*!"

Mika hadn't looked for a job since his disgrace at being dismissed from Borsalino's. The world-famous milliner was next door to the art supply shop, so Alessa knew the manager and had wangled him the job. He'd kept it for nearly a year by reserving his private life for the hours of darkness. But one evening, Mika had bumped into one of the shop's more regular clients in Via Conchese at Il Paradiso, dressed a little less conservatively than usual and in five-inch heels. Mika's stilettos were five-and-a half inches. The next morning, Mika was fired. He never managed to find out exactly why—the manager's distaste for his lifestyle, or the gentleman's fear of disclosure -- but he knew that his attempts at "normal" work would in all likelihood have the same outcome. So he decided to assume control of his own destiny and create his own way of earning.

He had refined a real routine. His mama would have been proud of him. In a well tailored suit, dove-grey fedora and cashmere coat, immaculately pressed and clean (he was always clean), shiny black soft leather shoes, with the appearance of a wealthy businessman, hair brushed back and eyes so blue, he would listen out for his English or American ‘clients’. Finer dressed ladies seeing the sights or out for coffee with their friends. Always two women together, never a man.

Mika would approach the women, stop as if struck by their beauty, and find some reason, any reason, to commence a conversation.

“Signora, *‘scusi. Prego.* Your bag is a little open – please do close it. You wouldn’t wish for anything to be taken from it by the robbers that can roam the streets round here.” And then in for the kill. In seconds, he would have judged the easier target of the two and reached for her hand. “Please, forgive me Signora, but I cannot help but feel that we have met before... you have an extraordinary power surrounding you... I’m sorry, I must sound crazy, but perhaps you may have heard of me? My name is Paolo Lucini, Chiromante! Chiromante? You know! *Lettore della mano?* Hand reader? If you are church-going which I am sure from the pure light that comes from you both, then you will know from the Book of Job that ‘God caused signs or seals on the hands of all the sons of men, that the sons of men might know their works’. I cannot allow this to be taken literally however, for although the sons of men may have deeper lines, I find far greater understanding of human nature by traversing the patterns on a woman’s hand. I have studied this science for years, I have read the palms of kings and presidents across the globe on their request, but every now and again in my

travels, I come across an extraordinary presence. One such as yours Signora.

Please, your hand?"

It was rare that Mika failed. For once he had engaged his subject, he would regale them with information as detailed as the date of their demise (unarguable and always a good way away), their marital possibilities (it was easy to see if they were sporting a ring or not), their key character traits (also quite simple to deduce from their dress, mannerisms and stance). He would never exclude the friend – that would be tantamount to performance suicide. You needed the spectator to be engaged as much as the participant, so he'd occasionally refer to the side of his vision for agreement or encourage small gasps of amazement at his perspicacity. For a good fifteen minutes he would perform for them. Then he would ask them for money. But as a request, a donation, towards his future. "Gentile Signora, please. It can only be that we were destined to meet here. Surely to God it is no coincidence that I been able to give you a lifetime of knowledge outside this wonderful building. Did you know that the name of this very famous store, La Rinascente, means 'she who is born again'? It may surprise you to know, and forgive the intimacy of details, but I am a woman born into the body of a man. Now, as you can see, I am not poor. And it was my great pleasure to meet with you today. But if you could find your way to making a donation for the valuable information I have imparted to you today - for which I would normally be paid a princely sum - I would be most grateful. This truly modest, indeed nominal, amount is to send me god speed toward what you are able to do so freely. To live my life as a woman. So you see the coincidence? My life's endeavour is to be 'she who is born again'! Perhaps ten lira?"

Sometimes he would get more. Most English-speaking female tourists had a very poor grasp of the Italian notes and their response to his request could go either way. The first, from the more liberal of the women, was to thrust a handful of their husband's money with glee, knowing that they had just had an 'Italian experience' that they could regale their travelling companions with at dinner that night. The second, from the more god-fearing, was to thrust a handful of their husband's money with fear of being tainted with lack of charity and a desire to get away from this sin against god as fast as they possibly could. Either way, he'd get the money and he'd watch the retreating backs with a mixture of pity and gratitude. Most days, he'd earn somewhere around fifty lira to give to Carlo to put into a savings account at the Banca Popolare.

He had little trouble from anyone. The shopkeepers surrounding the store on Via Santa Radagonda knew him by now and tolerated his antics. When they weren't serving a customer, they might watch with amusement through the plate glass windows as he wove his gypsy magic on his next duo, but he was clean, well dressed and well mannered, and never did harm so they had no reason to chase him away.

It was work, good work, and he put the hours in. Mika saw himself as an artist with a craft that he was as good at as any painter like Carlo, and he performed to the best of his ability. Of course he was grateful when he received money, but he earned every lira twice over and saved each one for the woman he knew he would be.

Sunday Feb 26th 2012: 7.20 a.m: Milan

Liz had a restless night on the plane, having deliberately not answered the persistent repeat calls from Stef before the plane's wings had stretched their shadows over the water in Table Bay. The four whiskies and plastic Spanish omelette hadn't helped. She felt slightly sick and wobbly, unable to move quickly enough to sidestep the couple of passengers who rudely barged through the relatively orderly de-boarding process. Way before baggage reclaim, she found a seat in a corridor and sat to switch on her Blackberry while Carlo shuffled off, disappearing under a yellow sign with a male stick. She closed her eyes and tried to quell the queasy mix of fear, eggs and alcohol. Mind over matter. Body over batter. Urgh. Focus. Back to Black.

As she keyed in her PIN, the seat sagged and rocked to the beat of another body beside her. It was Carlo, returning from the bathroom. He sighed loudly and quickly leant forward, as if trying to recapture the breath which had involuntarily escaped him. As he leant, his hat tipped precariously towards the floor and gently rolled off. Liz bent down at the same time as he did and together they picked up the narrow-brimmed gumshoe trilby. Smiling at each other. A moment of normality in an extraordinary time. Her phone jangled sharply and accusingly showed her five missed calls and three text messages. The emails were still piling in. Oh shit.

She decided to deal with the text messages first. One from each of her offspring which she knew would be hectoring, so she ignored those and scrolled up. There. Message one from Stef: 'WTF have u done?'. Message two: 'Where the hell r u?'. Message three: 'Liz, am worried. Pls call.' OK. So he'd hit the

predictable first stage of impotent fury while they were half way over Namibia. By Morocco he was concerned. By Milan he'd bowed to the inevitable. She wondered if he'd got any more sleep than she had. Probably not.

For the first time since she had landed, she looked out of the windows that contained her on each side of the walkway. Interrupted by flashes of bodies moving across her line of sight, some single, some groups, the day in Milan looked very different to the previous day in Cape Town. She'd left Cape Town in the Southern Hemisphere summer, but it had been a gray and stormy afternoon-- not particularly cold, just rainy. And here she was in the Northern Hemisphere winter – on one of the rare, gloriously sunny blue-skied mornings that were such a joy. There were clouds on the horizon, but she couldn't cope with the metaphorical weight of this observation so, gathering her breath and her belongings, such as they were, she started to get up from the seat. Mid-lift, she discovered a fundamental flaw in their plans and sat down again with a thump. Nobody knew where they were. And nobody, least of all Liz, knew where they were going now. Carlo would need some medical treatment at some point, so they would need to be registered and have an address. Where was it that he had said he wanted to go? Only scraps of conversation had passed between them on the long flight and change of planes at Amsterdam's Schipol Airport, nothing she now found of any use.

"OK," Liz said under her breath. "Baby steps. Baggage reclaim it is."

Nothing of note happened while they waited for the modest blue sports bag and battered grey case to take their fairground ride on the merry-go-round. Certainly not enough to account for the fact that the two of them had left home for

an indeterminate length of time which was likely to constitute both a life and a death.

As Liz stepped through the sliding doors into the bustle of arrivals, she absurdly discovered herself looking to see if anyone was waiting to meet them. She saw husbands kissing wives, chauffeurs holding placards with names, some exotic like 'CATERINA CUSCHIERI' and some very ordinary; 'MR MICHAEL COLLINS'. None said 'LIZBETH CIANCENTO & HER DYING FATHER IN LAW'. She saw toddlers running into the arms of their mothers and a group of teenagers jumping and screeching with excitement. But worst of all, she saw families. Families smiling, waving, hugging. One family had twelve arms, all jumbled up around each other so tightly that she found it hard to apportion the right arms to the right bodies. And she knew that at that moment, more than anything, she wanted to be in a family. It didn't really matter whose. Just to be one of many was the key to being part of a whole, so it would have to be a large one.

But Milan was Carlo's territory, and he was all the family she had at the moment, so she took the old man's arm and sat him to wait while she queued for an undoubtedly overpriced airport taxi.

"Papa," she said, "I suppose you do know where we're going?"

"*Si bella*. Of course. You think I can't pick up a telephone and do what's necessary?" He laughed with small heaves to his chest, a noise that reminded her of a cat with a fur ball in its throat. She smiled.

The drive from Linate was difficult. Carlo had been weak by the time they arrived from the changeover at Schipol, wheelchair or no. And here they were-- Papa and she, two crazies in a world gone mad. She knew the world had gone mad, because after a few quick words between Carlo and the taxi driver, she could

have sworn she heard the words 'Four Seasons'. She took Carlo's arm in the taxi and felt the pressure of a squeeze from him. Her mind cleared, giving way to a sudden understanding that there had been a subtle role reversal, a shift in the balance of power – Carlo was home. This was all he had wanted. To come home. And although Liz was undoubtedly the stronger of the two physically, she was most certainly a stranger in a strange place. She might be married to an Italian, she might have spent many Sunday lunchtimes at the Italian Club in Milnerton, her bolognese sauce might be indistinguishable from that made by Italian hands, but she still couldn't speak the language in any useful way and this was her only her second visit to Milan.

When the kids had been small and just a couple of months after they'd found out that Carlo had been diagnosed with early stage cancer, Stef had brought them to Italy for a family holiday. They'd all stayed out by Lake Como at a 'family friendly' resort chalets on the edge of the water, with surrounding mountains dominating the scenery. It was a little run-down, but fun. They could swim in the lake, but there was a net stopping them from going too far out. Children's games were organized in the woods nearby for the afternoons and Liz had spent a lazy week swinging in the hammock on the shore listening to the argumentative tone which passed for social pleasantries amongst the Italian women. It was amazing how sound carried over water and bounced off the mountain peaks. Stef and Carlo played round after round of silent golf on the nearby nine-hole course. Good for business connections, Stef said, covering his bitter concern for his father. She said nothing, swam and swung, not knowing what else to do or how to help either of them ease their pain.

Had she felt any more connected to Stef and his family after the visit? Not really. On their last day in Italy, they'd had afternoon tea at an hotel en route to Milan airport. Far from enjoying some sympathy with his Earl Grey, Carlo had been backed into a defensive corner by his son. Winning at golf had not made up for an angry childhood or the lack of success in Stef's life, it seemed. There was little laughter or exchange of wit. No-one to impress, Liz thought with sadness.

Carlo was tired, but Stef was rough nonetheless. Carlo's lifestyle, he implied, was tantamount to an invitation to tango with the Grim Reaper (he should be slowing down, he should be selling up his big studio and flat, he should get a smaller, easier apartment, he should stop holding exhibitions, he should get better medical insurance, he should move to South Africa to be with his family, he should, he should, he should...)

"But Stef," Carlo interjected, "you are talking about my home. Where I live and work. It's not a place for strangers to have. Besides, I still need the room to paint. I am not old and dying yet, whatever you seem to think. *Gesù* Stef – I might not be entirely healthy but I'm sixty-three, not eighty-three and on my death bed! I have plenty of life left in me! Enough. *Basta!*"

Seeing he was getting nowhere, Stef had then changed tack and spent the best part of an hour forcing the issue of some sort of live-in domestic help or companion, so by the time they had drunk black tea from china tea cups and eaten biscotti, Liz was begging Stef to calm down, Carlo was angry and the kids had gone into the hotel garden to slough off the adults' burdens by hanging upside down on the single magnolia tree, spilling white petals on the ground as they swung. Carlo, Liz and Stef said their good-byes with differing degrees of love,

fear, disappointment and frustration. The kids were quiet in the taxi and Liz had turned her face to the window as if dozing.

Eight years later, Carlo had been ready and had come to stay with them in Cape Town.

Now, Liz brought herself back into the world--her new world--and scanned the limited views framed by the taxi window. Outside, the clouds which had been on the periphery of her vision when she was at the airport had swung in, and blue skies had turned to grey. Milan was grey. The buildings were grey, the pavements were grey; she didn't remember it being a Greyscale city. Gradually colour started to infuse itself into her consciousness. Spray-can Red, Bolshevik Blue, Protest Yellow, Grunge Green. This season's palette, graffiti is the new black. Every possible wall, door, square vertical surface up to head height was sprayed with slogans – almost certainly political given the rage behind the lettering and the prevailing mood in Europe. She hadn't remembered graffiti, not like this. This was shocking. Indiscriminate. Beautiful pre-war buildings with stature, grandeur, arches and arcades were as defaced as post-war square-box office blocks. Residential buildings, shop shutters and play areas had all been made into exponents of a desperate hunger for individual economic justice. Giant 3D fists shaking the very foundations in anger, wraiths of humanity shadowing out from the grey walls, skulls, strange alien monsters, hammers and slogans in Italian which even for those with limited vocabulary were obvious in translation: **CONTRO LO STATO DI POLIZIA! CASA, SALARIA E PENSIONE PER TUTI. LIBERTA! NON C'E FUTURO.**

As the taxi drew up momentarily at a red light, Liz nudged Carlo for a translation of one longer piece of graffiti to the left of them with the name

(ARGALA) in brackets at the base. Carlo intoned quietly, barely looking at it:

“All of us need to do something, so that a few of us don’t need to give everything.”

“And Argala? Is it an organization or a person?”

“Was, my dear, was. Argala was a revolutionary. He fought for the right things, but I think not always in the right way. He was, how you say, assassinare.”

“Assassinated.”

“Si. In the late 1970s when you were a child.”

Liz didn’t press any further, preoccupied by another matter.

“So, Carlo, where are we going?”

“Ah! Si! Now we can talk happy. We have a night in a hotel while my friend prepares rooms for us. From tomorrow we will live like kings. Tonight, we must manage to get by at the Four Seasons...”

“Holy shit! Carlo, are you serious?” She was taken aback. Carlo had always been more than restrained with his money. Any large sums she’d ever seen had usually been swallowed up by Stef’s creditors and school fees for the twins. He’d never to her knowledge spent on luxuries.

He held up his hand sharply as if to stop the traffic. “Is treat... *Prego*”. And for the first time in some months, the old man’s voice sounded strong.

Thirty-five minutes and slightly less graffiti later, she was outside the Four Seasons and everything was all right. It had to be.. A top hat nodded in her direction as the doorman bent forward to open the taxi door and Liz straggled out, in a somewhat ungainly fashion. Her exit from the back of the cab might have been passable outside a Best Western or Holiday Inn, but was certainly not up to the Four Seasons' standards. Liz made a mental note to practice her taxi exiting,

oversaw the bags going onto the trolley, and walked slowly with Carlo through the swishing door into the hotel. The smell of money hung heavy in the fragranced lobby and for a moment she couldn't breathe with the richness of it all. The 'Reception Ambassador' smiled. Liz could see that he was well trained to not judge people by their attire.

Carlo was surprisingly commanding at the desk, talking faster than Liz could follow, so she turned towards their bags, only to find that they'd already disappeared to a better life. In short order, Carlo was handed two keycards and another smile from their host representative, Liz took Carlo's hand, and the two of them set off across the shiny lobby floor. As she walked, it seemed that magic dust had been sprinkled from above, making the two of them the most important people in the hotel at that second. Every member of staff they passed gave a deferential, neat 'body bob and smile' combo, with the musical sound of the courteous "*Prego, Signor Cienento, Signora Cienento*". God, they were good. She fleetingly hoped that no-one thought that she and Carlo were husband and wife, and then felt guilty for thinking so.

Oh shit. Stefano. She needed to phone him. It was now 8.42 a.m. Milan time, which meant 10.42 a.m. in Cape Town. Stefano would normally sleep in on a Sunday but she had a feeling he might also have had a bad night. That would mean—oh, joy--that not only would he be angry but he'd be sleep deprived as well.

Carlo and she were shown to adjoining rooms. She unpacked for him while he protested but rested nonetheless. By the time she left his room, he had taken his medication and was sleeping. She knew she would have some hours to kill before she could ask any more questions.

Her bag was indeed already in her room. She wondered idly if the porter had rushed off to sanitize his hands after off-loading her rucksack and grubby sports bag. After undressing and putting on the hotel's floor-length dressing gown, she splashed her face with water in the marble-bedecked en-suite. She dried her face carefully, patting it all over as they did in the beauty spa she had used to frequent before they lost their money. She knew she was putting off the inevitable. Here she was, all grown up and terrified to phone her own husband.

On the second ring, Stefano picked up. She could feel the handset being snatched from the receiver and imagined him, sitting at the long wooden table in the study with his laptop open in front of him and his longest-standing mistress at his side. Unlike the others, she was a family joke. Her nickname was Halle and she was his Black Berry. Halle Berry and Stefano were inseparable, even in the family's most intimate moments. Liz had never had a good relationship with Halle and railed against her constant interruptions in their life. But she acknowledged Halle's usefulness to the point of carrying one of her own and naming it Chuck.

Chuck and Halle co-existed with one-sided reluctance thanks to a unilateral declaration of peace from Liz and the strict enforcement of ground-rules: Halle is silent after six pm. Halle is silent at weekends. Halle does not secretly go onto vibrate. Halle stays out of the bedroom. What a shame the other women in his life were not subject to the same rules.

"Hi darling. It's me."

"Liz." Stefano's voice broke on the utterance of her name. "Liz, where are you?"

"I'm at the Four Seasons in Milan." Silence. More silence. "Are you there?"

"Oh shit Liz. What the hell's going on?"

She realised that she hadn't prepared herself either mentally or emotionally. He sounded bereft. Lost. Small. That wasn't supposed to be the way it went. She was to be appropriately aggrieved at his actions, while he livid at her unannounced departure. Instead, he sounded more like a small boy whose mother was leaving him for an extended stay with a miserable aunt.

"Liz?"

"I'm sorry Stef. I just reached a point. I don't know. I lost myself. I suddenly realised I'd been lost for years. And you. Somehow I lost you along the way too. And then there's Carlo..."

Given Liz' current uncertainty about her own actions, she had a difficult time trying to explain herself. After seven minutes of rambling from her side, running concurrently alongside seven minutes of near silence from Stefano, she stopped. There didn't seem much point in continuing. The connection was broken. The silence gave her the space her to understand that it had been for years.

The marital metronome swung back and forth in front of her. Yes. No. Yes. No. Yes. No... Stefano's low voice broke the ticking silence. "Liz, I can't begin to understand what has made you walk out like this. And to involve Papa in your sick schemes is unforgivable. From what I can see, you've used him as an excuse – you've taken a sick old man, no, correction, not a sick old man – you've taken MY FATHER to Milan because you want to get away and do whatever it is you want to do. Have you got it into your head that I'm having an affair or

something? Is that what it is? Well I'm not and if that's what's made you leave, then you're even crazier than I thought."

Oddly, Liz was relieved to hear his crescendo of anger – much easier to deal with and so much more familiar to her than the little boy lost.

"Stef, the fact that you brought up 'not having an affair' when I haven't even mentioned it as a reason for leaving is very interesting."

"Liz, this is so fucking crazy that I'm not even going to entertain a discussion about it. It's menopausal. That's what it is. You're menopausal. Erratic. Irrational. Miserable. This is bloody classic. What am I supposed to tell the twins? And Will and Julia who are due for dinner tonight? And the domestic? And the fucking bank manager? Liz! Do you have any idea what you've done? What your whimsical jaunt has done to us? Clearly not."

"I'll phone Julia. I'll explain."

"No you won't Liz. You've foregone the right to explain anything. Doesn't seem to me like you have much of an explanation anyway. So I'll deal with it. As far as everyone else is concerned, you're with Carlo in Milan. As far as I'm concerned, my wife has left me for no good reason and there's no telling when she'll be back."

And with that, the line went dead.

Without managing to press end call, Liz turned her head and vomited whiskey and airplane omelette over the 230-thread count Egyptian cotton sheets on the luxury king size bed.

July 1962 : Milan

“Sit for me Mika,” Carlo had asked. “Alessa is bored of sitting for me and it’s hard to ask people who are not so interesting to me. Please?”

“Of course I will sit for you – it would be a great honour!”

“Excellent. That’s settled then. Sunday? Will you come on Sunday?”

“Sunday is usually my best day for work Carlo, you know this. It’s the day when the god-fearing Catholics pile into the streets for Sunday strolls. Mind you, La Rinascente is closed, so there’s not so many tourists out and I always have to work a little harder for the money.”

“I’ll pay you?”

“No you will not. I’ve never heard anything so ridiculous from you and I’ve heard some pretty ridiculous talk coming from that head of yours over the years! Sunday it is. What do you want me to wear?”

“Anything you want, Mika. My desire is to capture the spirit and the soul of who you are, not what you look like. A photographer can do that!”

Mika sat for two days, watching his friend slather oils onto the canvas, not with a paintbrush, but with anything he could find to hand. A palette knife did most of the work, but fingers, newspaper, an old cloth, a closed pair of scissors all made a useful appearance. The concentration was immense – none of the usual banter that went between them. They ate little, working late into the night. It didn’t seem to matter too much to Carlo whether he had natural or artificial light; the oils were squeezed from the tubes faster and the palette knife became more frenzied as he worked himself into a trance, as if possessed.

When Carlo could work no more and his shoulders and back were giving him pain, he rested. He slept on the studio day bed while Mika availed himself of the under-stuffed couch in the living room. There wasn't a lot of other furniture in the living room but the apartment was charming. Some wooden toys and a large-pieced duck puzzle in the corner of the room by the high windows were the only clue that the apartment contained a small boy. The boy was now nearly two, and a sunny child – how could he not be, with the kindness and spirit of his mother, and the looks and big heart of his father?

There was an upright piano in the corner gathering dust and Mika idly drew the outline of a flower on the upper lid. A couple of photographs stood on the mantle – Alessa and Carlo's wedding photograph with the two Italian families standing shoulder to shoulder. Carlo's papa had shrunk into old age; he'd retired from the department store some years before as his eyesight failed. The older Signor Cienento could no longer see the tiny components of the wristwatches and clocks with sufficient accuracy, and the store had seen the future of battery-operated watches. The glass-fronted room that had housed him for fifteen years was replaced with shelves that held televisions – the latest technology that passed for entertainment for those who did not have access to shows, dance halls and night clubs of central Milan. Annamaria Cienento stood patiently next to her husband, a good head taller and looking very little different from when Mika was a boy. A 'handsome' woman. And still doing her job by all accounts, now heading up the administration department at the furniture factory. Bringing home enough money to make sure that her grandson wanted for nothing.

Alessa's parents stood to the left of the group, looking a little less sure. Fine clothes indeed, but they were slightly turned inwards towards each other and

away from the newlyweds, as if to protect themselves from the inevitable.

Change. Carlo, at six foot four, provided a natural central focus for the wedding portrait, and Mika marvelled at his beauty. What fortune had brought him this amazing friendship?

The second photograph made him smile. It was Carlo, Mika, Luca, Vittorio, Manny and Vinzo. The five of them had gone on camp in the last year of school and one of the tutors had snapped their picture by a woodpile. Carlo, of course, was atop the logs with a strongman flex in his arms, Luca and Manny were play-wrestling and Luca had Manny in a stranglehold vice around his neck. Even though it was for show, Manny's eyes were bulging uncomfortably. Vittorio was climbing up the woodpile as if to topple Carlo (which they all knew would never happen). And Mika was standing slightly to one side. The observer. The photograph was fading from the edge inwards; Mika would be the first to go as the image blurred through the years.

Now he could hear Carlo moving around next door. Coffee was quickly made and drunk, then it was back to work. Alessa would be due to return late afternoon with the toddler so they didn't have much time. It was a warm day and, as the sun heated the studio, a fine sweat appeared on Carlo's upper lip. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and Mika grinned. The sleeve had paint on it and a brief splash of colour now decorated the artist's face like a crooked rainbow moustache.

Mika drifted, thoughts wandering: Was this the start of summer now? Was the worst of the winter over? He would have liked to have gone out to the mountains or the lake, just to see something different from buildings and cranes and cars and dirt, but it would have to wait. He had important things to do. His money was building in the bank. Maybe another five years and he could think

about seeking some treatment. He'd heard that there were operations and pills that could make his body change, because until that happened, nobody would know that he was anything other than just a freak, a sideshow, an abomination against God and the Church, a man who liked dressing up in women's clothes. Carlo and Alessa understood. They knew that it wasn't the clothes, the clothes didn't matter. He just needed to be what he was meant to be.

Carlo suddenly stopped and swung round. "I'm done," he said. "You can look now".

Mika walked towards the canvas, a little afraid. He hadn't been allowed to view the portrait at any point until now, with Carlo claiming the artist's prerogative over when and how it should be seen. But what do you say to someone who is dear to you if you don't like something they've done? Are you honest, Mika wondered, or do you lie?

He looked, and there he was. A pale face, luminescent under an opal crown. Eyes lowered with an upward flirtatious peek. A slim neck slid into the finest chain mail collar, so fine that it resembled metallic fabric. The collar slashed down in a cross over the chest, meeting again around the waist, pushing milky blue breasts up and out so that no-one could fail to see the woman in the man. The fabric continued stretched taut over his hips, softly outlining the despised bulge in his groin. His hands and arms were in long gloves, his arms were crossed to the front of his body with hands meeting on one thigh in a deliberately mocking attempt at modesty, but serving only to emphasise his cleavage and draw the eye even more strongly to his feminine charms. One leg was pushed forward through a slit in the flowing material, the knee lightly slicing the bodyline as if to make comment on their shapeliness. On his feet, the figure

wore jackboots. The background was deliberately faux-Canaletto and post modern: a hill fortress, a huge sky with feather pink clouds dissolving into the canvas, and, to the left, a hunting dog, submissively sitting on its hind quarters, ironically conventional in its presence save for a visibly oversized penis.

“Well? What do you think?”

The slow half-moon smile spreading across on Mika’s face gave all the answer Carlo needed, and he watched his friend stretch out a fine finger to gently outline a translucent breast.

“Careful Mika – the paint’s not dry yet.”

University of Cape Town

Sunday 26th February 2012 17.46 p.m: Milan

There was a note slipped under her door. It seemed she'd slept rather a long time. Long enough for Carlo to lunch solo, go for a short stroll and then come back to his room. The note said that he had retired for the day and would see her in the morning for breakfast. She was to dine and enjoy herself. Liz groaned out loud. The bedclothes stank. She stank. Her head hurt and her hands shook. At least she'd managed to put pillows and the day blanket on the floor before she'd passed out, so as not to wake up in a vomit-stained bed. She groaned again. This wasn't the plan. She was supposed to be looking after him. She was supposed to be getting out and about, sorting things, being efficient. Not falling apart. It was all Stef's fault. No, no, it wasn't. It was hers. And his. But probably mostly hers. She groaned again.

One stripped bed, shaky shower, and a full bottle of scented shower gel later, Liz stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She looked OK. Pale, but interesting. Her aquiline nose, once referred to by a plastic surgeon as 'a man's nose on a woman's face', gave her face a strength and individuality that belied her insecurity. Her eyes were usually grey-green but today were distinctly more green. Unless of course it was the quality of the lighting in the bathroom mirror ... She pinned up her hair to expose her long neck and slid a lipstick across her heavy bottom lip, slipped on her one swishy dress, popped on her pumps and made sure to shut her demons firmly in the silent-closer cupboards before leaving the room.

Damn him. Damn her damn husband.. She'd overestimated his capacity for understanding. That had been the old Stef. The very old Stef. The more recent model was positively unpleasant.

What she hadn't overestimated was the warmth of the greeting in the Four Seasons bar. The fire, despite the late spring weather, was lit and roaring in possibly the largest stone fireplace she'd ever seen. If ever a fireplace called for a hog roast, this would have been it. The seating was varied and multiple, a little daunting for just one. But there was plenty to look at – heavy baroque drapery, antique-looking leather bound books piled high on the side tables, barely leaving enough room to serve their purpose (which Liz presumed was to put drinks upon), and what seemed like hundreds of etchings on the walls. Liz decided to attempt a mixture of nonchalance and interest at the same time, looking as if she had spent her life in five-star hotel bars and was merely seeing if this one made the grade.

She wandered idly around the room, looking at the sketches on the walls and trying to take her mind off her very strange day. The drawings were beautiful – sets and costume designs from over 150 years ago for Teatro alla Scala. Quite suited the drama that was going on in her life at the moment, she thought. Here, in this sketch, the woman had seemingly been pushed down to the ground and was lifting one arm into the air as if in supplication, and here, in another, three washerwomen were fighting in a courtyard between sheets, small children running around their skirts.

Examining the fine detail reawakened her headache, so, sinking into a large antique chair covered in red velvet, she ordered a paradoxical double single malt on the rocks. She'd left the 'Please Make Up My Room' hanger on the door handle of her room, deciding that the chamber maid would have seen worse in her time, and she wasn't going to worry about the pile of putrid laundry on the floor. "At least I stripped the bed," she thought, feeling virtuous.

Downing the first double rather too quickly, she ordered another and settled in for the evening.

At around five whiskies past seven, her phone rang. It was 'HOME'. Strange how the phone knew before she'd even looked at the screen. "New technology is just so prescient" thought Liz, with a warm glow of Lagavulin-fuelled friendliness towards the little black shiny screen. Then she remembered what 'HOME' meant and felt a lump rise in her throat. But this time it wasn't nausea. It was the caught sob of a small child. She held the first one down. And the second. With the third, the tears started to flow and, by the time the whisky had added fuel to her woes, she was sobbing like a four-year-old.

Switching her phone onto silent, she wiped her face on a pristine white cocktail napkin, oblivious to the obvious concern of both the barman and the only other occupant of the bar who could actually see her face. The barman noticed because he was trained to do so. The other occupant was a forty-something exquisitely dressed but visibly scarred man who was sitting with his back to the dusk-painted windows for, Liz assumed, maximum panoramic viewing and minimum facial lighting. From his position, taken up before Liz had arrived, he could see in every direction. All comings and goings were subject to his scrutiny and Liz's arrival had been no exception. She suspected that once the lights were turned on fully, he would turn the other way, so that his pock-marked face would be in as much shadow as possible.

As she snivelled and snorted into the tiny square of linen, a hand was placed gently on her shoulder.

"Um. I'm sorry to intrude upon what is clearly a difficult moment for you," he said, in English, "but might I proffer something a little something of a more appropriate size?" He handed her a crisp large hanky.

"Oh God," said Liz. "Yes, thank you."

Mortified, she took the handkerchief, briefly noting the monogrammed 'M' that adorned one corner, before shaking it open and blowing her nose loudly several times. At least it didn't smell of olives. In fact, it smelt rather nice. Sort of lavendery.

"I'm so sorry. How embarrassing," she said.

"Not at all."

"It's just..."

"Really. You don't have to explain yourself. It's fine."

Liz looked at him and smiled weakly. "Thank you. Again."

"It's my pleasure. Can I get you a drink?"

There was no trace of a pick-up line, just genuine concern. Indeed, with his delicate hand movements, quick smile and slightly foppish air, there were absolutely no predatory attributes to him at all. Liz felt instantly comfortable and nodded.

"Whiskey and a glass of water please."

He strolled over to the bar where the barman seemed to greet him by name. Liz strained, but heard nothing over the general hum of a hotel at work. Her phone vibrated with a voicemail which she decided not to recall for fear of a relapse. Mr Handkerchief returned to her table empty handed. "Drinks will be along in a minute," he said.

"Please, do sit down. You really are most kind. I'm Liz. Lizbeth Ciancento."

"Michael. Michael Collins." With a start, Liz remembered the chauffeur at the airport holding a placard with the same name.

"Michael. I'm pleased to meet you. I don't usually do this you know." Again, Liz wasn't entirely sure to what she was referring. Crying in the Four Seasons? Blowing her nose on a cocktail napkin? Accepting a drink from a stranger?

"Explanations are not necessary. I think I mentioned that already," he said sternly, but with a broad and pleasant smile.

"So, Mr Collins. What brings you here?"

"I'm only here for one night. I live in Chicago but I've come over for the spring break for a change of scene. I was supposed to be staying at a friend's house in Milan while he's away, but the caretaker couldn't get the keys to me 'til tomorrow so I'm bunking here for the night. Bummer eh?" and he smiled again, this time conspiratorially. "You?"

"Um, I'm over from Cape Town to look after my father in law. He hasn't been well and...I'm sorry. That's complete bollocks."

Michael laughed, genuinely and loudly. Loudly enough to turn some heads at the far end of the bar.

"OK. Let's start again," he said. "Just tell me what you want to tell me. If it's complete rubbish, I'll play along. I have no vested interest in hearing the truth. In my experience, fiction is usually much more compelling." And with that he slid back on his chair, touched his fingertips together, crossed his legs and looked at her expectantly. This was fun, thought Liz. She'd forgotten what pleasure there

was in being somewhere where you could be anything you wanted to be because there was no-one to call you on it. She could be an archaeologist, a bee-keeper or a timpani player in the Budapest Philharmonic. She could be a stunt girl from Hollywood.

"I've brought my father-in-law back to his home to die and in the process I've lost my husband" was what she finally managed to come up with.

"Hmm. Could that be considered careless?" he said, with a Wildean glint of mischief. Liz grinned, took a deep breath, and launched. By the time she'd reached the part about finding the list and packing her bags, she had his complete attention. And the word-for-word phone call with Stefano brought Michael up to date. She left out a few intimate details, such as vomiting on the bed, but essentially he now knew as much as she did.

Michael had got the barman to leave the bottle of whiskey on their table and it was now two-thirds empty. Liz realised that she hadn't really eaten that day and the alcohol was taking control of her body, but she was past caring. She was witty, funny and charming. Michael was a darling. The barman was a fantastic bloke and quite cute too. Ahhh. Yes. Good. Stefano's harsh words had receded to another time, another place, and the largest club sandwich that Liz had ever seen appeared on the table in front of her as if ordered via thought transference.

By the time Liz had polished off the last piece of Lollo Rosso, she knew that Michael was forty-six, gay (NO!), lived in a studio apartment on the thirty-second floor of an apartment block (with a doorman) on Lakeshore Drive in Chicago and taught English to mature students at a private college. He came from money, had lost much of the family fortune in bad property deals and had to seek gainful employment. However, he had never been able to restrain his spending to

the level at which he earned, so to supplement his lifestyle he wrote gay porn under a pseudonym. He was taking a three-month sabbatical from teaching to finish his third prick-buster in relative isolation (frankly it was far more financially rewarding than teaching) and he'd been offered an apartment in Milan by a friend of his for an inspirational change of scene. Liz was astonished at just how fast one could find a new best friend over a bottle of single malt.

At around 10.30, Liz was just sufficiently compos mentis to realise that the volume of her voice had gone up a few decibels and that even though the bar was now filling up, she was still laughing slightly too loudly to blend in. So she did the right and proper thing under the circs. She invited Michael up to her room for a nightcap before remembering the condition in which she had left it. When he graciously accepted, they walked very deliberately out of the bar, just to prove they were absolutely definitively totally not drunk. Liz spent the short lift journey to the second floor silently praying that the chambermaid had completed due diligence on Room 208.

Half an hour later, Michael really was completely off his pock-marked face and wearing nothing but his shirt, having spilled a good three-quarters of a Bloody Mary down the front of his trousers. They had tried to spot wash them and Liz was now standing by the dressing table holding the hair drier over a large stained damp patch at the crotch. The two of them were having trouble speaking, laughing so much that their stomach muscles hurt.

There was nothing left in the bar fridge to drink. But there was still food. Food being a relative term of course. Lindt squares in a bright red box, real American Jelly Beans, hand-cooked kettle chips (low in sodium, high in taste),

and last but by no means least, nirvana; the instantly recognizable horizontally extruded pyramid of Toblerone - no, make that DARK CHOCOLATE Toblerone.

“Mister Collins! How on earth did my lovely chambermaid know that Dark Chocolate Toblerone is absolutely my all time favourite? Did you know that it’s incredibly difficult to get hold of in Cape Town, unless of course you go to either Giovanni's in Seapoint where they sell all the delicious deli stuff but charge such outrageous prices, or of course you could always go to the English Warehouse that sells everything from the UK but that's right out at Milnerton and it’s a real schlep to get to unless you are actually going out that way and there's not much call to go out that way except to go to the Italian Club for a Sunday lunch, at least not when you live in the Southern Suburbs.”

Liz stopped for breath and looked round at Michael. He was flat on his back sideways across her bed, breathing gently. His eyes were closed. *Goddamit.* He was asleep. Well. At least she could honestly say that her first night in Milan was being spent at the Four Seasons with a tall, dark, handsome man in her bed. She undressed in the bathroom, pulled a pillow from the bed and a spare blanket from the cupboard, switched off the lights and lay down on the deep pile carpet so kindly provided by what was arguably Milan’s finest hotel.

Thursday March 21st 1963: Milan

It was the third Thursday night dinner that they had in near silence. They made strange, yet fitting, table companions. The lady of the house, dressed down in an offbeat multi-coloured housecoat with zipper front – not the most attractive of garments, but very practical for breast feeding (which her three-year-old son was showing no inclination to give up). The man of the house, in a dark turtle neck (with a dab of paint on the rear hem that he hadn't spotted) and slacks. And the evening's guest dressed appropriately in a neat mini skirt, blouse with sheer balloon sleeves, and knee-high boots with a heel. His aqua eye shadow was perfectly applied, his kohl and mascara made his eyes pop, his skin was porcelain with pancake foundation, and his hair fell in a chic bob with a headband. At any other time, it would have been a perfectly normal Thursday night. But that night an unusual gloom occupied not only the vacant fourth chair but all the empty crevices in the apartment.

Carlo was dealing with the unspoken subject by retreating into a shell, while Alessa did her best to come to terms with the bad news and was working twice as hard to cover for the two of them. The only one chattering was Stefano, in a baby language to which no-one was required to respond. Rather irritatingly for his parents, the child would fall asleep during the day and then remain alert and chatty long into the evenings. Alessa had tried hard to keep him awake so he would tire and sleep at a decent time but in recent weeks had been thankful for the distraction.

“So, Alessa, what’s the latest?” Mika said at last. “Have you had the test results back from last week?”

Carlo narrowed his eyes at Mika, willing him to shut up. But his friend saw need both in Carlo to deny and for Alessa to talk, so he carried on.

“Well? Alessa?”

“Really Mika, this is not suitable talk for the dinner table.”

“No Carlo. It’s not suitable talk for any time at all, but I’m here now and it will just have to do.”

“Thank you for asking, Mika,” Alessa said quickly. “Yes, the results have come back. It’s not good news. Hence Carlo’s greater than usual reluctance to discuss the topic...”

“So? How bad is not good?”

“Well, the tissue results show that it’s definitely a tumour. So they have to operate. But there is some good news. The tests show that it’s a type of tumour called a glioma. It’s not as aggressive as some of the other types and most people lucky enough to have this one rather than another get to live longer. Obviously they want to take it out, so there’ll be an operation, but it seems hopeful that I’ll get to see my little boy walking and talking. And my husband’s first exhibition...”

“Alessa, for God’s sake. Stop this torture!” Carlo burst out. And with that, he pushed his chair back violently and left the table, leaving his veal half eaten, his wine quarter drunk.

Alessa slumped back, wearily.

“I’m sorry”, Mika said. “I shouldn’t have pushed so hard. Have you told your parents?”

“Yesterday. My father went for a very long walk. Since then he, like Carlo, has been trying to pretend that nothing is happening. Mama’s busying herself with the shop. She’s strong, like Carlo’s mama. I think women are often better equipped to deal with bad news.”

“ And you? What are you feeling? Are you scared?”

“Of course. But I’m assured that the sooner the tumor is removed, the better chance I will have. So the operation will be as soon as possible. Mama has already said that she and Papa will take Stefano – Carlo can’t possibly manage with me in hospital and who knows what will happen after...” Her voice went unusually small, and Mika could hear one finger rubbing, no, picking at the wood under the table.

“What about Carlo’s parents? Did you talk to them about what is to happen with Stefano while you are recuperating?”

“No, Carlo and I talked about it, but Signor Cienento is starting to have serious physical problems – apparently from all the close work that he did on the watches. It couldn’t have been good for him, every day, to sit with his head bowed looking through a glass at tiny little workings of watches. It seems he is suffering from headaches as well as tunnel vision. Not often, but enough to worry Signora Cienento. And she works full time. Of course Mama works too, but Papa can always find someone to help in the shop while Mama looks after Stef. He’ll go to school in a few years and then....but I’m getting ahead of myself. This situation is only for a short while. And once I’ve had the operation, I’ll be back and we can all go on as before.”

Mika looked closely at Alessa. Yes, she was strong. But not so strong that he couldn't see the tic in her upper left temple and notice that her chin had tipped up with unconscious defiance against her sickness.

"I'll go and find Carlo," he said. "I just want you to know I'm here for you. For both of you. Alessa, you need to know that the two of you are the most important people in my life and the ones that I cherish the most. Anything I can do for either of you, I will do it. So I beg of you, let me help where I can?"

"*Grazie* Mika. And we love you too. If there is any place for you in this awful business, then I promise I will let you know. In the meantime, go and find my stubborn husband who only thinks the worst and, if necessary, beat some sense into him. He'll be in his studio. Please, tell him that we still have a life, a marriage and a son to look after and that I'm not ready to go to my grave!"

As Mika stood up to leave, Alessa was still sitting there with her son on her lap. She was staring out of the window, resting her chin on the top of the fair-haired boy, but given that the view was the bare wall of the opposing apartment block, he wasn't sure that she was actually looking at anything.

Carlo's studio was on the top floor of the building, the garret, a cold place at the best of times. The stairwell was dark, and Mika turned his heel on the top step and stumbled. There was no light coming under the door. He tried the handle and, as he'd thought, found it locked.

Now what? He knew that if Carlo wasn't here, he'd be drinking at Il Montana. It wasn't far, but Mika was dressed for an intimate dinner with close friends, not a stroll in the street. Still, it wouldn't be the first time he'd been out at night as a woman. It was risky anywhere, but there were areas that were more tolerant, darker, smaller streets in poorly lit districts. Areas where no-one knew

anyone else yet recognized each other for what they were. Areas where it was both dangerous and yet safe – where knives were carried yet rarely used.

But Alessa needed her husband, so Mika descended the four flights, past the safety of the apartment door and Stef's muted chattering. It was just after dusk and there were plenty of people around in the streets. He held his head high and hoped for the best. He was pretty enough to pass on first glance, and he was quick enough not to allow anyone a second.

Carlo was indeed at the trattoria. He was, unusually for him, rather drunk. Despite his size, very little alcohol was required to provoke him into an irritable ill-humour.

“Come my friend,” said Mika. “Let's go home.”

“What, Mika? Don't you want to stroll this evening? You're all dressed up and ready to go. Come on, you look beautiful. Go out and enjoy yourself, my friend. I'm staying here.”

“Please, Carlo, these are difficult times and your family needs you. Insulting me and getting drunk won't change anything. It won't make anything better.”

“You sound as sanctimonious and pious as Father Benedetti used to in those deadly dull Sunday sermons. Why don't you join me? Come. Sit.”

“No, I won't join you. But what I will do is ask that you come with me back to the apartment to apologise to your wife. For Christ's sake Carlo, she's the one that's sick, she's the one that's feeling responsible for turning everyone's world upside-down, she's the one that's scared beyond belief even though she's doing her best to hide it. You're so busy feeling sorry for yourself that you can't

see past your own personal demons. Be the man that we all know you are. Find it in your heart to set aside your own anger and fear, and be there to support her.”

“Goodness Mika. Piety does indeed become you. Perhaps you should be wearing vestments instead of all those fine fancy dresses of yours? Perhaps *you* should be the man that we all know you are...”

But he pushed back his chair, threw a handful of change on the table and picked up his jacket.

“We’ll go back via the park. I need to clear my head before I get home.”

Mika went to protest, but decided against it. The risk was minimal. And if it would get Carlo back to the apartment without any more scenes, then it was worth it.

The two men walked silently together. It was dusk, becoming night, and the moon read the outline of their bodies--the one broad tall and weighty, the other small, slender and fine. As they walked, there was a good deal of space between them. Mika was still smarting from Carlo’s harsh words.

They entered the park. It closed only at 10 p.m. between April and October and was well used on warmer nights where softer temperatures brought out families into the later evening for drinks and visits and play. Over to their left, what sounded like a small group of teenage girls were playing on the roundabout, each silhouette occupying a one-eighth section and languidly trailing an arm or a leg on the cross bars. Two of them were smoking – he could see the glowing red circles trailing in the half light as the roundabout spun.

The trees arced above them. The blossom had been and gone, the smell of near summer was faint, but there. Near, but not close enough to prevent Mika from crossing his arms over the front of his blouse, and hunching his shoulders

against the sharpening late hour air. Carlo, who felt no cold, sang wordlessly under his breath. For the next ten minutes, there was silence between them as the two men slowly relaxed. They could have been any couple out for an evening stroll.

They heard nothing. They saw nothing. There was no warning. Mika was taken roughly round the throat from the back. A knife pointed at his chest stopped him from making any further movement. At the same moment, a foot caught Carlo hard in the back of the knee, and he went down forehead first, crashing onto his hands and tipping sideways off balance. No one had said a word. Carlo grunted in pain and looked up to see where this unprovoked attack had come from. Bad mistake. A boot caught him under the chin as he lifted his head and cracked his skull back onto the concrete path. A girl shrieked with laughter--must have been one of the group on the roundabout.

Mika stood completely still, with a paring knife inches from his breastbone. His mother used to approach boning a chicken in this way, before stuffing it with garlic and roasting it for Sunday lunch. She'd slide the knife under the breast, gently cutting any flesh away from the bone. She had made it look graceful. Mika knew that this, whatever it was, was not graceful.

The bigger of the two attackers, hat pulled down, leant down and started to strip Carlo of his belongings. Wallet, watch and wedding ring. But the wedding ring was not a simple thing to remove. Not least because Carlo had started to realize what was happening and had no intention of letting his wedding ring off his finger. Mika barely had time to see the swift upward jab of Carlo's shiny brogue to the thief's testicles and an arm thrown furiously around the neck in force of fury. But he did see the pain from Carlo's revenge travel up through the

attacker's body and hear the sound of the pain screeching out of him. Then, as the assailant fell, head first, there was immediate quiet.

The knife at Mika's chest wavered. He still hadn't seen who was holding it. He knew he was fast and could outrun just about anyone, but could he do it in a mini skirt and heels?

"Renaldo! Renaldo..."

The knife holder was a woman. Jesus Christ. Mika dug his elbow backwards at speed, while with his other hand he grabbed the knife and twisted the wrist, fast and angrily. The knife fell and there was another shout, this time one of pain from the woman. He turned and saw only a doubled-up figure in a dark jacket and hat, presenting an opportunistic rear which he did not hesitate to target hard with the heel of his size eight court shoe. The woman stumbled, uttering foul language as she went, trying to keep the forward running motion but reluctantly veering sideways into the dark, onto the black grass to the left of the path, into the night and out of sight..

The other figure, larger and broader, was on the ground and not moving. Carlo levered himself off the ground, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. There was blood, but not much. He put on his watch, and his wallet went back into his pocket. Mika was shaking with fear, shock and cold. He hadn't been afraid, but he was now.

For good measure, Carlo kicked the body on the ground, just to make sure who was boss. Still nothing.

"Mika – OK?"

"Si."

“*Che cazzo!* Common thieves. And one of them a woman. I really don’t know what the world is coming to. There’ll be children robbing us next. We’re all going crazy. Hey! You! Get up, you shit.”

“Carlo!”

“Sssssh. Mika – keep it down for god’s sake!”

Carlo had turned away and was kneeling by the man, shaking him by the shoulders, urgently trying to rouse him.

“*E! Stronzo! Alza!* Get up! *E!*”

“Carlo, let’s go. Let’s get out of here. We’re in such trouble.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We need to call the police. We acted in self defence. We can’t just run, that would look as if *we’re* the guilty ones, that *we’ve* committed some kind of crime.”

“Of all the times you need to use your head instead of your fists Carlo, this is it. Don’t you see? Look at how I’m dressed. What I’m wearing. My fingerprints are all over that knife and you’ve beaten the living daylights out of that man. There’s no evidence of robbery. What do they have of ours? The bitch has disappeared. Who’s to say who did what to whom?”

But it was too late to say anything to anyone. Suddenly there was noise, voices, shouting and yelling within a few hundred yards. The sound of running, girls pointing and screaming, crying, bushes breaking, more shouting. They froze. Mika whimpered. Fear had taken his voice.

A whistle sang like a bird shrilling through the night air. Then feet came pounding towards them. Not the light dancing feet of young girls but larger heavier thuds weighed down with truncheons, cuffs and bigotry.

Monday February 27th 2012 10.42 a.m: Milan

It really wasn't far now, Carlo assured her. The journey had started interestingly, with a trip down Via Montenapoleone. She had thought that she would see glamour everywhere, but even though the graffiti had lessened, there was still little colour. She would have thought that she'd have been entranced by the wonderful displays of wealth and window-dressing, but was surprised to find herself looking through the smaller arcades to see what lay behind the building facades. The courtyard in the Four Seasons had given her a glimpse into a hidden city and she wanted more. Now that she knew behind the flat fronts and stone walls lay gardens, squares, courtyards and fountains, she was determined to uncover its secrets. Milan was keeping its silk petticoat hidden under an austere woollen skirt.

It seemed that they had gone in through the city centre (she thought she'd glimpsed the Pirelli building in between two other tall grey buildings but apparently it was the side of an extremely dull but worthy post-war office block), and they'd passed the Piazza San Babila with its ancient church incongruously sitting against a backdrop of yet more grey buildings. When she had visited Carlo in the early 90s, Milan had seemed unbelievably chic. Every single person she passed seemed dressed with casual nonchalance, sauntering with runway steps from street, to shop, to office, to bar and home again. For each individual, every new day was another opportunity to toss shiny black hair, slide feet half out of heels under cafe tables with supermodel style, all the while laughing and showing perfectly white teeth. It was the city that advertising executives dreamed of, full of beautiful people. And the worst thing was, they just couldn't help it. They didn't

try or make that much of an effort. They just Were. Liz had never felt so under-dressed, unattractive or insecure in her life.

But, twenty years later, the city was looking very different. Heads were down. Jeans were ubiquitous. Raincoats had collars pulled up. Jerseys were cheaper and shinier. Hoods and adidasnikepuma flashes ruled over stilettos and brogues. It wasn't just graffiti that was telling the tale of Milan in the twenty-first century. Fashion forward had come full circle and had gone into reverse gear. Milan, it seemed, was now fashion backward. Liz could have driven through Cape Town in similar weather and seen more variety in clothing, more casual chic, and probably considerably more leggy models than were on offer through her Italian taxi window.

She thought about Michael and his Chicago Blues Bar crumpled look as he'd risen sheepishly from her bed that morning.

“Christ Liz. Sorry.”

She'd giggled. Then they'd both snorted with laughter. It was fine. What could have been an awkward moment passed without incident other than a slap on the back when Liz had almost choked from laughter. And once Michael had splashed his face, taken two ibuprofen and straightened his locks and socks, the pair of them went down to breakfast like old friends.

La Verandah restaurant was pleasantly post-modern, if with a little too much sunlight coming in through the courtyard windows for the two hungover guests, but they gamely ordered coffees and Liz went to the front desk to call for Carlo.

It seemed that he'd already been out that morning and was waiting for her in the foyer. She grabbed her coffee and went to find him. He looked good. Better than she'd seen him in a long time.

“Carlo!”

“*Ciao cara!* And how are you this morning? Hm. A little, how you say, below the weather? You walk stiff. I think you must be getting old like me now.”

“Not exactly. There is a reason, which I'll tell you just now, but first tell me, how did you sleep? How are you feeling?”

“Never better *mi cara*. I cannot tell you how happy I am to feel the heartbeat of my home. It gives me new life. Now tell me. I am intrigued why you walk like a beggar who spent the night on the pavement, when you should have slept on the wings of angels!”

“Ah. Well. Yes. As a matter of fact, I had a rather strange evening. I'm afraid that I might have disgraced myself slightly.”

Carlo raised one eyebrow.

“No, no, not in that way! For heaven's sake! You're my husband's father and I would never, ever disrespect you or your son like that. At least, not so visibly!” The lady was definitely protesting too much... “No, but I did find a friend. We had a little too much to drink and he – yes, he – fell asleep on my bed. But as soon as you meet him you'll ...Ah! Michael! There you are! Carlo, meet Michael. Michael, Carlo.” Her job was done. Carlo had seized up the situation in a millisecond and had taken Michael's outstretched hand between his own in a rather Mafia-esque semblance of greeting. She had always felt that Carlo was a good judge of character.

She remembered a morning, not so long ago (but it felt like a lifetime), sitting under the slowly turning ceiling fan in his small living room in Cape Town. He had rolled up his sleeves, put his feet up on the table and announced with his characteristically mischievous smile that he'd accepted an invitation to tea from one of the female neighbours, one of the few neither too old nor too sensitive to take exception to the brush-offs meted out with regularity by the still handsome Italian widower. Liz had clapped her hands with pleasure, mentioning it had only taken him eight years to get around to it, before she'd asked him why exactly he'd said he'd go this time when he habitually turned down everyone else.

“She likes chickens.” And that was it. Apparently, anyone who liked chickens couldn't be unpleasant. Indeed, since Carlo had highlighted this fact, the few times since that Liz had come across anyone who had more than a passing interest in poultry as anything other than a Sunday roast, had proved the case. Clare, for example. Now one of her closest friends, Clare had a house in Hout Bay filled with all sorts of representations of the damn things and claimed it was all in error. The story went that one day, she'd bought two small chicken prints for her kitchen that she'd thought were cute. Her husband had then bought her an apron with a (“rather handsome don't you think?”) cockerel on for her birthday. And that, it seemed, was that. It became official. Clare was a chicken lover. For the next twenty years, cups, mugs, tea towels, tea shirts, prints, oven gloves, platters, hanging signs with silly messages on, the collection grew. Birthdays, Christmas, anniversaries. Gifts from her twins, friends, and relatives she'd never met. The most persistent was a distant friend who worked in a Charity Shop and the instant anything with a chicken came in would ‘set it aside’ for Clare. Who would have thought that so many people could make so many things decorated with poultry?

The poor woman had never had the heart to tell anyone that, although of course chickens were quite fun, she actually preferred hares. That's how nice she was. Liz was prepared to bet that Michael held both chickens and hares in high esteem.

“So, Michele!”

“Si Signor?”

“Please, young man, call me Carlo.”

“Oh Liz, I love him already. He's called me 'young man' within five seconds.”

“Are you staying here? How long are you here for? I'm afraid that I haven't given Liz a chance to tell me yet what it is you do or indeed why you are here at all. Something in fashion perhaps?” he asked and smiled at the ruffled embarrassment emanating from Michael.

“Uh. No. And I think that you are teasing me Signor!”

Liz smiled. The two men had hit it off instantly..

“Breakfast? Anyone? I could eat a Lipizzaner.”

“*Si cara*. But we have a taxi coming at eleven to take us to our next adventure.”

The three ate in the courtyard restaurant, between them marvelling at the how the sun was warming the grey stone and awakening the mottled colours. Slowly, the grey was no longer the dull grey of a cheap woollen uniform, but became the shaded greys of Fortuny fabrics, dove soft, raw blue steel, purple-hued fading silks. All the greys of the world were clustered in the cloisters of this ancient monastery, preserved for the modern traveller to gaze upon while starting her day with translucent hams, hot toast and the blackest of miniature coffees.

Their leave-taking was a little rushed, but Michael insisted on taking her number so that he could take her out for dinner and try to repay her for her night on the Four Seasons floor. She hadn't argued. She was looking forward to finding a little bit more of the old Lizzie in their next escapade and had insisted that it was to be somewhere equally glamorous.

"La Scala! Let's go to the Opera. Looking at all those wonderful prints on the wall in the hotel bar – yes Michael, I can remember doing that--has given me the appetite for seeing something completely over the top and fabulous. OK? Deal?"

And with that, she turned towards their taxi with an outstretched arm and springing step. Performing for the two men, she flicked her heel with a tight 1950s kick, waved her hand and projected her voice. "The Ritz!" she said in an Audrey Hepburn-ish coquette voice, thoroughly enjoying the moment. Michael laughed, Carlo shrugged with his hands as only an Italian or a Jew can shrug, and the driver regarded her with suspicion.

"Ritz? Signor?"

"*No, prego. Permesso. Via Santa Rosa. Mille grazie.* Cara, the Ritz here is not like the Ritz in London! Anyway, I know where we are going, so would you please sit and behave? I do believe that somewhere in that hotel you lost thirty years and now I have to scold you like a papa!"

So, after a short ride, there she was, craning her neck like a kid in a candyshop who couldn't decide what she wanted, when the taxi slowed and crawled for a few hundred yards before pulling over into something that bore no resemblance to a parking space. They had arrived.

July 5th 1976 : Milan

The square where Mika sat was warm. Summer had fused itself to the exposed bricks, and his shoulders opened wide to soak the gentle heat. It was possibly the first really hot day that had pleased Milan so far that year, although he couldn't be sure. He'd spent most of the first part of the year (and indeed the previous ten) in prison. So for now, he was content to sit.

He'd thought about this day so many times over. He'd tried to imagine the scene, but its particulars had evaded him. Where would he be? What would he be wearing? Who would surround him? The only thing he knew for sure was that Carlo would not be part of it. Just one month before his release, he'd finally found the courage to tell Carlo that there was to be no great reunion at the prison gate on his release.

"Don't be there on the day," Mika had said. "There's to be no party Carlo. No dinner, no theatre, no trips or outings, no walks in the park or expectations of picking up where we left off. It's been ten years, my friend. I'm no longer the person that you have always known. This has changed me. I need time. Yes, it's ironic, that it's the one thing I've had so much of for a decade, but now I need more – just this time with a choice of view."

"I don't understand. I want to help. You have to let me help. It's my turn Mika. You can't stop me from being here for you now!"

"No, I can't stop you from being here. But I will not be here for you to help. I'm leaving Milan for a while. Please Carlo, I don't wish to be cruel to you. We've been through so much together. But you need to let me be."

“Let you be where? How long do you need? When will you be back?
Where are you going?”

Mika had lied. He wasn't leaving Milan. How could he? The streets were his streets, the dwellers his family, the night brought his freedom. Where else would he want to put down his small bag of belongings and say “Love me or despise me, this is my life”?

Nobody could say that the ten years had flown by. In the early days, Carlo and even sometimes Alessa had come to see him nearly every weekend. They brought him gifts of cigarettes and chocolate which helped him buy favours and keep him safer than he might otherwise have been. But once Alessa had become housebound and then bedbound, the visits had all but fallen away, and he had not been smiled upon by anybody's grace for over a year. He feared the worst, and then, two years into his prison sentence, he had received a rare visit from Carlo.

“Prisoner 37289. Visitor. Twenty minutes. And make sure it's a good show so we can all enjoy the fun...”

Walking down the corridor to the familiar accompaniment that followed him whenever he left his cell--sucking cheeks, explicit hand movements and other singularly unimaginative sexual taunts--Mika entered the visiting room and knew instantly the reason for the visit Carlo was there.

“My dear friend. I'm so sorry. I've dreaded this day for a long time.”

Carlo bowed his head.

“It’s me who should be sorry Mika. It’s me who left you alone in this stinking shithole. I haven’t been to see you in so long. Oh Mika. Alessa’s gone and I’ve lost myself. I have never felt so alone. I think she may have taken me with her.”

It seemed that for the next several months, Carlo absented himself from the humdrum job of existing. He visited Mika on a regular basis, but had little to talk about. His personal appearance was shoddy, his brain occasionally scrambled. He muttered a bit. And sometimes he confessed to missing a visit with his son simply because he couldn’t be bothered to get out of bed. So the family had thought it better that Stef just stayed where he was.

According to Carlo, Stef was a unremarkable boy who worked hard, had flashes of humour and very little idea of what he wanted to do with his life, other than make money. He’d lived with his grandparents from the age of six, when Alessa’s illness had become so intense that Carlo couldn’t manage to care for both her and the boy, and what with the trial and everything... indeed, the last time Mika had seen the little one was at the house earlier in the evening on the night he’d been arrested for murder.

The year before, Mika had attempted interest and had asked Carlo to bring a photograph, but he’d been disappointed with the good-looking, rather pale boy who looked back, static yet apparently equally disappointed, from the small rectangle of glossy paper. None of Alessa’s flamboyance or Carlo’s gentleness spoke from the print, although his father assured Mika that the boy’s wit was sharp and his will was strong. Mika nodded with surface approval and kept his silence on the fact that both were traits which could either bring benefits or ill-fortune in adulthood depending on how they were deployed.

Stef would be what now? Mika wondered. Fifteen? At the suggestion of Carlo's Mama, he'd been packed off to Eton in 1971, with the goal of getting a good education, learning English, and eventually going to America to work on Wall Street. Mika shrugged. Wall Street was very far away—a world away from the walls he had been held within for the last ten years.

Mika sighed at the memory of his imprisonment and was reminded further when the deep intake of breath was halted by a shear of pain. It was one of the three ribs broken by the night guard on the transsexuals' segregation block, who had thought any man's sexual confusion an abomination against the church and enjoyed demonstrating the fact repeatedly with a rubber stick. Segregated for his own safety? That had been a farce. Although three broken ribs and anal rape with a truncheon had been the extent to which he had been abused physically in ten years, and he'd seen much worse on the block.

Mika had taken small and usually vindictive pleasure in the fact that the same guard had been on duty at the prison riot that had taken place just before his release earlier that month. A chunk of concrete landed on his abuser's head, randomly cast by a prisoner from the women's wing who had wrapped it in her brassiere and swung it like a slingshot from the roof into the yard below, where terrified guards violently lashed and beat those they could reach.

Mika hadn't seen a thing. He'd been out of the action in the segregation wing. But he'd heard the shots and the shouting, the sound of metal against metal.

He'd smelled the acrid smoke from the mattresses burning, and the CS gas had made his eyes run. He knew what was happening and was glad he was alone.

Two of the three ribs had healed nicely with nature's kindness, but the last one was taking its time to mend and jagged into his side when he forgot to keep his breathing even. Carlo had offered to take him to the doctor on his release, but Mika had politely refused.

Now, with his bag beside him, he was in a very familiar part of town. In fact, Carlo would have found him so easily if he'd have thought carefully. But the obvious was not Carlo's forte. Mika had made himself at home in the now-empty department store where he had spent so much of his childhood, holed up among the velvets and taffetas while Carlo ran errands for his father. He lived in the room which had housed the bolts of fabrics prior to their display on the shelves, one of the best spaces in the store: no direct sunlight (which might discolour the fabrics) nor exposure to extremes of temperature (which might invite mildew or mould). It was an internal room with glass running horizontally around the top fifth of the high walls, so natural light entered second-hand from the store's massive windows but nothing was visible from the outside. The walls of the bolt store bore evidence of dark oak panelling, with shards splintered around flat metal nail heads where the wood had been prised from the block-work and burned by some previous vagrant-in-residence, leaving the ashes mounded in restless piles in the far dark corners of retail history.

"Wood is good," Mika remembered his father saying while running a large hand across the oak moulding of the staircase on a rare family weekend outing to the store. "It's natural and so very forgiving of what goes on around it."

Sadly, little wood was left anywhere in the store. But most of the windows were still intact, a few bloodied and feathered here and there, some panes so covered in excrement that certain internal areas, particularly on the top floor, would experience a diurnal eclipse. It seemed that the store had closed down a few years ago— strange that Carlo had not seen fit to mention its demise, given its place in their lives.

When Mika had walked free from the prison, to the jeering and catcalling of the other inmates, his instinct was to seek safe haven. He'd gone to his old apartment but it had been razed to the ground. In its place stood a rigid pre-fabricated block of immense proportions and even greater vulgarity. Some of the exterior panels were grimy green and orange, but exhaust fumes and smoke filmed them with a uniform grey. Mika read some of the slogans that had been scrawled into the dirt at eye level. He'd heard that there were protests on the streets – rioting wasn't reserved for the prisons – but hadn't been prepared for the ugly mood that prevailed.

'It's not the politicised minority who create revolt, but the existence of exploitation' read one. Another, more to the point, simply said 'DP = Liberta'. Mika had heard that the communist Proletarian Democracy party had done well in last month's elections for the first time. Revolution was in the air... as were the visible remnants of protest. The detritus of dissatisfaction--torn posters peeling from the wall and defaced, graffiti daubed on walls, fencing pulled down to block civil pathways, manifestations of anger at the divide between poverty and prosperity.

So there had been no welcome for him from Signora Cretta on the Via Lugano, and he went on through the city revisiting other old haunts, trying to find

a place to settle. During the day time, he'd taken advantage of the summer light, visiting the wealthier areas to beg discreetly from the shadows, always careful to avoid the main roads and the *polizia municipale*.

He'd imagine he saw Mama sometimes, amongst the well-dressed, well-heeled women who frequented the Via Montenapoleone; she'd be there in a glimpse of loosely tied coal-black hair, the cut of a trouser above a neat ankle, a waist as small as the neck of an hourglass. A lump of longing would sit on his chest, making it hard to breathe.

At other times, some liberal Signora might throw him spare change, happy in her risqué generosity.

"That dress you are wearing?" she might say. "It looks like one my mother used to have."

"Grazie Signora, for your kindness. It is indeed a lovely dress. A little tight across the back for me, I had to put in a small panel here – see?"

"But that's beautifully sewn. Did you do it yourself? You are clearly skilled at tailoring. How do you come to be here?"

"I am one of the lucky ones Signora," he'd reply. "I am here by choice. I have a home. It is a beautiful home, full of love and happiness. It just lives inside of me instead of me inside of it."

And so it was that by the end of August, nearly five weeks after his release, Mika passed by the store and found it boarded up. Dereliction was not far off, but sufficiently distant for his purposes. There was no lifetime plan. Just one for the here and now, so it didn't take long for him to feel that finally he was settled. There was no moving-in party. No welcome home each night from a lover or friend, no dinners cooked or beds turned down. But he did have candlelight and

a small radio which played two stations without hissing. And his dreams were comparable to those of any wealthier individual lying in a featherdown bed: veiled omens about the possibility of this or the likelihood of that, but most of all they were about the certainty of the other.

February 27th 2012 11.24 a.m: Milan

Although it was a large, unprepossessing building, Liz knew by now to disregard the obvious. But it did look more like business premises than an apartment block. Two huge black plate glass windows embedded with what looked like mesh faced onto the street. Three stories high, it was probably some 200 feet across – large by any standards. Not very homely at all. Carlo caught the confusion on her face and smiled as he paid off the taxi.

“*Cara*, you’re looking concerned!”

“Just wondering what we’re doing here – from the Four Seasons to this? Is this home or just a stop on the way to where we’re going?”

“I suppose that depends on your final destination my dear. For now, this will do as a resting post.”

With that, he put on his glasses and peered at the box of bells. There were three. Must be large apartments if there are only three buzzers, thought Liz.

“*Si. Eccola! Madelina Vesuvo.*” And he pushed, with force, harder than need be for longer than need be. A few crackles, then the door clicked.

Liz fought Carlo for the bags and won, and he moved up the steps in front of her, busying himself with an under-the-breath monologue.

Nothing prepared her for what was behind the doors. She had expected a hallway, some kind of entrance, maybe a table with flowers, letterboxes fixed on the wall, some doors and maybe a marble or ornately tiled floor. Some faithful old retainer would shuffle along jangling a big ring of keys and see them to their rooms.

What she got instead was a cavernous space. No, not cavernous. Massive. There were no apartments. Liz scanned for visual clues – there, in the back, a long bar with optics filled with coloured liquids. On the walls, lights that looked like neon art, but they weren't lit so she couldn't really tell. Over there, a raised stage with silver curtains to the back, seeming to disappear into a wall. And mirrors – massive old gilt-framed, floor to ceiling. What style, what era was this place? It was too dark to see.

“Oh my god.”

“What is it my dear?”

“That's a massive disco ball.”

“*Si cara.*”

“This is a nightclub?”

“É...?”

“We're staying in a nightclub?”

“Not exactly. Come...”

Carlo led her towards the back of the bar. They passed a lift – well, it had obviously been a lift at some point because it was certainly a lift shaft – but it was now encased in glass, and the lift itself was equally transparent. There appeared to be no way in or out and there were no buttons. It certainly was no longer a passenger lift. Liz looked up – she could see clearly down one floor and up one floor. She felt dizzy.

“I guess we're not taking the lift then?”

Carlo laughed.

As he approached the back, where Liz was having a harder time making out the shapes in the dim light seeping through the blackened windows, they heard

an excited breathless voice rushing towards them, and they were suddenly bathed in light. Not exactly what Liz had expected – for the lights on the walls weren't neon but black lights, ultraviolet. Their eyes and teeth glowed while her white T-shirt went bright blue. She laughed and saw Carlo's whiter-than-white dentures grinning back at her. The breathless voice went up a notch and started giggling – then the neon lights went off and a calmer set of mid-century glass shaded wall sconces went on to the right of them. Liz could now see an open door in front of her and a figure coming through the passageway chuckling and with arms outstretched, moving as fast as an elderly body would allow.

“Carlo! My Carlo! Let me look at you. Oh, you look just the same. I've missed you so. Come sit. My dearest friend... And this must be your lovely Lizbette – I've heard so much about you my child. I hear you are a good person, that you like to laugh but that you do not laugh often enough and that you look after Carlo as if he were your own papa. Please, both of you, sit. Now!”

And with that, she marched them to the bar, sat them on a bar stool and started to pour three Camparis.

“Madelina, Liz. Liz Madelina. Now, is *my* turn for introduction!”

Carlo sounded smug.

“Madelina, I'm very pleased to meet you. I'd like to say I've heard a lot about you from Carlo, but I'm afraid that I can't! This is all just one huge surprise for me! This place...? I thought we were coming to Carlo's home. I mean, I'm not complaining, this is great fun, but just a little off the track. No Campari for me thanks. Bit early. Had a bit of a night...”

“Nonsense”, said Carlo. “In Milan, is never too early for an aperitif. And is perfect for hangover. My dear Liz, did you or did you not say to me that you

wanted adventure? So now. Here. Take it with both hands. Enjoy the moment!”

The old man’s eyes wrinkled and winked at her, and Liz took the glass of ruby liquid.

“*Mio caro* Carlo. You are wicked! You haven’t told her, have you?

Lizbette – this *is* Carlo’s home. He has an apartment on the top floor. There is a back way in but clearly he is up to absolute mischief for he has brought you to the front of The Store for maximum confusion!”

“Now Madelina, I have done no such thing. Maybe I haven’t exactly spelled it out, but I was only at the front because the taxi couldn’t get round the back with the bags. In the good old days that wouldn’t have mattered, but now I am not so strong and I have to fight with this slip of a girl to carry my own bag...”

“I’m sorry to seem so dim, but this doesn’t seem to me to be a store. At the risk of sounding as if I’m in a state of perpetual confusion, where am I?”

“In a club my dear. It’s called The Store. This building was once a modest but quite chi-chi department store. Carlo’s papa was a watch mender here for years. When department stores became huge, this one wasn’t big enough or modern enough so it just closed down. Lucky your papa had already retired eh!

“Anyway, at the time Carlo was looking for somewhere that was big enough for him to paint in and also have an exhibition space. I found this building decaying with a rotten old ‘For Sale’ sign on the boarded-up back entrance.

Thankfully for us, no-one had wanted somewhere that was too small to be big and too big to be small, so here we are!

“We took the top floor, split it into two and each of us has half to live in. Until he left for Cape Town, I held a weekly tea dance club just on the ground floor and Carlo painted and ran a gallery on the next level. Every Sunday we

combined the two and hosted a cake fight - a sort of artistic, culinary version of mud-wrestling – oh God, that was such fun! Carlo, we must start them up again! I suppose we were considered quite avant-garde at the time; this became quite the place to see and be seen. But since he left, things haven't been the same. Not quite the same level of clientele...still fun, but a little less 'cultured' I suppose. Anyway, I extended the club into the gallery space. I didn't know what else to do. In truth, I wasn't sure I would ever see you again, dear friend. I was afraid that you were lost to us forever in a foreign land...”

Liz could see that there was a deep bond between these two and wondered. Carlo had only ever mentioned his wife, Alessa, whom he had clearly loved with every cell in his body. Alessa had been sick for most of their marriage, it seemed, and had died when Stef was eight. Neither father nor son spoke of her, although probably for different reasons. Liz had seen photographs – there was no doubt that she had been exotic – and the family looked close and loving. There had been just two occasions in their married life when Stef had compared her mothering to his own mother's. Both times had been hurtful; he worshipped the memory of Alessa. How can you not idolize a beautiful kind woman who dies tragically, never having shouted at you for leaving the milk out of the fridge for the twentieth time or breaking the car windscreen with a cricket ball? Liz tried not to feel aggrieved or mean-spirited about it, but it wasn't easy.

But here was another flamboyant woman who seemed extraordinarily close to Carlo, of whom Stef had never spoken. They must have met after Alessa's death, after Stef had left for Cape Town. No wonder Carlo had fought to stay in Milan for so long.

She sipped on her Campari – oh, what the hell. She took a good slug. This was all weird anyway. It might make more sense with a drink inside her. Carlo and Madelina were clearly catching up. Any courtesy of speaking in English so she didn't feel left out had been dropped. Even though Carlo was well travelled and had smatterings of several languages, he had been forced to improve his English when he'd moved to South Africa. But Madelina also spoke good English, maybe even better than Carlo. As they chatted, Liz heard the odd word she knew: *ospedale*, *aeroplano*, *amico*, and several times she heard *Stef* and *matrimonio* which undoubtedly involved the trouble that was sitting below the surface of just exactly why she was here.

If she was absolutely honest, there was a miniscule piece of her that was hoping that Stef was flailing (even more than usual) without her. Perhaps, just perhaps, he was realizing what he was missing without her in his life. She didn't want him just to 'need' her for his day-to-day existence, making sure that dinner was on the table, the laundry was done, and the gardener paid. Or even to soothe his fevered brow after a difficult day, when she could see that the colour had drained from his face and he looked sweaty and agitated. She was overly familiar with the symptoms of a rash investment.

No, she needed him to remember who she was. She wasn't some little suburban drudge who was happy to be treated like a doormat. Twenty years of marriage didn't give him the right to forget who she was.

She banged her empty Campari glass down, abruptly halting the conversation between the two loquacious Italians.

“É! Madelina, you and I are so busy catching up the time that we have forgotten our manners. Please, forgive. Of course Liz, you want to see where you

will be staying? Madelina, please, let us show Liz the apartment, so she can settle in. I believe she did not have that good a night at Milan's finest hotel!" And with that, he smiled cheekily at her, cocking his head at the passageway that led towards the very black back of the building.

Slightly embarrassed--she hadn't meant to put on the brakes quite so hard--Liz picked up her bags, and the three of them set off into the dark.

"*Mi dispiace* Lizbette, but most of the lights are on a timer here. There are only the odd set which I can switch on without a big fuss. Here, at the stairs, there we are. *Luminare!*"

The stairs in front of Liz were clearly 'back' stairs – nothing fancy and with plenty of Fire Department notices showing graphics, symbols, or the word 'USCITA' in a font size that any person of less than 20/20 vision couldn't fail to see.

"There is a lift", said Madelina, "but it's not designed for passengers."

"Was that the glass lift I saw in the middle of the room?"

"*Si*. It carries the performers. It goes up and down slowly through the three floors of the club but only opens in the basement, which is where you find the work areas – the kitchen, restrooms, changing rooms for the entertainers and storerooms. But the lift gives constant movement and interest in the club. The clients love it - they never know what's coming – it's quite an attraction I can assure you. We've had all sorts happening in that lift, not just dancers and singers. We've had crocodile man, elasti-girl, we've even flown in Bell Nuntita from Thailand".

"*Chi?*"

“Carlo, *dove sei stato?* Where have you been? Bell Nuntita is an extraordinary performer! She can sing both soprano and baritone. Amazing... She was so popular here. We were full nearly every night even in the middle of the week.

“It’s so funny though, Lizbette, I used to ride up and down in this lift when I was little. I used to hide at the back behind legs and bags and time how long it was before the bell boy noticed me, and even then he didn’t make me get out unless somebody important got in the lift. Sometimes I think he was deliberately pretending not to notice me. He would pull the brass handles to go up or down a floor at a time and open the gates to let people on and off. Do you remember Carlo? I was so jealous of his job – I thought that was all I’d ever want to be and I’d never tire of it”.

They had reached the first floor and had turned the corner of the stairwell to face a library wall of books with a false door in.

“This way. Just pull this handle Lizbette - the books help to absorb sound if I want an early night.”

“Ha! That’s a rare thing indeed! Madelina has always been an insomniac – so running a night time business is just perfect for her!”

Liz had time only to glance round. Capitone faux-leather tufted walls in the manner of a gentlemen’s club set the tone for a far more cohesive and classical feel to this level. She could just make out a long range of booths on the opposite end of the room and felt the softness of carpet underfoot. Then she was off, up the next stairwell. At the top, a long corridor ended in a window, a slicing blast of sunlight that blinded her momentarily after the dense gloom in the rest of the building.

“See Lizbette? We do not live in the rabbit hole. Carlo, your keys...”

Finally Liz was able to see detail to Madelina. A fine featured woman, with good skin for her age, given that she was probably Carlo’s contemporary, or not far off. She had clearly been a beauty in her day. Cheek bones to die for, although with some very faint silvery scarring to one side of her face. Her hair was long, white-grey, and loosely pinned up. She wore a panoply of colour: emerald linen trousers, pink suede pumps, and the layered look on top, a variety of yellows from mustard to citrine. A long vivid purple silk scarf was woven several times around her neck. A peacock. She was clearly not a fan of the sad cloak of invisible aging. Liz had seen so many of the older white South African women in Carlo’s complex fade into the background with each year that passed, in stark contrast to many of the Xhosa and Zulu women who seemed to grow in strength, stature and character as they aged. Madelina had definitely taken the Path of the Significant Elders.

“*Grazie mille* my friend. We will settle in, and then perhaps we will all have dinner together later?”

“Indeed, that would be wonderful.”

She lightly held Carlo’s shoulders and leant in to each cheek in leave-taking. Then turned and went into her apartment.

Carlo gestured to Liz to pass in front of him to a door further up the corridor. She did a mock semi-curtsey and went ahead. The apartment had been prepared for their arrival; the long drapes had been drawn back with one of the two sets of oversized floor-to-ceiling balcony doors open, allowing the street noise below to filter in.

For the second time that day, Liz found herself catching her breath with astonishment. The walls of the drawing room stretched half again as high as a normal apartment and were painted black. The ceiling was white and bounced the light off it to be absorbed back into the walls. The furniture was worn antique and mismatched but it didn't matter. Because shouting from every pitch-dark vertical surface was a painting. There were twenty-five, or maybe even thirty enormous canvases hung two or three high. Around half of them were framed, the rest simply anchored on the black wall.

Portraits. They were all full-length portraits. But crossing the divide between the human and the divine. Human body parts entwined with features that belonged to she knew not what. Recognizable faces in shapes that were not so human but still carried a nose, a mouth and eyes – some one, some two, some four. A cross, she thought, between Picasso, Vivienne Westwood and Raphael. In the corner, a naked flamenco dancer wearing stiletto steelcapped boots was overshadowed by a massive stallion about to smash its hooves down to crush her. To the right, a slightly smaller canvas – a painting of a man in slashed purple vestments (with a face she was sure belonged to a certain Italian politician) in the act of prayer, the multiple rips of cloth revealing genital stigmata. Many of the paintings had religious references or iconography, and Liz remembered the hardcore element of fury that had greeted the exhibition in London all those years ago, with a group of protesters outside the gallery where the paintings hung.

“Iconography,” she said.

“*Che dice?*”

“Icography. That was the title of the exhibition that you were in when I first met Stef. I’d forgotten just how powerful your work is, how incredible. Boy did you piss off a lot of people.”

“Ah. *Si cara*, you have no idea... So, now. Let me show you your room. Then we will make a little light lunch and rest. It has been a busy day already and tonight we have work to do!”

“What do you mean, work? You can’t work.”

“Ha! So you say. You just watch me.”

Before Liz could launch into full flow, her phone buzzed in her pocket. Praying it wasn’t Stef (she had too much to digest before she could have a reasonable conversation with him), she answered with relief when she saw an unfamiliar number on the screen.”

“*Pronto.*”

Carlo smiled and applauded, silent movie style, at Liz’s attempt to sound Italian.

“Why Mr Collins! How simply lovely to hear from you again, and so soon! Are you still as well as you were when we left you two hours ago? Indeed, it is nearly lunchtime. Oh sweetheart, thanks, but no. We’re just settling in here and then we’ll be doing our own thing in the apartment. Yes, it’s spectacular – I’m a little disoriented at the moment but I’ll tell you all about it later. Uh huh? Oh. Oh dear. Hang on a minute.

“Carlo, it’s Michael.”

“I gathered.”

“He has a small problem.”

“You don’t say.”

“His flat seems to have been double-booked and he’s roaming the streets. He’s asking if he can seek refuge here for the afternoon while he figures out what he’s going to do because he’s already checked out of the hotel and is standing in the middle of some big square with his luggage. Apparently we’re the only other people he knows in Milan...”

“*Certo*,” Carlo said, without hesitation.

“Michael? It’s fine!”

As she gave him the address, she realized that she was looking forward to seeing him. She had no-one to share all this extraordinary morning with, no-one to exclaim and point and be amazed with. Carlo and Madelina and the place they lived in *were* the subject of her excitement, so they couldn’t very well share in it. But Michael would be in his element.

Thursday March 13th 1978: Milan

Heaven wasn't far now. Mika could smell it. If he breathed in long and hard, he could feel heaven entering his lungs, coursing through his bloodstream. He smiled, a half smile that brought no more than a nascent moon to his face. Mika had hoped for a while that he would catch a glimpse of where he was headed. So far the hospital had seen fit only to test his patience and keep him in suspense. But here. Now. It was so close.

He rolled over sideways, easing his back, stretched, yawned and coughed. They must come for him soon. The nurse looked up from her station but dropped her head down again when she saw there was no obvious emergency. No-one to resuscitate with crash cart and paddles. Mika had watched her over the last three hours. Sometimes surreptitiously, sometimes openly with bravado. It was the most important thing that he had to do now, except stretch for heaven.

He'd watched her eat her sandwich lunch--Mortadella, he'd thought. He'd watched her rinse her hands afterwards, circling them one around the other with fingers entwined. He'd watched her fingers adjust the grips which pinned her paper hat to her hair. He'd examined the smooth skin of her throat as she'd tilted her head back to a gravity-defying angle to drain the last drops of water from a plastic bottle. Was it possible that her head could drop off? If her heels were higher, perhaps she'd fall backwards...

He'd even overheard a whispered call that she took with the phone pinned between ear and shoulder during Signor Nardi's bed bath. Deftly turning the old man with one hand and an elbow, she flannelled down the old man's saddle-

bagged posterior, then left him exposed and half-naked on his side as she heard the phone ring at the desk. He'd heard her murmuring "I can't. I'm on late shift. Tell you what, I'll see you on Sunday, 3 p.m. and we'll go to a movie." Then she'd smiled and giggled something inaudible before putting down the receiver and briskly towel-drying the Signor's goose-bumped flesh.

She'd been on shift only that day. And if she was off on Sunday, then that meant she would be here for the next two days as well. Mika was certain it was Thursday. So, Thursday to Saturday. Then two days off. She'd be back again next Tuesday. But by next Tuesday Mika was sure he wouldn't be here. So he must watch her closely now.

It wasn't as if he hadn't practised for this moment. He'd been practising all his life. But now, now was the moment that it had to be perfect.

He coughed again, hoping to make her look up from her book. He remained unrewarded. But he didn't mind. After all, it didn't have to be her. It could have been any of the female nurses.

He recognised the look of absence on her face. Perhaps she was in love? He, too, had been to better places than this. In his sleep. And sometimes in his waking, although Mika's waking hours were not in time with the sun and the moon and the conventions of dreamers. On a good night, Mika wouldn't just dream. He'd fill his dance card with imaginary partners and waltz around darkened empty rooms, dressed in out-of-fashion evening gowns and mismatched earrings foraged from unwanted donation bags behind the charity shop on the Via Cappellari. One-two-three, one-two-three. It was easy to hear the music in his head. Every Sunday night throughout his childhood, mama would dance round the living room to the radio big bands. She'd jive and shimmy, until the tempo

changed and Papa would pull her close, swaying against her body and closing his heavy eyes with lids weighed down by love. One-two-three, one-two-three.

He'd watched the unspoken exchanges between the twirls and embraces of his parents. A complicit smile. A gentle tilt of the head. A quizzical look. He'd remembered them all. They were useful to practice. Much of his own practicing was done in private, using the steel polished door knobs of the public lavatory in the Via Malfi.

He liked those toilets. They were near the theatres and one of the few left in the city that were still attended, so they were always clean. And they held memories. Traces of glamour, licit drinking, illicit sex, other lives and other times. Warm damp hand towels and cologne, white silk evening scarves, and top hats placed on the shelves that ran to one side while business was conducted along the back wall and in the cubicles.

For the last two years (save for illness), Mika had been first at the door in the mornings for Signora Bartello to open up at 5.30, so he could at least be clean at the start of his day on the street. The two always greeted each other warmly, but on this particular day, the warmth was seemingly being overtaken by breathless excitement..

"Ciao Mika!"

"Ciao Signora..."

"Anything good for me this morning? Because I have something good for you. Oh, so very good for you!"

"I have a beautiful stole for you Signora. It is a little patchy in places and some teeth are missing, but Signor Fox still has both his glass eyes. There was a good clear-out at the charity shop yesterday."

“Mika – it’s lovely. I will feel like a grand dame when I wear it. *Mille grazie*. Now, listen to me carefully. I have something very important to tell you today. Oh!”

“Signora. Please. Before anything else, calm yourself. Take a breath. There. Another one. Good. In-two-three. Out-two-three.” Breathing. Dancing. The Waltz of Life. What was it that was so important that the good Signora had for him?

“I have another one of my regulars. He has been coming here for many years longer than you have, my Mika. He is like you in his spirit and in his soul. A good man. A very good man. He comes at night and has his secrets, as we all do. But during the day he wears a nice suit and is a surgeon at *l’ospedale* in town. He speaks to me with kindness and respect, and last night he tells me that he is retiring. We talk a little more and for the first time I find out that he is a very special surgeon. Mishka – he turns boys into girls and girls into boys. What a world this is where this can happen!”

“Signora...”

“Wait. There’s more. Oh my. I need to sit. Please Mika, bring me my stool?”

“Signora, of course. But...”

“All in good time! So, in the early hours of this morning, when my gentleman surgeon tells me he is to retire at the end of this year, I take my courage in both hands and tell him about you – after all, it is serendipity that has brought both of you to me. It would be a sin against God to waste such a gift.”

“But the money... I have some years before this is possible...”

“I know! I know! You are still saving your lira. Dear boy, you will still be saving when you die. There is something in this life that is not right when only death can bring us release from what we live for. So in the meantime, we can all try to help things along a little, si?”

“Signora, what did he say? *Prego? Que dice?*” Mika’s legs were not holding him. He put one hand against the cool tiles and leant forward so as to hear every syllable.

“He said that he would see you. He said that if your circumstances were correct and that you had money to give the hospital for your stay, he would make the final operation of his life a gift. He is not in need of more money, but I think he needs to repent. I don’t ask for what. All I do know is that this life, however good we are, we still need to repent for something.”

“But Signora – there are many things that need to be right for him to do this. Did he tell you this?”

“Mika – I am not interested in ‘but’. I do this for you because you are my friend and because you need it. I have no interest in ‘but’. Now, if you will excuse me, I have toilets to clean and floors to wash. Here is his card”. And with that, she handed Mika a grey card embossed with gold cursive script. He ran his finger across the raised text as if reading Braille. His eyes were closed and he leaned ever more heavily against the clinical surface of the china white tile. In this life we all need to repent for something. Forty years of living with a longing that surpassed the need for food, warmth or material possessions. The same number of years, understanding that he was not as he was meant to be, and being surrounded by that which he should be.

And now? Right now? Here in this hospital bed? His time had come. He was forty-nine years old. It was time to die and rise again. In kitten heels. He thought of his mama tsk-tsking at the window, watching Signora Benevelli being assisted into her apartment early one evening after her husband had left her for another, younger twinset. The Signora's cardigan was incorrectly buttoned and her hair was dishevelled. Mama had shaken her head and said "You can never be too drunk or too old to make an effort", giving herself a quick sideways glance in the mirror. Now, finally, he would be able to live up to her beauty. He too would wear bikini tops and pencil skirts – perhaps at the same time if he felt like it. He'd sing Tosca and cook spaghetti. He'd dance in the arms of another. Who knows, he might even find someone to love him as much as his papa had loved his mama. He smiled again and thought of laughing pale grey eyes and disobedient long blonde hair. Gina. His lady of the Lake. His first love. But not in the way that lovers usually find each other--no, he had found a different kind of love in her beauty. One that Mika would die for. Because heaven was on the other side.

Monday February 27th 2012 14.28 p.m: Milan

Michael's face was a picture. It was all and more that Liz had hoped for as he leant forward at the door to kiss her cheek and saw past her left ear into the now fully lit interior of the club.

“Holy shit Liz!”

“I know. Cool isn't it?”

“Cool doesn't quite cover it darling girl. This is outrageous! Oh my god! Look at that wall! And the lift! Who on earth puts neon with crochet, leather and glass and gets away with it? Whose place is this? And what are you doing here?”

“OK, slow down! It's a bit complicated, but it seems that my father-in-law has a very old, and apparently very 'close' friend, Madelina, who part owns the building with him. He has a flat upstairs, which is where I'm staying, and then I think you'll be bunking with Madelina. The apartments are huge, and there are two enormous bedrooms with their own bathroom in each. So if you hate it, you can come and share with me – there's more room in my bedroom than in an average house. But I have a feeling that you and she will get on just fine...”

As they climbed the stairs with Michael's bags, she brought him up to date with what she'd learned that morning.

“It seems your husband's family is far more interesting than I had given them credit for,” he said, dryly.

“Well, I've not been hugely impressed with my husband of late and I suspect that fact, plus a goodly over-consumption of whisky, can have the end result of a less than coherent story! No, Carlo was quite a famous painter when I

met Stef. In fact, the first time I ever met him was when I went to see an exhibition of Carlo's work in London and they were there together. They made a quite a charismatic pair. Carlo was a sort of 1960s and 70s Italian Brat Pack Artist. Not a Warhol or a Lichtenstein, but next tier down. His paintings were, and are, very collectible and, from what I can gather, hang in most major galleries around the world. Is that interesting enough for you?"

"Lizbeth Cienento. You are a dark horse. You spilled your guts out to me last night, but nary a mention of such a glamorous background!"

"That's because it's not mine Michael. It's Carlo's. What I told you about Stef and the money and the debt and the affairs? That's mine. That's where I've come from. I'm just basking in a vicarious glow at the moment...soaking it all up in the same way you are. Drop your bags here. You can take them in later but I think Madelina's downstairs with the kitchen staff. Ready for lunch?"

She pushed open the door to Carlo's apartment and watched Michael's head jolt back when he saw what she had seen. Twenty-foot-high ceilings, pitch walls and imagery so visceral that even on a second, third, fourth viewing it still had the power to take one's breath away. But there was little time to take it in. A rustling, bustling and cooing pre-announced Madelina's arrival.

"Darlings? Darlings... Carlo? Ah. Lizbette, there you are. And you must be Michael? What a lovely young man my dear. Shame I'm twenty years too late... Where's Carlo?"

"I think he must be in his room. He was tired and went for a rest."

"Good, then we three can talk and get to know each other. Come."

And on that imperious note, she turned and left the room, beckoning them with a graceful hand. Michael dropped his bags neatly by the door and the two of

them obediently followed the mistress of the house back down the three flights of stairs to the kitchens.

Lunch was as much fun as breakfast had been. It was akin to a reunion of old friends who had much to catch up on. As Liz had expected, Michael just slotted in. He had a Goldilocks character – always ‘just right’ in his tone and approach. For Madelina, he flirted outrageously, complimenting her on the decor, her fashion sense and her ‘flung together scratch lunch’ which was so clearly neither flung together nor scratch. And all the time, he was making sure that Liz knew that it was as much for her benefit as his, inserting a few one-liners and references that had passed between them last night but that Madelina would make nothing of. He really is a craftsman, Liz thought, watching him work the table.

“So Madelina, what is it exactly that you do here? I understand that it’s a club and that you have shows, but what’s the routine?”

“Routine? Such a dull word dear boy. I like to take things day by day. I’ve had plenty of time in my life when I’ve been forced to stick to routine and when I’ve known exactly what will happen at any given time, so I like to keep things interesting. But of course, our clientele and employees need to know, so I’m a slave to opening hours and bookings. In essence, we open at four each afternoon, four days a week from Thursday to Sunday. At around 5 p.m. we have a tea dance – nice old-fashioned ballroom dancing. That’s on for a couple of hours, to allow for people to come from work on the weekdays, or get out of bed at the weekends! Then there’s a break for a couple of hours for people to just socialise and meet. Later in the evening, we have a DJ, and on Fridays and Saturdays we have live acts as well. The last clients usually leave around four in the morning”.

“And who comes, Madelina? Who are your customers? I noticed some not very pleasant comments daubed on the outside of the building as I arrived...”

Liz looked surprised.

“Were there? I missed that. I was too busy trying to figure out why Carlo had stopped here!”. She had assumed, from the wire mesh on the windows and from the outrageous décor, that it was a gay club of some kind, a drag club perhaps.

“The Store is a club for anyone! We have lawyers, officers of the law, city councilors, housewives, businesspeople, bankers – note I don’t consider bankers to be businesspeople – fathers, grandfathers, sons, mothers, grandmothers and daughters. We’re not discriminatory about who comes through our door other than they have to be over the age of eighteen, able to pay their bills, and no drugs are allowed. It just so happens that we seem to have a clientele comprised mainly of differing sexual orientations that would undoubtedly constitute some form of Catholic sin . . .”

“So how did you come to start this? Why you?”

“It’s quite simple really. It was as much a commercial decision as anything. Back in the late 1970s when Carlo was starting to become infamous for his rather explicit paintings, he needed somewhere discreet to do his work and exhibit. This building was in an unoccupied and at the time unfashionable part of town. But once the word started filtering out that he was working here lots of, how can I put it, ‘interesting’ people came to see his exhibitions, sit for him or buy his art. It grew organically. They’d sit and have coffee. Sometimes folk would be here for hours and, to be honest, outstay their welcome. It was my idea to start running it more like a business. We had the visitors, why not make some money

out of them? So we started with afternoon teas – a sort of art ‘salon’ if you like. Then we extended it into a tea dance – we had the space and it seemed like a genteel yet offbeat thing to do. As we went on, the word spread, more people started coming, and it just became more formal. Carlo retreated into his art when he wanted to, while I kept all the clients and acolytes busy paying for drinks and dancing downstairs . . . It’s been going now for thirty-five years and it’s become an institution among those who know. And those who know bring their friends and so on...”

“And now Carlo’s back? Are you going to change anything?” Liz asked.

“*Cara*, you know why Carlo has come home. Nothing will change – that is why he is here. One of the many things he and I need to discuss is what is to happen to The Store. I can’t keep going for much longer and he and I are joint owners. His money, my talent and time. But I’m tired. I don’t sleep much and *il dottore* has told me I must rest more. I have a strong will, but my body is not always obeying my mind these days. I only tell you this because you are family, *capisce?*”

“Of course Madelina. But please, if there’s anything we can do to help, we’d be happy to. Right Liz? Anyway, I need to earn my keep here. I can’t stay in your apartment and eat your food without some sort of payback. I can make a mean Martini – did you know that Chicago is full of Italians? And I’ll even do the washing up!”

“Dear boy, there will be no need to dirty your hands in soapy water. We have a full team here. After thirty-five years, we’re quite professional you know! But we can always use an extra pair of hands behind the bar on a busy night and

you do seem to have a way . . . But first you must settle in. And I understand from Lizbette that you have a book to write as well?”

“Ah. Yes, I’d almost forgotten. Such a lot has happened in the last twenty-four hours that I feel a bit as if I’m having a slight out-of-body experience. Parallel universe and all that . . .”

“OK. Madelina, thank you for lunch. It really was lovely. May we go upstairs and get settled in a bit? I need to get changed and I think Michael could probably do with a rest after his exhausting morning chasing round Milan after a set of non-existent keys.”

“Of course. I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking. Michael, I believe we will get along splendidly. I’ll come up with you and show you your room. That’s code for ‘tell you what you can and can’t do in my apartment’! Have a rest, change and if you have the energy and the inclination, we’ll see you round about opening time. Then you’ll get a feel for how this place comes alive.”

Liz joined the pair as they headed up to Madelina’s apartment, which was a mirror image of Carlo’s in its layout and size, but completely different in its feel. Oak panelling lined the walls, giving the space the warmth of a much more traditional space. On one wall to the far end of the main room hung a montage of photographs, mostly black and white--old photographs, some yellowing, some of people, others of buildings, streets, crowds and monuments. It was a powerful history that drew both Liz and Michael across the large expanse of drawing room with exclamations of interest and surprise.

“You like? These are all photographs of Milan and its people from around the 1930s to the 1960s. Before the world became brash and loud. Before jeans and trainers became the lazy uniform of disaffected generations. When self-respect,

pride and courtesy meant more than how much you earned or how much you could afford to waste.”

Liz looked across at Madelina, surprised at her passion. The old lady was staring intently at her pictures. She seemed very alone, despite their presence.

“Madelina. It’s an amazing record of old Milan. Look at this. Oh my God! It’s this building! Michael – look! See all the people in the street in front? I swear every person looks like something out of a 1950s fashion catalogue! I’ve got some pictures of my parents at various functions and dinners in the fifties and they’re dressed just like that. Look at the hair – so chic. And there, look at that woman – little crop trousers and those amazing little tight fit tops. How come women always had such good boobs in those days Madelina? Even the men are uber smart in their suits and coats. And hats. Of course, hats. There’s nothing like a good hat to make a man look suave! You never see pictures of fat people, or ugly people. Everyone looked like a film star!”

“I’m not sure anyone could give you any specific insight on breasts my dear – other than the obvious assistance of some fairly stiff corsetry! But I can tell you that there was a personal pride taken by both women and men, from the upper classes to the lowest of the manual labourers. They were tough on their kids and themselves to make the best of any situation and live with as much decency and as high a moral code as possible under the circumstances. We helped each other, there was community and support. It wasn’t the free market, winner-takes-all mentality you have today.”

Her voice tailed off as she realised she was revealing a little too much of herself.

“Come, Michele – your room. This way...”

And off they went to the far end of the apartment, Madelina pointing out the kitchen on the way. Liz could faintly hear her issuing instructions about cleaning out the espresso machine.

She sat down on a leather chaise longue positioned under a window. It had been placed so that its occupier would be facing the photographic wall. Instead, she chose to sit sideways and look around the rest of the main room. To the back, she could see kitchen cabinets through a door. Nothing particularly remarkable. A bit old-fashioned perhaps. And in a quite unusual shade of duck-egg blue. To the left of the kitchen was a closed door. Madelina's bedroom? The main room was spartan, but interesting.

And then she saw. For the first time she took in the whole. Side tables, easy chairs, sofas, mirrors, desk, dining set, lamps. They were all pieces of mid-century designer furniture. That unusual blue in the kitchen? Original formica on plywood cabinets edged with steel. The chaise she was sitting on? Couldn't remember the designer, but she was sure it was from the 1950s. Le Corbusier? And that dinky coffee table over there. Danish. Or Swedish? 1960s. The light over the dining table? One of those fab sixties lights that arced over the table with a round chrome globe for a shade. She wasn't an expert, but she'd stake money on the fact that they were all originals – she couldn't think of Madelina as owning anything fake. But that dining table. That dining table she knew inside out and it pained her with its unwitting significance. It was a classic piece from Knoll with an elegant curved chromed frame supporting a glass top, and she'd had her eye on it for nearly ten years since she'd fallen in love with it in a second-hand design shop in Woodstock. Even there it had commanded tens of thousands of rands, and Stef had sucked air through his teeth at the price tag. As they left the shop, he had

taken her hand, pressed it to his heart and vowed that one day he would make enough money to buy her one. Those were the days that he still cared what she thought. When it mattered. Since that time, he'd made (and lost) enough to buy her several, but her dining table in Cape Town was still the yellow stinkwood topped oblong refectory table with ink stains, ingrained dirt knots, and indents of kids' blunt carvings.

On the wall behind the circular table hung an unframed canvas. It was the only painting in the room – all the other decoration was photographic. It was recognisably Carlo's work. Other than this anomalous baroque portrait, the apartment was quite austere in nature. No knick-knacks or mementoes, no collectibles, family albums or memorabilia. Interesting. Almost monastic.

Liz's musing was broken by cackles of laughter from the far end of the drawing room. Two figures appeared and, had Liz not known better, they could have been twins or brother and sister, each basking in the glow of mutual adoration. Madelina had tucked her arm through the crook of Michael's, and they had become wedged in the door frame – it simply wouldn't allow passage of two bodies at the same time. Hysteria had set in and they were enjoying themselves enormously with the stupidity of it all . . . Liz smiled. Now this was going to be fun.

22nd September 1978: Milan

She'd been watching Carlo's apartment for three days now. Each morning, she would dress carefully, pulling the straps to her bra carefully over her shoulders and stretching up slowly to get her arms above her head without pulling any scars. She was healing well. The mirror reflected back a well made-up face, adequate lips with a coral blush to them, kohl and aqua eye shadow expertly applied to enhance the grey of her eyes. Her hair was long and brown, with a gentle bounce, thanks to the heated curler set that a kind nurse had given her when she had left hospital. Her clothing was stylish and simple. She had no use for the blazers and trousers that many women were finding in fashion at that moment, nor for the extraordinary obsession with pinafore bibs and dungarees. She could understand that there might be some attraction in having the freedom to dress like a man, but she had no use for it. She had chosen a jade green soft jersey outfit for that day's meeting. The weather was temperate – a warm autumn day where it could almost still be summer. A blouson style top with pointed collar; the V-neckline and soft shirring in front accentuated her neat breasts. Her trousers were of the same soft material that flowed and flared at the bottom in a gentle feminine swish. She looked good. She looked like she'd always thought she should.

From the bench opposite his flat, she'd taken note of Carlo's schedule. It wasn't a particularly exciting routine, so either he was working hard or was in a depression. She hadn't seen him for nearly two years. Perhaps he had a new wife? Or a girlfriend? Perhaps that was why he wasn't emerging other than to go to the corner store for provisions. But she didn't think so. Yesterday he'd stopped at Il Mantina on the corner for a glass of wine on the way back. She'd seen him

exchange slow pleasantries with the owner Signor Borlotti, then down the glass in one gulp and return home. That was not the action of a man with a new lover. The curtains remained drawn. Carlo had appeared three times so far. Once a day.

The last time they'd seen each other was at visiting time in San Vittore prison. She had so much to tell him now, so much to catch up on. And she'd been rehearsing for some time. This meeting. This first introduction. It was like going on a date for the first time with someone she'd known all her life. How do you behave? She knew Carlo inside out, every nuance, every look. And he'd stood by her side, acquiescent and unquestioning throughout the lifelong torment that had twisted the very centre of her being. But this was different. She wasn't Mika in women's clothes any more. She was Madelina. Would Carlo still recognise his best friend? Would he stop punching her on the arm if she made a poor joke? Would he still let her pay for their drinks at the bar? At least when she'd been in her old body, she'd had the choice of how to be with him. No matter what she did or how she dressed in her secret times, when she'd been Mika, she'd just been 'one of the boys', dressed in jeans and a shirt, joining Carlo at a bar in the evening, playing five-a-side football in the small park behind the apartments on a Sunday with Carlo, Luca and Gian. Would Carlo's unquestioning acceptance and strength of friendship stretch this far?

Madelina had chosen to step away from Mika's body without telling Carlo. Or anyone from her past life. Since the operation, Madelina had lived quietly, waiting for the right moment to interrupt the silence between them. She'd had to make sure that there was nothing owed between them. That his acceptance of her would be based on genuine friendship, not on the fact that he felt guilt or need. So she'd waited. She waited until she had modest lodgings and a small job.

She waited for the scars to start fading. She waited until she was familiar with her new body and it gave her no more surprises, only pleasure. Until she stopped feeling nervous that she would be found out. Until she was satisfied that every day, every greeting from every stranger included the word ‘Signora’, without hesitation.

And here today, in acknowledgment of what would be her mama’s 70th birthday, in a soft jade green jersey suit with the flowing pants, she was ready. Now it was time to show Carlo that she was healed.

The door to the apartment building opened and Carlo stepped out. As she had thought. It was eleven thirty in the morning. He was unshaven. Apparently for several days. Lengthy sideburns jutted out from under busy unkempt hair, hiding most of his face. He was in jeans and shirt, blue with a long pointed collar and paint stains. The same one as yesterday. Definitely no girlfriend. For a moment she faltered, wondering if perhaps he would be angry at being interrupted without notice. Then she sat back down again and decided to wait for his return. She’d waited two years, she could wait a little longer.

Thirty-seven minutes later, she saw Carlo turn the corner back towards the apartment. She walked towards the door and reached it before he did. Leaning back on the wall, she rested and crossed her arms, cradling her purse. It wasn’t a deliberate pose but could have been construed as such. Carlo wasn’t really looking at her. His mind was elsewhere. As he drew near, the little attention that he had available was being spent on finding the right key, so he merely acknowledged her presence with the briefest of nods and leant over the lock.

“Carlo.”

“Si?”

“Carlo, it’s me. Mika.”

“Mika? What... but... *Gesù* Mika, it’s good to see you! Finally! I thought I’d never see you again! Holy shit Mika. Oh man... I mean.... You’re...”

“It’s OK Carlo. I know. Sorry to jump you like this, but I didn’t know any other way. You’re not hard to find given you haven’t moved from this apartment in fifteen years.”

“You could have rung the doorbell Mika.”

“No, I couldn’t. I wasn’t sure what sort of reception I’d get and I needed you to see me before you heard me.”

“Oh for God’s sake Mika. What did you think I’d do? Turn you away? Let’s not have this discussion here. Come up man, come up. Sorry, I mean friend. Come up my friend...”

“Don’t worry. I know it’s weird. There’s plenty of room for having a good laugh about it all, though. And for the record? I don’t mind if you want to call me Mika, thankfully it’s a name that’s occasionally given to girls so it’s not going to create a major problem. But I’m Madelina now.”

“*E! Fantastico!* Madelina. Pleased to meet you!” Carlo held out his hand jokingly and as she took it, he pulled her close and gave her a hug that dispelled any fears she might have had.

“*Mamma Mia! Prego. Entrare.*”

Madelina stepped through the apartment door and back in time. The table wasn’t set for dinner, no candles were lit, and no smell of meatballs came from the kitchen. But the half-light that filtered through the curtain slit outlined a small box of wooden toys in the corner, gathering dust. Madelina moved across the room

towards the daylight. The piano lid on which Mika had once traced a flower in the light trace of dust had a covering now not just of dirt but of dead flies and moths.

Carlo switched the light on.

“*Scusa*. I spend most of my time upstairs in the studio these days. I’m rarely here except to sleep.”

Of course, that would explain why the curtains were not opened. The studio upstairs overlooked the back of the building. How stupid, she hadn’t thought to look. He’d been working.

“I’m glad to hear that you’re busy. I see your name in the papers almost every month now with an exhibition here or there. And I believe congratulations are in order?”

“*Perché?*”

“Why? Because I read you are to exhibit at the Biennale! Surely this must be one of your greatest honours to date?”

“Why thank you! But this is small news in comparison to what is standing before me... Come Mika. Madelina. Tell me. I am so happy to see you. You look fantastic. So elegant. I always knew you would. Alessa was always so jealous of your grace – did you know that?”

“Don’t talk crazy talk Carlo. Alessa was one of the most beautiful women I ever had the fortune to meet.”

“Of course, I thought so too. But she was envious that, even though you were a man, you had a style that she felt she could never achieve.”

“Any style I managed was only ever thanks to her. I couldn’t have managed it without her.”

The two were silent for a minute.

Carlo broke the silence. “So?”

“So. Yes. First I must begin with an apology Carlo. No, please, don’t dispute. Whether or not you wish to hear it, I would ask that you listen. I know how much you wanted to help me when I left prison. On reflection, it wouldn’t have been so awful for me to have let you. But at the time, I had figured out that in order for me to be free when I left San Vittore, I needed to *allow* myself to be free. And that required me to be able to live as a woman. I wasn’t certain that you would be able to deal with that. Look at what happened to you the one time that you were out in public with me when I was dressed for dinner. We were attacked.”

“But that wasn’t you – that was just a robbery that went wrong.”

“We don’t know that for sure. I doubt very much that we would have been attacked by one woman and one man if they had known we were two men . . . Anyway. That’s past now. I’m all woman – or as much as I can be - and for the first time in my life I am content. I want for nothing, and I am afraid of very little.”

“I’m so happy for you my dear friend. I would have stood by your side and held your hand every step of the way. No. More than that. With the ridiculous amount of money that people are paying for my paintings, I would have got you the finest surgeon in the world to do this for you. It is the least I could have done.”

“That’s exactly what concerned me. I don’t want a friendship based on guilt or debt Carlo. I just want the friendship that we’ve always had.”

“But where are you living, Mika? Madelina. What are you doing? When did you have the operation? And, if it doesn’t sound too weird, I think you look amazing.”

“Thank you again. I take every compliment I get with gratitude. It’s as if I’m making up for lost time! I have a small bedsit which goes with a job. I keep house for a neurosurgeon whose wife left him last year and I clean and cook for him. He is an acquaintance of the surgeon who performed my operations. Otherwise, I have a life where everyone new meets Madelina and has little idea of the Mika that went before.

“I think after my operation I just needed to be normal for a while,” she continued. “I needed to live somewhere ordinary, do a daily job like anyone else. I’ve never really managed that. Perhaps it was about finding out which bits of me were to do with nature or nurture . . . I’ve got a better idea now. And it’s not really me. Whether I’m male or female, I’m not really cut out for a wage-paying job and a bedsit. So, I needed to find you and make sure that you weren’t scared off by the change from Mika to Madelina before I told you why I’m here. Besides of course formally re-instating me as your best friend - if you will have me...?”

“I’m insulted that you’ve even raised that as a question, Mika! Consider yourself re-instated, my friend. But I’m intrigued . . . Go on.”

“I have a proposition for you. A business proposition. It involves a big old building which holds some of our history and has the potential to hold much of our futures.”

Wednesday September 26th 2012 17.58 p.m: Milan

Had the takings had been banked? Michael was supposed to have deposited them that morning, but they weren't showing in the account yet and he wasn't back from his errands. It was Wednesday evening. Month end. Payday for the staff. Carlo was as happy as a puppy and Madelina would be delighted with the money they'd had in. That weekend's act had been a spectacular success, a Southern American burlesque act, 'Miss Demi Nur', entertaining the crowd with the rather counter-intuitive concept of erotic dressing, with adroit use of a unicycle providing an additional edginess to her act. As the evening had worn on, the use of the unicycle had become ever more inventive and the crowd had taken Ms Nur to their collective bosoms (latex strap-on, silicone, or genuine), climaxing in a crescendo of appreciation around 2.30 a.m. on Sunday morning.

But more pleasingly, Ms Nur was also an artist of some note, having worked with a number of highly respectable contemporary institutions including MoMA in New York and other performance art spaces in Zagreb, Montreal, Copenhagen and Berlin. Her condition of doing the Saturday night cabaret stint was that she could host a Sunday Performance Art Installation activity on the second floor. It seemed that she and Carlo had connected a few times previously on the international art circuit and had a rather unexpected appreciation of each other's work. Ms Nur had been surprised at enjoying the outrageously iconographical kitsch bent of Carlo's work, while apparently Carlo had been intrigued by the concept of an artist who worked only from behind a mask.

Over a late Sunday brunch and before the Salon afternoon started, Liz had been able to spend a little quality time plying Carlo and Ms Nur with espresso and eggs scrambled lightly in the frying pan so they were one step away from an omelette. She watched with fascination as the neon latex face flexed with chewing and swallowing motions. Carlo seemed to take it in his stride.

“Ms Nur – Last night was amazing!” Liz said. “If my marriage wasn’t shot to hell, I’d have taken some of those moves straight back into the bedroom. Frankly I still might if I ever get the chance again! And we’re booked out for the Art Salon this afternoon. In fact we’ve been booked out almost since Carlo announced your visit three months ago. It’s a great honour for me to meet you.”

“And if I may add my compliments as well?” said Michael, entering kitchen left.

“Indeed honey. It’s an honour for me to be here. Thank god for Carlo Cienciento. The art world has more dick with him in it. And call me Demi.” The deep Southern drawl was definitely very sexy and she used it to full effect.

“Um. Yes, indeed. Definitely more dick. Demi.”

Liz threw Michael a warning glance. He snorted into his orange juice.

“Ms Nur, Carlo told me that no-one has ever seen you without some sort of mask on. Is that right?”

“Now sugaface, I’ve exposed every inch of this sweetassed bag of bones in front of your entire audience. I’d like to think we’re all on first-name terms...”

“Sorry! Of course. Demi. I guess that’s probably why I try to keep it a little formal. I don’t want to presume anything!”

Liz watched the grey eyes wrinkle and crinkle around the edges and a quite thin mouth lift at the corners. There was a smile going down under there...

“That’s very human of you. But presume away...”

“OK. So, has anyone ever seen you without?”

“Not since I was old enough to commit to art. I made myself a promise that my conscious life would be the ultimate piece of performance. So from the age of nineteen, half way through art school, I’ve never seen my face or allowed anyone else to see it either. Under each mask - and I’ve got about seven hundred different ones - I wear an opaque stocking, so that I can change masks in public. And I’m highly disciplined at home. I have no mirrors or reflective surfaces in my house. And if I need some air on my skin, I make sure it’s under the cover of darkness when I’m *’toute seule’*. ”

“Can I ask what the intention is? What do you expect to achieve? What’s the art about? I mean, since Carlo told me about you, I’ve read pieces on your work, but most of them feature your ‘Masque du Jour’ or whatever installation you’re doing at the moment - not many talk about your intent.”

“Sure honey. That’s easy. It’s about keepin’ it real. You can swag it up. You can turn it around. You can shake it down. You can be anything you want to be. But in the end, you’re all about what people see. And if how we see ourselves is an extension of how others see us, then what do I see? Alternatively, if how you see yourself is how others see you, then am I invisible? Will I die never knowing who I really am? This gorgeous, shapely, womanly human form, sweetheart, is an Existential Question.”

“Wow. Ok. That’s cool.”

She’d felt embarrassed at her clumsy response, but the performance piece had been fun, and she decided not to beat herself up for not being an Existential

Question herself. Michael had quite rightly pointed out that not many people were.

Later that day, Liz had gone downstairs to take Demi a coffee. She'd knocked and entered the Artistes Dressing Room without much thought. The room was dark, lit only by a single pillar church candle which one could neither look directly at nor look away from. Both actions would have the same result of casting all around into darkness. To the back left of the room a slit of light from under the threshold outlined the closed bathroom door.

Liz had caught her breath; the air was humid and felt almost tropical. Her star performer was naked, save for the obligatory mask and was standing in what Liz thought initially was prayer. Her extraordinary body shone as if enhanced by the aura of the Holy Spirit, but was simply the sheen of sweat in candlelight..

“Come Liz. Join me?” Liz had been startled by the invitation before she watched the pose change and realised that Demi was in the middle of a yogic Sun Salutation cycle.

She'd laughed with embarrassment.

“Uh. I haven't done Yoga for years.”

“Come on. You know it's like riding a bicycle. You never forget the Salute to the Sun...”

“OK. But don't laugh.”

“Honey, the last time I laughed in a yoga pose, I twisted an internal organ. I take this very seriously.”

Liz had put the coffee down on the dressing table and edged in the general direction of the area that was serving as yoga space. She took off her shoes and

socks. She couldn't help but be self-conscious in front of such physical superiority.

"Come on darlin', take 'em off."

"I have."

"No sweet thang. You haven't. You've taken off your shoes. You don't really think we're gonna do yoga *a deux* with me naked and you dressed? I don't think so." And with that, Demi inverted herself into a no-holds barred, everything-on-display Downward Dog.

Liz choked involuntarily. "I can't. I mean, I can, but I wouldn't be comfortable. I'm fifty. I've had twins. And you're gorgeous." It had slipped out before she'd had time to stop herself.

"Liz honey. Take your clothes off and get over here. Let's cut to the chase. While I appreciate the compliment, I'm not going to bend and stretch all night *and* all day. If you wanna do some yoga with Miss Nur, then you need to shake booty because I'm not doing it butt-naked while you're dressed. No free show this afternoon. So. I stop. Or you strip for for a little *saluté!*"

She had hesitated. Rock Chick, Up-for-Anything Liz wouldn't have thought twice about getting down and dirty for round of naked yoga with a gorgeous woman. Whereas older, married and harried, lost and unhappy Liz would have found it hard to see the joy in a bit of exercise *déshabillé*. But now she was in a world where the exotic was commonplace, where she was free to do as she pleased, clothed or not. This was an initiation. A rite of passage into the next stage of her life and she couldn't back out or she might as well get the next plane to Cape Town.

She stretched her arms out of her top, took off her Sunday sweatpants, unhooked her bra and stepped towards the candlelight. Before Demi had a chance to speak, Liz said firmly, "You keep your mask on. I get to keep my knickers on." And for the best part of forty-five minutes, the two extended their muscles to the best of their respective abilities, arching forwards, backwards and sideways. Liz groaned and grunted with exertion. Demi made it all look so easy, executing her moves with the silent grace of a dancer. It was impossible not to watch her. She was so beautiful. And although Liz still had no idea what she really looked like, it just didn't matter.

Demi signalled a close to the proceedings by settling in the Child's Pose with her forehead on the floor for several minutes. Liz crouched just to the right of her and strained her eyes sideways to look at the resting woman without being caught out. It had been a very long time indeed since she had felt any kind of sexual tension in her body, but at that moment every hair on her skin was raised, each sensory function on high alert. She heard her own heartbeat in the quiet of the closed room and the regular long breath of the masked woman next to her.

She had raised her head first, her thoughts about sex making her suddenly anxious about her state of undress and the dents and rolls in her body. She knew that leaning forwards would be making her breasts look stretched and thin. Her nose was beginning to run with post-exercise drip. Reality was rapidly pulling her back, and she felt a little foolish at her arousal. She'd dressed hastily, wiping her nose surreptitiously on the inside of the sleeve, all the while keeping an eye on the relaxed form still face-forward on the floor. As she'd put on her fleece trousers she cleared her throat.

“That was quite extraordinary. I haven’t done anything like that in years. Naked yoga. Amazing. Thank you.”

Demi raised herself up slowly from her kneeling position and smiled. She drawled, “The pleasure was all mine. It’s real good to see some tight British ass windin’ down an’ loosenin’ up. And for the record? I happen to like your body. It has a story. I can’t afford to let my body have its own story because I have an audience that needs to imprint their own mental pictures on it and give me the face of their dreams. You, honey, have your life written all over yours. You’re lucky.”

She’d crossed the room towards Liz who was standing rooted with one arm about to go into her top, and, in passing on the way to the bathroom, kissed Liz lightly on the lips. The touch of latex mask and a stranger’s mouth had driven a spike of desire up through Liz’s already heightened senses. As foolishness gave way to hope, Liz had walked out of the dressing room knowing one thing above all else: her journey back to herself was only just beginning.

Now, the computer glowed with an abundance of mail. There was the notification from the bank. The money was in. The Store’s bank balance was well into the black with some to spare. Takings were up. And, with a “Hi darling, I’m home!”, Michael was back.

“Hi gorgeous,” said Liz. “Demi left about two o’clock. Standard blacked-out limo. Very un-existential. But I liked her. She was good value. I’ve asked her to come back again for an extended run. We could have sold those tickets ten times over . . . and now the wires will be buzzing with her hip and happening happenings . . .”

“Agreed. She’s a star. And I’d have to have had my head in a tin bucket not to see that you were smitten, kitten. Where’s Madelina?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen her today. She was very tired yesterday so I assume she’s still sleeping off the excess of the weekend. It’s got to get to you when you’re in your eighties, even if you refuse to acknowledge it. Carlo had an afternoon nap and he’s now gone for a walk. So it’s us to sort the wages. Got your Euro head on?”

She smiled and ruffled his hair. She wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of seeing her embarrassment.

“Sure thing,” he said. “Just let me go change and get washed up first. The market was cold and wet. September in Milan can be glorious, or it can just be damn miserable. I’m soaked and need a towel-down ...”

With that, he raised one eyebrow lasciviously at her, laughing as he left. So, he’d had a good afternoon then. She thought she’d noticed a slight glitter in his eye and a heightened colour to his face.

“You tramp!” she shouted after him as he left the room, throwing a casual V-sign over his shoulder in response.

She logged in again to the online banking. It had been rather bizarre how quickly she had found herself fully employed. Nothing specific had been said, no real conversations had taken place between herself and Madelina, or even Carlo at first. It had been a natural progression from helping with the odd task for the older woman, who seemed to tire easily these days, or helping Carlo set up for the occasional Sunday Salon, to menu planning, stock-taking and staff rosters. A crash course in Italian and total immersion had helped her in her mission to assume more and more responsibility, seizing every opportunity to occupy the managerial space that had mysteriously appeared and seemed to grow daily.

“Michael – we’re two months in to your three month break,” she’d said in April. “What am I going to do without you? I’m going to miss you so much. Besides, it’s been so cool having you around in the evenings to help MC and I know you’re loving hitting the decks and flexing those pecs on the dancefloor! Do you really have to go back?”

“Sweetie – it seems to me that you’re getting a little bit over-invested here. Look, I know that Carlo’s not so strong and that you’ll be here for a while – but please. Remember why you came. You came to look after him and be with him when he came home to sort his affairs, possibly to the end of his days. Not to run a club. I came to write – not be a DJ. And at some point we all have to go back to being what we’re supposed to be. It’s great to step out of life for a while, but you need to face reality at some point.”

He was right about one thing. She certainly had become over-involved. But she’d needed it. In South Africa, she’d been seduced with the ease of it all; it had been so simple to relinquish ‘doing’ in favour of ‘being’. Being a mother. A wife. An eye-rolling, brow-raising, shoulder-shrugging, hard-faced Capetonian woman--weekly manicured, monthly highlighted, keeping up with the Smits, lunching on a Friday with the girls, and bitching about the inadequacies of domestic staff.

But was he right about the rest?

“I’m not so sure Michael. Just think about this for a minute. Madelina seems to be stepping back in a big way. It seems almost as if she’s been waiting for us, for this moment. She needs us. If she doesn’t have us, then what has she got? She can’t keep going forever. I’ve noticed recently that she’s not even

staying the course for the big names at the weekends. Did you see? She was in bed well before your midnight set on Sunday.”

“Liz, she’s in her eighties. Of course she’s getting tired. Women half her age don’t have her energy.”

“No, it’s more than that. It’s like we’re meant to be here, now. Stop it! Stop grinning at me in that way. I know you think I’m a bit weird but I do believe that everything happens for a reason . . .”

“So what are you saying Liz? We throw in the towel on our ‘real’ lives on the strength of a two-month holiday job in a Milanese alternative cabaret joint? Are you serious?”

“Actually yes. Yes I am. Michael, you’re a writer. You do a job you dislike, teaching kids that don’t give a shit because daddy’s going to get them a job in Wall Street anyway, and you spend every possible moment you can getting out of Chicago looking for pastures new. That tells me you don’t find your ‘real’ life particularly fulfilling. Here, you get to do stuff and be something completely other for three or four nights a week with people that you enjoy and have fun with *and* you get paid for it, with all your living expenses covered. Then you’re free to write for the rest of the time. It doesn’t get better than that...”

“When you put it like that, there is some bizarre logic to what you say, Liz. Although I can’t help feeling it smacks of a holiday romance. You fall in love with a muscle-bound Adonis under the stars on a Greek island, only to find out that he expects you to milk the goats and look after his grandmother while he’s off drinking in the taverna .”

“Yes, I know. But it’s not inevitable that you get the goats and grandmothers and end up slinking back to the homeland with your tail between your legs. Holiday romances can work. I have a girlfriend who--”

“--alright Liz, point made. Personal histories are not necessary at this juncture. We all ‘know someone who’ . . . I’ll think about it ok?”

Having planted the seed, Liz left him to ruminate. Time was running out and she was getting nervous that she would be left alone with two strong-minded individuals in varying degrees of aging and health, along with a quite large nightclub to run. He had left her to stew for ten days, giving her a warning look any time she tried to raise the subject with him. But finally, they’d cracked open a bottle of wine on a closed Tuesday evening and he’d caved in.

“I’m almost certainly certifiable, or at least as mad as you are. But my life doesn’t amount to a whole lot in Chicago. I have friends, don’t get me wrong. Good friends. But most of them have their own busy live and seem intent on making them busier by the year. Some even have kids and dogs and a house on Lake Geneva.” Liz looked confused.

“Wisconsin,” he followed up helpfully. “So you know what? Maybe it is time to shake things up a little. You’re quite a good role model you know.” He grinned. “Look at you. When we first met, you were snivelling like a baby and drunk. Now you’re just drunk! See how far you’ve come!”

Liz laughed and play-punched him. “So? Does that mean you’re in? That you’re staying?”

“So... that means let’s give it a try.”

Liz had hugged him and cried a bit which made them laugh even more again because there she was, drunk and snivelling like a baby. Then they’d put on

some really awful seventies music, switched on the disco ball and boogied until Carlo had come down in his dressing gown and joined them, for a nightcap.

The next day, they'd worked on a business plan and structure. Michael proved to have a surprisingly good commercial head on his shoulders, and Liz was tight on the financial side – watching her husband donate the marital savings to poor business deals had given her a will of iron on fiscal matters. It had taken forty-eight hours to get the figures looking right and then Liz had cautiously approached Carlo over his morning *caffé latte*. Mornings were always his best time, and downstairs The Store had not yet opened for the day. He was still in his bathrobe, but looked as if he'd had a good night. Always a plus.

“*Bella*. So. What do you have for me? Is this the plan? Are you done making a mischief of our business with Signor Michele?” he teased.

In retaliation, she tossed her head, and with false bravado replied, “If it’s mischief you want you must look elsewhere. If it’s a good plan which keeps The Store going and growing, then have a read of this!” Turning on her heel in mock outrage, she walked towards the door and heard him laughing as she exited, stage right.

She returned an hour later, to find him resting with his eyes closed, the plan on his lap. As the door clicked behind her, he raised his head and smiled.

“*Si, si*. I have read. I have looked from cover to cover and there are too many words I don’t understand. But I do see that you have good ideas and from my ignorant place the euros come in nice big numbers. We will give to the accountants and make sure they happy.”

“Oh fantastic!” Liz said, exhaling. “But the most important thing is that we need you and Madelina to understand that we don’t want to barge in and step

on any toes. This isn't designed to be a 'takeover'. We want to help, but we can also see that Madelina isn't someone who accepts offers of help easily. If you like the way we're suggesting that Michael and I split the responsibilities in the business, then it's a win-win foreveryone. I'm being useful as well as being able to stay here with you, and Madelina gets to keep her toy-boy! Oh come on, you know I'm joking. But you have to admit that Madelina enjoys Michael's company?"

"*Cara*. I will speak with Madelina. I don't know about your win-win in English, but in Italian it seems to me to be that this could be what you call *una soluzione elegante*. I see my friend is very tired these days and I am old man - no use to anyone except grave digger."

"Carlo! Don't you dare talk like that. To me of all people..."

"*E!* Is joke! OK?"

"No, is not OK. Just don't. Don't. OK?"

So it came to pass. Michael's employers in Chicago hadn't been chuffed at being stuffed just two weeks before he was due to return, but he was now in charge of Entertainment and Front of House, while Liz had assumed responsibility for everything else, including the all-important Finances. No-one had any success at persuading Madelina to relinquish control of a planned refurbishment that was due to commence after Christmas in the quieter winter period, but they decided to cross that bridge when they came to it.

It hadn't taken Michael long to find his niche or to call in a favour from an A&R friend from Chicago who had networked him with some high profile international DJs looking for interesting European pit stops on the way back to the States after the Ibiza season. And with his eye for the common vote, he'd also

sought a more populist mix of artists and acts to extend into the quieter nights of the week, bringing in a whole new crowd who enjoyed a slightly calmer pace of entertainment.

Now, on this Wednesday afternoon, The Store was very quiet. They were closed on Wednesdays – always lots of prepping to do for the weekend ahead--but the staff would return at six for their wages. As Liz focused her attention on the accounts, the phone suddenly rang beside her, startling her. It was Michael phoning down from the apartment. And he sounded a little panicky.

“Liz!”

“Michael?”

“Madelina hasn’t got up yet and she’s not answering my knock. Darling, you know how private she is about men in her bedroom. Won’t you please come up and see if she’s OK? It’s better if you go in. You know . . .”

He sounded like he needed her. It was only three flights from the basement. She could do with the exercise.

“I’m on my way.”

Il dottore diagnosed a brain haemorrhage, causing a massive stroke.

They had found Madelina neatly dressed, apparently asleep on the bed. Nothing outwardly obviously wrong, other than she lacked consciousness. Her hair was brushed, her shoes were on. Her skirt was slightly askew, as if she’d had trouble pulling her legs up fully onto the covers. The only thing which Liz noted as out of the ordinary was that the buttons on Madelina’s shirt were done up out of sequence.

It took an agonizing fifteen minutes for *il dottore* to find the tiniest dent surrounded by swelling underneath the back of her head.

“See here,” he said. “She has internal bleeding in the brain. My guess is that she fell or banged her head in some way, and that shortly afterwards she would have felt unwell, perhaps dizzy or off balance. Maybe she was dressing at the time and had perhaps lain down to recover? She’s damaged the soft tissue at the base of her brain, but she may not have noticed anything as there would have been no cut or blood. But it is sheer misfortune that her head took the weight of the knock.”

Liz looked at him sideways as he was speaking. He was a plain man with a moustache. Ear hair protruded coyly from his left ear. Presumably also from the far side, but she couldn’t see.

“Carlo,” she said suddenly.

Michael looked confused. “What?”

“Where’s Carlo? He doesn’t know.”

“Didn’t he go for a walk? I don’t think he’s back yet.”

“Oh shit. OK, you go with Madelina to the hospital, I’ll wait here for Carlo. Keep your mobile close.”

The ambulance took an age to reach them, delayed by road closures for student doctors protesting against government cuts. When it finally arrived, and Michael climbed in with Madelina, still unconscious, he looked pale and scared. He wasn’t good with illness, he’d confessed to Liz some time ago when she’d come back from a particularly gruelling session with Carlo at the local hospital.

“Don’t know how you do it Liz,” he’d said. “I couldn’t. All that misery and unhappiness. All that medical ‘stuff’ going on. All those sick people . . .”

“Listen you wimp. You’ll see. One day, you’ll be there for someone who’s going to need you and you’ll do it. You’ll do it because you have to and because you care. Remember that when the time comes.”

Looked like today was the day.

She sat down in the face of the oncoming dusk and waited for Carlo to return from his constitutional stroll, spending valuable thinking time on how to minimise the shock.

In the eventuality, she didn’t need to tell him. News travels fast in Via Sebeto, and the Signora at Grappi’s Bar on the corner had described in overly vivid detail what she had seen – Madelina, not moving, being wheeled out on a stretcher and taken away in an ambulance. As he barged in through the door, Carlo was without colour and his breathing was laboured. Liz guessed he must have run back from Grappi’s. He sat heavily, and, when Liz had finished telling him what had happened, said nothing, sitting with shoulders bowed and head lowered, his chest heaving. Liz got up and went to comfort him but, to her shock, he pushed her away violently.

“Please. Leave me. If I am going to need to grieve, I will grieve on my own.”

“Carlo, she’s had a stroke. She can’t move much of her body, but the doctors say we’ll know more tomorrow. She’s not dead.”

He groaned. “It’s supposed to be me to go first. I am the one who is sick. I am the one who is dying. I can’t do this without her. I don’t want to do this without her.”

For the first time in the nearly two years since Carlo had started treatment, Liz was scared. She’d been with him all the way in this illness, but had never seen

anything from him other than pragmatic acceptance and wry humour in his situation. Now he was small, crumpled and desperate. She noticed that he was rubbing his chest. A handkerchief nudged a corner out of his pocket. He needed to use it.

“Take me to the hospital,” he said. “I want to see her.”

“They won’t let you, Carlo. She’s in intensive care. Michael’s there and he’ll call us the moment we can see her. Please, you need to rest.”

“Rest? You think I can rest while Madelina is dying?” The old man got up, slightly toppling to one side as he rose, using the table to steady himself. Liz reached for his hand and again, he waved her away angrily. “Go and do whatever it is you do Liz. See that all is well in the kitchen and that we open on time as normal. This will be important to her. Leave me be.”

And with that admonition, Carlo turned and went towards the door at the back of The Store that led upstairs to the apartments. Liz tried very hard not to take his anger personally and wondered if he would make it up the two long flights of stairs. She hung around by the doors for a while, listening. But she heard nothing untoward, so went back to the business of running The Store as requested.

Tuesday 6th November 2012: Milan

Without Madelina at The Store, they had all slowly started to find a pattern to their days. Michael rose first – he was alone in the apartment now which seemed to make him feel more responsible for both himself and others. He would make breakfast and lay the table: tea, toast and fruit for Liz, and a tray with *caffè latte* and museli for Carlo to have in his bedroom when he woke. By mid-morning, Carlo would take a taxi to see Madelina, and then Liz would arrive, spend a little time with them both before taking Carlo on to the hospital for treatment on the days that he was scheduled. Liz would see the tremendous effort that he put on for his dearest friend and watch as his shoulders sagged and his body curved with sadness on leaving Madelina's room. He did his best to remain cheerful in their presence but spent most of the remaining daylight hours in his apartment, as if fully present only for the hour that he spent with Madelina.

“It's like he's in a permanent state of shock,” she told Stef on the phone, having decided, at last, to voice her concerns over his father's state of mind. “He's withdrawn, Stef, depressed. His doctor is concerned that this will affect the speed at which the cancer progresses. And how well he copes with the increases in treatment.”

“I'm sorry Liz,” Stef said, sounding very far away. “But I've never known him well enough to read him right. You've always been better at that than I have. I understand your concern, but it was your choice to take him back to Milan and I can't do anything from Cape Town.”

“Stef, I don't think you're hearing me. I'm seriously concerned about your father's health.”

“I do hear you Liz and of course I’m worried. But it’s been seven months since you decided to take Carlo to Milan. And I’ve had to come to terms with a lot of things in that time – one being that I don’t really get on very well with my father. I do believe that he and I love each other, but we’re so different that we don’t necessarily understand one another. So my sympathies are with you. But I don’t know Madelina, or what sort of relationship she has with my father. Don’t forget that Liz. This woman, whom I’ve never met, seems to have some sort of hold on my father. He’s had a secret relationship for much of my lifetime that I’ve known nothing about until this year. Also not an easy thing to come to terms with.”

Liz was silent. When he put it like that, he almost sounded right. It couldn’t be easy on him.

“Why don’t you come over, Stef?” she ventured. “It would be good for Carlo to see you. You could meet Madelina – maybe take some of the unknown out of the equation? And it would give us a chance to talk.”

“Talk about what Liz? Do we have anything to talk about?”

“Oh come on! That’s a little disingenuous! I’d have hoped that seven months might have given you a bit of space and time to at least be adult about this. Whatever your feelings might be about me or about ‘us’, we’re still legally married and we’ve never really talked about what’s happening between us or what we want for the future. The twins seem fine and settled. I speak to them nearly every week, one or the other... But you and I Stef? As difficult as it may be and as irritated as you might sound, we need to have this conversation.” She hadn’t meant to do this – it wasn’t the right time, but he’d goaded her. Absence had certainly not made the heart grow fonder on either side.

There was a sigh from the ether. Or perhaps it had been her own internal sigh, she hadn't been concentrating.

“OK. Look Liz, I can't come right now. I've got a deal cooking here and it's about to go on the boil.” Liz smiled. Thankfully Stef couldn't see. “What do you want? I'll do what you want. You want a divorce? Fine. You want to stay in Milan? That's fine too.”

Liz said nothing, taken aback. She thought he'd at least make a stab at protest.

“Whatever you want,” he repeated. “Listen, when you first arrived in Milan and I was so angry? The truth is, I was scared. It's always been you and me, Liz. I didn't know what I was going to do or be without you.”

“I'm sorry Stef. But most of the problem for me was exactly that. It's always been you and me. Somewhere along the line I stopped being me and became 'us'. And South Africa is not a good place for women like me. Whatever anyone says, the fact is that you still have to have your husband's permission to open a bank account, or get a bond, or do anything significant with your life. And that feeling of inequality is insidious, you know. It gets under your skin eventually. Unless you work very hard alongside me to overcome that prejudice, then 'us' becomes 'you'. And working alongside me is something you've never really done. I think I mentally dropped out of the marriage about ten years ago and I'm not sure I even noticed it happen. You certainly didn't!”

“Liz. I...”

“Right here, right now, I don't need anyone's permission to do anything. I've done my time making sure my children grow up to be decent human beings and I've stood by you and supported you through the aftermath of whatever

particular piece of advice of mine you chose to override at the time, usually to my own detriment. It's enough now."

She drew breath. It felt such a relief to release the thoughts that she'd been holding prisoner for so long.

"OK Liz. Take it easy. No need to bite my head off." Steph sounded uncertain. The force of her response had clearly thrown his balance. "So?"

"So what?"

"So what do you want to do? I'm really sorry, genuinely sorry. I know that I may not be the easiest person in the world, but I actually had no idea that you'd felt like this for so long. I thought you were happy enough and that our marriage was strong..."

Why was she not surprised?

"Oh Stef. Please. 'Happy *enough*'? That says it all. Let's not get into detail. I think we both know what the end result of this is going to be, but at the moment we shouldn't actually 'do' anything. Carlo isn't strong enough to take another piece of bad news and although he's aware we're 'estranged', for lack of a better word, I don't want to change the status quo in case it has any effect on his health."

"OK, I'll take your lead. Liz. I'm still very fond of you." And there it was. That terrible word that put the final nail in the coffin. 'Fond'.

"Thank you Steph. I'll call you again if there's any change. You're welcome to phone anytime – I'm sure Carlo would appreciate hearing from you."

She put down the phone and sat for a while. Rather unexpectedly, that was that. The line was now free for incoming calls.

Monday 19th November 2012 8.14 a.m: Milan

Carlo was having a bad start to his day. He had fallen in the night, and Liz had found him still on the bathroom floor in the morning. Then she'd roused Michael by the unusual urgency and pitch of her voice across the second floor corridor.

"Michael. Get over here and help. Now!"

They had lifted him gently into bed, cleaned him up and put new pyjamas on. He protested that he was fine, and that yes, he had stumbled.

"Not fell, Lizbeth, not tripped, just stumbled!" he mumbled belligerently, persisting on expanding the fantastically ridiculous notion that he had found the floor so comfortable that he had decided to stay there for a while and, guess what? It was so comfortable that he'd fallen asleep there, waking only when Liz had roused him with this terrible shrieking. Liz raised her eyebrows at Michael but kept silent. She knew the old man better. He was stubborn and proud. It was bad enough that he had been found this way and she wasn't about to make it harder on him.

But he'd rested for a few hours, and seemed almost back to his old self again.

"Lizbeth, *cara*. Open up the curtains for me – it's time to go to Madelina."

"Carlo, not today, please, not today. Just rest?" She knew she was going to have a fight on her hands.

"Pass me my slippers. Then you may leave while I dress. I will be there for her. I have spent so much of my life not being there for her and she is near the

end. There is not a day that can be wasted.” And with that realisation, his voice broke and he sank back into the bed. Liz’s heart went out to him. She knew that the shadow of his own limited time was measured alongside Madelina’s and that as she faded, so did he.

“Why don’t you let me go and see her today instead? Carlo? Michael can take me, and I know she’s very fond of us both. Of course it won’t make up for you not being there,” she added hastily.

Liz saw a moment of softening and jumped at her chance. “C’mon Carlo – give Madelina a day off – it will give her a chance to miss you more, and you’ll see her tomorrow – that will give her two sets of visitors in two days instead of just one – you know that will make her happy.”

“Ah Lizbeth, *cara*, you know how to spin me round your finger. OK, you go. But you take her flowers from me and tell her I see her tomorrow.

“*E!* Another thing. If you tell her that I have not come because I decided to sleep the night on the bathroom floor, I will ask my Sicilian friends to pay you a visit. *Capisce?*”

Liz smiled and nodded.

As she adjusted her eyes to the gloom of Madelina’s room, she saw that Luisa’s bed was empty.

“Madelina ...”

“*Si bella*. No Carlo today? Who is with you? Is that my gorgeous young man?”

“Madelina – he may be gorgeous but you know he’s not young and you’re too good for him! Yes, it’s Michael. Where’s Luisa today?”

“Her son came to take her for a bit of sunshine. She’s happy today. She has some warmth on her face and a hand to hold.”

“Well you have two hands. Here’s mine...”

“And mine.” Michael settled himself on the opposite side of the bed and took the old lady’s other hand. She seemed to gain some strength from their touch and smiled. “Ah, *mi angeli*. You have the healing touch. And Carlo? *Dové?*”

“He had some personal matters he had to attend to today, but he will come tomorrow instead. Today you are fortunate enough to have the Liz & Mike Show – far more glamorous and much, much more fun! First we’ll have a sing-song, then Liz will be dancing the Tango with Nurse Chiara.” Michael was always so smooth with these things, Liz thought. She was a terrible liar, and he had agreed in the car that he would cover this little episode without lying but also without offence to Madelina or embarrassment to Carlo.

“*Fantastico Michele!* That’s it. What a wonderful idea. We must create glamorous nursing homes. We should make them extremely exclusive and expensive. It’s a perfect and wonderfully subversive way of securing all our futures. I dream of a nursing home with dancing poles and gilt mirrors and cocktail bars, not drab brown curtains, clanging trolleys, and beds that are cold to the touch! Now that is a dream that would sustain us comfortably into old age! Michele – what a wonderful idea! But my Carlo, he is not coming today... ? Ah! It’s just as well. Without Luisa, I had no-one to brush my hair. And just look at me!”

She sank back on the pillow, exhausted after such a long speech. Liz seized her chance.

“Madelina – I had a conversation with my husband the other day which raised a delicate question. I don’t want to pry, and I’ve never talked to Carlo about it despite the fact that he’s practically my father – he’s just such a private man. But...well, were the two of you ever together? You and Carlo? You know. As a couple...”

“Liz! That you should ask such a question! Ha! He has never spoken to you?”

“No. I just assumed that the two of you are so close and he has such love for you, that you and he were once together, that something happened to keep you apart.”

“Ah. *Si*.”

Madelina lay silent. Liz looked at Michael helplessly. Had she gone too far, stepped where she shouldn’t have? She found no answer in his face. His head was bowed and he seemed intent on something completely other.

“I will tell you a tale,” Madelina said. “It is neither happy nor sad. It is what it is, so do not give it the power to change what you see or feel.”

Her voice was barely discernible. Liz decided Madelina must be speaking so quietly so if necessary she could pretend she hadn’t spoken at all.

“I had a job once. Many years ago. I was a Panama hat salesman.”

Liz looked again at Michael, willing him to lift his head, but he was still finding something fascinating on the linoleum.

“Now the two of you could spend the rest of your lives thinking that a Panama is just a simple hat. But, *grazie a me*, you’ll know better. There are round-

topped ones. Ones with a crease in. Tight weave. Loose weave. And Every Weave in Between weave. And let me tell you two wonderful things about a Panama: one of true quality can hold water and when rolled can pass through a wedding ring. Fancy! There's even different weaves for different sexes. A weave for men. And a weave for women. It was not right to sell a man's hat to a woman, nor vice versa. You may think this a foolish start to my tale, but it's fitting, as you will see."

Madelina paused. Liz watched the tiny particles of dust floating in the sunbeam that had found its way through the curtain to strike the bed. If anyone had taken a picture of that moment, it would have captured the essence of physical stillness and mental turmoil. Liz had no idea where Madelina was going with this story but knew that she mustn't break the quiet. She heard Madelina take a breath.

"I was lucky I think, my childhood was quite interesting. My father was a regular kind of gentleman, but that in itself was unusual in our neighbourhood. Most of the papas worked long hours and came home sweaty. Their shirts were always a little yellowy grey under the arms and around the neck, you know? But my father's shirts were always crisp and white. He wore cufflinks. And his ties were silk and pressed. When the house was empty or Mama was resting, I would open their clothes cupboard and slide my cheeks against his tie hanger. Sometimes if I thought it was safe, I'd slide my hands deep into mama's fur stoles or quietly slip on a pair of her kitten heels. Then I'd hear Mama downstairs in the kitchen rattling the pans, or Carlo shouting 'Mika! Where are you? Come play!' And I'd shut the cupboard quickly and run downstairs, making sure that no-one could ever know I had been there."

“Who’s Mika?” interrupted Liz. “Did you have a brother? You’ve never really talked about your family before, Madelina—”

But Madelina was in her own world, living her own story, and was not prepared to let Liz’s questions interrupt the weaving of it.

“Mama was a beauty. Everyone said she was crazy. And that Papa was crazy for marrying her and sticking with her. But I knew why Papa couldn’t leave. Mama was amazing. So beautiful. She was a Romanian Jew. A gypsy. Dark, dark hair. Black eyes. And olive skin. Carlo and half the other teenage boys in my street used to climb up to our kitchen window on crates just to catch a glimpse of her. ‘*Gesù*, Mika - your mama is *so* sweet!’”

Madelina laughed at the memory. Then, jagged with pain, drew breath sharply and calmed herself. Her visitors were silent, now understanding that all that was required of them was to accompany the old woman back into the past while holding her hands as a link to the present.

“And she was clever--clever in a time when women weren’t supposed to be. She read books about philosophy, politics and art. She talked about communism, solidarity and the struggle. About inhumanity, injustice and Stalin. Sometimes, my father would get weary of her passion, but mostly he just loved her. He couldn’t help it. And neither could I.”

Liz wished she’d brought a tape recorder with her. Madelina’s voice had taken on the quality of a storyteller or a play reader. This wasn’t a conversation. This was autobiography.

The old lady continued in the same faint voice, and Liz found herself being drawn into the rich detailed pictures from Madelina’s memory. Madelina described how their all birthdays fell within three weeks of each other in

September--hers, Mama's, and Papa's—and how on the evening of each of their birthdays, Mama would dress up in her Sunday clothes, put on her reddest lipstick, her gold earrings with the tiny diamonds in the middle, and bring out the crystal ball to give them a reading as a birthday treat. Her predictions came to pass on a regular basis, Madelina said, and not just those that were to do with the family, either. On one reading, Mama had been interrupted by a vision of Signora Marcella falling from the second floor of the Palazzo delle Stallone. This was really bad news as Signora Marcella brought them a fresh duck from the countryside each August when her husband took her on their annual vacation from the city.

“Mama was right of course,” Madelina concluded. “That year there was no duck.” But mostly, she said, the tellings were unremarkable: “I would do well in school. Papa would be promoted (or not). Mama would meet a tall dark handsome man and laugh happily, because it was always my papa. I loved her so much. And I believe that, despite everything that went between us, she loved me.”

Madelina paused. Liz looked up. What, she wondered, had gone between them? How could Madelina's mother not have loved her? Then she saw that Madelina's mouth had become dry with the exertion of her storytelling and that she was licking her lips. It was necessary to break the spell.

“Some water, Madelina?”

“*Si cara. Prego.*”

“What happened Madelina? I don't understand. What did you do that upset your mother so much? What 'went between you'?”

“It was my fault,” Madelina said, in a near-whisper. “On my fourteenth birthday she did my reading but before she could speak her predictions she fell

unconscious. Papa carried her to bed and called the doctor, but she never got up again. The doctors said it was a bleed on the brain but I know it was because she saw my truth. Papa wouldn't let them take her to hospital –she would have hated it there and there was nothing to be done. She died a week later.”

“Oh Madelina. I'm so sorry. That's awful. But it can't have been your fault. You were only fourteen. You'd have to have done something really bad for your mother to be that upset. Like get pregnant or something. And even then... there are always ways of dealing with these things. What on earth could have been so bad?” Liz faltered, seeing no reaction on Madelina's face. Madelina continued as if Liz hadn't spoken.

“Papa was nothing without her. He went to work every day but the joy had gone out of his life. Out of both of our lives. He did his duty long enough to see me reach eighteen, and on the day after my birthday he took his shotgun into the bedroom and killed himself. He couldn't bear the shame.”

Liz was horrified. How, she wondered, had Madelina carried this all her life? Why hadn't Carlo told them any of this? And Michael—he'd been living with her in the same apartment for seven months. How had he not known any of her history?

The old lady's eyes rolled in the direction of the water and Liz reached out again. “Madelina,” she asked gently, “what shame?”

At this point Michael lifted his head.

“Mika,” he said softly.

“*Si caro.*”

“Who's Mika?” asked Liz, looking from the one to the other, confused.

Was she being incredibly stupid? Was she somehow missing the point?

“I, Lizbette. I was Mika. Not everything you see here is as it always has been.”

“Madelina, you’re talking in riddles. Michael? Please. Would somebody please enlighten me?”

“Dear girl. I was born a boy who wanted nothing more than to be a girl. Carlo was my best friend, but for years he never knew my secret. Only my parents knew, and our priest Father Benedetti who had given me absolution. The day papa killed himself, I was crazed with guilt and grief. I put on Mama’s Sunday best, her stockings and her hat with the feather in the band, and went to church for confession. I didn’t know what else to do. Father Benedetti called Carlo to fetch me. Apparently I was an abomination,” Madlina whispered, barely audible, “but Carlo saw it was me, even in my mother’s clothes. He didn’t hate me or laugh at me. He wasn’t repulsed by me or call me a sin against God. I was simply his best friend. And that, my dear, is how it has been ever since.”

Liz rocked back on her chair, stunned. She couldn’t speak. Madelina was spent. And seconds later, any possible response had to be deferred when Luisa’s tall, slightly stooped lawyer son knocked politely, and they all politely welcomed Luisa and her wheelchair back to the room. She looked contented with the visit, and he was diligent in assisting her back into bed, lifting her gently, straightening the covers over her involuntarily twitching birdlike limbs. The visits were never long enough, she complained after her son had left, but he was so busy and important and his wife so demanding that she had to take what she could.

As Luisa gabbled on, Liz stroked the back of Madelina’s fingers, knowing this was one of the few parts of her body where the sense receptors still functioned. Face or hair would have been too personal, despite the intimacy that

had been created between them by Madelina's devastating history. But there would be no more revelations that afternoon; Madelina was breathing quietly with her eyes closed. Before they left, Michael remembered to carry out Carlo's instructions and discreetly marked a tiny notch on the bed frame next to the others. His was the twenty-first.

Neither spoke as they headed for the exit and the relief of fresh air. Liz, exhausted, reached for Michael's arm, seeking unspoken comfort. Sensing this, he put his arm around her and pulled her tight to him. They walked in step, silent and bound by the history of their absent friend.

University of Cape Town

November 28th 2012 : Milan

She could see him walk the glass corridor. The plane had disembarked and Stef was second in line, speed-walking into the Arrivals Hall. He looked briefly into the crowd but didn't bother looking long enough to pick her out. Then he was out of view. He had his computer bag with him. Typical. If she'd received a phone call telling her of the death of a parent (would that she still had any), she would have thrown random items into whatever bag was nearest and be completely unequipped for whatever was to come. But not Stef. There was the man she had married all those years ago, but he looked different. Different in a strange way. The same, but different. She was getting the same sensation as she had the last time she had gone to London on a trip – total familiarity combined with an absolute lack of belonging. To all intents and purposes it was her home, but she didn't live there anymore.

In the same way, she had forfeited her rights to look at Stef with familiar boredom. In the small window of her one-way mirror world, she examined him with different eyes. Tall, broad of shoulder, slightly overweight but nothing he couldn't get away with and certainly a lot better than many of his contemporaries. Hair gelled to give just the right amount of tousled trendiness but remain respectably smart. He was wearing his Armani raincoat and a yellow scarf. The colour reminded her of Carlo's beloved Peruvian woollen cardigan, and the lump came back.

She'd lived with this lump in the back of her throat for nearly fifty hours now. From the moment she'd been tapped on the shoulder at the bar by a regular customer and turned to see Carlo on his knees by the back stair doors, her

heartbeat had become irregular. It hadn't righted itself yet. She had moved as fast as possible, spilling her glass onto a table along the way, shoving and pushing those who hadn't been as observant or who were simply too busy enjoying themselves to worry about anything outside of their groove. Half run, half stumble and all panic, she had crouched beside Carlo, having to shout to make herself heard over the music.

“Carlo!”

But he was already on his way. His left arm had no use, his right hand was pulling at his throat and chest. His breath barely gulped in before it was expelled and dragged back in to his body in a rhythm of anguish. He looked straight ahead, staring at something. She followed his eyes. Nothing but legs and a slowly clearing path as people realised that all was not well. The music was still pumping and keeping its beat against all the odds. Carlo's heart, on the other hand, was not. But he was looking. And he was seeing. Whatever it was seemed to please him, for as the breath swept tidally in and out of his body, his efforts to fight quietened and he went calmly down into unconsciousness.

“Carlo! No! Somebody, for god's sake, call an ambulance. Call 911. Or 999. Shit! What's the bloody number here for emergency services? *Numero*.

Ambulance – *si?* ”

“*Ambulanza?* 112.”

“Well call the number. Someone please! Turn the music down.

Emergenza. Emer-Genza. Get it?”

A stout freckled man with three days stubble crouched down by her side. He was wearing a tight rubber bodice and shorts with high heels giving him an extra couple of much needed inches.

“Infermiere. Prego.”

And suddenly quiet moved like an avalanche across the room. Word had reached the DJ, the music stopped, and the shouting and laughing gradually tailed off. The only noise was a background hum of concern, in marked contrast to Liz, who was wildly yelling at anyone in her immediate orbit. Minutes must have passed. She had no idea. All she knew was that Rubber Nurse had placed a glass-polishing towel from behind the bar over Carlo’s face so she could no longer see the warmth from his eyes and the kindness of his smile.

Michael was by her side. He held her face and forced her eyes to look at his.

“Liz. Stop shouting. Please. You’re shouting and there’s no one to shout for or at. We can hear you. Liz. My darling girl. Come...”

And she had followed him out of the room, wondering what the hell had just happened. Six months ago, Carlo had taken the floor to glide round the room in the arms of cancer in a long, slow, measured waltz. One-two-three, one-two three, one-two three. But something had cut in on the cancer, going for the quickstep with a heart-stopping finale. One. One. Gone.

And now here, at the airport, in a very real waking dream, was Carlo’s son, her husband retrieving his hard metal case on wheels from the belt. Stef had positioned himself as efficiently as possible for maximum time-saving and minimal physical effort, even though he may have upset a few people around him in the process. But that was Stef all over. He didn’t even really notice ‘other people’. Liz could count on the fingers of one hand how many times she had spoken to him since he’d refused to come out from Cape Town last month. He’d called a couple of times to see how Carlo was doing but it was clearly more out of

duty than any other emotion. All conversations between them had been extraordinarily polite. And now, too late, here he was.

Stef disappeared momentarily, and she knew he would be walking the long corridor from baggage collection to the exit doors while brazenly eyeing up other people's luggage. "I've always had a thing for hard cases. That's why I'm with you..." or "Come on darling, you always knew I came into this with baggage, that's why you love me!". Early banter in their relationship would have numerous allusions to his strange obsession. But then it became an irritant, along with just about everything else.

Everything else? Was that a cop-out?

"Liz!".

Startled that she'd missed him coming out of the sliding doors among the crowd, he'd taken her by surprise, and for a moment she was cross that she hadn't been more prepared. Then she remembered why he was there.

"Stef. I'm so sorry. I really am. So, so sorry."

He nodded abruptly and took her elbow.

"Come, let's get out of here. I'm being stalked by a South American woman who sat next to me on the plane. She was one of the passengers from hell that you hope you never sit next to. Loved to speak English but only knew six words: 'I love your Queen and BBC'. Then proceeded to get hammered on the business class champagne and persisted on bashing me repeatedly to get my attention before she drank herself into a stupor and passed out! I got about three hours sleep."

"Oh god. How awful. Still, you look good".

“Do I? Thanks Liz. If your eyes were less red and puffy from crying, I would probably say the same about you...”

“I’ll take that as a back-handed compliment whether or not you meant it as such.”

“C’mon... you know what I mean. Don’t let’s start bickering already. This is hard enough for everyone.”

“I’m not bickering Stef. Really? Two seconds in and I’m already the bad guy?. That didn’t take long”.

“Liz. Please.”

“Ok. Sorry. I’m sorry. Car’s this way.”

They silently wheeled the matching luggage set, Liz two steps ahead of Stef ostensibly because she knew the way to the car, but actually just because she didn’t feel there was any space for her at his side.

3rd December 2012 19.38 p.m.: Milan

Stef and Michael were sitting at the bar. Nothing new there then. It seemed like they'd been sitting at the raised oak counter for a week now. But in between had been the funeral, and Michael had absolutely promised her that he really, really didn't particularly like Stef, he was just being supportive and polite. Liz tried very hard to conquer her jealousy, but only got a 'could do better' on her emotional report card.

Michael was looking earnest and his hands were flapping. Stef was frowning. It didn't look good--although she wasn't sure what 'good' was any more. At the moment, 'good' felt more like seeing the back of Stef as he walked to the departure gate for the next available flight to Cape Town. Really, he was insufferable. His behaviour at the will reading had been outrageous--all that shouting and finger jabbing. For once, though, the finger hadn't been jabbed in her direction: Madelina had come in for the major share of his wrath.

Clearly, Stef had been looking to his birthright inheritance to solve most of his financial woes. So by the time the notary had reached inside his jacket pocket for a cotton handkerchief to soak up the sweat from his forehead at the conclusion of the reading, Stef was having a hard time remaining civil. Indeed, he was on the verge of losing his temper. From force of habit, Liz knew it was time to find her safe place or she'd have one of those humiliating panic attacks brought on by conflict. So the deeper the furrow on Stef's brow became, and the heavier his breathing, the more Liz sought out in the distraction of the stranger nearby.

The notary, Signor Ganare, was a good subject for 'You Are'. This game was a diversionary tactic that she'd developed to distract herself from hypersensitivity to her surroundings. Without distraction, severe stress would bring out intolerances both physical and emotional: intolerance to noise or movement, to foot tapping, to paper rustling, the hum of an air-conditioning unit, the barking of a random dog in the street, the buzzing of a fly on a window. Body odour, cooking oil, incense. Twisted socks, labels in clothing... The patch of eczema on her leg would flare and the scratching would start. All the while, her emotions were becoming uncontrollable, and, if allowed to spiral without check, would erupt in magnificent but destructive rages.

She needed to get into this game quickly now. She was watching the notary take his handkerchief out. Side pocket. Left. The flap of his pocket got stuck halfway out and his houndstooth jacket appeared to tilt on his shoulders with the effort of extraction. He wore a wedding ring. Gold and old. Scratched. Worn with love. Married for many years. The handkerchief was folded but not ironed. He kept it in his left pocket, and had taken his glasses on and off with his left hand so there was a strong possibility that he was a frustrated creative channelled by a strong mother into marrying a strong wife who didn't like ironing but did like the regular monthly income that a vocational trade brought. He loved her more than she loved him, characterised by a distinct lack of self-confidence and the visual marker of sweat under the armpits. He had good teeth, but ate three mints during the meeting so was prone to gingivitis. Just another piece of proof that he was less loved – his wife didn't feed him properly so his gut gave him trouble. Overweight too. Probably a seventeen and a half neck size--

As Liz jumped with shock at the sound of shouting, she was sucked back forcibly through her nerve-neutralising game portal.

“This is just wrong. What the fuck’s going on here? What spell has that old witch put on my father? How did she get him to leave her all his paintings? How long has this ridiculous obsession with Madelina been going on? When did this all start? Was he fucking her before my mother died or did he have the grace to wait until afterwards? Just as well she’s on her way out or I’d help her along...”

“*Signor, prego...*” The notary was attempting to engage Stef in a conciliatory tone, but conciliation was not in his line of sight at that moment.

Liz started to bite her thumb. The heavy wool of the notary’s winter jacket rasped between arm and body every time he moved. Someone in the room was rocking back on their chair – she could feel the movement travelling up from the floorboards through her own chair legs. Stupidly, she realised it was her chair that was rocking. She got up and went to the window.

“Liz – please. Do you know what’s going on? Why my father has ignored me and given his work to Madelina?”

“Stef, he didn’t ignore you. He left you some money!”

“Yes Liz. I get the statutory fucking minimum share. Not only is it a measly sum in comparison to what his paintings would fetch, but frankly it’s a fucking insult. He couldn’t have shown me what he thought of me any better during his lifetime than by what he’s done at his death.”

“Perhaps that’s why he left them to Madelina?” Liz ventured. “Perhaps he wanted them to go to someone who wouldn’t sell them?”

“Oh shit Liz. For God’s sake. Don’t be so ridiculous! What’s she going to do with them? She’s paralysed and dying in a hospital. She’s hardly in any state to

take possession of a multi-million-euro art collection. Holy shit. This is not what I'd expected of my father. Or perhaps it's exactly what I should have expected. Liz – did you know about this?"

And without waiting for her answer, he left the room. Liz had remained standing by the window pinching her own arm so tightly that she was causing herself pain. The notary was behind his desk but still looked remarkably uncomfortable, given he was on home territory. Signor Ganare then imparted the news to her that Madelina (as the main recipient of the bulk of Carlo's estate) had already been visited earlier that day and given the news.

"What did she say?"

"Very little Signora Cienento. She thanked me. She seemed unsurprised, calm, and, as I see so often in these situations, cried a little. She asked me to relay a message to you. She understands that you are very occupied at the moment but would like to assist you going forward should you wish, and she enquired whether you might visit her as soon as you have time?"

"Of course. Yes. I'll go as soon as I can. Please, forgive me, but I have to go and find..." Liz gestured in the direction of the door, unable to utter the words 'my husband'. She hadn't used the term for some time. Neither the death of her father-in-law nor Stef's physical presence had made it any easier to use it now.

"Si Signora. I quite understand. May I say it is a very human reaction? Your husband's anger? If you need me at all please, do not hesitate. I am at your service."

"You are very understanding Signor."

She went to shake his hand and despite the chill of a wintery December day, felt a warm, moist palm against her own. Her sympathies were beginning to side with the hardcore wife.

As she rushed towards the exit of the narrow building in the even narrower street, she grabbed her phone out of her Pucci Parka pocket to hastily sms Michael with an update. Predictive text had never been her strong point, and, as she pulled the heavy wooden door, she hit the send button just a little too quickly.

‘Coming good. Rude not happy. Mad got all the six.’

And thus was the summation of Carlo’s will.

Undoubtedly that was what all the fist-banging was about up at the bar. Rude was certainly not happy. Their taxi ride back to The Store had been one of grim silence, which, after a while, Liz tried to break.

“Stef – I don’t think you should take this so personally. Look at it like a general election. Your father didn’t vote against you, he just voted for someone else...”

“Liz.. If you think that telling me not to take it personally and comparing my father’s will to an election is helpful, then I really don’t know who you are any more.”

So from that point, some hours earlier, he’d sought the company of others and she’d kept out of his way. She was relieved really. She didn’t have to excuse him or apologise for him or try to smooth things over. They were separated and separate.

But Michael provided a good foil for him. Very even-tempered and pragmatic, with just enough humour to prevent proceedings from becoming too intense. She remembered the first night she'd met him, eight months ago, in the bar at the Four Seasons, and how well he'd taken her histrionics. How far she'd come in those intervening months. She'd learned how to make a decent Aperol Spritz that would pass an Italian's lips without raising an eyebrow, she'd had a crash course of full-on and utterly ridiculous pole dancing lessons from Mimi Chaleur, she'd found a new best friend and soul mate in Michael and best of all, she'd found a family. It wasn't a two point four family with a Honda Civic and a Labrador. It was a big, messy, crazy family of various sized arms, legs, heads, bodies with varying degrees of hair and real or fake appendages. It was a family that liked, loved, bitched, gossiped, berated and supported each other through almost everything except a bad outfit. It was the sense of family that she had been missing for so much of her life and in the midst of its noisy generosity and clattering welcome, she'd found a quiet place inside of her that made her happy. Carlo had given her that. Well, not given it to her exactly. Not like an inheritance. But he'd shown her where it was.

Now, at the bar, Stef had stopped to take breath. She caught his eye and smiled. In a small way. But she smiled. He looked at her a little oddly and raised an eyebrow.

It was fine, she realised. She was fine. He would be fine eventually. It would all be just fine.

Tuesday 26th February 2013 14.16 p.m.: Milan

Madelina could just see her bag of memories. It was still there, safe, protected. No one had touched it. No-one had opened it. No one had rummaged. It lay close to her at all times and she would have protected its contents with what little life remained in her body. The nurses knew not to touch it, and Carlo had made a peg for her bedside table so she could see it from where she lay. She didn't need to look inside it but had given instruction that, when the time came, it should be burned with her, for it contained all that she had been, all that she was and all that she had hoped she would become.

A violet band from around a Panama hat as soft as the silk ties that had hung in Papa's wardrobe. A puddle-stained glove, found on the street but trimmed with rabbit skin at the cuff, genteel and delicate, perfect for stroking across her hairless groin in lieu of the touch of another human. The soft crumpled grey and gold business card of the surgeon (long since dead) that had been given to Mika by Signora Bartello – a good woman who had spotted serendipity in a public toilet all those years ago and changed the course of Mika's life. A baby blue taffeta skirt with torn netting beneath, stolen from Mama's closet when Mika was just sixteen and falling in love with Carlo. Both Madelina and Mika had been in love with him forever. As male and female, she had loved Carlo as a best friend, a brother, a soul mate, a lover who would never be hers.

And, as she sensed death nearby, she knew Carlo was there. Carlo was always there. She knew it. She missed him too much. So this would be easy.

Thank god. All she had to do was go. He would be there. She knew he would. He wouldn't let her be alone. And Alessa. Dear sweet Alessa who had helped her so much but had never known the extent of Madelina's love for her husband. There was nothing wrong, nothing sinful about her love for Carlo. Thank god. It had remained restrained, pure. It was all that it had ever been allowed to be: love for her soul mate, love for the one who had lived her complicated life alongside her, who had played, soothed, teased, who had covered up for her misdemeanours, who had understood her pain and her need, who had encouraged her to live her life to the full, embracing the ultimate challenge without showing pity or charity. It was everything that it could ever have been, given the lives that they were given.

But best of all, she had been able to give something back. Madelina had allowed Carlo to spend his days alongside Alessa while the sickness wasted her muscles, the fighting exhausted her, and the will became weaker. It was Madelina who had kept Carlo safe and granted them the time together to come to terms with the inevitable. When Alessa had struggled to walk from room to room, it was Madelina who had made sure that Carlo could be by her side for support, that he could kiss Alessa's forehead a thousand times while she slept and that he could cry with her when she was confined to bed. And it was Madelina that had given him the cruel freedom to hear Alessa's lungs straining through her dying days and the courage to hold her hand and bid his love farewell in the early hours of the morning as she failed to see her final dawn. None of this would have been possible without Madelina's gift of love.

Liz got the call from the clinic at 3.45 p.m. Michael was out somewhere, and she was furious that he wasn't there to share the news. Lost, raging, she cried and shouted through the empty cavernous rooms. She threw a teapot which merely echoed bizarrely as it bounced off the rubber wall of the bar front and separated from its lid when it landed. Other than that, there was no satisfying smash or release of her misery. When Carlo had died, there had been hundreds of people surrounding her, from the moment he dropped to the floor. Then there'd been the large funeral, Stef, the kids, friends, and many, many professional colleagues from the art world flowing through The Store almost day and night to pay their respects. Michael hadn't left her side for a moment. And when all the big fuss had abated and only those closest to Carlo were still left to grieve, she'd at least she had Madelina on whom to focus her energies. She had The Store to run and visits to the hospital to make each day.

But this wasn't fair. It was too soon. It was too soon for Madelina to go. She needed to talk to her, to listen to her, she needed so much more from her. And where the hell was Michael? Why wouldn't he just answer his damn phone?

"Madelina's died. Michael, she's dead. Please. I need you. I need someone to be here that understands what this feels like. I need help. I don't know what to do. Please, pick up? Pick up. For God's sake--pick up! Listen Michael, if you're in some back street shagging some little fairy whose name you haven't even asked, while I'm here dealing with this on my own, I will kill you." She screamed at his voicemail and having done so, felt no better.

Now what? She sat on the stair to the cocktail bar, rocking back and forwards with misery. The bar staff would report for work in two hours. The DJ

an hour later. What passed for the kitchen staff and doubled as table staff would be there in forty-five minutes. In less than three hours, there would be eleven people relying on the club to provide an evening's entertainment for dozens of regulars. Thank god Tuesdays were quiet nights. She could even shut ...? But Liz knew that honestly, really, truly, however trite and clichéd it may sound, Madelina would want the show to go on. It must be business as usual.

Now there would be a funeral to arrange, relatives to contact (did Madelina have any?), and a myriad of other things to do. All of which would have to be done in Italian, some of which she already knew from Carlo's funeral, but this time she didn't have Stef with her or Madelina to guide her. She was alone with her grief. Quite what she was to do with it, she had no idea--other than, in the immediate future, a damn good cry.

Thursday February 28th 2013: Milan

“I’m putting all her personal documents in the steel box,” Michael shouted from the living room. Liz came through from Madelina’s kitchen, where she’d been sorting out the fridge. He was over by the open bottom drawer of the slender tall shelved writing desk that doubled as an elegant bookcase. Liz thought about the tour that Madelina had taken her on around the apartment – a testament to her pleasure in mid-century design of the 1950s and 1960s. She had been both passionate and knowledgeable about her subject, caressing each item as they went, urging Liz to feel the invisible settings of dovetail joints.

“See – you can’t even tell that there’s a join there...”.

“Madelina, you are probably the most stylish woman I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. How do you do it? Can anyone learn to be stylish? Can you teach it?”

The answer had been uncertain. Madelina implied a debt to her mother’s innate sense of style, of understanding how it wasn’t simply about dress or design, what you bought or wore, but as much about how you lived your life, how you carried yourself and moved, how you stirred a pot or chopped an onion, what music you listened to and most of all, how you conducted yourself towards those around you.

“Always you must be proud enough to make the effort to live with grace and style,” Madelina had said. “For example, this furniture – it is made by craftsmen who have poured years of apprenticeship and a sense of personal pride

into each and every piece. See here – would you even know that this was a desktop that slides out? And this here. Press? Ah yes! An extra drawer just the right size for a box of one dozen graphite pencils. See how the legs curve down so finely. And shelves above, for books. This is a true piece of workmanship. If I had children I would be able to pass on these pieces as something of value. Not disposable like so much of today’s junk... *Madre mia!* Listen to me. I sound like an old person!”

Liz could still hear Madelina laughing at herself. Liz’s lesson in mid-century Modern furniture had come long before the Alice-in-Wonderland lesson that ‘all was not necessarily what it seemed’. Those were the days - and not so long ago - when she had sustained the straightforward belief that Madelina had held a torch for Carlo which had not only left her childless but had never been extinguished. Would that it were a love so simply unrequited. Now she knew better why there were no children to whom this lovingly curated collection would be passed.

“Liz?”

“Sorry Mikey, miles away. What?”

“I was saying we should have a celebration. We should have a damn great celebration of Madelina and Carlo’s life. They may have left the building, but they had such huge spirits and histories that every inch of The Store is imbued with their characters. So let’s celebrate with a party. You know they’d want it. Look, in one year, our lives have completely changed. I’ve gained three amazing friends, I’ve lost two of them – no, don’t give me the ‘careless’ joke. And I’ve found myself living a life that I didn’t even know existed this time last year. I’m confused and sad. The only thing that is clear to me at the moment is that there

were two people here who lived quite extraordinary lives in their way. And I believe we should celebrate that. We don't have to tell anyone what we know. But Madelina would like a good party to see her off. And we can't send her off without Carlo – she'd never forgive us. What do you say Liz? Are you with me?"

"Sure."

"Sure? That's all you can say?"

"Yes."

"Hey. I know that look. What's going on Liz? What do I need to know here? Is it my turn to be missing something?"

"Michael." She drew breath. "You know how angry Stef was that Carlo left most of his art to Madelina?"

"Of course I do, darling. I was the one that had to counsel him in his cups and stop him from suing the damn estate. Why?"

"There was a reason he did that. A reason beyond the fact that they were best friends. Well, actually solely to do with the fact that they were best friends."

"Liz?"

"Yes?"

"What the...?"

"Sorry. This is difficult. Michael, remember when I went to see Madelina after the will reading? The solicitor had already been to see her so she knew that Carlo had left her his half of The Store and most of his art. Didn't you ever wonder about that? Did you ever ask yourself why?"

"Well, they're lifelong friends. No? For the love of God, would you just get on with it!"

“I’m trying... OK, the day after Carlo’s will was read, I sat with Madelina for an hour. Much of it was just holding her hand. Her misery was so deep. It felt as if she had lost her reason to live. In fact, I’m amazed that she lasted for three months without him. I think that from the moment he died, she lost any desire to continue. What I am sure of is that Carlo had no idea when he wrote his will in South Africa and had it notarised here that Madelina would be so incapacitated and that he would have so little time to put his affairs in order. But the bequest to her was a sort of a payment of a debt.”

“My god, he must have owed Madelina a stack of cash to leave her that much. What the hell happened? Did she bankroll The Store?”

“No, not at all. In fact, quite the reverse. Carlo bankrolled The Store. Everything that Madelina told us was true. She just left out one major part of the story.”

“Lizbeth Ciancento, if you don’t tell me right now, I might just have to slap myself around the face to stop from getting hysterical. Would you please just get to the point?”

“It’s been a bit of a puzzle to me. I’ve picked up pieces here and there. Stef was raised by his grandparents because his mother, Carlo’s wife, died when he was eight”.

“Yes, with you so far.”

“Well, whenever I asked him if he’d wanted to live with his father, he always mumbled about how his grandparents thought that he was ‘better out of it all’ and I was never quite sure what ‘it all’ was. It turns out that there was a scandal involving Carlo and Madelina.”

“Madelina or Mika?”

“Sorry, quite right. She was still a ‘he’ at that point. She was Mika.”

“So nothing weird and sexual then, presumably, given that Carlo was as straight as a die... OK, go on.”

“No, nothing like that. Carlo was married to Alessa and loved her dearly, Stef was a toddler and they were all blissfully happy. Carlo was just beginning to become well known. Madelina said that Mika and Alessa were really close as well – she was like a sister to him. Then one night, Carlo and Mika were walking in the park. Madelina wasn’t precise about what happened, and she was getting quite tired as she talked to me so I didn’t press her, but there was an accident of some sort. Carlo and Mika were attacked. There was a fight and one of the attackers died. The whole awful thing ended up in a charge of manslaughter against Mika. He was found guilty and went to San Vittore prison for ten years.”

Michael looked at her in disbelief, lips parted but no sounds that might relate to coherent speech were discernable. Liz ploughed on, relieved to slough off the weight of others’ histories. “I tell you no lie Mr Collins.. Mika was sentenced to fifteen years and was released in ten for good behaviour.”

“When? When was this?”

“Well, according to Madelina, Mika was released in 1976. Two years later he underwent surgery and became Madelina. That same year she and Carlo went into business with The Store.”

“Wow. I don’t know what to say.”

“Well don’t say anything yet, because I’ve only told you the half of it.”

“There’s more? I guessed there was a story in their relationship, but I wasn’t prepared for this. What comes next?” .”

“The reason that Carlo needed to come back and spend his last days with Madelina, and that he left most of his estate to her?. She took the rap for him.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“The accident in the park. The manslaughter. It was Carlo who was guilty of the manslaughter.”

“I’m sorry. Am I understanding you right? Mika spent ten years in prison for something Carlo did?”

“Yup. That’s about the sum of it. Alessa had just been diagnosed with a terminal illness and Carlo was distraught. Mika knew that it would destroy Carlo to go to prison while his wife was suffering and dying, and Stef was only four at the time. So he decided that he would take the guilty plea and exonerate Carlo. Apparently it was relatively easy to convince the police – Mika was dressed in women’s clothes, and, back in the nineteen sixties, parading around in a public place in women’s clothing was considered cause for provocation. He was ‘asking for it’. There was a big scandal at the time because Carlo was with him, and that was part of the reason why Stef was sent away – the family thought it better that he should be shielded from all the attention.”

“So what happened then?”

“I’m not sure. There seemed to be a bit of a gap for a couple of years when Mika left prison, which she left blank when she was talking to me. I wanted to ask her about it but now...”

Liz paused, swallowing back the lump in her throat, took a deep breath and continued.

“Then Mika had her sex change and, as she put it, ‘died and rose again as Madelina’. That same year, she and Carlo started this place. And before you ask,

yes, I did ask the question. About her and Carlo. She explained to me and I think I understand. You know, she told us that they were best friends as boys, from the age of eight. Inseparable. And that Carlo found out about Mika's desire – no sorry, his *need* to be female on Mika's 18th birthday, the day his father committed suicide.

“Her love for Carlo was all-consuming--as a brother, a best friend, a protector, a companion, a confidant. If she ever felt had any physical love for him as between a woman and a man, then she never told him, or me for that matter.”

“It's not often in my life that I'm speechless...”

“So when you say to me let's celebrate their lives, I say sure. You just need to know that there's more depth to their relationship than anyone knows, or can ever know, other than you or I. Not even Stef knows, and I don't think he deserves to. Let him stay blissfully unaware of just what two people can do for one another when they love without judgement or rules.” Her voice broke on the last words and she gave up trying to swallow back her sadness.

Michael took her in his arms. He didn't try to 'shush' her. He just held her, rocking gently as if soothing a baby. She was weeping for lost souls, lost loves, her lost love. She was weeping for the shame that had been carried by Mika, for the pain and guilt that had been borne by Carlo, for the bitterness that was still held by her husband. Her tears were hot with envy for the bond between two that had led each to give everything for the other – a state of human grace that few could attain.

After an indeterminate length of time, she lifted her head from Michael's sodden cashmere.

“I'm sorry,” she said quietly, more to herself than to him.

“What for? Ruining my very expensive jumper?”

“No Michael. Although yes, of course I’m sorry about your jumper. But more than that, I’m sorry that two people that I loved have permanently left the building. I’m sorry that their lives were so full of trauma. I’m sorry that I didn’t know more, sooner. I’m sorry for so much. For wasting so much of my life not recognising that it takes strength to stay true to yourself, just because it’s simpler to follow what seems to be the easiest path.”

“My darling Liz. We are but human. We do the best we can under the circumstance in which we find ourselves. You are one of the greatest self-flagellators I have ever known.” And with that, he took her right hand in his, placed her left around his waist, and proceeded to dance her around the room in a dizzying mash-up of waltz, tango and flamenco, until she tumbled laughing and dizzy onto the Le Corbusier chaise longue while Michael sank to the floor breathless next to her.

Of course she knew the pain wasn’t over. She’d had some experience at this grieving business. She was aware that loss would continue to steal up on her and catch her unawares, even on good days. And on bad days, self-pity dressed up as misery would circle her while she railed at the loneliness and unfairness of life. She had no-one to be responsible to, or for, but herself. Michael would do his best, she knew that. The Store would keep her busy. And she knew, too, that the time between the bad days would lengthen with each year that passed. But the last year with Carlo and Madelina had given her a new piece of wisdom: that sometimes life gives the most determined people more than one chance to get it right. Now there was a bit of luck.