

A TOTALLY GRIPPING PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

KATHARINE
JOHNSON

THE **SECRET**

LOVE, LIES AND BETRAYAL



~~THE SECRET~~

KATHARINE JOHNSON
~~KATHARINE JOHNSON~~



Giftbooks4u.com

Copyright © 2024 Katharine Johnson

The right of Katharine Johnson to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Re-published in 2024 by Bloodhound Books.

Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this publication may only be reproduced, stored, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, with prior permission in writing of the publisher or, in the case of reprographic production, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

www.bloodhoundbooks.com

Print ISBN: 978-1-917214-72-8

Giftbooks4u.com

Contents

Newsletter sign-up

1. [Sonia](#)
2. [Carlo](#)
3. [Sonia](#)
4. [Sonia](#)
5. [Carlo](#)
6. [Carlo](#)
7. [Sonia](#)
8. [Carlo](#)
9. [Carlo](#)
10. [Carlo](#)
11. [Sonia](#)
12. [Irena](#)
13. [Carlo](#)
14. [Sonia](#)
15. [Carlo](#)
16. [Irena](#)
17. [Carlo](#)
18. [Sonia](#)
19. [Irena](#)
20. [Martina](#)
21. [Martina](#)
22. [Martina](#)
23. [Martina](#)
24. [Carlo](#)
25. [Martina](#)
26. [Martina](#)
27. [Irena](#)
28. [Martina](#)
29. [Martina](#)
30. [Martina](#)
31. [Martina](#)
32. [Martina](#)
33. [Martina](#)

34. [Martina](#)
35. [Irena](#)
36. [Carlo](#)
37. [Martina](#)
38.
[Martina](#)
39. [Martina](#)
40. [Martina](#)
41. [Irena](#)
42. [Martina](#)
43. [Carlo](#)
44. [Irena](#)
45. [Irena](#)
46. [Martina](#)
47. [Irena](#)
48. [Martina](#)
49.
[Martina](#)
50.
[Martina](#)
51.
[Martina](#)
52.
[Martina](#)
53. [Martina](#)
54. [Irena](#)
55. [Martina](#)
56. [Martina](#)
57. [Martina](#)
58. [Martina](#)
59. [Sonia](#)
60. [Sonia](#)
61. [Martina](#)
62.
[Irena](#)
63. [Martina](#)
64. [Irena](#)
65.
[Irena](#)
66. [Irena](#)
67. [Sonia](#)
68.
[Sonia](#)
69. [Sonia](#)
70. [Carlo](#)

71. [Sonia](#)

[Also by Katharine Johnson You
will also enjoy:](#)

[Newsletter sign-up](#)

[A note from the publisher](#)

Giftbooks4u.com

JOIN OUR BOOKISH NEWSLETTER!

DISCOVER THE BEST OF
PAGE-TURNING READS AT
BARGAIN PRICES

SIGN UP HERE!



BLOODHOUND
BOOKS

Giftbooks4u.com

ONE Sonia

Sonia

A moment was all it took.

Sonia heaved open the door of the little church. A shaft of sunlight crept through the window spilling onto the milky white floor, leaving the corners in shadow. She breathed in the familiar smell of polished wood, beeswax and crumbling plaster, waiting for her eyes to adjust.

She fumbled in her purse, pulled out a coin, put it in the slot and watched the painting behind the altar light up. Although she knew what to expect, she was still shocked by its intensity. From the shadows rose a fiery, wrathful Mary wielding her club above the head of a small child. She lit the usual candle, placing it in front of the painting. Not that it would make any difference, not now.

You never listened. Now it's too late.

It was years since she'd given up on her prayer. Now her swollen stomach and the absence of monthly blood seemed like a final mockery of the state she'd longed for all those years when she was still young enough for it to bring hope.

But the ritual was a comfort. She watched the flame flicker and the smoke drift up, veiling the glowering Madonna. For ten, perhaps twenty minutes she sat absorbing the quietness and coolness of her surroundings, savouring those few moments away from the world.

Feet crunched on the stones outside. Sonia felt a tightening in her chest. Heard the grating of iron against wood, the squeaking of the rusty ring handle. She shrank back behind the font. The heavy oak door juddered. A shaft of light appeared. The silhouette of a small figure with plaited hair.

One of the English girls from Villa Leonida. They came here sometimes – got up to mischief, messing about with the candles, having water fights with

the holy water, leaving screwed up chewing gum wrappers on the floor, dusty footprints on the marble, empty drink cans under the pews. They gouged disgusting words into the panelling. On other days she saw them down at the pool too chasing each other round the deckchairs while she was clearing the café tables.

Sonia could seize the moment. She could rise up and accost her about the mess and the disrespect. This child would be easy to take on. Her face flushed, and she twisted her plaits around her fingers when people spoke to her, let alone raised their voices. She was pallid except when she blushed, and her eyes were wistful and watery. Not so different from Sonia as a child. But the girl didn't speak much Italian and Sonia didn't speak English. Scolding her would be a waste of breath.

The girl was carrying something. She seemed to be in a trance. That round face, so white and smooth and the large, clear eyes – a lovely face like the cherubs on the altarpiece. But she was no angel. None of them were.

She laid the bundle down on the floor in front of the altar. Stood up, took a step back, staring up at the painting as though she might be about to make the sign of the cross. But instead, she slipped something from around her neck and dipped down to the floor again.

The ancient pew creaked. The girl whipped round, her eyes filled with light and fear. A choking noise escaped her. The trance had broken. Sonia should say something to reassure her, step out of the shadow, see if she was all right. But her breath caught.

The door banged. The girl was gone.

The pile of rags twitched. It bleated. Sonia's heart exploded. How could this be happening? The thing she'd prayed for so many times brought directly to her. Right here in this place where all her secrets were known. She must be mistaken, must be mad. A trick? If so, it was the cruellest yet. But no, as she got closer and peeked inside the bundle, a tiny face looked back. This was no doll. It was a real baby – weak but alive.

She gathered it up, marvelling at the lightness, nuzzling her face against the baby's soft head. Breathed in the wonderful smell of his skin. His little face was red with crying, but he stopped just long enough to open one of his huge, unfocussed eyes.

"It's all right," she whispered.

Outside, the air was damp and smelled of sweet acacia wood. The path was deserted – no sign of the girl. She should go after her, call her back. But

if she did that, she'd be rejecting God's gift. A bit late in the day perhaps but after all her prayers how could it be anything else?

Giftbooks4u.com

Carlo

“The day I left this village I swore I’d never come back,” said Carlo.

That spring morning was still clear in his memory – the piazza bathed in a soft, liquid light as he hurried through, accompanied by the muffled toll of the church bell. Twenty years old, hair newly clipped, clean white shirt, clutching a hold-all containing all his belongings.

Past the boarded-up restaurant, shops, and gelateria – ghosts of buildings that had never been in operation in his memory. Blown render, flaking paint, broken shutters and faded signs that said *vendesi o affitasi*. For sale or rent.

An old man tethered his mule up in front of the stone cistern at the end of the piazza. A small child wearing only a pair of grubby pants lay on his stomach across the wall of the fountain trailing his hand into the silty water for coins thrown in by people hoping for some luck. Carlo dug in his pocket and tossed him his last few lire. He wouldn’t need it where he was going. The child sat turning the money over and over in his hand as if he couldn’t believe his fortune.

“Carlo. Wait.” An elderly neighbour dressed in the floor-length black dress that was customary among older women ran out of her door and pressed some bread and ham into his hand. “Go on – I insist. You’ll need it for the journey. God knows when you’ll next get a decent meal.” Thanking her, he squeezed it into the hold-all.

Two shoeless children jumped down from the step outside their house. “If you meet Elvis Presley will you get us an autograph?”

He laughed. “America’s a big place but if I do, I will.”

Someone gave a shout. The bus was coming up the hill. He couldn't miss it. He broke into a run under the arch and out to the bus stop where a knot of people was gathering to wish him luck and offer advice. Looking down over the precipice he could see the bus lumbering up through the olive trees.

Carlo's mother took his face in her hands and planted kisses on him until he begged her to stop. He had never seen tears in her eyes before, but she pushed him onto the bus, making sure he had everything, reminding him to be good mannered and make himself useful in his uncle's business and to remember to write.

"You'll come out soon, won't you?" he said. He would save up enough for her air fare. She assured him she would.

Sitting on the bus as it pulled away, he noticed Sonia with her mother Martina walking up the hill, arm in arm, eyes cast down to the floor as usual. They were always on their own, those two. Only three years older than he was and Sonia already dressed like an old woman. Her hair was scraped back behind her round ears so hard it pulled the skin taut around her dark rabbit's eyes.

As though she sensed him looking at her, she glanced up and gave a shy wave.

Relief swept through him. The crazy thing was if he stayed around here, he'd probably end up marrying Sonia simply because there would be no one else left.

With the new industrial opportunities springing up in the cities, girls these days were looking for a better catch than boys from Santa Zita. Why marry a peasant when they could be living in town surrounded by new, shiny luxuries and wearing red lipstick and miniskirts?

His mother evidently suspected the same thing. Why else would she have arranged a new life for him in the land of opportunity? Carlo wasn't complaining.

As the bus started its descent the two children who had asked about Elvis chased after it for as long as they were able but just before the first bend they gave up, folding onto the ground in defeat.

His last image was of the desolate grey Villa Leonida, where Martina and Sonia had once lived, rearing up above the village of Santa Zita as though to say,

Don't come back.

“And yet here you are,” Cass said, handing her husband a glass of Prosecco.

The piazza in the village was filled with chatter, laughter, the clinking of glasses and the splashing of the fountain. Fairy lights strung among the potted olive trees glowed like fireflies as the sun dipped behind the mountains.

Yes, here he was, proud owner of the Tre Fratelli restaurant. If he hadn't been away for decades pursuing the American Dream, rising from humble reporter to owner of a newspaper empire, he'd never have had the means to buy this place and restore it and Cass wouldn't have been able to start her Tuscan property business. Three years ago, friends had said they were mad to embark on these new ventures, but Carlo had given retirement a try and concluded that playing golf, pruning roses and joining senior fitness classes weren't for him.

Cass brought round the tray of complimentary Prosecco to mark the restaurant's anniversary. Laughter floated up as she weaved her way through the tables, receiving grateful comments and congratulations.

“Speech!” someone called.

Carlo protested but they weren't going to back down. He spoke in Italian and then English for the benefit of the foreigners.

“Five years ago, when I was living in Manhattan if someone had told me that I'd be back here today in Santa Zita, the village where I was born, running this restaurant I'd have said they were mad. But it turned out to be the best decision I've ever made, and its success is down to all of you sitting here. So, thank you for coming and please keep telling people about it, keep leaving your reviews and posting your photographs.”

He raised his own glass. “And to my wife Cass who always says to me ‘Don't call it a dream, call it a plan.’”

Applause broke out as he kissed her.

“So now can you please stop thinking of yourself as the rat that deserted the ship?” she said in his ear.

He smiled. “I can't help feeling bad that I abandoned this place when it needed me, and I come back flashing my money around while the people who stayed aren't much better off than they ever were. But I like to think the rat's come back in the nick of time.”

Laughter erupted from a table behind him. A camera flashed and a couple of small children broke out of their seats and chased each other across the piazza.

Looking round, he felt a swell of pride. Life was returning to the village of Santa Zita, and the restaurant was largely to thank for that. Having somewhere to stop and rest and enjoy the surroundings made the mountain drive worth it.

Moving here and helping him set up the restaurant had turned out to be a larger undertaking than Cass had expected or would admit. Nonetheless, she'd got stuck in, planning the kitchen and dining room and ordering the catering equipment. Now the space was simple and welcoming with sandblasted beams, colour-washed walls and a tiled wood burning pizza oven. She'd sworn she wouldn't get involved in cooking, but when it came to she had helped out until they could afford to take on staff.

"What about you?" he asked her. "Do you have any regrets about moving here, doing this?"

She laughed. "Oh plenty. All the things that drive me mad – the bureaucracy, the life-sapping battles with the council. But I only have to see that view to feel better. You?"

Looking around, he couldn't think of any.

"I think these two gentlemen would have been very proud," she said indicating the picture on the wall behind the bar of the two moustachioed brothers who had owned the restaurant from the 1920s until the war. When Carlo had been growing up people always talked about I Tre Fratelli in reverend tones as "the best restaurant in Tuscany" – which really meant "in the world" since most of them hadn't ventured beyond the boundaries and those that had were convinced the cuisine outside the region wasn't worth risking.

Carlo and Cass had renamed their two most popular pizzas after each of the brothers, one a fattening mix of mascarpone and walnuts (Pizza Paolo) and the other topped with spicy sausage and tomato (Pizza Mario).

Yes, it was good to feel that by opening the restaurant he'd helped put the village on the map. But he had to admit there had been another reason for coming back to Santa Zita. The question had dogged him for years. Why had she done it? Why had Martina, Sonia's mother, betrayed her neighbours, provoking the reprisal massacre that ripped the heart out of this

tiny village? And perhaps just as importantly why had other people, including his own mother been powerless to stop her?

Giftbooks4u.com

Sonia

At last, the gates of the villa came into view. There was a notice tied to them, but Sonia had to get closer. Had to read it for herself. Her heart raced as she climbed up from the piazza through the honeycomb of cobbled alleys, under tiny arches and lines of washing. She'd forgotten how steep they were. It hadn't occurred to her in all the years she used to walk up and down to clean the little church below the villa.

The houses here hunched up together, shutters closed, as if guarding a secret. At first sight it was hard to tell which ones were still lived in. But another glance revealed glimpses of life - pots of well-tended geraniums stacked on a stone step, a bicycle stashed up on a balcony, a sleepy dog lying across a doorway, the canaries in a cage on a window ledge. She caught the occasional cheeping of the birds, a burst of music from a radio and the smell of cooking.

Narrow arches between some of the houses revealed a slice of brilliant sky and a glimpse of the turrets and bell towers of the town below. Steep stone staircases led down to more houses and cellars built up against the rock. The solid front doors displayed tarnished brass knockers, simple rings, lion heads and human faces, some cherubic, some demonic. The walls were adorned with terracotta suns and moons and other good luck symbols. After all, this was a village that couldn't afford any more bad luck.

The final street that led to the villa was cloaked in cool, dark shadow for most of the day, however much sun splashed the piazza below. At the top, up a flight of overgrown steps beyond the little church of Santa Maria del Soccorso, stood the villa.

Villa Leonida stared back at Sonia, battle scarred but intact. The lemon trees on either side of the door had died in their pots. Grass grew waist-high amid the stone chippings of the forecourt. The shutters were closed, and skeletons of geraniums stood in the window boxes. A sign tied to the rusted curlicues confirmed the rumours.

Vendesì.

For sale. Which meant only one thing – that the awful business from last year would be dragged up again. A shudder passed through her. Everyone would be talking about the discovery of those bones and the deaths that had followed in this tiny village. And each time it resurfaced the thought tore through Sonia – would this be the moment when one discovery led to another?

She stumbled down the narrow path, but someone was coming up towards her. She faltered outside the church, then ducked inside. As she opened the door a crack her eyes went straight to the wall behind the altar. The space that had been dominated by the painting was bare.

So much had happened here under that Madonna's glare. Terrible things and wonderful things. It was here the priest had told her about the awful reprisal massacre in 1944 – more than three hundred people from Santa Zita were butchered including an old woman of ninety and a baby of just a few months old. The massacre had been her mother's fault. She'd been the one who gave the Nazis the information they were after, which led to their terrible act of revenge.

"But why?" Sonia asked. It was so much to take in.

He couldn't give her an answer. "It was war. People do things they'd never normally do. I'm sure she didn't realize what would happen."

But it was also here that Sonia had prayed for a child and here she'd seen the girl putting the baby in front of the altar.

It was hard to believe sometimes what she'd done, deceiving everyone. Her legs felt hollow. She sank into a pew.

And yet looking at Lorenzo as he was growing up, she'd told herself over and over that taking him had been the right thing to do. Perhaps she had done it for the wrong reasons, but it was the right thing.

He'd been so small and weak. He wouldn't have survived. She was his only chance. Would anyone really blame her? How could it have been wrong when the outcome had been so right?

But now that Villa Leonida was for sale again, she must talk to her son – call him and persuade him not to come home at Easter. Nothing mattered more than that. With all the curiosity about the villa swirling around again he must be kept away.

Giftbooks4u.com

Sonia

Down in the piazza, Carlo was wiping down his tables. Please God, he hadn't seen her. But he looked up and waved and came striding across the cobbles towards her, mopping his forehead with a tissue.

"The villa's for sale again," he said with an anxious smile. "I thought you'd want to know."

"Thank you. I've just seen."

Why did he sound apologetic? A splinter of ice entered her – did Carlo know about the baby? Had he known all these years? No. He must be thinking about the more distant past, about the villa being her childhood home. Of what had taken place there in the war.

Her stomach knotted tighter. Bad blood. That was what they would say.

"Have you had much interest?" she managed to ask.

He turned his mouth down. "It's early days. We've had a few enquiries but who knows if they're serious? It won't be easy to sell, that's for sure. There can't be anyone around here who hasn't heard about what happened there last year. Or in the past."

She felt her face colour as he said those last words.

"It'll sell to foreigners," she said. "They don't care."

To put an end to the conversation she headed into the bar instead of continuing across the piazza as she had hoped to do. The door scraped on the floor as she pushed it. Heads turned and then away again. Voices dropped. Backs spread out to form a solid wall. Something of that old fear was back. It hadn't happened for years and yet that sense of rejection she had faced daily in her youth had never entirely left her.

The bar was dark after the dazzle of sunlight in the square and she stood for a few moments waiting for her eyes to adjust to the change of light. It seemed to take longer these days.

“Hello Sonia, how are you?” Leo the barman called over the hubbub.

The faces were smiling, not hostile.

She managed a smile and murmured, “Not bad.”

What was the matter with her? Why did she always think like that? Imagining people could see through to her innermost thoughts? Most of these people were younger than her or had moved to the village recently. They had no idea about her family’s past. To them she was just Sonia, wife of Flavio, mother of Lorenzo. Her stomach squeezed. How would they react to finding out that she had deceived them all this time?

The cluster of bodies parted to let her through to the marble counter where Leo pressed down her usual cappuccino. She thanked him but declined the pastry from the glass cabinet. Her stomach was too churned up. She picked up the cup and saucer and carried them with both hands to stop them rattling, over to one of the tables.

But someone had got there before her.

It was then through the murk and shadows in the rear corner of the bar behind the shaft of sun streaming in from the door that she saw who it was. Or who it must be. It was the hair she noticed, light brown, drawn tightly into two French plaits. A small, fragile figure sitting quietly with her head down, thumbs tapping away on her phone. Sonia held her breath, waiting for her to look up, certain that when she did, she would see a look of triumph in those glass-grey eyes.

They belonged in a round, pale face that could have been painted by Filippino Lippi. A face that had haunted her dreams over the years. A child with a bundle in her arms. A child who had been wearing a shooting star pendant.

If she’d been a decade younger Sonia would have turned and fled. Instead, mesmerized, she walked towards the girl, feeling everyone’s eyes on her. Was this some terrible joke at her expense? Were they all in on it?

As she moved around the table the girl lifted her head. Sonia released her breath as she caught sight of the girl’s long, angular face, dark eyes, and aquiline nose. She sank into her chair, heart pounding. This time she looked properly at her, taking in every detail, waiting until her vision had stopped

shifting. The girl with the Modigliani face returned her gaze indifferently before returning to her phone.

She must stop this. It was guilt, of course. Guilt and fear. Over the past year she had started to see the girl again in every tourist's face. Because it was always there, that thought – she'd come back like the avenging Madonna in the church. She would want what was hers. And she'd make sure everyone knew what Sonia had done.

The girl wouldn't let Sonia forget her. She kept reappearing in dreams – always in that calm, trance-like state. Sonia would open the front door, and she'd be standing there. Never spoke, just held out her arms. She looked so frail but was so strong.

Sonia would battle against the door, but the girl would push through with her super-human strength. Or if Sonia succeeded in shutting the front door she'd find the girl coming in the back from the loggia. If she slammed the shutters closed, she'd turn round and find the girl standing behind her.

The girl would lift Lorenzo out of his cot or lead him away by the hand through the olive trees. Always the girl would whip round with that startled, light-filled look. But she would always succeed.

Sonia bit her lip until she could taste blood. She was being ridiculous. How could the girl sitting here in the bar be the same one? She was still young, still a teenager. The one who dumped Lorenzo in the church like a bag of shopping would be in her thirties now. Probably had children and a husband who had no idea another child existed. Probably guarded her secret as carefully as Sonia cherished hers.

In the corner of the bar, the TV was on – one of those debating shows with the audience split into different opinion groups, everyone shouting at once. A blonde female presenter with dazzling white teeth invited their views and recapped every few minutes, alternating between a grave expression and a radiant smile.

Surely if the girl really meant to come back, she'd have done so years ago? When Lorenzo was still a child? Sonia sipped her coffee, but it burned her stomach as though it had been laced with poison. She made herself focus on the faded pictures on the wall showing the bar in the previous century, waiting for her breathing to be steady again.

Above the general hubbub one conversation stood out.

"It's a relief," Leo was saying to someone. "New owners, new start. Standing there like a rotting carcass, it's a constant reminder. Makes us all

feel bad. Someone needs to breathe new life into the place, make some good memories for a change. Then we can finally move on.”

So, she’d been right. All around her people were talking about the discovery last year of the bodies at the villa. It was no surprise now that it was for sale again.

“Twenty-five years they were lying there and none of us knew anything about it.” “An awful thing for that poor child to discover.”

“What would drive someone to do something like that – kill the people closest to them?”

“They say it’s the house. It’s cursed. Drives people mad. It’s not the only bad thing to have happened there, is it?”

“Come on, no one really believes in curses.”

“The new owners will get a bargain, that’s all I know. A place that size going for the price of a one-bedroom apartment in town.”

“Yes, but would you live there?”

So little happened in this tiny village that the events last year had shocked everyone as much as if an earthquake had ripped through it. Sonia took another sip of coffee, but her stomach was on fire now. She set the cup down again.

The TV debate was livening up. It looked as though it might come to blows. A large woman was hurling insults at a young man who stood up now, waving his arms and appealing to those around him to back him up.

It was only recently that she’d finally allowed herself to think the matter was over and done with but of course it never would be. The acute pain she’d experienced after taking the baby home had receded but never left. But if the truth ever got out... She’d forgotten in the intervening years how painful fear was – a churning chaos inside her as though she was being torn open.

Every time the house was sold, that grisly business would be dragged up again. And with the story, there was the possibility, however tiny, that her own secret would claw its way to the surface.

“Sonia?”

How long had they been trying to get her attention? She dragged herself out of her thoughts.

“Didn’t you live there once?”

“Only as a small child,” she managed to say. “I don’t remember it. It was too big for my mother after the war, so she moved back to her old home.”

Sonia still felt her presence there sometimes. It was hard to avoid. Martina had been such a strong personality she couldn’t just disappear leaving nothing behind. There were reminders in so many places, from the bed Sonia slept in to the plates she ate from to the books she had read.

Who was she trying to fool? It was impossible to escape the past. There would always be someone who remembered her mother or who’d been told about what she did. Sonia would always have a story attached to her, a weight dragging her around. She’d managed to convince herself that the whispering had stopped years ago but no, it was still there behind the smiles on her neighbours’ faces. Any excuse and it bubbled right back up.

“How’s Flavio today?”

She closed her eyes. She’d left her husband asleep, oblivious to all this. She should be with him now, but she’d had to see if the villa really was for sale.

“It was a heart attack. He’s resting. The doctor says if he watches what he eats and doesn’t exert himself he should make a full recovery.”

The woman squeezed her hand. The warmth and gentleness of human contact brought tears to her eyes.

“He will. Of course he will. He’s strong as old boots, Flavio.” Not so long ago that had been true. If only it still was.

A group of tourists came into the bar – young women in their early twenties with backpacks, dressed in shorts and vests as though it was already summer. Their eyes widened and they laughed in disbelief at the giant Easter egg on the counter, arguing about whether it was real until Leo confirmed that it was. They took selfies in front of it. One of the girls in her enthusiasm to embrace the egg almost knocked it off the counter and Leo had to ask them not to touch. Amid much hilarity one of them asked if he could pose with them for a picture. Leo gave Sonia a resigned smile.

“Do you mind?” asked the tallest of the girls handing Sonia her phone and gesturing.

Sonia tried to control the tremor in her hands as she took the picture, but the girls were happy with it. Now they were studying the list of Easter events – a torch lit procession, a passion play, lunch in the piazza on Easter Sunday, followed by the Medieval games and flag throwing.

“Will Lorenzo be back for the flag throwing?” someone asked.

He would. Of course he would. He loved the traditions. Living in Florence had its advantages and its own Easter celebrations, but he missed the mountain air and the tranquillity of this village. Santa Zita was his home.

But the full impact of this sank in. What reason could she give to dissuade Lorenzo from coming back over Easter? That burning in her stomach again. She couldn't waste any more time. "I need to get home." She needed air.

As she stepped back out into the piazza Sonia cast a look back up at the villa, the home she had been born in. It stared back. *All of this is your fault.*

Giftbooks4u.com

Carlo

“She’s back,” said Irena looking out onto the piazza. “She’s got a nerve.”

“Who’s back?” Carlo asked. He was only half-listening to his mother while calculating how many tables would be needed at the restaurant that evening and whether extra waitresses would be required.

“Martina. Look – out there in the piazza.”

Carlo joined her at the window and followed her gaze. Sonia was passing the fountain. “That’s not Martina, it’s her daughter, Sonia. Martina’s dead, remember?”

“Dead? Since when?”

He placed his hand on her arm. The skin was soft and papery, a spiders web of contours. “Must be twenty-five? Thirty years ago, Mum.”

The furrows in her heavily-lined face deepened as she thought about this. “No one told me. Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

There was no sense arguing with his mother when she was like this. At her age it was hardly surprising she forgot things. Although lately he had started to worry that it might be something more.

“It was when Cass and I were in New York. You wrote and told me. You didn’t go to the funeral – it was a very small affair from what you said.”

Irena’s stare was hard. “Please don’t treat me like an idiot. Of course, I know Martina’s dead. And good riddance.”

She looked as though she might spit but checked herself and turned away. Her voice trembled. She turned towards her chair, taking his arm to steady herself.

“You can’t blame Sonia for what her mother did,” he said. “It isn’t fair.”

To change the subject, he placed a box on the table in front of his mother.

“I found these. Thought you might like to look through them.”

Irena stared at the box but made no move to open it. It wasn't unusual for her hands to shake these days, but a flicker of panic crossed her face. “Whatever for?”

He could tell her the doctor had recommended it as a way of helping reinforce her memories but why worry her?

“Remember we were talking about the book I wanted to write for you? The one about the village? I thought these might help jog some memories.”

She had talked so often about writing the book herself but had never granted herself the time to do it. Always too busy doing to sit about, thinking. Arthritis had long made typing impossible for her. Now with dementia setting in she had all the time in the world but sometimes couldn't even write her name.

Several guidebooks had been written about the area, but none specifically about the village, and all of them talked about the topology and the Etruscans, comfortably distant historic events, glossing over its more recent past.

He'd never taken the idea that seriously until now but increasingly he was getting a sense that time was running out. Besides, it might be something he could sell in the restaurant or to his property clients – a bit of local colour. There were so few people left in the village that remembered what it had been like in the last century. He couldn't stand the thought that when his mother died all those people that lived on in her stories would die too.

He'd heard some of the stories so often that he'd stopped paying proper attention. But later, he'd found himself recounting them to his daughters and now his grandchildren, but he'd embroidered these with a few details of his own so he was no longer sure he could trust his own memory. He felt a little ashamed now that he had not paid more attention.

Perhaps it was already too late. Occasionally you could still have a lucid conversation with Irena but so often these days the talk went round in circles. When had she got like this? She'd always seemed indestructible.

Whereas most of their neighbours, those that were left, had packed up and gone after the War ended, Irena had stayed and watched Santa Zita decline like a sailor refusing to abandon a sinking ship. Carlo had asked her

many times to move to the States and live with them, but she refused. She would no more have left Santa Zita than cartwheel round the piazza.

There were still days when Irena recalled surprisingly small details about people, but others when she didn't know them at all. She'd start a story and then stop.

"No – it's gone," she'd say, shaking her head with frustration, as though her mind was a piece of lace with some solid bits strung together by a series of holes.

"It's okay – I know what's happening to me," she said calmly, fixing him with her dark eyes. "I know I'm losing my mind. It happens at my age."

She shook her head and looked out across the mountains where a bird of prey was circling.

"Do you know the cruellest thing about it? I forget stupid things like what I came into the room for or what I was about to say. Things I need to remember. And yet the things I most want to forget are clearer now than ever."

She said this last sentence so quietly he barely heard her. He took her hand, which suddenly seemed very small.

"What do you mean, things you want to forget?"

She shook her head. She wasn't going to talk about them now. After all, she'd always been proud – determined to cope on her own. Before the *alimentari* opened in the piazza, she had made the arduous walk down the mountain to the market twice a week and back up again with shopping bags, a trip that had taken her most of the day rather than accept anyone's help. It was only in the last couple of years that her health had shown signs of decline.

Sometimes, and he felt guilty acknowledging it, she was easier to deal with these days. Her sharp tongue had been eroded along with her sharp mind. Her new vulnerability made him feel that he could look after her now, give something back. But at other times she was as shrewd as she had always been, which made him feel young and useless again.

He had a good idea what was going through her mind, but it was useless saying so. Losing most of her family in the war must have had a huge effect on her but she would never talk about it. "What's the use in dragging all that up again?" she'd say.

Come to think of it, she had barely mentioned the war at all as he was growing up. Sometimes in passing she would refer to the scarcity of food,

and not having shoes to wear, and the festivals and parades that formed such a large part of her childhood – but never the war itself or the day that changed so many lives in Santa Zita.

He felt an urgent need to know more before it was too late. How much longer would she be around? And how long would her memory remain sharp enough to recall the details? There were so few people of her generation left. For years he had shared that sense of shame and defiance about the village's past. Why should they let it be defined by one brutal moment of history? But now he wasn't so sure. Was it right to pretend it hadn't happened?

Reluctantly, Irena took the box and started to rummage through the photographs. At first, he wasn't certain if she really knew who she was looking at, but she recalled most of the names.

"Ah, Michele – he was handsome. Sara – what a beauty! Guglielmo – did I tell you he had nine sons? He used to say he would have his own football team but the next two were girls."

There was one of Carlo's father and mother when they had got engaged.

"I didn't look so bad in those days, did I?" she said in a surprised tone, marvelling at the chubby-faced young woman with wavy hair clipped back at the side. "I do get annoyed thinking about all the time and energy girls waste worrying about their looks. Most of them have no idea that they look lovely anyway because they are young. Having smooth skin and bright eyes, small waist – they take it all for granted. I wish I could go back and tell that to my young self."

She looked too young to get married, Carlo thought. His own daughters were well into their thirties and showed no interest in tying the knot. But as things turned out time hadn't been on his mother's side. The young man in the picture was not especially handsome but had a kind face and smiling eyes. It must have only been taken a few months or even weeks before he died. She had rarely mentioned him over the years, although she kept a photograph of him beside her bed.

Carlo and his mother had always felt like a complete unit. It was hard to imagine what life would have been like if his father had survived the war. Perhaps he would have seemed like an intruder.

He dug around and found a picture of the two brothers that used to run the I Tre Fratelli restaurant. Just as she'd described, one was ludicrously tall, the other short and stout but they sported matching handlebar moustaches.

Irena laughed when she saw it, and recounted some of the stories he already knew so well.

“Paolo and Mario disagreed on everything. They used to scream abuse at each other over the tables. Madonna, the language they used! You could hear things smashing in the kitchen and every so often objects were thrown out of the window. My father used to joke we should wear our crash helmets to eat there.

“I’ve got the clearest picture now of Paolo dragging Mario out into the piazza by his hair for putting too much salt into his sauce. And I’ll never forget the time Mario punched Paolo in the face for setting fire to his moustache when flambéing a steak.”

“What happened to the brothers?” Cass asked, studying the photograph.

“That’s the interesting thing – we always thought they would end up killing each other but in the war one of them died by throwing himself on top of the other to protect him. The one who survived died a few weeks later, of a broken heart.”

As she was talking Carlo picked up another photo. “Whose wedding is this?”

His mother’s face sagged as she looked at it for a long time. A shadow flickered over her features and her head shook. “No, I don’t know those people.”

She reached out for the next photograph, but Carlo looked more closely at the wedding picture. Surely that was the road that led up through to the arch into the piazza? The houses were familiar, too. The street was crowded with people dressed in their best clothes. A child in pigtails and a checked dress and cardigan had climbed up on one of the stone steps outside her house so that she could get a better view.

“None of them? It looks as though the whole village was there.”

She reached for her bag and started fumbling in it for one of her mints. He had a sense he was losing her – or was she stalling for time?

“Isn’t that Aunty Vittoria? In which case, that must be Stefano? Who’s the bride? Surely this is you here, the chief bridesmaid?”

He pointed to the young woman standing next to the bride, her brown hair parted at the side, falling in carefully sculpted waves to her shoulders. She was wearing a 1940s style floral dress with puffed sleeves, and gloves. Her hands rested on the shoulders of two little girls in front of her, whose sashes and ribbons matched her dress fabric.

Her frown deepened. "No, I don't remember."

She stared at the photograph for some time as though she was seeing more than the picture. Eventually she slapped it down in frustration, knocking the box off the table and spilling the prints around the room like confetti.

"It's no good asking me. What's the point? They're all dead now."

Carlo picked them up as carefully as he could. One or two pictures had stuck together, and he peeled them apart. There was one he hadn't noticed earlier, of two girls, sitting on a wall, eating ice cream, swinging their legs and laughing.

"This is a lovely one," he said hoping to change the mood.

The girls looked about fourteen or fifteen and without a care in the world. So obviously at ease in each other's company and having such a good time. On the back someone had written a short message: I'm sorry.

"Who are these children? Are they relatives?"

She shook her head. Seemed to disappear into her thoughts.

"Isn't this girl on the left you? Whose writing is this on the back?"

She closed her eyes. "I've no idea. It's all in the past, amore. Leave it there."

"Do you recognise the handwriting? Why would someone write that?"

She shrugged and closed her eyes, making it clear that the conversation was closed. He would have pushed her further but when she opened her eyes they were glistening. It looked as though her mood had been set for the rest of the day. He had no choice but to pack the photographs away.

Giftbooks4u.com

Carlo

When Carlo came in from the restaurant the following day, his mother's face lit up, making his heart drop.

"Amore! How lovely to see you. Why did you stay away so long? If you'd told me you were coming, I'd have saved you some cake."

He set down a cup of tea and a slice of the cake he'd made earlier from one of her old recipes and passed Irena a small electronic object.

"What's this for?" she asked suspiciously. "Oh, not this again. Isn't the restaurant doing very well? You seem to have far too much time on your hands."

"It's a voice recorder. I thought it might be easier for you to tell your stories when I'm not here listening you. Then when you're happy with it, you can give it to me."

She didn't look impressed.

"It's easy to use. Look – you press this button with the red dot when you want to talk - this one here when you want to stop. This if you want to erase what you've said and start again."

She waved it away. "You know what I'm like with technical stuff. I've never touched a mobile phone or one of those tablet things and I don't want to. Life's quite complicated enough as it is. I don't need any of that."

"This is simpler to use than either of those. Really. Why don't I show you how it works?"

"Not now amore. I don't have time."

"Why? What else have you got planned?"

She shook her head and turned away. Her mouth was set firm. Evidently, she didn't think the question deserved an answer.

Looking out of the window, Carlo watched Sonia disappear under the arch that led out of the piazza. He felt bad about upsetting her with the news that the villa was for sale again, even though it turned out she already knew. It had obviously come as a blow to her but that was hardly surprising. It was never going to be easy listening to the gossip surrounding the house, having your memories of your childhood home sullied.

But then the deaths last year weren't the worst thing to have happened at the villa and Sonia wasn't the only person affected by what happened in the war on the day no one ever talked about. The day of the reprisal.

An image came back to him of Sonia as a sullen teenager back in the fifties when they were growing up. Walking arm in arm with her mother across the piazza, eyes cast down to the stone flags. She hadn't been pretty, not even then. Good skin but her dark eyes were too deep-set in her bony face, and her hair was always scraped back behind her round ears in an unforgiving style. If she'd smiled occasionally, it would have helped – although she probably didn't have a lot to smile about.

With those big hollow eyes and stick-like arms and legs, she reminded Carlo of a marionette in the travelling puppet show that came to entertain the children in the piazza at Christmas and in the summer. It was easy to see who worked her strings.

Everyone knew Sonia was the daughter of Martina the Traitor although as a boy he hadn't known exactly what she had done to deserve the title. He just knew it had something to do with the sadness you could feel in the village, the reason old people never talked about the past.

There hadn't been many children in Santa Zita when he was growing up after the war. Carlo and his friends felt like shadows, keeping out of people's way, knowing their presence upset them. They had hung around together, roaming the countryside and making dens in abandoned houses, left empty since the war. There had been so many to choose from in those days although his favourite had been the house at the top, Villa Leonida.

The villa had been the perfect teenage den. He'd never thought about what had happened to the owners, why they didn't come back. Being forbidden to go there made it more enticing. Once when his mother discovered he'd disobeyed her, she came marching up to the villa red-faced after the steep climb, and dragged him away, smacking him round the head and shouting at him in front of his friends.

“It’s an evil place. It’s cursed. Don’t you ever go in there again.” “What did you mean? Was the villa really cursed?” he asked her now.

Irena shrugged. “It’s what they say. All I know is that once people start living there they change. They do things you never believed they would do.”

“She’s coming!”

“Run.”

“Did she see you? She’ll put a spell on you.”

All the pranks they’d played on Martina – knocking on the door of her little terraced house and running away, stealing clothes from her washing line or painting words on her shutters. Peering from between the branches of a tree, behind a wall or through a broken window, he’d felt his heart thumping against his ribs.

It was hardly surprising Martina had taken on bogeyman status. The somber clothes, closed-in expression, the jagged scar that made it look as though she’d been stitched together like Frankenstein’s bride – although he’d enjoyed the dodging and hiding, the frisson of fear when she approached or looked at you was absolutely real.

It was easy to believe Martina was to blame for everything that had gone wrong since the war, too. A bicycle disappearing, a dog that died, plants that refused to grow – the whispers flew around the children and helped justify their own misbehaviour and their parents, normally so quick to make sure they behaved, didn’t stop them.

None of the children knew what Martina would do to them if she caught them. They only knew that she was somehow responsible for bringing the Nazis up to the village on the day of the massacre. For Pilade’s mother being the only member of her large family to have survived. For Daniele’s uncle to have spent two days hiding in a tree only to return home and find the bodies of his parents and younger sister on the kitchen floor.

None of the children ever asked Sonia to join them. Carlo had thought about it but how could he when half their games involved dodging Martina, her mother? He sometimes caught Sonia looking over her shoulder as she and her mother passed but if he smiled at her she would colour and turn away. He had the feeling that some of the older people felt sorry for her, but not enough to want their children to be her friend.

His mother occasionally asked after Sonia but when he told her she never smiled, Irena just shrugged and said “Beh...” in her characteristic way that meant that this was no real surprise. They were just strange those two. Everyone knew it.

Perhaps things could have been different. Once when he was riding a friend’s bicycle through the village, his brakes failed. Hurling down the winding cobbled lane towards the piazza, he’d felt his teeth rattling. The next thing he knew he was sprawling on the ground tasting blood. Sonia, who’d been coming through the arch at the other end of the piazza ran towards him and scooped him up. Speaking soothing words, she soaked a handkerchief in the fountain and cleaned up his knees and chin, then picked up the things that had fallen out of his pockets while he sat on the edge of the fountain dabbing at his injuries. Her face looked quite different that day, lit by a lovely smile rather than the usual defensive scowl.

But then his friends had come round the corner. Seeing Sonia with him they jeered and made kissing noises. Her face flamed. She scrambled up and ran away home to her puppeteer.

He hadn’t given much thought to how she must feel, growing up as the daughter of the Traitor. It never occurred to him that she and her mother needed or wanted anyone else but looking back the loneliness must have been brutal.

But these days how many people knew anything about Martina or what she had done? Most of those who hadn’t died on that day in 1944 had since died anyway of old age. Younger ones had left - moved down to the town for a more reliable income and comfortable lifestyle.

After years of stagnation new people were starting to move back into the village. Most of these were foreigners who knew nothing about its history and probably didn’t want to know. It didn’t fit with their image of a Tuscan idyll. And he had been as guilty as anyone else of hiding the truth. After all, he had a business to run.

His guests wanted to believe in the Tuscany they saw on postcards. Wanted to congratulate themselves on discovering this enchanting out-of-the-way village after their stressful drive around the mountain bends. They wanted to sit in a sunny square sipping cold wine and eating olives and talking about the magic of the place – the fireflies and folklore and festivals - submerge themselves in an icy pool or go horse riding through fields of

sunflowers. Who was he to spoil it for them? Because what they saw wasn't a lie. Just another truth.

But the thing he found hardest to understand was Martina's decision to stay in the village after the war. Why hadn't she left and made a new start in a place where nobody knew what she had done? Why had she been determined to stay here and remind people?

That's what they hadn't been able to forgive.

From time to time, you heard gossip about her having a secret stash of money in that little terraced house she'd moved to after the war but if she did no one ever saw her spend it. He couldn't help wondering – had she ever talked to her daughter about why she had betrayed her neighbours? Did she know what she was doing? Where it would lead? She must have been aware of what was happening in other villages. Why had she believed it would be any different for them? Or did she simply not care?

There had to be a reason. He didn't want to make excuses for her – he'd grown up without a father because of what Martina did. Now it was too late to ask her why, but not too late to ask Sonia.

He'd have to find a way to ask her. They spoke quite often these days. Perhaps Sonia would find it a relief to talk about her mother after so long. No one had answered his questions when he was a child, so he'd stopped asking. But he'd made a career out of asking questions. He wasn't going to be fobbed off this time. He had to find out the truth before it was swallowed up like so many of Irena's memories.

A beep on his phone hauled him back to the present. A crisis at the restaurant. He'd have to ring the suppliers and sort out a delivery that had gone astray.

"I'll leave this here anyway," he said to his mother before he left, patting the Dictaphone.

"Don't bother," Irena called, turning purposefully away from it.

He pretended not to hear.

Irena

After Carlo had gone, Irena picked up the tiny machine. The late afternoon sun slanted across the piazza, making the fountain shimmer.

What was this nonsense? Didn't he understand that at her age she was past learning new tricks? Why would she want to talk into a machine? Was this his way of apologising in advance for not being around much now that the tourist season was underway, and the restaurant would be full every night? Did he think it would be some sort of substitute for his company?

That mischievous look he'd given her when she said she was busy. Why should she justify to him how she spent her time? Why did he think he had to find things for her to do to relieve her boredom? Hadn't it occurred to him that she was perfectly happy as she was?

She turned it over, examining the buttons. They were very small for her arthritic fingers, and they had symbols that meant nothing to her but reminded her of the ones on the remote for the DVD player they had once. She's never got the hang of that either. So much money wasted on useless things. She tried one or two of the buttons. A red light came on. Did that mean it was recording? Perhaps, just out of curiosity, she would try to speak. She cleared her throat.

"Well – here I am, my darling. I wish you wouldn't waste your money on these silly things. And that, I'm afraid, is all you're going to get."

She laughed nervously. Not too loudly – anyone outside the window in the piazza might overhear and think she was talking to herself. For a while she experimented, trying to get it to play back to her. Eventually she found the right button and pressed it.

The voice she heard over and over, she barely recognised. It was the thin, cracked voice of an old woman – frail, tired and nervous. She snapped the Stop button and put the thing down on the table in disgust. What would he come up with next?

Sonia

“They’re selling Villa Leonida.”

Flavio was up and dressed by the time Sonia got home. The plates were piled in the sink and a smell of cigarette smoke lingered. She kissed him, unpacked the bread and oranges and reached for the moka pot. For a while she thought he hadn’t heard what she said.

Finally, without looking up from his paper he said, “Do you want to buy it back?”

She stood halfway to the sink holding the two halves of the coffee pot. Was he serious? It could be a solution – the only chance to keep the truth buried. But living in that house after everything that happened was unthinkable.

“How could I live there again? I’ve spent my life trying to escape it.”

He put down the paper. “I wasn’t serious. But neither can you blame the villa for what happened. I’m not saying your mother didn’t have her reasons...”

Sonia turned away, drowning him out with the sound of the tap as she filled the water chamber.

“What my mother did was unforgivable. If it wasn’t for Lorenzo, I’d still be paying the price.”

She spooned the coffee into the filter, tamping it down with back of the spoon. Marrying Flavio had helped – coming from Viareggio he was outside the circle of gossip. But it was the birth of Lorenzo that had turned things around, changing her status from daughter of Martina the Traitor to mother of the lovely Lorenzo.

Flavio put a hand on her arm. “You’re overfilling it – look at the mess.” He drew her towards him. “You must have some good memories of being at the villa.”

Yes, of course she did. Lately they’d started to surface, flickers of recollection. Dancing with her mother on the moonlit lawn to one of Nonno’s gramophone records, the notes floating out of the open French doors. Counting fireflies in the velvet night sky. Standing on a chair in the kitchen and helping Nonna make a pine nut cake. Sitting on the edge of the waterfall, looking down at her bronzed knees and feeling the damp, mossy rock beneath her legs, blowing bubbles and watching them float off over the roofs and towers below.

Being carried on someone’s shoulders through the woods. Whose she could never remember, just a feeling of being a giant striding through the trees. She’d always thought it was her father but looking back now with an adult’s understanding, that couldn’t be right – her father had died so early in the war. Yet another bit of her childhood that made no sense.

But the only day she remembered in detail was the last one. The day the soldiers came. A small space in solid darkness, the sound of gunfire, the smell of burning. She shut her eyes and shook the memory away.

“I was three years old when we left,” she said, turning her back to fetch the cups down from the cupboard. “How am I supposed to remember that far back?”

Flavio’s pills were lined up in different dishes on the counter. She checked he had taken his dose for the day. It was hard to believe that this man who had always been her rock was now dependent on so many pills for his survival.

Back in the past when he’d worked at the villa his days had been made up of hard, physical work – chopping and stacking logs, clearing paths, building stone walls. He was never still. When he wasn’t at work in his own wood, he would be helping others in theirs.

He’d carried Lorenzo on his shoulders for miles – he could never say no to Lorenzo. She was yet to come across anyone who could.

“Can’t blame them for selling the villa, can you?” Flavio said. “Wanting to get rid of the place now they know what happened there.” “No, of course not.”

Why did this have to happen now? No stress, the doctor had said. The truth could kill him. She bit back a sob. It was so unfair. He was old – she was

old. If the truth had come out years ago it would have seemed like the end of the world – but now he was frail it would be so much worse.

“I’ve been thinking about Easter,” she said, wincing at the false brightness of her tone. “We should go away this year so you can recuperate properly.”

Flavio’s bushy eyebrows shot up. “You always insist on staying here for Easter.”

“I’m thinking of your health. We should go somewhere beautiful and peaceful so you can rest and not worry about this place falling down around our ears. How about Giglio? Or the lakes? If we hired a villa Lorenzo and Francesca could come too.”

He took her hands and pulled her towards him, kissing her, barely able to conceal his amusement. “That’s what I love about you – after all these years I still don’t have a clue what you’re going to come out with next.”

She rested her head against the reassuring warmth of his chest trying to ignore the churning in her stomach. The screech of the coffee pot pulled her back into the present. She broke away.

Giftbooks4u.com

EIGHT

Carlo

Carlo stood in front of the villa. The forbidden territory of his youth. The English family had called in on spec. Carlo could have asked them to come back another time when Cass was free but the opportunity to see inside the place he’d spent so much time in as a teenager was too hard to resist. The

marble chippings scrunched underfoot, sending up a cloud of dust, which settled on his shoes and the bottoms of his trousers.

It was normally Cass who dealt with the clients – the property agency was her business, after all, but she was out accompanying some other clients to the notaio's office in a town just up the coast and wouldn't be back until late.

Last year from down in the piazza Carlo had become gradually aware of the villa reawakening. For decades it had been hidden in summer by a thick forest and in the winter by cloud. One morning he'd heard rumours someone had bought the place – foreigners obviously because what local would live there?

Every so often vans would trundle through the piazza, carrying materials. The air echoed with banging, sawing and scraping as roof and floor tiles were restored, chestnut windows repaired, and electricity upgraded. Workmen processed up from the car park with bathroom and kitchen fittings and finally furniture, but the house had remained hidden from view, a slumbering ogre behind the trees.

It was only in the weeks leading up to Easter last year that they'd woken to the whine of saws reclaiming the land and the villa had risen phoenixlike out of the trees in its new guise - a perfect pink palace with gleaming green shutters, almost unrecognizable from the dour grey fortress he'd known. Now it stood empty again, abandoned since it had been made the subject of a police enquiry last year.

He greeted the family at the gates and led them through the wisteria walkway.

The English woman in a white linen dress pushed her sunglasses up on top of her head. "We're so glad you speak English. And so well."

"My wife's American," he explained. "We lived in New York for years. She tells me my accent is still terrible."

They protested but probably out of politeness.

The two children tore past him brandishing porcupine spines they'd found on the steep path up from the village.

"Put those things down – you'll have someone's eye out!" shouted their father, a chunky-legged man in shorts.

Carlo unlocked the door. Stepping through into the cavernous salotto he felt a curious thrill. Being here brought it all back – the smell of damp that

had caught in your throat, a thick layer of dust blown in through the broken windows, patches of blown plaster on the walls, cobwebs strewn like paper chains across the room, the floor littered with old bottles and cigarette ends.

Damp stains had smudged the faces of the cherubs painted on the ceiling, turning their expressions sinister. The old dresser that stood against this wall used to be full of mould but still had glasses and plates, as though the house was waiting for the owners' return.

All gone now, replaced by a clean, smooth interior, and a smell of fresh paint. Perfect for a new start. Or had the past embedded itself in these walls?

Moving through the *salotto*, the drawing room, he heard laughter, a burst of music, caught a trace of joss sticks. Ghosts from five decades ago shifted at the corner of his vision, old faces turned towards him then melted back into the walls. Shaking the images away, Carlo walked purposefully through.

From the loggia he pointed out the boundaries of the land. His gaze stalled at the place where the chestnut drying tower used to stand. He distracted the buyers, drawing their attention instead to the pergola where the couple couldn't possibly guess he had smoked his first joint, watched for shooting stars, had his first kiss...

"The sun sets over there. It's a lovely place to sit in the evenings," he told them.

Below them the two lemon-haired children flickered in and out of the silvery olive trees in pursuit of a small dark shadow. One of those wild kittens someone kept leaving food out for.

"You'll never catch it," the mother shouted, laughing. "I don't know how they can run about in this heat."

She wandered back to the other side of the loggia, resting her hands on the stone wall. A sudden change came over her, as though someone had turned off the music. He followed her eyes to the patch of land where the chestnut drying tower had stood, built up against the rock, with a cave where the grisly discovery had been made last year. She pointed to it with a nervous smile.

"That's where they found the bodies isn't it?"

He wasn't going to deny it. "But the bodies had been there a long time – since the 1990s."

She drew her arms around herself and walked off biting her lip. He couldn't help thinking she must have felt it – that cold presence his friends had talked about.

“Shall I show you the other rooms?”

They carried on with the viewing, but it was obvious now they wouldn't buy it. They couldn't wait to get away. Carlo sighed. Maybe the next people would be less sensitive to the atmosphere.

Giftbooks4u.com

NINE

Carlo

“You didn't think I'd get the hang of it, did you? It's rather fun.”

Carlo grinned as he came into the kitchen and sat down at the table next to his mother. “I knew you could do it.”

He pressed the button and heard her familiar voice, tired but clear – a little grander than usual.

“In Napoleonic times, the rich and famous used to flock here to escape the stifling air in the towns – writers, artists, musicians and philosophers, all seeking inspiration for their work. You can feel their spirits everywhere.”

She clicked the Off button and looked at him triumphantly. “Well?”

Carlo smiled, struggling to say something that was encouraging but at the same time....

“It's great.”

She raised an eyebrow. “But...?”

How was he going to put this? “But it sounds like a guidebook.”

“I thought that was the point. You said you wanted to know about the area.”

Perhaps this wasn't going to work after all. “Yes, but I want to know what it was like to live here. What life was like during the War - how you managed without a car, how it felt when the earthquake erupted. And about the other people who lived here. What they did, things that happened to them. Not all that ancient stuff about poets and philosophers that nobody's even heard of. Stories about real-life people – things that readers can relate to.”

“So, you don't want proper information?”

“I want it to be your personal account,” he said. “Things other people don't know - how your cousin saw Puccini chasing the girls down the street. Or how your aunt threw herself off the bridge to see if God would save her and survived.”

His mother looked at him aghast. “That's family business. We don't want everyone knowing about that. What would the villagers say?”

He laughed. “Why not? What harm can it do? These people died decades ago.”

“They're still entitled to some respect. Anyway, she didn't survive, *caro*. I made that bit up to give it a happy ending when you were small.”

“You did what?” He shook his head at his own gullibility but rather wished she had let him carry on believing after all these years.

Carlo

Irena was asleep in a wicker armchair on the loggia. The air was heavy with rain. Carlo touched her arm. It was cold so he fetched a blanket to wrap around her shoulders. He eased the device out of her grasp and put it back on the table. Should he listen or wait for her permission? Surely she wouldn't mind? That's if she'd used it at all after his reaction to her last attempt. Perhaps he had been a bit harsh. He hadn't meant to discourage her, but it had been a bit pompous and not what he wanted to know at all. Irena grabbed for it instinctively but then settled back to sleep. He hesitated for a moment, retreated into the kitchen and pressed Play.

"Ahem – hello? Oh blast this thing, is it working? Oh yes. Where was I? Well, you asked about the wedding photograph. I may as well tell you you've probably guessed by now anyway. The bride was Martina. And yes, I was the bridesmaid. And the two girls on the wall – Martina and me. We must have been how old – twelve? Thirteen? We were very close back then. I couldn't imagine my life without her. And that will surprise you, I know, because we never spoke to each other after the War. At least not properly. I don't know why I'm telling you this." *Don't stop.*

He rummaged through the box until he found the picture of the two girls on the wall of the fountain. Was that girl laughing and swinging her legs on the wall with his mother really Martina? They looked so happy and relaxed in each other's company. And yet he never remembered them being friends.

How could this beautiful girl be Martina? It was so hard to equate this lovely face with the gnarled, dour one he recalled. And on the back the simple words *I'm sorry*. It was far from adequate obviously for what Martina

had done, but presumably the words had meant enough to his mother to make her hang onto the photograph. How much more did she know?

He poured himself a glass of wine, took it outside and sat down at the table at the other end of the loggia where he could see his mother but was less likely to wake her.

“You can laugh but you don’t know how things were. That’s what I want to get you to see. Funny – I remember so clearly saying to her once, ‘We’ll be sitting here by this fountain in fifty years’ time, you and I, and nothing will have changed.’ How could we have guessed our lives would change by so much?”

Irena must have been holding the device too close to her face and her snort shattered the air with its vehemence. A few moments of silence followed. She must be taking a moment to collect her thoughts.

“Sometimes I allow myself a little fantasy – an alternative history where Martina didn’t do what she did. Then she and I would really be able to sit by the fountain discussing our children and grandchildren. We didn’t have any idea back then how precious and precarious our friendship was.”

Giftbooks4u.com

ELEVEN

Sonia

“Lorenzo, I’ve been thinking about Easter. Why don’t we come to you instead this year? You’ve always told me what a spectacle it is in Florence, with the fireworks in front of the cathedral. It would be fun.”

There was laughter in his voice. “But you hate Florence.”

“I never said that.”

He was probably still in his bathrobe standing on the roof terrace of their flat, a strong black coffee balanced on the terracotta tiles.

“It’s chaotic, yes. I couldn’t live there. But it’s a splendid city and you’re always telling me Easter’s spectacular with the fireworks in front of the cathedral.”

“And you always say you hate crowds.”

“Oh, it depends on the reason for the crowd,” she replied although the thought of being hemmed in by so many people, herded about by police with megaphones made her shudder.

“But what about Dad? Wouldn’t he be better off in Santa Zita where it’s quieter?”

She bit her lip. If only she could explain that stressing Flavio was what she was so desperate to avoid. It was true the traffic would put up his heart rate but not as much as finding out that he wasn’t Lorenzo’s father.

“He doesn’t need to come to the cathedral. He’d welcome the chance to have a rest on your terrace.”

Lorenzo sounded reluctant. “I don’t know. The flat’s so small and we’ve both been busy at work. I don’t think we’re up to cooking a large meal.”

“You needn’t do a thing. I’ll bring the food and cook for us all.”

How else to stop him coming, stop him hearing things she didn’t want him to hear? A photo on the dresser caught her eye and she found herself addressing it as they spoke although the boy in the picture was around six years old. He was playing on the swing in a park – skinny knees, bright, mischief-filled eyes, thick, looping curls like Flavio and a smile that would melt any heart.

Everything changed when Lorenzo was born. People she’d never spoken to crossed the square to congratulate her, breaking into smiles, bringing gifts and offering advice. A new beginning in a village that had lost so many lives. They marvelled at the improbability of a woman her age becoming a mother for the first time. A miracle, they said.

Lorenzo was the reason that people talked to Sonia now and asked after her husband’s health. Something other people took for granted but that she, after the cold, isolated childhood she had endured, never would.

During those first weeks and months after she had brought him home, she’d jumped every time she heard someone at the door or behind her in the street, thinking the girl had turned up to claim him.

She had been terrified that someone would spot he wasn't theirs. She used to scrutinise him as he slept, running her finger lightly over his silky skin and perfect features, searching for clues that might betray her, waiting for someone to remark that it was curious how his earlobes were attached when theirs' weren't, or some other sure giveaway. Dreaded hearing someone say, "How odd - he's the image of so-and-so when he was little."

But they had been lucky. Whoever the father was, he must have shared their dark hair and eyes, and Lorenzo's face was not a replica of anyone else's she knew.

As he got older she'd worried about him falling ill or having an accident – something being discovered on his medical records that proved he couldn't be related. Or that he'd just instinctively know he was different, that it would become obvious.

What if he turned on her and demanded to know why she hadn't told him? Would he be able to forgive her after so long? But month after month and then year after year it didn't happen. Perhaps she had misunderstood her neighbours all along. Even those who couldn't bring themselves to acknowledge Lorenzo when he was born gradually fell under his spell. He took the lead in the school plays and the Medieval processions as chief flag thrower.

It was Lorenzo who had taught her to believe in unconditional love. As a tiny child he had snuggled up to her and promised to protect her from wolves and bears – the worst dangers he could imagine anyone facing. And she had made that promise to him that all mothers make to their children and not all are able to keep – that she would keep him safe no matter what.

As time passed, it was obvious that whatever biological claim the girl might have, she was nothing to Lorenzo whereas Sonia and Flavio were everything. So much of his appearance turned out to be due to the facial expressions he'd adopted from her and his attitude to life picked up from his father. It made her laugh to see the way he mimicked his father's groan as he sank into his chair or the way she turned a yawn into a song.

"Well, I'll speak to Francesca about it anyway," said Lorenzo at last. "I don't much mind either way. Look, I have to go but I've been wanting to talk to you about something."

Sonia held her breath. "What is it?"

His voice changed. He sounded distracted. "No, it's fine. It can wait. I'd prefer to wait."

Her hand trembled as she replaced the phone. Was there any way he could have found out? She reached for some painkillers, stood at the sink and took them with a large glass of water. It felt as though she was swallowing barbed wire. She turned back to look at Flavio, but he was asleep, the newspaper spilling its pages onto the floor. She picked them back up, folded the paper and put it on the table. His mouth was slack like a child's, the creases in his brow smoothed out in sleep. This was all so wrong.

Giftbooks4u.com

TWELVE

Irena

Irena's voice was stronger now with less hesitation, as though she'd become more comfortable speaking to a machine.

"Where do I start? In 1944 I lost my best friend. It's possible, you know, to lose someone who's still alive. Martina and I were born on the same day, hours apart. Sometimes we were put in the same pram to sleep, and people mistook us for twins. As we grew up, we did everything together. We went to the village school, took our first Holy Communion, talked about our futures. She was always the dominant one – louder, more demanding, dare I say it more reckless. But life with her was never boring.

"We each had a china doll with long hair and lovely dresses. We used to walk for miles pushing them in their prams and chatting to each other just like young mothers. We never ran out of things to say. People would ask us what we found to talk about, but I could never tell them. On the few occasions Martina wasn't with me - if she was off school ill, for example - I used to feel half of me was missing.

“Once a wheel came off my doll’s pram. It rolled right off the road, down the bank and into the river. She insisted we search for it. Wouldn’t let me give up until we’d found it. And we did too. She pulled off her dress, waded in and fished it out. I still have a picture of her in my mind, standing in her pants with a huge smile on her face holding the wheel up in triumph, and all the water droplets falling from it glittering like diamonds in the sunshine.”

Carlo turned off the device, went over to his mother and adjusted the cushion behind her head. Her face was blank, lost to sleep. He thought he had heard all her stories – it would just be a case of getting her to recount them. But there were probably thousands of other memories stored in her head that he’d never even heard.

“...That picture of us on the wall of the fountain brings back so many memories – fond ones mostly. We spent our childhood playing skipping rope games, chalking squares to jump on in the piazza and catching tiny frogs down at the river. We used to wait at the fountain every day for Gianni, the boy from Villa Leonida. Then we’d all walk down to school together. Gianni took lots of pictures in those days. He had one of those old box cameras – we thought it was wonderful.

“You can see how beautiful Martina was. Oh, I know what you’re thinking – how she was a dried-up old prune when you knew her, and that scar was hideous. But life does that to you. War does that to you. In those days I felt very plain in comparison to her.

“I always had that square face and thick eyebrows, and I was a heavy build but now I’m looking at this picture again and I look all right. And yet I felt I ugly. I felt plain and plump and I suppose because of that it made me want to be good at something, so I studied. She and Gianni called me the Encyclopedia. They tested me out on facts and dates, and they hardly ever managed to catch me out. They used to copy my schoolwork which made me feel proud.”

There were various shuffling sounds as though Irena had got sidetracked by something.

“We all thought Martina would be famous one day. She dreamed of moving on, being someone. This place was too small for her. She should have been a Hollywood star. She had that innate sense of glamour - and the temperament to match. If the War hadn’t come, if she’d had different opportunities, maybe it would have happened. So many things would have been different.”

That last sentence was barely audible, and he had to play it back a few times.

“I don’t know to this day why she married Gianni. I suppose it was because she could. She said she loved him, but I think what attracted her more was the fact that all the other girls wanted him. He was a good catch. His family was the best off in the village. They had the big house with lots of land. You could say she married him for her parents, to make them proud. But knowing Martina, I don’t believe that.

“Gianni and I were wary of each other for a long time – we both knew we were competing for Martina’s attention. But we came to realise that if we both wanted to be with her, we had to learn to rub along with one another. I grew fond of him. God knows, he didn’t deserve to die the way he did.”

Giftbooks4u.com

Carlo

The restaurant I Tre Fratelli was bathed in a warm glow as the sun dipped behind the mountain and the lights came on in the plane trees, throwing the houses and towers into silhouette. While locals still insisted on eating inside this early in the year, holidaymakers preferred to sit in the piazza so they could enjoy the surroundings and feel they were living *la dolce vita*.

Even the murder enquiry last year hadn't deterred people from visiting the village of Santa Zita as Carlo had feared. If anything, it had brought them up in droves, curious to find out more about the villa that was for sale and the story that surrounded it. He felt slightly ill at ease with the village's new-found notoriety but had to admit it was good for business. He'd had to turn several groups away already this evening.

He heard snatches of conversation as he moved around the tables. An American couple kept expressing their shock at having seen Villa Leonida on a rental site and thought about booking it last year.

"We were that close to taking it," said the woman to anyone who was listening, as she washed down her *bistecca alla fiorentina* with long swigs of Diet Coke. (Carlo had almost stopped finding this culinary mismatch insulting, after many lectures from Cass on food snobbery).

"If we hadn't made enquiries and found how hard it is to get a car up there and what a long walk it is all the way up from the square, we would have done so. Then it would have been us who found the bodies."

Several people asked him to confirm which house it was. When he pointed to the pink villa at the top below the castle, they seemed doubly shocked as though evil things couldn't happen in beautiful places. Anyone

who had grown up in Santa Zita knew better than that, he could have told them but why ruin their evening?

“Any luck at the villa today?” Cass asked as they crossed paths by the kitchen.

Carlo shrugged. “They said it was beautiful, loved the views. Usual sort of thing.”

“Do you think they were serious?”

He turned his mouth down. “Doubt it. They had young children of their own. Said it was purely a financial investment but it’s always the same when they get there. They can’t wait to get away.

“I took them to Miramonte afterwards, but they said it was too dark with all those trees. They wouldn’t even get out of the car at San Giuseppe. But they seemed quite interested in the mill apartments – even though they said they wanted a detached property away from the road.”

Cass rolled her eyes with a grin. “People hardly ever know what they want until they’ve seen what they don’t want.”

The peace was disturbed by a raised voice at the table nearest the fountain. “I asked for pepperoni on my pizza,” a man was saying in an aggrieved tone.

“Here is peperoni – here, and here,” said the waitress.

“No. That is a pepper.” He enunciated clearly as if speaking to an idiot. “Where is the meat?”

Carlo was tempted to march over and suggest the man learn some Italian before being patronising to his staff, but he took a look round first in case Cass was watching. Sure enough she was. She placed a hand on his arm.

“I’ve got this.”

A few minutes later a bark of laughter erupted. Somehow, she must have managed to explain the linguistic confusion in polite terms and the man stayed to enjoy a *digestivo*.

“Still no regrets?” she murmured as she turned back to Carlo.

But one ignorant customer wasn’t going to ruin this evening.

“None.”

Sonia

Sonia swallowed another tablet, the phone conversation with Lorenzo still running through her mind. The pain in her stomach was worse. How had she got herself into this situation? It wasn't as if she had ever set out to deceive anyone. When she found Lorenzo, her only thoughts were about saving him. How could she have known that people would lose their lives as a result?

Then

She had never held anything so precious. She wanted to run with him to the house but couldn't risk tripping on the steep, cobbled path so she'd made herself walk.

It took forever to reach their terraced house in Via della Chiesa. All the time thoughts raced through her mind. The girl had abandoned the baby. She had meant to do so. She wanted someone to find him. Otherwise, she could have dumped him anywhere, couldn't she?

And the necklace was a parting gift. She wouldn't have left it if she was intending to come back. But what if she had had second thoughts or told someone and they had come to look for the baby?

As she closed the door of her house she leant back against it, her heart thumping, letting the enormity of what she had done sink in. Any number of people might have seen her cross the piazza. She hugged the baby to her, tears falling on his head. His cries jolted her into action. She warmed some

milk in a pan and fed it to him from an eggcup. It wasn't ideal – it was messy and took ages despite him being so hungry and the baby was frustrated because he couldn't get it fast enough, but she had to try. She couldn't risk a delay while she went off to buy baby milk. He was already weak. She was unaccustomed to handling someone so small. It was terrifying, the thought that she might drop him. Afterwards his crying increased, and panic surged through her. What if she had done more harm than good? What if he died?

How would she explain that all she'd ever wanted to do was help him? The shame bit into her. No, she couldn't think like that. Eventually he quietened down, and she lay back on the bed with him, exhausted, her head whirling with everything that had happened.

The stairs creaked, waking her. Flavio came in, smelling of sweet acacia wood, petrol from the chainsaw and rain-soaked foliage. What was she doing? She hadn't thought any of this through. In all the chaos of emotions in trying to keep the baby alive she hadn't planned what she would say to Flavio.

"What an evening," he said. He stopped, face etched with shock and confusion. For some moments he said nothing.

Slowly he walked towards her, his eyes fixed on the baby.

Eventually he whispered, "What's going on?"

Of course he'd say no they couldn't keep the baby. You can't just help yourself to a human being to satisfy your own selfish needs. This isn't the Middle Ages.

She felt the tears slide down her face. She swallowed, sorting out her explanation in her head. Of course, she realised he wasn't hers. She understood that he must go back to his real mother or somebody more suitable, whatever the authorities judged. She was only looking after him, keeping him safe.

Flavio sank to his knees. He pressed the back of his hand to his mouth and then stroked the baby's head with his giant, oil-stained thumb. His breathing was audible. His clothes were covered in bark chips.

"Isn't he beautiful?" she managed to say. At least he should admit that before she had to let the baby go.

She meant to tell Flavio about what she had seen in the church. About how she had been praying to the Madonna dell Soccorso in the painting just as she had so many times.

Of course he would need time to get used to the idea. But it was obvious, wasn't it that the girl had left the baby in the church for someone to find? The poor girl, she was so young. A child herself. Imagine the trouble she'd get into if Sonia told anyone about the baby.

"Flavio."

He put his finger over her lips. "I didn't dare hope." Those were tears in his eyes – actual tears. She'd never seen him so emotional. "I noticed you getting larger. I knew you'd stopped buying the tampons, and I knew you'd been to the doctor and of course I wondered. But I thought it would end like all the other ones. I mean, who'd have thought after all this time? I didn't dare say anything in case I jinxed it."

Her heart sped up. The idea started to take shape. He was so happy. Why hurt him with the truth? It could at least wait until morning.

Giftbooks4u.com

FIFTEEN

Carlo

Carlo poured himself a grappa and sat looking out into the dark piazza. Cass had gone straight up to bed after they'd finally closed up the restaurant, but he was still buzzing from the success of the evening.

One thing he was sure of – if Irena hadn't been his mother, he wouldn't now be running a restaurant. It was here in this kitchen that most of his childhood memories had been formed.

Half the size that it was now, the tiled room had been full of steam from the range in the huge chimney. The cooking smells used to drive him wild. He'd steal a taste of the sauce that was bubbling on the stove as his mother

mixed eggs into a well of flour on the marble table to make malfatti. She used to give him his own bit of flour and he loved stirring it with his finger and feeling its coolness under his flat hand as he patted it into a perfect circle.

The modern units he had installed since they'd moved back from the States were more practical, but the room seemed to have lost part of its soul. His mother had always worn an apron in those days, spotless and crisply ironed at the start of each day. Her hands were rough and smelled of garlic and lemons when she dabbed his face clean, which she did as often as she could catch him.

There was always a sense of urgency about the place. Herbs hung from the beams, strings of tomatoes were tied to the shutters, and vegetables and beans were packed into jars of olive oil.

"Who are we expecting?" he used to ask. "The five thousand?" But it was only ever the two of them.

She always seemed to be preparing for something as she chopped, boiled and pickled but the big occasion never came. He teased her about it but with hindsight that fear she had of running out of food, of not being able to provide enough for him to eat, must have stemmed from the War years.

Although things had improved after the war, inflation galloped. But the food never did run out and his mother's larder was more efficient than any modern supermarket. What they didn't have in the house grew in the garden or in the hills around.

She hadn't been a cuddly sort of mother – always too busy to spend much time with him on her lap – but he'd grown up with clear boundaries, clean clothes and a knowledge of how to fix most things. Despite her own distrust of authority, she had always tried to instill in him good behaviour so he still found it difficult to be rude to people, even when provoked.

As she worked, she talked, explaining what ingredients she was using and why.

"We'll add a bit of milk to soften the dough. And slowly mix in the raisins and aniseed. Now we leave it over here to rise."

He used to think everyone knew these things but as he grew older, he realised many didn't.

"Knowing about food could save your life," she told him as she helped him weigh out ingredients. "If you know what to eat and how to prepare it, you can always survive."

When he'd once ventured to say that someone had told him French cuisine was most highly prized in the world, she gave a dismissive snort. The French wouldn't know how to cook if it wasn't for the Italians, she told him.

"It was we who taught them to cook. Our Catherine de Medici brought cooks and ingredients with her to Paris when she became queen..."

Carlo sat and listened to her stories while shelling a huge heap of beans or cracking nuts, dissecting vegetables and skinning rabbits. By the age of ten he knew most wild herbs and mushrooms and could be reliably sent out with a basket to collect these. He loved leaving the house early, when the air was damp and misty and smelled of damp earth and foliage. There was constant competition among his friends to find the best and biggest mushrooms.

He had several favourite places that he guarded jealously, sometimes making ludicrous detours to avoid being spotted. Sometimes people tried to follow him into the woods, but he was quick at noticing them and could easily give them the slip, standing still behind the trees or crouching among the ferns. That thrill of evading them and the expression on his mother's face when he returned with a full basket...

He always had something to tell her about his adventures - some deer or a wild boar he had spotted or some porcupine spines he had found. He used to bring back armfuls of herbs - wild garlic, fennel, coriander, tarragon, chamomile and oregano which Irena used these for medicinal purposes as well as culinary ones. She knew all sorts of remedies, passed down to her by her own mother - basil for nettle stings, coriander for burns, elder for colds, thyme for eczema, sage for indigestion.

Her larder was like a medicine cabinet. She had a solution for everything. Her ivy treatment had made Agata's ugly warts disappear, and her bilberry tea had done wonders for Maria's hemorrhoids and raspberry tea eased Paolina's menstrual pains.

Carlo was banished from the room during these consultations but often crept up to the door, fascinated. He never doubted in those days that his mother knew everything there was to know - although he sometimes wished she didn't. She was impossible to fool. It was no good leaving something unfinished or trying to escape before doing the tasks she had set him. She would always know.

His main memories were of taking things apart on the cotto floor and putting them back together again to see how they worked. His mother cursed the mess he made but it sometimes amused her too.

“You’re going to be an inventor when you grow up,” she said.

“And you’ll be a cook when you grow up,” he replied which for some reason made her laugh.

Taking things apart, creating something wonderful. Yes, he could be an inventor.

Spotting the recording device on the table, he shook himself out of the memory, reached out for it and pressed Play.

Irena

I hadn’t any plans in those days other than to marry and bring up children – as we girls were encouraged to do back then. It sounds so old-fashioned, but you felt you had a special role. No matter how smart or stupid, rich or poor you were, you had the chance to do this one miraculous thing for Italy that men with all the cleverness and strength could not do.

But I couldn’t really see it happening – me getting married. I knew I had to have something to fall back on in case I didn’t find someone. My family didn’t have much money, and I didn’t want to follow my siblings into service or factory work. I wanted to be a teacher.

I had such a thirst for knowledge – I read everything I could get my hands on. People used to give me their old books and I devoured them. Every book was like a doorway into a different world. From Petrarch to Proust to Dickens - as soon as I finished one, I’d start another. I don’t read much now. I get halfway through and forget what happened at the start.

Pouring himself another glass, Carlo thought about those thousands of words she had crammed into her head. How many were left? It was all such a waste.

At weekends we’d bring seats out into the piazza and watch a film on a big screen under the stars. They always started off with newsreels of the good work Mussolini had done. Black and white images of men working in fields,

digging roads, piling up food. In those days of course, the films were unnaturally fast which made the men seem even more industrious.

I can't remember the days before il Duce was our leader. He was just always there. We knew some of his followers were doing barbaric things, but we didn't blame him personally for that. My mother sometimes muttered about the economy and corruption and money not getting to the people it was meant for, but a look from my father would stop her saying any more. I picked up that you had to be careful what you said.

From time to time, things happened. We children were in the piazza one evening when a van pulled up and a man rolled out of it. Was kicked I suppose. He lay there, groaning and we realised he'd soiled himself. We ran away.

"Do you know what they did to him?" Gianni said the next day. 'Forced him to eat live frogs and drink castor oil.'" There was a long exhale of breath.

As children, I'm ashamed to say we found it funny. We assumed he'd done something evil and deserved to be punished whereas he'd probably only expressed an opinion someone didn't like. It never occurred to us that we would ever be in danger.

As Carlo closed up the shutters and climbed into bed Cass turned towards him.

"I'm worried about your mother. She's been muttering to herself most of the day and now she's tossing and turning. Something's upset her. Do you think she might be ill?"

She was shocked when he explained about the book. "Is now the best time for that? Couldn't you wait until after the summer? If tonight was anything to go by, we're going to be rushed off our feet."

She was right, of course. But he wasn't sure he could wait. At his mother's age you never knew, did you? And besides he had the sense he was on the verge of discovering a side of her he'd never known.

Irena

I had very strong ideas about justice. When I was eight years old, my younger brother was beaten at school for something he didn't deserve. I ran into the classroom, grabbed the ruler off the teacher's desk and hit him with it, shouting that he was a coward for laying into a small child. The rest of the class watched in stunned silence. One by one they started laughing. The teacher was furious.

I took my brother's hand and marched him back home, leaving the teacher too shocked to run after us. I expected my mother to be proud of me, but she was mortified when we told her. She took us back down to apologise and had to beg to get us taken back into school. Years later, the teacher told me that although he had been enraged by my behaviour at the time, he had also admired me for my courage. He joined the fascist secret police and was well known for his sadistic interrogation methods, so I don't feel guilty about that anymore.

I do have one or two regrets though. One of the few times Martina and I fell out was over the trick she played on Alvaro. It was one of those occasions when she really went too far. Alvaro was a skinny boy with a squint and thick glasses who used to mutter to himself and play cards on his own for hours. He knew every fact about insects and engines but could barely write his own name. Mostly he was very quiet and a bit obsessive, but he was easy to provoke and could be quite frightening when he got angry although he usually ended up in tears.

Martina knew he was in love with her. There was nothing unusual in that of course but she didn't discourage him, just let him trail around after her making a bigger and bigger fool of himself.

On Valentine's Day Alvaro wrote her a love letter, which included a poem that I must say was awful – The sight of you makes me swoon. I want to taste the sweet sugar of your lips – that sort of thing.

Martina let everyone read it – I'm afraid we thought it was hilarious. Spurred on by the rest of the class she wrote back to Alvaro, everyone chipping in with terms of endearment and appalling rhymes. I don't remember how it went now but the gist was that the love was mutual, and she wanted to meet him alone in the woods so they could demonstrate their love for each other.

She asked me to deliver the note. I agreed because I felt sorry for him, and I thought it would give me the chance to warn him off. But when I gave it to him and told him not to go, he screamed at me to mind my own business. His face was purple, and he became very abusive, swearing at me and choking with rage. Said I was jealous and possessive and trying to deny my friend happiness. He was so unpleasant I lost patience and left him to it.

So that evening Alvaro turned up for their date in his best shirt and a tie he'd probably stolen from his father, stinking of gone-off cologne. What he didn't know was that half the class was stationed behind trees for the performance. He tried to kiss Martina, but she set him a series of dares first, all designed to make a fool out of him. She had him running about singing, then down on his knees declaring his love, reading out his poem. Everyone was in fits.

She ordered him in a sultry, seductive tone to take off his clothes. But when he was standing in front of her naked like a scrawny chicken she screamed in shock and disgust, picked up his clothes and threw them in the river. At which point children started emerging from the trees all around laughing and jeering, leaving Alvaro scrambling in vain to fish out his sodden clothes and walk home naked and in tears. I stayed behind my tree, not wanting to take part in the jeering but I wish now I had had the strength to stop her. Unfortunately, as he walked right passed me, sobbing, he caught my eye so I'm sure he thought I was complicit in the whole thing. I felt awful.

Carlo smiled and shook his head at his mother's confession. He picked up the picture from the floor of her room. She must have knocked it off the bedside table without noticing when she was getting up that morning. He fetched a brush and swept up the broken glass but would have to warn her

about it in case he'd missed any. Meanwhile, he'd look for another frame. She'd be distraught if she found it like this.

It was the only photograph of his father that she had apart from the engagement one of them both together. It showed him as a young man in military uniform. Carlo would like to have found out more about him, but Irena must have found it too upsetting to talk about and there was no one else left he could ask. He wasn't aware of any relations on his father's side of the family. Perhaps they hadn't approved of the relationship or perhaps they hadn't known about it.

At least his memories of his maternal grandfather were clear. He was a craftsman, making crib figures out of plaster in a workshop down the hill. They were about half a metre high, surprisingly detailed and meticulously painted. In the run-up to Christmas large crib scenes were displayed throughout the area, illuminated at night to magical effect. Carlo used to stand for hours on icy winter nights gazing at the different figures, always certain he could distinguish the ones his grandfather had made.

Nonno had also made other things out of plaster, including cherub head mouldings which could still be seen above the interior doors in larger houses such as Villa Leonida, and he had made a small white dove for Carlo which he had loved but had broken by throwing it off the loggia to see if it could fly.

Sometimes Carlo would spend the day in his grandfather's workshop watching him create the figures. He only spoke to him once about his father. "What did he do in the war? Was he brave?"

Nonno shrugged, pulling down the corners of his mouth. "Yes, son. They were all brave in those days."

Carlo sensed he wasn't saying what he really wanted to, but his grandfather became very busy after that and wouldn't talk about it anymore.

Now it was almost certainly too late to find out any more about his father. He couldn't help feeling angry about it sometimes. However Sonia might rationalise it, Martina had taken so much from so many people. Whatever grievance she had or whatever point she'd wanted to make, nothing could justify what she'd done.

Another worry was forming at the back of his mind. If Irena was such a close friend, didn't she have any idea what Martina might do? Couldn't she have stopped her? For such a strong, independent person she seemed to

have fallen firmly under Martina's spell. She must know more than she was letting on. How was it that Martina still had such a hold over her quarter of a century after she'd died?

Giftbooks4u.com

Carlo

“Who are Marisa and Giorgio?” Cass asked as they were preparing the tables in the piazza the following day. She shook out a white cloth and laid it at an angle over the yellow damask one. “I swear I will never get to know everybody in this place. Do you think they’ll be wanting a table for the Easter lunch?”

Carlo laughed. “I doubt that. They died before I was born.”

She looked up. “Seriously? Then why does everyone keep talking about them?”

“It’s their house. The one by the well? Everyone calls it Marisa and Giorgio’s. It’s just a landmark.”

Sometimes he felt he knew two villages – the Santa Zita he saw around him every day and the place he had heard older people talking about as he was growing up. Born just after the war, he had watched the village grow smaller with every year he grew older.

But he’d heard so many stories so often it was sometimes hard to be sure which of these events had really happened to him and which had happened to people around him and had somehow got woven into his own memories. That blurred line between past and present. Most of the houses in Santa Zita were known by the names of their former occupants, which is how they were usually referred to.

“Marisa and Giorgio met when Marisa was in mourning for her husband, a local butcher called Salvatore. On the feast of San Silvestro in this restaurant the owner Paolo had tears in his eyes as he apologised for the

meat not being up to its usual standard. Everyone knew the best meat came from Salvatore but they had done what they could with what they had.

“The diners drank a toast to Salvatore. But Giorgio, who’d had too much to drink and was never known for his tact, wiped his moustache on the back of his hand and spat.

“Come off it, who are we kidding? The man was a selfish bastard who slept with everyone else’s wives.’

“A hush fell. All heads turned.

“‘Well, it had to be said, didn’t it?’ He looked around for support.

“‘Perhaps. But not in front of his widow,’ hissed a neighbour, grabbing him by the arm and nodding towards Marisa sitting stony faced and shrouded in black.

“Appalled by his gaffe, Giorgio called round at her house the following day with a bunch of flowers to apologise. He expected her to be angry, call him names, burst into tears – he couldn’t believe it when she started laughing.

“‘Thank God someone finally said it. It was all true.’

“She ended up cooking him lunch and they were married a year later,” said Carlo.

“It’s a good story,” said Cass, laughing. “And Alice? Who’s she?”

“Not Aliss,” he said tutting at her accent. “Aleechay.”

The farmhouse just below the piazza was known as the Casa di Alice, even though it had been in the hands of another family for decades.

“Ah she was a formidable woman by all accounts. Her house sparkled and her six children were always immaculately turned out. On the day before her fiftieth birthday, she cooked and cleaned for her family as usual. But the next morning she wasn’t up at dawn to light the fire like she usually was. Her family were worried about her. They peeped round the door of the bedroom and found her sitting upright against a cushion.”

“She’d died?”

He laughed. “No, she was fine. She said to them, ‘I’m staying put. I’ve spent all my life looking after you lot. Now it’s your turn to look after me.’

“They had thought she was joking. But no amount of pleading or reasoning had any effect. She stayed there for the next forty years, despite being in rude health, waited on by her disgruntled husband and offspring.”

Cass liked that one. She swore if she wasn't given due appreciation for her efforts she would "do an Alice".

"Aleechay."

Seeing Sonia in the piazza talking to someone outside Bar Fontana, Carlo broke off. He couldn't keep putting off the moment. Sooner or later, he'd have to pluck up courage and talk to her about her mother. The book wouldn't be complete without her side of the story. Of course she wouldn't want those memories raked up. Yet it had happened, and it was part of their common story. Of all the people in Santa Zita, Sonia's story would be the most crucial part of the village's history. It was something he needed to understand.

"No, Carlo – you can't," Cass's voice broke into his thoughts. "I know what you're thinking, and it isn't fair."

"I wasn't going to."

He would, though. As soon he'd worked out how.

Giftbooks4u.com

Sonia

Carlo was hurrying towards her across the piazza. Sonia peered anxiously down the road through the trees. If only the bus would hurry up. There it was lumbering up, but it had a couple more turns to make.

“I haven’t missed it have I?” Carlo asked as he puffed through the arch. “Ah no, good.”

A few tourists got out fanning themselves with guidebooks, exclaiming about the steep climb and dizzying bends. The bus was almost empty. Carlo sat himself next to Sonia, remarked on the heat and asked after Flavio and Lorenzo before he came out with it.

“Thought you might like to see this,” he said digging the photograph out from his jacket. “I never realised how close our mothers were.”

The picture of the two girls on the fountain took her by surprise. They could have been two film stars. One of them wore shorts, the other a dress, which she was having to hold down as it ballooned out in the wind. Her head was thrown back in laughter. The sun was on their faces, catching the light in their eyes.

“It’s a lovely picture,” she said at last. “I haven’t seen it before.”

“I can get you a copy if you like.”

Sonia didn’t remember seeing a single picture of her mother as a girl. It was as though Martina had removed all reminders of her younger years, erased that part of her life. Perhaps it was just too painful to look back. She’d never mentioned being friends with Irena but then presumably she’d had a number of friends before the reprisal. It was hardly surprising they’d dropped her afterwards.

“Thank you. Please don’t bother.”

It seemed only polite to ask after Irena, which led Carlo into talking about the book he was writing from her stories about the village. “I want to give a full picture and that has to include a chapter on the war.” He cleared his throat. “I know this is difficult and the last thing I’d want is to upset you, but I was wondering if I could talk to you about your mother?”

Sonia sighed. It was hardly unexpected. “I’m not upset. I just don’t know the answer, I’m afraid. She never spoke about it.”

“Never?” He was clearly trying to cover his disappointment.

Sonia closed her eyes. “It wasn’t an easy subject.”

She’d been on the verge of asking several times and sometimes regretted that she hadn’t had the courage. It wasn’t just grief that floored her when Martina died but terror and rage at being left to fight on alone in the battle they had always fought together. Sonia had rarely gone out without her mother. Martina had taken charge of everything, made all the decisions. She’d exercised such control that Sonia hadn’t really felt a separate identity. Inside her head she was someone different – someone carefree and risqué, the way she was with Flavio. But after all he was a *straniero*, a foreigner, in the village.

For those first few months after her mother died, she’d been so lost. It had taken a long time to gain the confidence to make decisions by herself. Having Lorenzo made her feel her mother’s absence most acutely. Martina would have known what the different cries meant, how long he should be allowed to sleep, how many layers he should be wearing. Instead, Sonia had to rely on instinct, which she hadn’t realised until then that she possessed. Gradually muddling through had given her a strength she hadn’t experienced before.

Of course she had sometimes wondered as she was growing up what had put that glass wall between them and the rest of the world. Very gradually, after one or two things children said, the looks people gave her mother – she’d started to make connections but it wasn’t until she’d badgered the priest to tell her the full story that she finally understood.

The bus’s brakes squeaked as the driver pulled over to let a car pass on a bend.

"I kept thinking, there had to be a reason why my mother would do something like that," Sonia said. "She was strict, yes, humourless perhaps – but not evil. Something very powerful must have driven her to do it.

"Love? Greed? Revenge? At any rate it made sense at last, the reason people in the village shunned her and why they couldn't bring themselves to look at me – the child who had been able to grow up when theirs hadn't. I must have been a constant reminder as I crossed each of the milestones that their children would never see."

The bus stopped outside the school and a crowd of children piled in.

"How could she have kept this terrible thing from me? Allowing me to believe that I was just unlikeable?"

Carlo gave a sympathetic shrug.

"The strange thing is, when I got home after the priest had told me what happened I didn't tell my mother I knew. That was my chance. Looking back now, I wish I had taken it. If only I could believe there was some justification for what she did, however small – some kernel of hope that she was not simply evil or mad."

"Perhaps she gave them the information they wanted by mistake," suggested Carlo. "Isn't it possible she was overheard talking to someone? Or perhaps she was threatened. Even tortured. Or she might have done it for a good if misguided reason, accepting a bribe for the village believing it would help others." She shrugged.

"What stopped you?" he asked.

She frowned, holding the back of the seat in front as the bus lurched round another hairpin. "Oh, I wanted to. But I'd thought up so many reasons – not that could justify it but that could explain it. I couldn't bear the thought that I might be wrong, and the truth was as ugly as everyone thought it was. I don't think I could have carried on living with her if I'd known for sure."

"I'm sorry," said Carlo. "I'm sure no one meant to be unkind to you. I don't think any of us thought about what it must be like for you."

Sonia shook her head. The anger had gone a long time ago. There had been a time when it had eaten her up. Perhaps it was unfair but although finding out what her mother had done made it easier to understand why people shunned her, it hadn't stopped her resenting them for it. They probably felt they couldn't help it but how was it fair to extend their feelings about what Martina had done to her? It wasn't as if she could put the clock

back and even if she could how could she, a tiny child, have done anything to stop Martina?

“I didn’t mean you, of course,” she said. “Your mother was one of the few people who used to acknowledge me.” He looked surprised.

“When Lorenzo was born, I worried for him, of course. I don’t think I would have been able to stand it if he had been punished for it too.”

She had always protected him from the truth about his grandmother so that he could grow up free of her inherited guilt. And yet the fear was always there that he would find out anyway from another source.

“I used to watch him so carefully to make sure he wasn’t taunted or disliked or even just whispered about by the other children the way I was, but I never saw any evidence of it. By the 1990s when he was born it wasn’t fashionable to talk about the war. Not good for tourism.

“But after the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, the atrocities in the world wars were talked about again. They said children needed to know about this side of human nature in the hope they could grow up in a better world. But as far as I could see the children in Lorenzo’s school didn’t make the connection between the reprisal in Santa Zita and his grandmother. After all, she was dead too by then and there weren’t many people left who knew her name.

“All I could do as he was growing up was hope that by the time his peers found out about his grandmother as they inevitably would, their friendships would be secure enough to withstand the blow.”

The bus pulled into the arcaded piazza in town, and they got up.

“If my mother had had any idea what her actions would result in, I’m sure she wouldn’t have done it,” she said. “You must understand why I don’t want it brought back up after all this time.”

But something was coming back to her, a box of diaries and letters she found after her mother’s death, which she had never allowed herself to look through. It had been too soon after the death and her feelings were too raw. Besides, she had been thrown into the role of new mother and there hadn’t been a moment to spare. But perhaps after all now was the time to discover the truth for herself.

Irena

1940

Martina's wedding to Gianni took place on such a beautiful day. Despite the scrabbling, panicking, fretting and bickering I had witnessed in her cramped little house that morning as she got ready, she came down the stairs looking like a graceful swan.

She looked glorious in her mother's old ivory silk dress. It had been cleverly adapted by her seamstress mother to fit her much slimmer figure and incorporate the fashionable V-neck and beaded waist panel. Her hair had been styled in large rolls, like a film star. It wasn't too difficult to stand out in a tiny place like Santa Zita, but Martina with her glossy dark hair, fine nose and long-tailed, bright eyes would have stood out anywhere.

It wasn't always easy being her best friend, but I didn't begrudge her having everything her way on that day. Nobody could. As the couple cut the ribbon across the front door that afternoon and started their walk up to the 12th century church most of the village spilled out of their doorways to join the procession.

She and Gianni stepped out of the church of Santa Zita into a cloud of rose petals thrown by the crowd, and I remember thinking to myself if only I could hang onto this moment. We were all afraid of the future you see. The petals hung in the breeze for a moment before cascading down over the happy couple, settling on their hair and clothes. Martina threw back her head, laughing as she shook some of the petals away from the long, scalloped veil, lifting one of her slender arms to clutch her headpiece and stop it from sliding back.

It didn't seem any time since we were dressing up in grown-ups' clothes. I can see her now staggering around in shoes that were much too large, a streak of smudged lipstick across her mouth, pretending to be a bride, throwing flowers behind her for me to catch. Now her time had really come.

But then it struck me – nothing would be the same again. Life would change for me, Martina and Gianni, whether we wanted it to or not. Still, it was hard not to get caught up in the excitement and we all needed something to celebrate.

Martina threw her arms around me and whispered, "Promise me we'll stay friends forever?" I was happy to promise but I was praying I'd be able to keep my word.

I was laughing and brushing away tears, teasing her that she wouldn't want to know me anymore now that she would be living at Villa Leonida, but she said that was nonsense.

"Look this way, Martina."

She turned this way and that for the photographer. But beneath the laughter and shouts of *Vivi gli sposi!* Long live the married couple! you could feel a tiny current of apprehension and anticipation. With war having just been declared none of us knew what was going to happen but I think we all sensed it wasn't going to be as speedy and straightforward as il Duce would have us believe.

The reception took place at the Tre Fratelli restaurant. Tables had been set out in three long rows across the square, just as they were at the end of olive gathering in the autumn, with lines of bunting strung above the square and candle lanterns hung from trees.

As we took our places at the table, the guests raised a toast and there were cries of *'Per cent'anni!* wishing the couple a hundred years of happy married life together. Wine flowed and the food kept coming - antipasti, soup, pasta, meat and fruits. Each plate of food was arranged like a work of art by the two brothers who owned the restaurant. I don't know how they managed to produce it - we weren't used to eating so well.

Every so often someone would chink their glass and call out "A kiss for the bride!" Gianni would kiss Martina, and another burst of applause would break out. The meal was followed by dancing until the early morning.

Towards the end of the evening, Gianni and Martina smashed the vase. At least they tried to. But it stayed intact despite several attempts to break it – a bad omen. I held my breath. Nervous laughter was followed by wild

applause as Gianni picked it up and hurled it across the square. It slammed into the church door and this time it splintered into tiny fragments symbolising the many happy years they could expect together in the future.

Martina tossed her bouquet into the air. There was a scramble among the young women, each hoping to be the village's next bride. Despite those years of practice, I didn't catch it – I don't remember who did.

After the dancing, the newlyweds followed the line of lanterns up the steep path towards the house where Martina would be joining Gianni's family to live. I watched them until they disappeared.

Turning back, I spotted her father Vincente sitting at the table nearest the fountain and sat down next to him.

"It's been wonderful, hasn't it?" I said.

"One down, three to go," he replied gruffly, but his eyes glistened as he smiled. No wonder he was proud. Whatever happened in the next few years, he would at least not have to worry about Martina.

But despite the warmth of the evening and the wine I had drunk, a shiver crept through me. I felt abandoned by the two people I cared most about in the world.

Giftbooks4u.com

TWENTY **Martina**

Martina

Martina had dreamed for most of her life of living in Villa Leonida. After the noise and clutter of her terraced home, she'd been thrilled by the space and solitude at the villa when she first moved in. The frescoed walls, gilded cherub heads above the doors and the kaleidoscope pattern on the ceiling created by the electric light reflected off the crystal droplets of the

chandelier were still wonders to her. It was amazing to be able to wander from one end of the house to another without bumping into anyone.

Her own home in Via della Chiesa had been crowded, everyone talking at once, nobody listening, arguments erupting. One sister singing, another in tears. The two boys racing around, breaking things.

In the warmer months it wasn't so bad. They could mostly live outside on the small terraces, only needing to use the interior for sleeping but in the winter, they were always on top of each other.

Here at the villa, she could throw open the enormous French doors onto the balcony and look down over the family's splendid estate, the rooftops and bell towers of the village of Santa Zita, the town below and the glitter of sea in the distance. And yet living here was nothing like she had imagined it would be.

Today as she pinned back the shutters there was nothing to see. A dense wall of fog hung heavy and oppressive over everything, brushing against her face like a gloved hand. It had been there for days, closing around the villa like prison walls, gradually sucking up everything in its path, people, houses and mountains, swallowing them back into faraway memory.

It muffled all sound so that it was possible to believe as she stood there on the balcony that nothing existed beyond it, and the house was islanded in a silent, grey sea. The air smelled of damp, ice and wood smoke. Standing out here in the cloud was as close as she could get to escaping.

Although her old home was only a short walk away, she may as well have moved miles into another world. As a child she had first visited the villa when accompanying her mother with dress samples for Elena. For weeks she would watch a piece of clothing taking shape on the kitchen table in their small home, awed by the transformation from a piece of fabric to a thing of beauty.

She had helped her package the dress and between them they had carried it up the steep cobbled path, right up above the roofs until their own house looked like a dolls house.

They'd had to stop several times to shake out their arms and wipe the sweat from their hands, so they didn't drop the package.

"I just hope she likes it," her mother said.

At the villa they followed the housekeeper through miles and miles of echoing marble-floored rooms. Elena greeted them coolly as though their presence was a disturbance.

Martina stood by her mother gazing up at the cherubs on the painted ceiling as Elena examined the stitching under a lamp, frowning.

“This is perfect,” she said at last.

They discussed the design for a jacket. She showed Martina’s mother some pictures from a magazine, and they talked about colours, and cloth. Martina stood gazing around her, awed by the grandeur of the place and by Elena’s tall, commanding presence and fine clothes. But after a while listening to the grown-ups her legs ached, and her gaze wandered. She saw a beautiful blue and white glazed urn on the dresser and when the women’s backs were turned, she reached out to touch it. It was perfectly smooth and cool beneath her fingers.

I want to live here. I want to own things like this.

A stinging slap brought her to her senses, and she whipped her hand back, nursing it under her arm. “Don’t touch.”

Her mother’s face was red. Martina had to run to keep up with her on the walk back down. “Why did you have to embarrass me like that? You could have broken it. Do you have any idea how much things like that are worth?”

But it only made the villa more enticing.

Now after all these years she did live here. And yet it was nothing like she’d imagined. Wherever she turned, Elena’s eyes were on her. Both of Gianni’s parents watched her but Elena was the worst. She was always the one in command, her strident tones resounding through the house. She had a way of arching her eyebrows that conveyed surprise at someone’s lack of good sense or taste if they didn’t do as she wanted, and Martina hadn’t yet worked out a way of countering this without being openly rude. Resting her forearms on the cold iron rail of the balcony, she thought about running out into the mist and losing herself but there was no escape from Elena. If only the old bat would leave her alone.

“Who left those doors open?” Her mother-in-law’s voice rang through the house. “You’re letting in the draught and making the fire smoke.”

Martina took a deep breath and pulled them closed. She twisted the handle to drive the bolt down and pressed her head against the glass for a moment before turning with an acquiescent smile.

She tried to make herself look busy tidying the room although it didn't need tidying. No doubt Elena was thinking of a dozen other things that Martina could more usefully be doing, but she didn't say anything.

Martina lifted each of the framed photographs on top of the piano in turn and dusted them, reminding herself that she was now also part of this handsome and distinguished family. Elena herself had been a beauty in her day with her aristocratic neck, high forehead and hooded eyes. The skin around her eyes and mouth now creped when she smiled but she was still strikingly elegant - tall and straight-backed for her age.

Cesare was quiet and taciturn, with simian features worn by time and the weather, like the house. He was more difficult to read. It had been easy to charm them until the engagement, but they clearly felt they'd made a great concession in allowing her to become part of their lives. It would be nice to think that Gianni had won them over by telling them he had no interest in any of those insipid girls they'd lined up for him. Nice to imagine he'd fought for Martina, pointing out her intelligence and strength of character. But more likely, he just enjoyed defying them. It had all been a game to him.

There must have been some reason for them relenting. Probably they had drawn the conclusion she would bear them healthy, good-looking grandchildren. And they knew she could carry off her new role as confidently as anyone who was born into it. She wouldn't let them down.

No, it was more than that. She knew, even if she wasn't supposed to, that Gianni's parents couldn't afford to be so picky these days. The family's fortune was a mere shadow of what it had been.

The blue and gold paintwork, the gilt mirrors and Napoleonic style furniture in the drawing room at Villa Leonida gave the impression of a successful, established family whose wealth and status was assured as far into the future as it stretched back into the past. But the rest of the rooms, which looked as though they had had the life knocked out of them, gave a far truer picture.

For most of Martina's life the villa had held a mythical status – it had been a storybook palace that she never expected to be invited into. When she was growing up all the talk in the piazza was about the glittering parties held up at the villa - glamorous women in silk dresses and gentlemen in dinner suits silhouetted on the balcony, music and ripples of laughter floating through her open window on still summer nights. Resting her

elbows on the stone sill of her home below the piazza, Martina would gaze up at the villa, which would be aglow long after the rest of the village had retired.

But after a series of bad investments the finances had dwindled. Last year a forest fire ripped through the chestnut trees destroying many of them. The exceptionally harsh winter that followed killed off most of the olives.

After Italy joined the war in the summer most of the labourers had been called up, leaving Cesare to do the bulk of the work on the estate himself. As the economy worsened, he couldn't afford to keep house staff. Soon after the wedding the cook and then the housekeeper were let go. Had it been part of their plan that Martina would replace them? It was hard sometimes to think otherwise.

She'd soon come to understand that there were disadvantages to living in Villa Leonida. Although the fire damage had been repaired, most of the heirlooms and treasures had been lost. The high ceilings made it difficult to heat, the windows rattled and during storms rain crept in under the frames, running down the walls in unsightly grey trails. Damp seeped in everywhere, up through the floor and into her bones. It formed black mould on walls and behind the skirting boards, and created fluffy breeding grounds for scorpions and centipedes with whom she battled daily.

But there was something else - a whisper, a restlessness that worked its way through the house. It made her want to break out and run. She would have if there had been somewhere to go. Gianni said it was just the wind in the chimneys, but it seemed to have a life of its own.

In her childhood games Martina had always been queen or empress. It seemed natural to her that she would marry into the wealthiest family in the village, whatever anyone else might have thought. But now she couldn't help feeling that she had been duped. She sometimes had a longing to go back home despite the chaos and bickering. No, her pride would never let her to do that. On her wedding day she had felt triumphant, like she had run a race and won. But was starting to suspect that this trophy was made from fool's gold.

Perhaps Gianni had felt the same way. But it was all right for him, wasn't it? He'd found a way to escape.

Martina

Driving away from Santa Zita the morning after the wedding, Martina had felt like a new person. A signora rather than a signorina. The bride who lived in Villa Leonida. She felt she was on the cusp of something brilliant. As the gleaming motor car slid through the arch at the end of the piazza and made each turn down through the olive groves, apple orchards and vines Irena's madly waving figure, like those of the rest of the cheering crowd, grew smaller and smaller until they had left Santa Zita behind.

The drive over the mountains and through a series of coastal towns to their hotel in Liguria was beautiful. Through pine branches and bougainvillea, they glimpsed colour-splashed houses, churches with rounded bell towers, craggy cliffs and the sea.

They found the hotel at last, perched above a picturesque harbour. For the first few days it was idyllic. They played hide and seek in the hotel gardens, took a boat around the coves, spotted dolphins in the bay and explored the village. But gradually she felt him withdrawing.

One evening they ate dinner in the main piazza with its pebbled floor, orange trees and view of gleaming yachts. The autumnal sun drenched the pastel coloured houses with their trompe l'oeil shutters, pediments, garlands and balconies. As the sun dipped the darkening sea looked as though someone had poured a pot of gold paint across it. It was perfect until Gianni told her about the money.

"Did you think we were rich?" he asked. "I'm afraid not. We have the villa but that's all – and it's a lot of work. We all have to do our share. You don't mind, do you?"

“Of course not. Not at all.” Money wasn’t everything, after all – she knew that. But inside she couldn’t help feeling cheated. It confirmed her growing suspicion that she didn’t know Gianni half as well as she had thought she did. Why hadn’t he told her before?

“I was afraid of losing you.”

Something in his mischievous smile was triumphant, as though they were back at school competing in some pointless game and he’d been holding onto the winning card under the table. She tried not to mind, or not to show that she minded. But the lifestyle had been part of the attraction. What was wrong with that? Why shouldn’t she take the chance of a better future if it was offered to her? He could have put her in the picture earlier but had deliberately withheld the information until after she’d married him.

As the lights came on in the harbour, they finished the wine and talked about other things, but the deception sat there between them like an unwelcome guest. Until they came away her worries had all been about the wedding night and had turned out to be unfounded because he didn’t seem that interested in consummating the marriage anyway. But lying next to him in the darkness now she had new things to worry about.

Over the next couple of days, she tried to push it to the back of her mind but he, perhaps out of guilt, had become defensive. After breakfast as they sat on the palm-shaded terrace of the hotel reading the papers it was becoming hard to find anything to say to each other.

“The view’s nice.”

“Nice?” he echoed. “Is that all you can say?”

She rolled her eyes. “All right – it’s wonderful. Exquisite. Is that good enough?”

Looking down over the ancient port and the castle across the bay, she had to admit it really was beautiful. But with this atmosphere, she’d have been happier back home.

“Nothing’s ever good enough for you, is it?” he said.

They struggled on but most of their conversation had become forced and punctuated by awkward pauses. Why had it never been like this before? Perhaps because they had never really been alone before and never really talked, not in the way adults talked to each other. It had all been teasing and one-upmanship. Now they were playing at being grown-ups and it wasn’t working. Anger and disappointment swept through her.

“You’ve changed,” she said.

He held up the paper, which was full of stories about ruthless and ineffective air raids on Italian cities and the invasion of Egypt. “Yes, well in case you hadn’t noticed the world’s changed. Everything’s changing.”

“I know that,” she said at last. “I just don’t see why we have to change because of it.”

“You’re disappointed in me, aren’t you?” he said a few moments later.

“I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to. It’s the money thing, isn’t it?”

“Of course not. I keep telling you – it doesn’t matter.”

He laughed. “Don’t lie. It’s written all over your face. Well I’m sorry – again – but you’ve got me. I’m all there is.”

“And I’ve said it’s enough.”

It was maddening, like a living death. And yet when she looked at their surroundings everything was almost perfect. The air was scented with thyme and laurel and the last of the honeysuckle. The bay was beautiful. Some tiny adjustment must be all that was necessary to set them back on course, if only she could think what it was.

But over the next few days Gianni became even more dismissive and agitated. What was he hiding? He took long walks on his own, coming in late at night or leaving early in the morning when he thought she was still asleep. Was that normal on a honeymoon?

She was forced to spend the days in the company of an older couple who had evidently taken pity on her, which was so humiliating. They talked in intense low voices for what seemed like hours. Anyone would think they were the honeymooners.

“Where have you been?” she asked when he stumbled into the room stinking of brandy.

“In the bar. I met some people – had a few drinks.”

“With those men again? Why are you spending so much time with them?”

“I’ll talk to whom I like when I like,” he shouted like a sulky schoolboy when she asked where he’d been that night.

“All right, you do that.” She swept out of the room into the night with no idea where she was going and not caring. The air was balmy, and she felt a sense of release being outside. She walked through the moonlit rose

gardens, barely aware of their beauty. She heard his footsteps behind her and quickened her pace.

“Martina, please. I’m sorry. You know I love you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He caught her up and they walked wordlessly down through the steep terraces of pine trees, past lichened statues of emperors and goddesses to where a grotto overlooked the sea. They stood side by side at the stone balustrade and watched the moon dance on the water.

The sky and sea were indistinguishable now, as nebulous as the thing that was destroying their relationship. It was too dark to see the waves, but they could hear them crashing on the rocks and the boats in the harbour creaking. What was going through his mind? There was no point in asking. She had done so enough times, and his responses had been sharp and belittling.

“It’s all so fucking beautiful,” he muttered.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, catching her hand and kissing it and for a moment he had a look of the old Gianni about him, the boy she had grown up with. “I don’t know what’s happening to me. I don’t want to lose you.”

“You won’t.”

But the next morning she woke up alone again.

Thinking about it now on the balcony of Villa Leonida, perhaps Gianni had already been looking for a way out – from her, from his parents, from life in Santa Zita. If so, his prayers had been answered. Within a few months of being back at the villa he had joined up to fight in Albania.

So now he was out there fighting the Greeks. Why, she had no idea. Building a new empire, he’d said. She pictured him strolling through ancient ruins, the proud conqueror of a backward nation grateful to be part of the second Roman Empire.

If only they’d parted on better terms. She worried for his safety but couldn’t really say she was sorry to see him go. Perhaps this separation was what they needed. It would give them both a chance to think about things and start again when he came back, and everything was restored to normal.

After all, it would be over in a week, Cesare told her. The Greeks were undisciplined, woefully ill-equipped and didn't know how to fight. They needed bringing to order. "It's their own doing. Il Duce's ultimatum was perfectly clear. They refused to abide by it. How could we let them go on pretending to be neutral when all the time they were letting the British use their naval ports to attack our country? All they had to do was to allow our troops in and it could have all been avoided."

But progress seemed to be slower than expected. It was snowing now and why had the army retreated to Albania?

There must be a reason for the delay, he insisted, banging his palm down on the table with uncharacteristic force. "It's a strategy. It won't be long now."

But a shiver of guilt ran through her as she allowed herself the hope that it wouldn't be so straightforward as he believed, and that Gianni would need to stay away for longer.

Giftbooks4u.com

TWENTY-TWO

Martina

Walking down Via della Chiesa below the piazza towards the house where she'd grown up Martina was struck by how dark and narrow the street was. The houses seemed smaller, shabbier even than she had remembered, the washing that hung across the street looked like rags and the children sitting on the steps outside the houses looked like urchins. She knocked on the door. It seemed somehow wrong to open it herself although it was never locked. There was the usual kerfuffle inside, everyone pushing and shoving

to get to the door. But once they had opened it, her siblings stood there staring at her, suddenly shy.

Her sisters asked after Gianni, admired her hair and clothes and wanted to know about life in the villa. Their questions were polite but sounded as though they were addressing an acquaintance. Back at the wedding she had enjoyed the envious looks Rebecca and Alessandra had given her but now they seemed only relieved that she belonged to a different family. They seemed annoyingly cheerful without her and eyed her quizzically, as though wondering what her business was.

Inside the house, everything was smaller, flimsier, dingier than she had remembered. Her mother put on a good show of being pleased to see her, but her face was strained and puffy.

“Have you been crying?” Martina asked. “What’s wrong?”

“The factory burned down. Your father’s out of a job.”

Looking down at the valley out of the window, Martina could see that the framing factory had been reduced to a blackened shell.

“What happened?”

“No one knows.”

The owner hadn’t been seen since and no one expected to see him either. Her father would have to find work elsewhere, but he wouldn’t be able to mention his employer’s name. Couldn’t risk the association.

“Perhaps Gianni’s father could find him some work on the estate?” said Martina’s mother. “After all, we’re all family now.”

Her heart leapt at the thought of having him closer to her, but it was unfair to offer false hope.

“I doubt he’ll have anything suitable. Is there nowhere else you could try?”

Her father shrugged. “It was just a thought. There’s a new factory about thirty kilometers up the coast taking people on. We’d have to move of course. I’ve a cousin who lives out that way – he might be able to squeeze us in.”

“Can I come with you?” she found herself asking. The words were out before she could stop them.

Vincente evidently thought she was joking. “What are you talking about?” His expression changed from puzzlement to vexation as he rounded on her. “You’re the only one who’s got a future in this place now. You make

the most of it. For God's sake, can't you for once in your life be happy with what you have?"

He was right of course. She had to stop fooling herself, she thought on the way back to the villa. Things could never go back to the way they had been before the wedding. How proud her parents had been that she had married into a good family. They would never forgive her if she threw it away. The last thing they needed was another mouth to feed. Villa Leonida was her home now and she'd just have to get used to it.

Giftbooks4u.com

TWENTY-THREE

Martina

In the town an old man stopped in front of a poster of Mussolini and spat. The spit hit il Duce's bald head and ran down over his eye. Martina was pushed back against a shop as two uniformed young men rushed forward and knocked the old man to the ground.

They weren't more than boys, perhaps sixteen years old. She thought they were going to arrest him or merely give him a warning but one of them punched the man in the stomach. As he doubled over the other one kned him in the face.

He curled into a foetal position as they rained kicks on him – a series of thuds followed by howls of pain. When they stopped, he lay there. One of them shouted at him to get up. He tried but fell back. As though outraged at his disobedience the men set about him with their clubs. Martina was reminded of the painting in the little church below the villa in Santa Zita of

Mary brandishing a similar-looking club – but they weren't beating off the devil, just an old man.

His head hit the ground with a crack. Blood seeped out onto the collar of his coat and ran in rivulets across the paving stones. She jumped back in horror as some of it splattered her shoes and stockings.

His face twisted towards her as he writhed, his eyes pleading directly into hers. A boot stamped on his head. She looked away, shaking violently, trying to control her breathing. What could she do? If she walked off, it would show that she disapproved of what they were doing. There was no choice but to stand there and endure his cries.

She risked a glance at the other people watching. They came out of shops, leaned out of windows. Male passers-by shielded their female companions from the sight. Some looked shocked, like her, embarrassed to be witnessing the event and appalled at the violence. Others seemed to be enjoying it. More disturbing still, some seemed unperturbed, chatting and lighting cigarettes as though it was easier to pretend nothing was happening.

Still trembling Martina drew her coat around herself. She tried to concentrate all her energy on the dried golden leaves that skittered across the piazza and the slanting gold light cast on the walls of the buildings by the late autumn sun, but she could still hear the blows and the old man's moans. She felt her face jump with each groan. When they stopped the silence was worse. She glanced up. She couldn't help herself. The body was twitching. Then it was still.

The youths, their faces alight with adrenalin, gave the Roman salute. Someone stepped forward out of the crowd to help the man, but they shouted out a warning. Some people returned the salute. The boys looked her way. Martina felt nausea rising and a tingling sensation in her face. The sounds faded out around her. She retreated to the wall for support but didn't reach it in time. Her legs were hollow. The next thing she felt was someone catching her as she slumped, and a sea of faces peering at her full of curiosity and concern.

She looked up into the eyes of a man she didn't know. Everything else was a blur. She had to wait for it to all make sense. Where was she? Whose eyes were these?

After a few moments she saw that they belonged to a man. Young, a kind smile. He helped her to her feet. Holding her by the arm he helped her gently

across the piazza into the café where he brought her a coffee and offered her a cigarette. She couldn't face either, so he ordered a glass of water instead.

Someone brought her a napkin to wipe the blood spots off her shoes, but she couldn't remove the ones on her stockings. They would have to be thrown away. A waste but otherwise she knew she would be reminded every time she put them on of what she had seen, and she couldn't bear that. She sat and stared out of the window for a long time, seeing it take place over and over.

She had been getting easily upset about lots of things recently, but they seemed so insignificant now. It was unsettling in the house without Gianni, knowing that he was in danger a long way away. They hadn't heard anything from him although letters were clearly getting through because plenty of other people had heard from their loved ones. But when something truly terrible like this happened, it put everything else into perspective.

"You've been very kind. I'm sorry to be so silly."

"Not at all," the man said. "You've had a shock."

He picked up the blood-stained tissues and threw them away without ceremony, then sat down across the table from her looking at her with concern. "Don't try to get up too quickly. You should stay until you feel better."

Her legs still felt empty. His sympathetic words touched her, and she felt tears slide down her cheeks too quickly to catch. She hid her wobbly mouth with her hand. He fetched some more napkins. She felt his hand close on hers for a second as he passed them to her. The unexpected contact sent a shockwave through her and she snatched hers away.

He sat back in his chair, contemplating her. He had lines around his eyes that stayed when he smiled. He was handsome in an understated way – dark hair, a good jawline. Or perhaps she had been starved of company for so long she would see beauty in anyone who showed her kindness.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to offend you."

She closed her eyes. "You didn't. This thing's made me jumpy."

She had an impulse to reach out and touch him again, to feel the warmth of another human being after feeling alone for so long. She suddenly wanted to tell him everything.

I dread my husband coming home. I should never have married him. I feel a stranger every day in his home.

Instead, trying to make sense of it all, she asked, "Was he Jewish, the man they killed?"

He shook his head.

"A Communist?"

He cleared his throat. "I don't think his politics were that thought-out. He's been in and out of prison so that they could 'redirect' him. Obviously, they didn't break his spirit so I suppose they thought they would shut him up for good this time. Make an example of him in case others should choose to follow suit."

She shuddered. "It was horrible."

"Yes, it was."

The body had been covered with one of the tablecloths from the café. It was still out there, a lumpen shape under the bizarrely cheery red and white checks, a dark patch of sticky blood on the cobbles just visible when a corner of the cloth was lifted by the breeze. The spectators had melted away by now, leaving the grotesque thing alone in the piazza. A dog scampered up and sniffed at it, but his owner roared a threat at him, and he darted off again.

She put her head in her hands. "What's happening to this country? I just don't understand." She almost hadn't realised that she had been speaking aloud. She looked up startled and could tell that she had.

"I know what you mean," he said quietly, almost in her ear. "None of us saw it coming. Not like this."

And I didn't see that Gianni would be taken away so quickly, before we'd had a chance to put things right. Leaving me with this life I no longer recognise, living with people I don't like and who don't want me there. It's all such a bloody mess.

But she carried on talking about other things, things that didn't matter the weather, the surroundings, the history of the place. They stopped abruptly as the café door swung open. A middle-aged man came in, issuing a general greeting to which they both replied.

"I haven't seen you here before," said the man she was with.

"I live in Santa Zita. I came down to pick up some things for my father-in-law."

He nodded. "I have some relations up there. It's a pretty place."

All the time her mind kept flitting back to how she had seen the old man die right there in the piazza and she had his blood on her stockings.

The door opened again, and a pair of young militiamen came in, different from the ones she had seen earlier. They looked around them, then sat at the bar where they were served immediately. There were other people waiting but no one objected.

"I must go," she said at last. "I hadn't realised the time."

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" he asked, getting up and walking with her to the door.

"I'm fine now, really. Thank you."

He held the door open for her. Outside, she turned down a small street to avoid walking past the patch where the body had been. It had finally been taken away, and the stained paving stones were being scrubbed.

She caught her breath as she felt rather than heard someone come up close behind her.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't let you just go without asking your name." "It's Martina." Despite everything felt herself smile.

She held his gaze for some moments, then began to turn away again. He caught her by the shoulders and swung her back round. She should stop him. She thought about screaming. But as he drew her towards him, she forgot about everything else in her small life and allowed herself to believe she was someone else, the kind of woman that did things like this.

Carlo

“Who’s the steak for?” Carlo asked Anita the waitress.

“The lady in the flowery top by the fountain.”

Looking out through the dark restaurant into the bright piazza, he saw the woman fanning herself with her menu.

“*Bistecca alla fiorentina*,” he said, setting it down.

She grabbed it from him and started attacking it before he’d even let go of the plate. Feeling sorry for her, he wished her a good appetite and returned to the kitchen. A few minutes later, he heard a clatter and a shout.

“He took it – that bloody animal. Thieving bastard stole my steak right off my plate. I’d hardly started it.”

Carlo hurried out to see the broken plate on the floor and Bruno, a Labrador cross, tucking into something. He shouted at the dog, and he scampered off. Carlo stared after him, bewildered. “I’m so sorry. He’s never done that before. We’ll cook you another one.”

The waitress came up, hands on hips, glaring. “It wasn’t Bruno. The dog didn’t take it. She ate it.”

“Are you calling me a liar?” the woman demanded in English.

“She dropped the plate – I saw her. She’d already eaten the steak.”

There was a short silence and then a murmur went round the other diners. Carlo wasn’t sure what to do. He believed Anita but didn’t want the situation to turn ugly. He agreed to cook another steak for the woman. Anita refused to carry it out to her.

“She ate it herself. No wonder she’s so fat.”

“For God’s sake be quiet,” he snapped. The shocked silence around him told him it was too late.

“I heard that.” Heads lifted as the woman’s voice carried through the restaurant. “I understood every word.” She began to cry loudly and desperately, balling her fists against her eyes. One of the diners lent her some tissues and she started recounting her version of the story to anyone who would listen, between great choking sobs.

When the second steak was ready, Carlo gave it to the waitress.

“I’m not going,” she said, folding her arms.

“Take it and apologise.”

“No. She lied.”

“Anita, go.”

“No.”

He closed his eyes. “Just do it if you want to keep your job.”

He hadn’t meant to snap. All this worry about his mother was getting to him. Anita looked as if she wanted to kill him, but she went anyway, and he heard her murmur an apology.

A slap rang out. Carlo whirled round. Anita was clutching her face. The other diners watched in silence. He strode over, took back what was left of the second steak and asked the woman to leave. She did so, shouting expletives all the way and threatening to let everyone know about it in a review.

One or two of the other diners caught his eye and gave him sympathetic looks. Others buried their faces behind their menus convulsed in silent laughter, or just looked down at their plates, shocked.

Cass was appalled to hear he had cooked her a second steak.

“But you’re the one who keeps saying *The customer’s always right*,” he protested.

“Yes of course they are,” she replied. “Except when they’re wrong.”

Could this day get any worse? The Dutch couple in their thirties who had just sat down were prospective buyers who had popped into the restaurant earlier and asked to view Villa Leonida that afternoon. He hoped to God they hadn’t witnessed that little scene. And wasn’t that the English schoolteacher sitting next to them? Much as he liked her, she would be sure to start rabbiting on about curses and bang would go another chance of a sale.

He took a deep breath and emerged into the square, greeting the couple warmly.

“You may be more comfortable inside,” he said indicating the clouds that were gathering over Villa Leonida. “It looks like it’s going to rain.”

“We’ll take the chance,” said the woman, nodding over to two small boys who were chasing each other around the fountain, giggling and screaming in delight.

He ran through the day’s dishes with them. Later when their father called across to the children, they raced each other back to their seats almost cannoning into Sonia as she crossed the piazza.

“That was lovely – as always,” said the English schoolteacher as Carlo handed her the bill. She turned to the couple next to her. “I couldn’t help overhearing – you’re interested in the villa up there?” She motioned towards the house. “It has quite a colourful history that place. It’s supposed to be cursed, you know.”

The couple glanced at each other.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Carlo said.

“It’s well documented,” she insisted.

“What kind of curse?” the woman wanted to know.

“Usual story of unrequited love. I’m not sure if there was a duel or the man just shot himself in front of the family, but he cursed them as he was dying – something about death to the eldest daughters. The sad irony was that Antonella was pregnant with his child. The shock of watching him blow his brains out caused her to miscarry. It was a girl, of course. And I’ve heard quite a few baby girls have died there since. Not that that was particularly unusual in those days. But then of course there was that ghastly business with the English family whose bodies they found last year...”

Carlo remarked that the curse made a good story if unlikely to be true and warned her that the fine weather was forecast to break that afternoon. He turned back to the couple but noting the woman’s hands placed protectively over her swollen stomach was hardly surprised they were reluctant now to go ahead with the viewing. How was he ever going to sell this wretched villa?

Martina

Martina had suspected she was pregnant for some time. She'd only just begun to understand it on the day the old man was killed by those thugs. She hadn't expected the pregnancy to make her feel so unwell. Elena who had been watching like a hawk for the symptoms recognised them at once and was delighted, as though a part of Gianni would be re-born. Martina hoped it would be a girl.

The frost that normally surrounded Elena fell away, to be replaced by an oppressive concern for Martina's welfare. Suddenly she was fussing over her, cooking her special meals and encouraging her to eat more than her fair share. Martina was allowed to lie in late in the mornings and take a rest in the afternoon, with Elena continuing to see to the running of the house. She brought Martina ginger tea and assured her cheerfully each time she vomited that this was her body's way of protecting the baby from anything that could harm him.

But it turned out there was almost nothing Martina could safely eat. She began to worry she might have a more sinister condition. Elena was convinced that the cause of the sickness was not eating properly.

"There's nothing of you. People will think we're not feeding you."

Martina felt as though she was being fattened up like a pig. She looked at her swelling stomach with distaste. She'd never taken much interest in food before and took no enjoyment from it now but discovered that if she didn't eat regularly, she was sick. Smells were more acute and preparing food invariably made her ill so she was grateful when Elena told her to get some rest instead.

Alone in her room she had time to dwell. Sitting up against the monogrammed pillows, feeling the cool, silk bedspread under her and the

breeze from the open window rippling across her bulky body, she thought about all the things that had happened to her in the last year.

She sometimes thought of the incident with the old man spitting on the poster. The way his eyeball had rolled when he was lying on the ground. The way he twitched, and all the blood. Perhaps because it was the first time she'd seen violence up close it made everything about that day seem unnaturally sharp in her memory. That was the first time she had felt truly frightened. Now she was afraid most of the time.

She kept seeing herself back in the café with the man she'd kissed. The whole encounter had lasted only moments, but it seemed to take on a significance that was out of all proportion.

She'd fainted a few times since then for no reason at all. "If you must go out in the heat with an empty stomach..." Elena used to say. On coming round, she half expected to find the man's intense eyes searching her face and his reassuring voice. She imagined him lifting her up and carrying her away.

Sometimes in her imagination she didn't leave him in the street after that kiss but walked away with him arm in arm and disappeared through a door into a house she had never been to. After making love they'd lie in bed and talk about how their lives had gone wrong. They'd each climbed aboard the wrong train, but now they had a chance to jump off together.

If only she'd met him at a different time under different circumstances. Sometimes she imagined bumping into him again. If she went back to that same café, would he be there? No, she mustn't go back. It would only end in disappointment.

Even so, she occasionally thought she saw him, just a glimpse of his head in a crowded street, the outline of him on a bridge or the shape of his shoulders several rows in front at a concert. She saw him everywhere. Places he might have been and places he could not have known existed. Caught his reflection in a shop window, noticed his hand on a rail in front of her. The smell of his cigarettes, his footsteps in the street behind her. Every man reminded her of him – his smile, his gestures, his voice. She never had the urge to call out or confront him. That would spoil everything. It was enough to think she had seen him.

Once she thought she saw him in Santa Zita, sitting on the wall of the fountain. But that would be impossible. What reason would he have for coming all the way up here?

It was just a kiss. A stupid, unthinking kiss so why couldn't she get it out of her mind?

Her stomach felt big and hard and uncomfortable as she changed position. She sometimes caught herself wishing the baby was his instead of her husband's who didn't feel like a husband. Gianni was little more than a name now – a shadow that cast itself over her life. She could have carried on fooling herself all her life if she hadn't met the stranger. But she had to admit the truth to herself if nobody else – marrying Gianni had been a mistake. And she didn't want his baby.

Giftbooks4u.com

Martina

Once the sickness had passed, Martina felt a rush of energy and optimism returning. Although she felt much better Elena still insisted that she do nothing around the house but although she enjoyed being looked after, there were still times when she felt trapped. It seemed there was nothing she could do these days without it being commented on. It made her want to do something reckless to annoy Elena. Sometimes the whispering in the chimneys upset her so much she had to burst open those French doors and get some air.

The one thing that remained constant in her life was Irena. She of all people could be trusted not to change and Martina looked forward almost childishly to seeing her when she could think of a pretext to escape.

“What’s the old dragon been saying now?” Irena would ask and she would pour out her latest grievance about Elena.

She could ask Irena for hints and tips on how to do household things ordinary things which practical people like Irena picked up as children but which had passed Martina by. Somehow, they hadn’t seemed important.

“For God’s sake Martina,” her mother used to say, “it’s a good job you’re pretty because you can’t cook, you can’t clean, and you certainly can’t sew.”

Irena also kept her up to date with things that were happening down in the village.

“The Gramscis have left,” she told her as they sat on the wall of the fountain. “The professor’s been away on business for some time – now his wife and the children have gone to join him. The housekeeper says they left

in the middle of the night. No note or anything. I don't suppose we'll see them again."

They were getting used to people disappearing. There one day, gone the next. Sometimes they came back after a spell in a correction centre. Other times they didn't.

"There'll be no one left at this rate," said Martina. "I expect even you'll leave one day – be swept off your feet by some rich, handsome man."

Irena shook her head and laughed. "That's never going to happen – there's nobody left for me. The only eligible men have joined up. We'll be sitting here by this fountain in fifty years' time, you and I, and nothing will have changed."

She didn't mean to tell Irena about kissing the man in town – it just tumbled out.

"What were you thinking of?" Irena's eyes widened, and her nostrils flared the way they did when she was angry. "You had the pick of all the men round here. You chose Gianni. You made it happen. He's out there risking his life for you and the baby. What if this gets back to Elena and Cesare?"

Martina stopped. "It won't."

"No? How can you be so sure that no one saw you? It's not just about you anymore – you'll have a child to think of soon."

It was true. Anyone might have been there. Anyone might have seen her kissing that man. If word got back to Elena and Cesare, what would they do? Just because they hadn't said anything yet didn't mean they never would. Villa Leonida was her home now – and since her family had moved to be nearer the factory where her father now worked, she had nowhere else to go.

"Promise me you won't look for him," Irena said.

"I won't."

Anything to stop her nagging. She should have known Irena would react like this and not just because she had principles – was that a spark of jealousy?

Irena

Irena pressed the record button again. It was funny how she had been afraid of the machine at first. Now it was starting to become a friend. The best sort – one that listens without interrupting and then forgets when you’ve told them on command.

People judged Martina because of her manner. And yes – she could be selfish, stubborn, condescending, but she was different with me. I thought that somehow whatever happened she’d be true to me. She’d never given me any reason to doubt her. She promised me she’d never do anything to jeopardise our friendship, and I believed her.

When she married, I felt bereaved. It was as though I had had an arm ripped off. I knew she wasn’t going far, but it seemed like the end of our childhood. Everyone around me was entering a new life. Factories had stopped making one thing and were now making others. People whose only ambition had been to work on someone else’s land were suddenly busy, working at the Todt, joining the Army, even going into politics.

The children I grew up with who had struggled in class were now commanding respect as members of the militia. I seemed to be the only person who didn’t have a new life to go to. I was afraid Martina wouldn’t want to know me anymore.

Playing the recording back, something puzzled Carlo. It was the voice. It wasn’t so different from his mother’s normal voice, but it was the one she used for other people, not the one she used for him, her son.

“She’s forgotten,” he thought. “Forgotten I’d be listening.”

I needn't have worried. She wasn't happy. I'd never seen her so wretched, sitting there in those beautiful surroundings, all alone. She told me how it felt being under Elena's eye all day, as though she was an intruder in their home. She couldn't understand why Gianni never wrote. Everyone else had heard from their husbands and sons but at Villa Leonida they heard nothing.

Martina tortured herself half the time, wondering if he'd been killed or captured but also drove herself mad with suspicion about what he was getting up to. I felt sorry for her, but I must admit a tiny part of me rejoiced because I could see she was missing her old life. I had a little fantasy she might turn up on our step one night and say she'd chucked it all in.

The other girls were livid when Martina got Gianni. They'd always been jealous of her – said some awful things behind her back but never to her face. They didn't believe she really loved him.

As for me, my chances of getting married shrank even further as the war went on. The pool of eligible men was small enough in Santa Zita before the fighting broke out and even smaller during, so I buried myself in my studies. Martina teased me about it, saying I was married to my books but what else could I have done? Looking back now I suspect she was envious that I had the chance to learn things instead of playing the rich lady of the villa. I wish now I'd made more of an effort to understand her. If I had, who knows if things might have turned out differently?

Giftbooks4u.com

TWENTY-EIGHT

Martina

A few of the houses in Santa Zita had orange trees but the one at Villa Leonida was magnificent. The tree had been an engagement gift from Gianni. Sometimes it felt like the last real connection to him. Caring for the tree was becoming an obsession. As long as the tree stayed alive so would he.

Despite the prodigious rainfall that battered the village in autumn, and the harshness of the winters, the plant managed to flourish, and bore plump, sweet oranges from December to April. It stood in a loam compost in a large blue glazed pot on the long, wrought iron balcony at the back of the house, displaying fruits like giant Christmas baubles, and filling the living room with its fragrance when the French doors were open.

The pot stood on a little stand with wheels that Cesare had made especially for the plant and at different times of the day it was wheeled along the balcony to take full advantage of the sun.

Martina fed the tree weekly with a fertiliser made to Cesare's secret recipe. She watered it sparingly in winter and just enough in summer, inspecting the soil and leaves daily to look for any signs of scorching or yellowing, and pinching out the branches to encourage a bushy growth at the centre of the plant.

"You give that plant a lot of love," Elena said.

Perhaps it was guilt, but her words felt like a rebuke. *What about my son? Why couldn't you have fussed over him in the way you do that damned weed?*

Sometimes, as she stood at the balcony, Martina imagined Gianni walking up to the villa. As he looked up to the house from the road, the orange tree would be the first thing he'd notice. But sometimes the fantasy

would go wrong. When he lifted his face, it wasn't Gianni at all. Despite seeing his photograph every day on the piano, she found to her shame that it was harder and harder to recall his features. But the face in her imagination was clear.

It was the man she'd met in town the day the old man was killed. The one she'd kissed outside a café. If she couldn't remember Gianni's face properly how on earth could she recall with such precision the face of a man she'd only met once? In her head she'd probably tweaked and perfected his features over time. He was no longer real either.

Giftbooks4u.com

Martina

“The bump’s lower today. The baby’s on its way.”

Martina felt a surge of annoyance. Sometimes it felt as though her body belonged to Elena. As the birth date drew nearer, she found herself under even sharper scrutiny. The staring, the prodding, being followed everywhere – it was unbearable. Elena’s greedy eyes were constantly on the lookout for signs: “Are you needing the bathroom more often? Has the indigestion eased? Do you feel you have more energy suddenly? Let me see your feet – are they swollen?”

The questions were endless. Martina couldn’t think straight anymore. It made her feel more and more detached from her own body. But now she came to examine her stomach, she had to agree that the bump was lower, and the heartburn had eased. Elena flew into action making the arrangements.

“You can’t have the baby here,” she announced. “It’s too risky. We’re too isolated. If anything should go wrong...”

She let the awful possibilities hang in the air. It was obvious what was at the back of her mind. That wretched curse. How could such a smart, practical person who had no truck with superstition be taken in by an old wives’ tale?

“I don’t believe in curses,” Martina said. “They have no power over people who don’t believe in them.”

Elena took hold of her hands. “You’re wrong. Please listen to me for once. I can see you think it’s all nonsense but please don’t be like me, Martina. I was stubborn and opinionated just like you.”

The change in tone took Martina by surprise. Elena's voice was soft and seemed on the verge of breaking. "When you're young you think you know everything and nothing can hurt you. I ignored the curse and my first child, a girl, was stillborn. I was very ill myself. I nearly didn't survive." She drew in a long breath. "At the time I wished I hadn't."

Her face, usually so haughty, had such a vulnerable expression Martina had to look away. "I never even saw my baby. They said it was better not to, but I sometimes wonder about that. The birth took too long. She was in an awkward position – starved of oxygen." Her voice had dropped to a whisper. Her skirt rustled as she stood up and walked over to the edge of the terrace and examined the plants.

"Look, I'm not saying I believe the curse had anything to do with it. I don't. But what I do know is that it would make things easier for you if anything does go wrong. You won't have to deal with the guilt. I couldn't get it out of my head that there was just a possibility it was my fault. That all that terrible grief could have been avoided if only I had moved out of the house and stayed with a relative as Cesare had begged me to do."

She smiled at Martina, but she seemed to be fighting to control the emotion in her voice. "Now I have the chance to make sure it doesn't happen to someone else, however silly it sounds. I couldn't bear to lose my granddaughter."

It still seemed unnecessary but Elena's expression, the softening of her voice and the tears in her eyes made it hard to argue. But Martina had to bite her lip to stop herself saying what was really on her mind. If she left the house, would she ever be allowed back? She couldn't help the thought that this might be a trick to get her away. Why should that bother her when she hated the house anyway? But this was her home now. She had nowhere else to go. Dislike each other as they did, she, Elena and Cesare needed each other.

Martina

Nuns in immaculate white habits floated like doves through the marbled corridors of the maternity hospital in the convent below the villa.

“Get back to bed. Eat it up. No more reading until morning.”

Even Martina, accustomed to getting her own way, and Elena, who was used to giving the orders, had no sway when it came to extending visitor hours or varying the routine. The Sisters knew best.

Being here in the convent should be restful but she couldn't help thinking about all the young women incarcerated in these walls in the past against their will. “Difficult” girls whose fathers or husbands wanted rid of them. Girls with forbidden lovers or inconvenient pregnancies and obstinate girls who refused to marry the man chosen for them.

The view over the patchwork of rooftops and the piazza with its fountain was the same as the one from Villa Leonida although from a little further down. Elena and Cesare would be up there now adjusting back to their old lives, just the two of them, laying two places at the table instead of three. What if they preferred it that way? Sending her here might have been a trick to get rid of her. What if they wanted the baby but not her? What if gossip had reached them about Martina kissing another man?

It must be nerves – the whole business of giving birth and being a mother. But the thought wouldn't go away. It kept creeping back. Was she stuck here for good?

Sonia was born in April 1941, a few days before Athens fell to the Germans.

“She's beautiful,” said Irena gazing at the baby through the viewing window. “Perfect in every detail.”

But through her exhaustion Martina sensed other people's disappointment. A girl. Somehow, she'd failed to produce the grandson Elena was expecting. Elena behaved as though someone had died rather than been born and kept consoling her.

Elena's smile looked forced, as if she was being terribly brave. "Yes. A sweet little thing. She'll have plenty of little brothers to look after when Gianni comes back."

Everything would be better when Gianni was back. Surely now that Athens had been captured, he'd be allowed home on leave?

At least, Martina's fears about being abandoned in the convent turned out to be unfounded. When the three of them walked to church with the new baby on a mild spring morning, pear blossom falling on the pram like confetti, she was showered with compliments and gifts. No doubt they looked like a perfect family, but she felt an overwhelming sense of loneliness as though she had passed through the final doorway to a new world and there was no way back.

Giftbooks4u.com

THIRTY-ONE

Martina

"She's too cold. You mustn't let her sleep too long. You haven't winded her properly."

Elena's constant fussing was driving her mad. During the first few months she'd been encouraged to eat well – or as well as the rations and their own food stock permitted – and rest as much as she liked but now Sonia was ready for weaning, Elena's attitude seemed to have changed. It

wasn't anything she said so much as an air of impatience. The implication that Martina must pull her weight and make herself useful now that her job was done. She couldn't be lazy anymore.

"They only looked after me in the way you'd look after a machine," she told Irena during one of those glorious moments of escape, pushing the pram around the village. But their lives were so different now, how could Irena be expected to understand?

"Signor Marconi from the school has asked me if I'd like to teach," Irena told her. "He said I was his best student. As soon as I get my Party membership card, I can start training. After all, it's the closest I'll probably ever get to having children of my own."

"Don't be silly – this war isn't going to last forever."

After all, the radio broadcasts, always preceded by martial music, sounded so victorious, it was surely only a matter of time. Although she couldn't help the thought that whispered through her head.

And then what?

As the weeks passed with no word came from Gianni, a numbness settled inside Martina. He must have been offered leave. What father wouldn't want to come back and see their first child? The tension in the house had soared during the spring offensive but Elena had insisted throughout that no news was good news. But even now after the victory in June they heard nothing. Sometimes it seemed obvious they were all fooling themselves. Gianni was dead. If he wasn't he would have written.

She wrote to him frequently, mostly out of guilt, telling him about the minutiae of her day but reading the letters back always made her feel ashamed. How banal these things must sound to someone who had been on the battlefield.

"Your daughter's growing every day. She's smiling now and I know it sounds silly but I'm sure she's nearly able to talk. She's very noisy, chattering away, practising her sounds all day long. I show her your picture each night so that she will recognise you when she sees you. I think she knows it already. I can see you in her. It would be lovely if you could write her a few lines so that we can keep them and show them to her when she's older."

She hesitated as she sealed the letter. Was it fair to use Sonia to blackmail Gianni into writing? But it probably wouldn't make any difference. The baby helped distract her, but Elena was fiercely capable of managing her, leaving Martina the mundane tasks of boiling nappies and pressing clothes in between feeds.

Sonia was a hungry baby. She was underweight, and desperate for her own survival. It was impossible not to admire her spirit. Martina cherished her time with the baby, uncurling the little fingers, stroking her soft cheek. At least there was one thing that nobody could take away from her.

Giftbooks4u.com

THIRTY-TWO

Martina

Martina timed her visits to the park to coincide with the end of school so she could catch Irena. Looking through the open door of the school building, she saw the children in their clean pinnies bow their heads in prayer for il Duce. Irena caught her eye and smiled as she dismissed her pupils one by one.

"You seem to have them under control," Martina said, watching the last girl and boy disappear. "How do you remember all their names?"

"They're all different. Massimino a terror! Alessia's such a dreamer. Claudia a dreadful show-off." As they walked, she made Martina laugh with stories about their foibles and misdemeanors. "They're not bad children. It's so funny to think we used to sit in those same chairs – you, me and Gianni. Any news from Gianni, by the way?"

Martina quickened her pace. "None."

“Hard to believe in a few years Sonia will be in my class,” said Irena, gazing at the sleeping baby in the pram.

It took a while to get through the park because of all the people stopping to compliment Martina on the baby. “Doesn’t she look like her grandmother?” Martina made herself smile and thanked them through gritted teeth.

Back at the villa Elena was playing the piano. As usual she made it look effortless, her fingers sweeping over the notes as though they were dancing. She seemed moulded into the house. Would it be like that for Martina too one day?

But it was lovely to hear her play. For one thing it gave Martina the freedom to move around without being watched, away from the clipped comments and sharp looks. Sonia also loved the music. Even when the baby had worked herself up to a crescendo Elena only had to start playing and Sonia would stop, her expression startled but then you could see the calmness washing over her.

She started exploring the piano as she sat on her grandmother’s lap, delighted by the different notes her doll-like hand produced when planted on them. When Elena played songs and they all sang along, Sonia would clap her hands and bounce up and down in delight and in those moments, they were able to forget their differences.

The piano had been Elena’s mother’s. On it stood the treasured photographs, dusted daily. Martina found it hard to look at the one of Gianni in his military uniform - dignified but with his mouth parted as if about to break into a smile. But she made sure she showed it to Sonia each day, so she’d grow up knowing she had a father. Perhaps to Sonia, Gianni would always be a face on the piano. It was getting harder to imagine him being part of the household again.

“Play it again,” said Cesare when Elena finished. His breath was short as though he had been running.

Martina hadn’t noticed him sitting quietly in his chair. When she’d first known him, he rarely sat still but now he was doing so more and more often under the pretext of listening to Elena play. He didn’t say much but sometimes Martina saw him grimace as he sat down. The problem seemed to be that he could get his usual medicine.

A few years go Gianni's brother Sebastiano had been killed in Abyssinia. Elena's dark hair had turned grey in a matter of weeks, but she carried on with life. Now she held resolutely to the belief that unlike his brother Gianni was fine and would return safely.

"Gianni's different," Elena said. "He's the lucky one. He's always been a survivor. He should have died when he had TB as a child. He should have died when he fell out of that tree and right down the terraces. And he should have died when he got run over in town by that fool of a bank manager. But he's lucky. He'll survive."

Even if, as was supposed, Gianni had been taken prisoner by the Greeks, she was certain he'd find his way back to them now victory had been secured with a little help from the Germans.

Martina no longer knew what she thought about Gianni. If only he'd write just once so that they knew he was okay. The problem was at the moment she didn't know whether to love or hate him. If he'd decided the marriage was a mistake, why not just say so? She'd prefer it. At least she'd know then whether she should be feeling guilty all the time.

Giftbooks4u.com

Martina

There was nothing remarkable about the morning the telegraph arrived. Looking out from the balcony and seeing the boy come up to the house, a horrible feeling settled inside her. She just knew. For some moments she stood in front of the door not able to open it. But Elena moved her to one side, opened the door and took the telegram.

She watched Elena read and re-read the message as though the words didn't make sense. Her eyes darted back and forth across the page, her mouth repeating the words as though they were in a foreign language. As if by staring at them she could rearrange them and make them say something different. She kept whispering the words like an incantation until Cesare shouted at her to stop and she crumpled into his arms.

Killed in action.

Erased. As though he'd never existed.

Martina felt numb. She sat with her face in her hands, stunned, appalled and ashamed of the fact that there were no tears. As though nothing could reach her. She was aware of Sonia growing restless for a feed, but the cries seemed to be coming from miles away.

At last, she came to her senses enough to lift the baby, check her nappy and feed her, glad of the excuse to sit and stare into nothingness for half an hour. It still hadn't sunk in. What was her future now? Did she have to stay here in this gilded prison with people who were to all intents and purposes strangers now that Gianni had gone? But Sonia of course belonged here. She belonged to them too.

Over the next few days questions crowded her head. Had Gianni received any of her letters? Why hadn't he replied? Did he think of her at all when he was out there? Did he think of her at the end? She checked herself. What did it matter what he thought? And why couldn't she feel?

Gradually over the next few days the numbness wore off and the anger started to creep in. Killed in action. What action? What for? She wouldn't be fobbed off. She had to know what Gianni had been through, what he had seen, what he had felt. It couldn't have been so clean, so simple. You couldn't just dismiss someone's life in those few words, but no one seemed willing or able to give her more information.

For weeks Elena seemed unable to digest the news. "It's a mistake," she kept saying. "They do make mistakes. It happens all the time." There had been that fellow in the village opposite who had been found alive, hadn't there?

It was agonising, watching her tear open letters convinced each time that this would be the one that explained there had been a mix-up. Every time there was a knock on the door, she leapt up.

Confirmation came several weeks later when someone from Gianni's regiment returned to the village.

"It's Alvaro Paschi," Cesare said. "He's come to tell us about Gianni. He was there when it happened."

"No." Elena's face was white.

"Amore, we have to accept it. He's gone."

She closed her eyes, gave a long shuddering sigh took a deep breath and nodded.

Martina found herself staring at Alvaro, the school misfit. The boy she had made a fool of so many times. She felt a stab of shame remembering. But she reasoned he was one of those people to whom bad things always happened. The things she'd done surely would scarcely stand out when he looked back over his school days.

And yet how ironic that of all people to have survived it should be Alvaro. That he should have been the lucky one when it really counted.

Alvaro's eyes grew wide when he saw Martina and his face filled with colour.

"How are you?' she managed to ask.

He looked at her warily. His had purple shadows under his eyes. He had lost his hearing when a shell exploded close to him, so his voice sounded unnaturally loud and hoarse. He was taller and broader than she remembered but his clothes still hung off him. She had the feeling they were being addressed by a ghost.

Alvaro was nervous – that was obvious by the way he fiddled with a loose thread on his shirt. His eyes flicked towards Martina as he spoke, but the words were addressed to Elena – the usual story mothers were told.

“He was brave, you should be proud of him. He wouldn’t have felt a thing.”

“How did it happen?” Martina asked.

Alvaro stammered when he answered. How could someone who’d fought in a war be scared of her?

“Gianni stopped to help another soldier. He was killed instantly.”

He was lying. She could tell. Or at the least he was giving her a sanitised version of the truth. For the first time since Martina had received the letter emotion ripped through her.

When he left, she followed him. “Please. I just want the truth.”

When she eventually caught up with him, she grabbed him by the arm, but he shook her off with surprising force for his feeble frame, slipped through his door and slammed it.

“Please - I just want to talk.” She bashed the door with her fists until he opened it.

“What do you want?” He looked even paler and more hollow-eyed in the natural light than he had back at the house. His voice shook as he said, “I can’t bring him back. I’m sorry. What else do you want me to say?”

“I just want to know what really happened,” said Martina in a gentler tone. “Not the version you gave his mother to make her feel better. I want to understand what he went through.”

Alvaro shoved the door shut but she kept pushing back

“I know it can’t be easy. I’m sure you don’t want to go back over it. But please – I have no one else to ask.”

At last, he let her in. They stood awkwardly in the tiny room. He looked at the floor. His voice was barely audible. She felt like a bully again.

“Gianni went to inspect a building. There were two others close behind him. Inside was a pile of blankets. As they approached it the whole thing blew up. They were there one minute, gone the next.”

Her stomach churned as she waited for it to sink in “Is there no chance at all he might have survived?”

She wasn’t prepared for the reaction. Alvaro’s voice shook. “Are you calling me a liar? What do you think happened? Can’t you use your imagination?”

She jumped back as he lunged at her with his fist raised. “Leave me alone.”

He was mad. He was going to punch her in the face. She screamed as she brought up her own hands to cover her head.

A bout of coughing saved her. Alvaro doubled up. He was struggling for breath, spitting on the floor.

She backed away and ran.

“At least it was quick,” Cesare said putting his arm around Elena. “Gianni wouldn’t have known anything about it.”

“Are you saying we should be grateful?” Elena’s voice was ice cold. She sat at the piano, monstrous and fragile, staring into space. She played for three days with hardly a pause. The notes resonated through every room, drowning out the whispering in the chimneys. Her eyes were fixed ahead of her and Martina wondered what she was seeing. Perhaps a photo album, turning over the pages of Gianni’s life. But mixed up with Martina’s grief was a shame to which she hardly dared admit.

“It’s almost as if I willed this to happen,” she whispered to Irena when they sat in the park one evening.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s the second time I’ve been granted my wish. First to marry Gianni and then for him not to come back.”

Even saying the words, she hated herself. She would always grieve for the boy she grew up with, but the memory of their honeymoon still tortured her.

“Do you know what I think he was seeing that night he was so agitated looking into the sea?” she said. “I think he was having a premonition of his own death.”

Irena put her arm around her. “Come on, you can’t know that.”

But Martina clung to her until she had no more tears. “This house is cursed. Everyone says so. There’s an evil presence here and it’s rubbing off on me.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Irena said. “Evil doesn’t work like that. It’s something you choose to do, not something that rubs off on you.”

If only Martina could find these words a comfort. But if this darkness wasn’t coming from the house, seeping through its walls into her soul, then the truth was worse. Because that meant it must be coming from inside her.

Giftbooks4u.com

Martina

WINTER 1941

Elena plucked the howling baby out of Martina's arms and soothed her back to sleep, singing in a soft, sweet voice. Martina sensed her mother-in-law's darting glances over the top of Sonia's head as though she were saying *You're no good at this. You failed as a wife. Now you're failing as a mother.*

Left with nothing to do, she let herself out onto the balcony to feed the orange tree. The icy air made her shiver. She couldn't remember a winter as cold as this. The ice made the roads treacherous, cutting the village off from the rest of the world. Fuel supplies were low, partly because so many trees had been cut down so the land could be used for growing food and the log piles were raided almost as soon as they were left.

It was hard to think about anything other than being cold and hungry. She was used to going without sugar – it had been rationed before war broke out – but over the last year rice and pasta had been restricted, too, and meat was only available on certain days. Even when they had enough ration points, food was hard to find. The influx of evacuees who had fled to Santa Zita to escape the bombs in their cities were straining resources even further, and the price of non-rationed food had shot up. Most things were available on the black market but at prices they couldn't afford. Martina would have to take another long bicycle trip into town to barter oil and chestnuts for essentials – but that would lead to more accusations that she was neglecting the baby and leaving the long-suffering grandmother to do all the work.

She shook herself out of these thoughts. They were safe here at the villa. It must be so much worse for the troops, freezing to death in their trenches.

Despite the relentlessly positive news reports there were rumours about lack of kit and scarcity of food. She tried not to think about what Gianni must have gone through before he died. And for what? Although down in the village they were saying things about Gianni that couldn't be true.

Giftbooks4u.com

Irena

I first heard about them talking about it down at the bar. *“You can’t have seen Gianni. He can’t have come back from the dead.”*

They always stopped talking when they saw me. It was just whispers – half finished conversations that hung in the air, questions left unanswered, looks exchanged. Gianni’s death was a lie, a piece of trickery. But how was that possible? Had Alvaro made a mistake? Or was he lying?

The problem was, there were so many rumours back then. You didn’t know who or what to believe. Alvaro might have seen someone blown to bits and thought it was Gianni. Or he may have said so to cover for a man he had always been in awe of – perhaps in love with although none of us realised it at the time. It would have been easy in the confusion for someone to disappear. Two men blown apart – it could have been three. Either way the stories were getting round that Gianni had survived though nobody knew where he was.

It made me so angry that people had nothing better to do than put about these stories. If the wrong person got to hear of them and believed there was any truth in it, all our lives would have been in danger. A few weeks ago, these girls were gossiping about how Martina enjoyed playing the part of the grieving young widow. I told them what I thought of them for criticising her at a time like that and I hoped for their sakes they never got to know how it felt to be widowed. They looked a bit chastened but I’m sure the whispering went on when I wasn’t around. Now it had all started again. It could only be a matter of time before the rumours reached Martina. I thought it would be better for her to hear them from me.

“I wasn’t sure if I should say anything,” I told her. “I don’t suppose it can be true – and letting yourself believe in something like that can be dangerous.”

But she’d already heard. I went with her to speak to Alvaro. It was our only chance of getting to the truth. But his house was shut up. No one had seen him in a while.

“Why would Alvaro lie?” Martina kept asking. “Did he hate me that much? And if he’s alive, why hasn’t Gianni got in touch with me?”

None of it made sense. Gianni had been such a passionate believer it was impossible to imagine him deserting. Although, who knew how they’d react when they were out there, seeing heads blown off and limbs exploding? We agreed not to tell Elena or Cesare. It would be unfair to offer this sliver of hope and confusing for Sonia. Besides, there was Cesare’s health to consider. Discovering his son was a deserter would kill him.

As weeks and then months passed, the idea began to seem more like a fairy tale. If Gianni were alive, he’d have got in touch by now – found a way to get a message to Martina, even if he couldn’t face his parents. He must have known she wouldn’t judge him for staying alive. Her own instinct was to do anything to survive – she wouldn’t blame anyone else for doing the same.

News from the battlefield was far from positive and public opinion was turning against il Duce but you had to be very careful what who you were talking to. Still, we had no idea what was coming.

Giftbooks4u.com

Carlo

Cass found Carlo in the empty restaurant listening to the voice recorder long after the staff had left. “Here are the menus for Sunday. They look pretty good don’t you think?” He took one and ran his eyes over the dishes. Stuffed quails’ eggs, asparagus lasagne, roast lamb, raspberry parfait, *colomba* and prosecco. “Perfect,” he said handing it back. “Except you’ve put *basilica* instead of *basilico*.”

“What?” She snatched it back. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m sorry. I’m telling you now, okay? A basilica’s a church. It’s a funny thing to find in your pasta.”

“Yes, thank you – I know what it means,” she snapped. She turned to go but paused at the door as if weighing up whether now was a good time to speak her mind. “By the way, your mother seems quite worked up. Do you think you ought to lay off the memories for a bit?”

“What do you mean?”

She puffed out her cheeks. “Just that it seems to be stressing her out, trying to recall these things.”

He sighed. “If I stop now, all that history will be lost. I mean, it’s our memories that make us what we are.”

Cass frowned. “I’m not sure that’s right. Isn’t it our choices that make us who we are? And to be honest I don’t think it’s doing you much good either. We’re run off our feet and you’re so distracted.”

“Mmm?”

She banged the door in disgust.

Martina

From the summer of 1943 things had become so confusing. In the bar, anger exploded over the appalling losses in Russia and North Africa – which might have been avoided if their troops hadn't been tied up in occupying Greece. Why had they been dragged into this war when they didn't have the resources to defend their own cities from being bombed? Where were the anti-aircraft guns and air raid shelters they needed? Why hadn't they been better prepared? There had been whispers for months of a growing movement to overthrow Mussolini but then so many things were talked about. It would probably never happen.

On 19 July, shortly after the Italian troops had surrendered in North Africa the Allies landed in Sicily. Cesare shook his head as he slapped the newspaper down on the kitchen table.

“Liberators? Is that what they call themselves? Assassins, more like.”

But seeing the pictures of Sicilian locals kissing the Allied soldiers and Roman buildings in ruins, Martina couldn't help feeling a flicker of hope.

A few days later as she opened the French doors onto the balcony, a barrage of noise hit her. In the village below, shutters were banging open, people were running into the piazza shouting, whooping, embracing each other. A crowd was spilling out of Bernado's bar punching the air and chanting.

“Close those shutters immediately – you'll let in the mosquitoes.”

Ignoring Elena, Martina ran down the path to the piazza. Red flags hung from windows. Fascist emblems had been torn down. People were dancing, some with children on their shoulders. A picture of Mussolini floated down in front of her. Looking up, she saw more fluttering from the windows above. As they landed, people stamped them into the ground.

“What’s going on?” Martina asked the doctor’s wife.

“Haven’t you heard?” The woman’s face was pink with excitement. “Il Duce’s gone.”

“Gone? Gone where? You mean he’s resigned?”

“He had to. The Fascist Grand Council voted him out.”

“Can they do that?”

“They’ve done it – his son-in-law among them. The King’s dismissed him, and he’s been arrested.”

“Where have they taken him?”

“God knows. Who cares? This country’s in bits because of him.”

The atmosphere was jubilant – people unleashing their pent-up anger at the state of the country and the way the war was going. Bernardo couldn’t serve the drinks fast enough.

“But what will happen now?” Martina asked anyone who would listen. “Are we still at war?”

The noise dropped around them as though someone had turned down the music.

“The King’s put Marshal Badoglio in charge,” said Bernardo. “He’s talking about continuing the war but it’s over.”

“Italy will make peace with the Allies now,” a bearded man said. “Chase out the Germans – get rid of the fascist scum.”

Others cheered. They’d had enough of the fighting. They wanted their sons and husbands back – those who’d survived. Just audible over the din, a middle-aged woman shouted, “The English killed my two sons in Africa. How am I supposed to make friends with the people who did that?”

Another woman dragged her daughter away muttering, “It’s not over yet. The Germans aren’t going anywhere. Be careful what you say.” Another was in tears, shaking her head.

But it was hard not to get caught up in the elation. Martina hardly dared hope. An end to all this – an end to Fascism. It couldn’t come soon enough. Then maybe life could return to normal.

After the fall of Mussolini, the Axis troops evacuated from Sicily to the mainland. On September 3rd the Allies crossed to the mainland from Sicily with more following at Salerno. Surely now it could only be a matter of time?

Huddled around the radio in Bar La Fontana, the residents of Santa Zita listened to Badoglio's announcement – the Italian troops would cease all acts of hostility towards the Allied forces but would oppose other forces.

"Other forces? Does that mean we're at war with Germany now?" Martina asked but someone shushed her. No one seemed to have an answer. Eventually, the man beside her shrugged. "If the Allies can help us get the Germans out of this country that's good enough for me."

"How can it be fine?" A veteran in the corner spat on the ground. "We'll become the battlefield for them to fight it out on."

Martina pulled Sonia onto her lap. Bernardo gave the child a homebaked *cantuccio*. A woman chucked her under the chin. "*Bambolina!*"

Yes, at two years old Sonia did look like a little doll. Her soft hair had grown just long enough to tie into bunches and her arms and legs had turned a deep brown in the sun. She'd outgrown the dress Martina made for her out of some curtains, but Elena had tacked a ribbon around the bottom to make it last a bit longer.

The little girl sucked on the almond biscuit, following the animated conversation with her large, dark eyes. If only the fighting would stop, Sonia could grow up in a peaceful country that wasn't torn apart by war and politics. For the first time in age, Martina felt hopeful. Surely now there was a chance?

Martina

“What did I tell you?” Cesare thundered at breakfast under the pergola.

“They’ve made things worse for us, not better.”

Martina’s chest tightened as she read the news stories. Hitler was incensed by what he saw as Badoglio’s act of treason in signing the armistice. Although the Allied invasion took the Germans by surprise, they’d already been putting their troops in place and were able to seize control of the Italian forces in Italy, south of France and the Balkans. Within a few days most of Italy except the far south found itself under German occupation.

Prisoner of war camps were abandoned by their Italian guards and taken over by the Nazis, who sent the Allied inmates to German camps. POWs who escaped were joining the growing resistance movement in the mountains and fleeing the country with help from the partisans.

“I hope none of those POWs turn up here begging for shelter,” Elena said. “If they do, send them away. Anyone caught helping them is being put to death.”

The day after the armistice, to avoid capture by the Germans, Badoglio and the royal family moved to the coast where a government was set up under the protection of the Allies, leaving Rome to its fate. The following day on 10 September the Germans took the capital. Seeing pictures of the tanks rolling into Rome sent a chill through Martina. She sensed things were about to get worse.

“I told you he wasn’t finished.” Cesare set the newspaper down with a flourish.

Martina caught her breath as she read the headline. Mussolini was free again, rescued by the Germans from the mountain hotel in the Abruzzo where he'd been held prisoner.

Silence fell as the three of them read the words again, contemplating what this might mean. Martina couldn't look at her parents-in-law. If Mussolini's government was reinstated, what would happen to the people who'd been celebrating its demise?

Eventually they heard that the new Italian Social Republic government had been set up in Salo, Lake Garda.

"So, we have two governments now?" Elena asked, frowning.

Martina bit her lip. She had to be careful what she said even in Villa Leonida. Cesare still believed in Fascism. If she dared voice a different opinion he'd explode. "My two sons died for this country," he said. "Your husband died for this country. How dare anyone say their sacrifice was for nothing?"

It must be happening in houses all over Italy – people within the same village or even the same family supporting different sides. But every Italian now had to make a choice and that sometimes meant turning against the people closest to you.

Giftbooks4u.com

THIRTY-NINE

Martina

1943

As the weeks passed and Italy officially declared war on Germany, fear dug in its claws. Thousands of Italian soldiers were drifting home having abandoned their regiments. Would Gianni be among them? If he hadn't

already been picked up and sent to a labour camp in Germany like so many, he must choose between fighting for the Italian fascist army or laying low and joining the partisans. Either way he'd be fighting his own people.

Week after week passed with little sign that the Allies were making any progress since taking Naples in October. Nothing changed much during the winter except that the cold and hunger had become unbearable.

"What's taking them so long?" Irena said in the bar one morning.

"They should have stopped the German troops before they evacuated to the mainland," said Bernardo. "Now they're much harder to fight off. They won't be able to do any more in this weather anyway."

A renewed offensive after Christmas didn't seem to make much progress. Each month seemed like an eternity but hearing about how people were living down south, Martina was starting to fear the liberators too.

The Allies' bombs had flattened towns, leaving those who survived homeless and starving. Villages were being evacuated and turned into battlegrounds. When they returned to their homes, people found only rubble. Families starving because they didn't dare go into their own fields as the Germans had laid mines as they retreated. The thought that these things could be repeated around Santa Zita was too awful to contemplate.

All she could do was try and blot it out by focusing on everyday things. Growing vegetables, feeding and slaughtering animals and keeping the trails to the chestnut tower clear of the tenacious brambles and acacias that thrived despite the weather. She made clothes for Sonia out of scraps of fabric and used any leftover pieces to patch her own.

Apart from the emotional pain, there were the practical worries. Gianni's father was too weak to manage much of the work and there were no young men left that could offer their help. After coming back from another shopping trip emptyhanded, Martina slumped at the table, sinking her head onto her forearms.

"What did you get?" Elena asked.

She tried to keep her voice level. "Nothing. There was nothing to buy."

Elena drew in her breath. "We can't go on like this. What use is a ration card if there's nothing to buy with it? If we can't produce enough food of our own, we'll have nothing to exchange."

Gunfire made them both cower, but peering from the balcony they could see Cesare with his gun hunting for anything that they might be able to eat. He shot and trapped all kinds of animals and birds these days for Martina to

cook. Frogs, snails, squirrels all went in the pot. She often didn't know what she was eating and didn't dare ask. They ate these meals without a word, sitting in the shabby dining room.

A knock on the door made them jump.

"Who is it this time?" Elena moaned.

"I'll go." Martina steeled herself before opening the door. You never knew these days who to expect. "I'm sorry. We can't help you."

"Please," asked the elderly man. He was rake thin and wheezing from the climb up the hill. "I have money."

But what use was money these days? "We don't need money, we need food. I'm sorry."

She tried not to notice the tears in his eyes as she shut the door with a polite smile. What food they had, they couldn't store because getting hold of salt to preserve it was impossible and anyway, they had to eat it before someone stole it or demanded it off them. If it wasn't the soldiers, it was the partisans hiding in the hills who helped themselves to chickens from the yard or the potatoes in the cantina. An endless trail of people came to the villa asking for food. Even if she'd been able to help, was it safe to do so?

"You never know who you were dealing with," Elena warned.

These men weren't from the local area. Half the time Martina didn't recognise their faces. They all wore different uniforms with the badges torn off. And the way they spoke made her both frightened and indignant. They had no ration cards so had no choice but to beg, she understood that, but if they didn't get what they wanted, they could soon get aggressive.

"Everyone seems to think they have more right to our own food than us," she fumed, clearing away the dishes.

"Don't be taken in," Elena said. "A family in Santo Stefano gave some partisans a meal and a bed for the night. They were found in their beds next day with their throats cut."

Martina

Because the balcony at Villa Leonida was so high above a sheer drop, the oranges were not stolen from the tree at night, unlike the fruit and vegetables in the orchard below and the animals in the yard. So, Martina was able to give Sonia oranges to eat most of the year, which must surely be the reason for her daughter's lovely skin and clear eyes.

She hugged the little girl close, feeling the Sonia's ribs as she wound her bony arms around her waist. Her own ribs were visible too and she was walking more slowly these days, like an old woman. She tried not to look in the mirror. It was always a shock to see the limp hair and hollow cheekbones. She'd passed the stage when she could get away with having a fashionably small waist. Scrawny was a more accurate description. She covered her chest with a sense of self-loathing.

If Gianni was really out there somewhere it was no surprise he hadn't come back to her. He would hardly find her attractive these days, would he? Nonetheless, she continued to care religiously for the orange tree.

From the balcony Martina could see the whole of the valley, as the river meandered its way through the town, and she could count no less than seven tiny villages perched on top of the surrounding mountains, clinging precariously to the side of the hill so that they looked as though they might topple down at any moment.

But at night when the curfew was imposed and the villages under blackout, all she could see was stars. She could hear the planes though, and the occasional thud of bombs as the fighting began to intensify between the Allied troops and the Germans. The end had to come soon.

Giftbooks4u.com

Irena

Everyone knew, or thought they knew, one of the partisans up in the hills around Santa Zita. From time to time someone in the village was arrested for their anti-government views. We saw them dumped on their doorstep in soiled clothes, caked in blood. Afterwards they either went into hiding or joined the fascists although whether they'd really changed sides or were infiltrating them to pass on secrets was anyone's guess. There were so many double and triple agents, the confusion was terrible. You didn't know who to trust. And it wasn't just the men – women and schoolchildren were involved, smuggling weapons in prams and delivering food parcels by bicycle – or telling on their neighbours.

Someone told me Gianni was with the partisans. I had no idea if it was just gossip that had got out of hand. I said nothing to Martina. It was hard to believe he could be living so close to the villa and in such primitive conditions, but I was starting to think that anything was possible.

We were coming through the arch into the piazza one morning when we saw the trucks.

"What's going on?" Martina asked one of the brothers from the restaurant.

"The Germans are moving in. They're helping themselves to food, so you'd better hide your animals," he said.

"That's not a good idea," muttered Bernardo, wiping down his bar tables. "You'll only anger them. Refusing them anything is taken as an act of disloyalty."

But over the next few weeks we got used to seeing them sitting in the restaurant or propping up Bernardo's bar. They played cards with locals, sang songs and passed round photographs of their families. Unlike us they could afford to buy meals and drink good wine. Once we saw them handing out sweets to children. Sonia put out her hand for one, but Martina pulled her away and she burst into tears.

"Let's see what's going on over there," I said to distract her.

A little knot was gathered around the door of Santa Zita church on the other side of the piazza. As we got closer, we saw it was a list of crimes punishable by public hanging: being caught out after curfew, tearing down posters, helping partisans. Martina hugged Sonia to her, but we tried to hide our emotions.

"They wouldn't really kill someone for things like this," whispered Marisa, wife of the outspoken Giorgio. "It's just their way of getting us to comply."

Her companion agreed, "They need us on their side. They can't afford to turn us against them."

"I wouldn't bet on it," said the blacksmith's daughter.

As we turned away, a German soldier, flint-eyed, pink cheeked and beardless, offered us cigarettes.

"No thanks," said Martina.

But she said it less sharply than she normally would have done. Despite my feelings about the Germans his accent made me smile. He looked so young – just a boy. I had the feeling he didn't want to be there any more than we wanted him there.

"What's your name?" he asked Martina.

She studied him for a moment, then told him, eyeing him coolly before adding, "What's yours?"

"It's Dieter."

"Short for Dietrich, I suppose?"

"That's right." His cheeks turned even pinker. "I just wanted to tell you that I find you devastatingly beautiful and I would be honoured if you would show me around the town."

Martina burst out laughing. "I'm afraid I'm busy."

But he could tell she wasn't, and she didn't move away. He laughed too, a little disconcerted but not apparently offended. He held out the cigarettes. "Would you like one?"

"No thanks."

But on our way back to the villa we found that he'd slipped a few cigarettes into her bag.

I was furious with her afterwards. That list of crimes and punishments was still going round my head. "What were you doing back there, flirting with that boy? You saw the notice on the church."

She just tossed her head the way she used to. "We were just talking. You shouldn't take everything so seriously."

After that the young German often called out to her. She'd reply rudely but with a twinkle in her eye. I caught her glancing over her shoulder as she walked away to check that he was still watching her, and I noticed that from time to time she had new stockings and lipstick and other luxuries.

I had a sinking feeling that her recklessness would get us into trouble one day.

Giftbooks4u.com

Martina

Looking up from the piazza on her way back from the shop, Martina saw men in uniform standing on the balcony of Villa Leonida.

“Looks like they’ve have chosen your place to accommodate some of their men,” Bernardo said, following her gaze. “You’ll have to find somewhere else to live.”

“What? They can’t do that.”

“No?” He smiled grimly. “How are you going to stop them?”

It shouldn’t be such a shock. Of course, they’d want the most prestigious house in the village and Villa Leonida’s commanding position with views from either side of the ridge, made it a perfect choice. But what if Cesare refused? Sonia was up there with her grandparents. Heart thumping, she tore up the path.

At the top, she cannoned into two men coming out of the gate. They greeted her courteously but one of them made what she guessed was a suggestive remark because the others laughed.

She found Elena alone in the drawing room.

“What’s going on? Where’s Sonia?”

Elena pointed to the ceiling. “She’s fine. Slept through it all.”

. The men had been polite and respectful, she said but the tiny break in her voice sent an icy feeling through Martina. The idea of being turned out or squeezed into a couple of rooms while foreign soldiers had the run of the rest of their family home was unbearable.

“But they’re not coming. Not this lot anyway. For some reason they decided they didn’t want it.”

It seemed too good to be true. For days, they jumped at every noise in case the soldiers had changed their minds again but eventually, word reached them via a neighbour, that they’d chosen a house across the valley. After the initial relief, Cesare seemed quite affronted by what he took to be a snub.

“Villa Leonida’s in much better condition. That house hardly ever gets the sun. It’s no surprise that they’ve never been able to grow much over there.”

“That won’t bother them,” Elena replied. “They can take food whenever they want it. Those two brothers in the restaurant don’t even bring them a bill after their lavish meals.”

Standing on the balcony, watching them moving in, Martina felt herself slump in relief. But what about next time?

They had to plan for the possibility that it would happen again. “We’re not leaving,” Cesare said. “The only way I’m leaving here is in a box. It’s different for you, though. We can’t have Sonia growing up in a house full of foreign soldiers. You’ll have to take her away.”

But where could they go? Martina’s family was living in a flat that was much too small for them already since they’d moved to be closer to her father’s work at the munitions factory. Their old home in Via della Chiesa stood empty and dilapidated – there was no way they could live there.

“I have some relatives who might be able to take the child,” whispered Elena. “Just until the end of the war.”

“No.” Martina drew Sonia to her. She’d never let that happen. Whatever happened, Sonia was staying with her.

Carlo

When Carlo got back from the restaurant his mother denied any knowledge of the recording device.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never seen anything like that.”

But looking for biscuits later, he found it inside the tin. She was so forgetful these days. He tried to fight back the suspicion, but it kept creeping back in. Had she hidden it here on purpose? What didn’t she want him to hear? Glancing at his mother to make sure she wasn’t looking, Carlo picked it up and slipped it into his pocket.

Irena

Martina was playing a dangerous game stringing this young German along. It reminded me of how she used to flirt with Gianni when they were young. She obviously hadn’t learned anything from that mistake – and this had the potential to be so much worse.

We saw less of each other these days. Our lives had taken such different paths, it was harder to find things in common. I had my job. She had the villa. I was happy teaching at the school. I loved seeing that magical moment when it all made sense to a child. That was enough for me. I didn’t need to fall in love to be happy.

But just when I thought my life was never going to change it was turned upside down. If my Great Aunt Lucia hadn’t when she did, it would never have happened. My mother said we must go to her funeral which would

mean staying with my grandmother for a few days although she wasn't in the best of health herself. Oh, the palaver of packing up to go there! My mother acted as though we were going away for a month, but we hardly ever went anywhere in those days and with the lack of public transport it took forever to get there.

After the funeral which I don't remember much about – when you've been to as many as I have, they get mixed up – we crowded around the table in my grandmother's dark little living room. It was an old person's flat, smelling of polish and tobacco, and crammed with ornaments and heavy furniture. A clock ticked away on the shelf, chiming every quarter hour. The table was so highly polished you could see our reflections. It was strange to see so many faces from my childhood, the same and yet different.

There was a false jollity I found hard to muster. I never feel like eating or drinking after a funeral – it seems disrespectful. But my aunts had pooled their ration books and laid on a feast, although to tell the truth the food was quite meagre.

It was the last place you'd imagine falling in love.

Carlo switched off the Dictaphone. It was obvious by now that Irena no longer considered it to be his property. He felt like a boy again, sneaking biscuits when her back was turned. But it wasn't what she was saying that intrigued him so much as the way she talked. As if she'd forgotten why he'd given it to her. She seemed to be talking to the machine now, not to him.

He laughed at himself. Was he jealous of a machine?

Irena

Most of the relatives were ancient but my mother's cousin had brought her son with her. He was a doctor, just back from the Eastern Front where he'd been wounded. He looked fully recovered to me, but perhaps the wound was on the inside. I was given strict orders not to talk to him about it.

I'd met him before at other family events, probably other funerals, when I was younger. He was one of three boys, and I remembered his brothers as being bolder, funnier, louder but couldn't recall anything about him.

We had soup, one of those robust Tuscan soups with cabbage and beans and pasta that could be stretched to suit any number of people. We ate in silence except for a clinking of spoons in bowls and my Aunty Vittoria blowing over hers to cool it down. Then gradually everyone started talking at once, the way they always had.

He was quieter, more thoughtful than I remembered. A little older than me, very well-educated, and good-looking but not in the way that would turn heads, not like Martina for example. He wouldn't be the first person you noticed in a room but he would be the one you'd remember afterwards, as though he'd left a space behind.

I wish I could describe him. I want you to be able to see him just as I can. I was an avid reader as you know but I've never been a writer. Never spent time building a picture out of words. And even if I could I doubt I could do him justice. Still, I'll try.

There was something about him – a quiet intensity. And an understated beauty that revealed itself slowly. I think it had something to do with the subtlety of his expressions and the light in his eyes as though he were always harbouring some private joke.

Even now, I'm thinking, was his hair brown or blond? Were his eyes green or brown? The answer is something in between. That was the thing about him – nothing was obvious.

Sitting squeezed between my elderly aunts, he listened to their banal chatter, politely fielding their enquiries and responding to their endless list of ailments with patience and courtesy when he must have had many better things to do and more interesting people to spend time with.

That's when I fell in love.

Carlo had the uneasy feeling now that he was intruding. Should he switch off and leave Irena to her memories? Probably. But he wasn't going to.

Irena

The more I watched him, the more attractive he was. They dawned on me slowly, the little things that made him handsome – like the sudden sensation when he smiled of being bathed in warmth and light.

“Irena!” My mother’s voice burst through my thoughts. “Are you even listening to Giovanna’s story?”

Giovanna’s story was long and tedious, and I’d heard it many times, but I forced myself to listen.

“Gangrene it was,” she repeated for my benefit. “His toes completely black. Terrible. He had to cut them off himself. It was the only way to survive.”

My aunt’s face was scrunched up like an old paper bag, the lines channelled into her skin, bearing witness to her careless attitude to the sun. She was the cautionary tale in our family, the most rebellious of the sisters, the one least willing to accept convention and inherited wisdom. The one I was accused of being like.

She was held up as an example of the ill that can befall a person who doesn’t stick to the proper path. Next to her, he looked like a god. He could have had any number of women hanging round him but instead he let this old crone bend his ear. Why did he put up with it?

From time to time his eyes flicked towards me, a ghost of a smile playing around his lips. I gave him what I hoped was a sympathetic smile in return but in all honesty, it was probably more of a simper.

I had the sense my mother and Aunty Aurelia might have been trying to set me up with him but dismissed it as nonsense. They were as resigned as

I was to my staying single. Every family needed a daughter who stayed. I couldn't say I relished the idea of devoting my later years to caring for elderly relatives, but all that seemed a long way off.

"Irena's a bookworm," my mother said at one point with a roll of her eyes.

"Me too," he replied. "What do you like to read?"

I mentioned the book I was reading. He hadn't read it but loved other books by the same author. I loved his constrained enthusiasm, the way he chose each word with care. It made me feel I was only seeing a glimpse of what he really was and there was much more to learn.

I'd never met anyone who was as passionate about books as I was. It was fantastic to be able to talk about something in a story and for him to recognise it straight away and quote lines back at me.

"Listen to those two," my aunt cried. "What on earth are they talking about?"

The others gradually lost interest and carried on their conversations around us. As the evening wore on, it felt as though a spell had been cast and they were outside the invisible dome that encased us. I felt them all melting away.

The only time I saw a chink in that restraint was when Aunt Vittoria told him he was lucky to survive his injuries. "God saved you."

His face tightened. "I don't think it works like that."

"Well, if it wasn't God, it was Fate. It wasn't your time to go."

He rounded on her a little too sharply. "Do you really think it's all preordained? I'm afraid that's nonsense." Colour rose in his cheeks but he added in a kinder tone, "The only fate I believe in is the choices people make."

Giftbooks4u.com

Irena

The next afternoon he called round to the house to check on my grandmother.

“I’m glad I caught you,’ he said. “I was wondering if you’d like to come for a walk? I could show you the fresco I was telling you about last night.”

I tried to make it look as though I had other possibilities to consider but I didn’t want to leave it too long in case he changed his mind, so I grabbed my hat, and we went.

Sitting in his car after visiting the hypermarket Carlo switched off the machine. Why had his mother hidden the device from him? It was obvious now she distrusted his motives. Perhaps in a way she was right to. How much right does anyone have to someone else’s thoughts? But surely a son should be able to learn from his mother even if that son is old enough to be retired?

Perhaps Irena felt embarrassed by something she’d done or said back then. Carlo had often suspected she was holding something back although she’d drummed into him that he must always be truthful. But now he had the sense that he was close to finding it.

As he parked the car, Cass came out of the restaurant, with her face flushed and hair escaping from its bun. “Where have you been?”

“Sorry, I got held up.” Carlo kissed her cheek. Why couldn’t he admit he’d been sitting in the car park listening to the Dictaphone?

She wasn’t fooled. She bit her lip but then evidently decided to say what was on her mind. “Carlo, I know your mother’s past life is interesting, but

we live in the present even if she doesn't. I mean come on – you've got a restaurant to run."

"I'm sorry. I'm here now."

She gave him a resigned smile and handed him a plate of bruschetta to take to one of the tables.

Irena

It started with that walk the day after my grandmother's funeral. There must have been other people in the streets as we wandered down to the main piazza – children playing, mothers pushing prams, old men playing cards under the trees – but I didn't notice any of them. It was such a release to be away from the clucking of my grandmother and all the aunts and the smell of cabbage in that dingy flat.

I was aware of my heels clicking on the cobbles, the rustling of his coat as we walked. We brushed against each other as we walked, and I noticed for the first time how tall he was. What did we talk about? Everything I suppose. Books, art, history. The war, After the war...

He took me to see the frescoes he had told me about the evening before. They were as lovely as he'd described. The faces, the hands – so real the centuries seemed to fall away. It was as if they had been painted yesterday. Their beauty was almost frightening in the dim light of the church.

"It's a tragedy that all these works of art are being left to rot. Some of them won't survive this bloody war. That painting in your village of the Santa Maria del Soccorso is in a shocking state these days."

"How do you know that?" I asked. "I thought you hadn't been to Santa Zita since you were a child?"

He looked thrown and I felt bad about challenging him. "I must have heard about it from someone."

I'd like to have asked more questions, but the door burst open, making us both jump, and a party of school children filed in to escape the cold weather.

On the way back, we crossed the river and climbed the steps to marvel at the view. It felt as though it had been put there for us. We sat in some

gardens that had been turned into allotments until the air grew cold. He noticed the goose bumps on my arms and put his coat around my shoulders as we walked back.

When we kissed, I felt weightless, as if I had been lifted off the ground. I've no idea how long we stood there in each other's arms. But afterwards when I looked up, his eyes were searching mine with a strange, intense expression. And so that's how I found myself falling head over heels in love at an age when friends of mine were already widows. It was amazing to be so happy. So giddily, violently in love. Every time I looked at him, I felt a surge of joy.

That night after the walk I lay awake for hours going over everything that had happened and things that I hoped would happen. It was wonderful that this man loved me. I wanted to tell everyone, wanted to shout it from the top of the clock tower. But I also wanted it to be my secret.

It didn't seem right to be embarking on this adventure when friends of mine had lost the loves of their lives. I didn't want to make them feel even worse by parading my happiness. But I'd waited long enough for the right person to come along. This was my chance. I grabbed it with both hands.

Giftbooks4u.com

FORTY-SIX

Martina

Christmas came and went. It wasn't the festival Martina remembered as a child. One morning she was woken by the rumbling of an engine. It was unusual these days to hear a truck so early in the morning. Looking out of the window she saw a soldiers in the piazza below, and then a family being

brought out of one of the little streets and boarded into a covered vehicle. Her heart went cold.

At the last moment the woman looked up in Martina's direction as though she had sensed her watching. Martina inhaled sharply as she recognized Luisa, a girl she'd been at school with. She hadn't even realised Luisa was Jewish. Perhaps the connection was further back – one of her grandparents.

Her chest burned. She wanted to throw open the window and shout at the soldiers, demand they at least let the children stay. But what good would it do? She stepped back from the window and turned away and closed the shutters, hating herself.

It was at times like this she missed Irena most. If she'd been here, they could have talked about what Martina had seen. It seemed ages since she'd gone away for her aunt's funeral. Now the grandmother was ill, it seemed she wouldn't be coming back for a while. It was so hard to know who else to trust these days. She wrote a letter instead, being careful how she worded things just in case the letter was intercepted.

You won't believe the things that are happening around here. There's so much to tell you.

For one thing she'd heard more rumours about Gianni.

Irena

I tried asking about his experiences on the frontline, but he always changed the subject. There were times when he seemed hard to reach, and I guessed he was being driven mad by horrific memories. I hoped in time I would be able to make them disappear.

We started to meet regularly for the *passeggiata* around town and then it became a daily event. My grandmother had a bad turn so my mother suggested we stay on at her house for a few weeks until she was better.

One day he turned up with theatre tickets. "There's a performance of Turandot this evening. I was hoping you might like to go?"

It was the most wonderful evening although to be quite honest I don't remember much about the opera. The theatre itself was a spectacle – all red

and gold. The costumes were extraordinary and the music sublime. During the performance I kept gazing around unable to believe my luck being there with him. But what I remember most from that evening is what it felt like to be part of a couple. It made me feel invincible.

I can't remember how we spent all the days that followed. I only know that my feelings for him grew stronger each time I saw him. I would have done anything for those eyes, that smile.

Giftbooks4u.com

FORTY-SEVEN

Irena

I was so proud of him. I wrote to Martina to tell her about him but couldn't wait to get back to Santa Zita so he could visit, and I could show him off.

"But you must promise you won't work your charms on him and steal him away."

I was only half serious when I wrote that, but she replied by the next post. "You know I'd never take anyone from you, not even if they looked like Rudolf Valentino."

I felt a bit mean, then. I knew I was being unfair. Martina had Sonia to think of these days, and Gianni's parents. Besides, she was the person I trusted most in the world.

Cass's voice broke into his thoughts. "Carlo – could you please give me a hand here?"

After a few weeks of being apart once I was back in Santa Zita he asked me to marry him. "I know it's sudden, but I've made up my mind. I saw so much death in Russia but I'm alive and I just want to get on with living."

I wanted to throw my arms around him and shout 'Yes!' But I didn't want him to know how desperate I had become so I made him wait two days before giving him my answer.

The recording broke off. Carlo jabbed the buttons. His mother must have got tired or overcome by emotion.

"Carlo, this is ridiculous. It isn't healthy."

Cass was standing in the doorway, bleary-eyed, wild hair hanging about her shoulders. "It's not doing her any good and it isn't doing you any good either. Come back to bed. What good will it do, listening to that thing for hours on end? You know how confused she gets these days. How do you know these memories are even real?"

"All right, all right. Just give me a minute." She was right of course. But he couldn't stop now.

Giftbooks4u.com

Martina

Martina followed Irena across the crowded room. Through the veil of smoke, she made out a flurry of colour, a flash of pearls, and the dancing orange glow of cigarette tips. Hair swished her face. Laughter rose above the music from the gramophone. It was ages since she'd been to a party. She caught the odd accusing look as though she had no right to be here, now she was a widow with a child to look after. But for one glorious moment, she could almost forget there was a war on.

The man was standing with his back to them, talking with a group of people. Irena put her hand on his shoulder, and he turned, putting his arm around her. Martina's breath stalled.

"Roberto, this is Martina," Irena was saying. "I've been dying for you two to meet."

It couldn't be. But it was. This was the man she'd met in town the day she saw the old man beaten to death. The man she'd kissed. Recovering herself, she took the hand he was offering and shook it. Did he squeeze hers a little too firmly? She thought she saw a jolt of recognition in his eyes, as she felt her own face catch fire.

This isn't happening. It can't be him. Here. With her instead of me.

It was clear from the way Irena was looking at him that she was in love. Everything about her seemed different this evening – softer, lighter and she'd twisted her hair into a chignon.

Roberto. So, that was his name. In so many ways, he was the same as the man she remembered. Perhaps the nose was a little broader, the eyes a little greener. But in essence he was the person she'd imagined being with for so long. In her head, she'd spent more time with him than with her

husband. The absurdity of it struck her. There was no reason why he should remember her. Why should it have made any impression on him?

Once or twice during the evening he seemed to be looking at her, weighing her up, trying to work out where he might have seen her before.

Do you remember me?

Watching Irena lead him away to dance, Martina had a sudden vision of being in his arms as he helped her across the piazza. Of feeling enveloped in those arms as he kissed her. Excusing herself, she pushed through bodies pressing around her to get to the balcony.

“Well?” Irena asked, appearing next to her, and handing her a cocktail. “What do you think?”

The garden below them was moonlit. A couple sat on the bench by the pond. The tip of their cigarettes flickered like fireflies.

“Yes – a lovely man. Lucky you.” Irena’s eyes were shining. Her own reflection in them was pale and sunken.

“I knew you’d like him,” Irena said. “I’m so glad. He’s asked me to marry him.”

Giftbooks4u.com

FORTY-NINE

Martina

The words struck her like a bomb exploding. Around her everyone carried on chatting, dancing, laughing. Now Roberto was coming out to join them.

“Congratulations,” she said. “What wonderful news.”

Someone called Irena's name, and she rushed off leaving the two of them on the balcony.

After an unbearable pause Roberto said, "Irena tells me you lost your husband in the fighting. I'm sorry."

Martina looked away. "It's not unusual."

"No. But I'm sure that doesn't make it easier." After a pause, he added, "Especially when you have a child to look after."

Yes, she had Sonia. She could never wish Sonia away. But was that how people saw her now? A widow and a mother. No longer a young woman with needs, desires, ambition. Would she always feel judged for taking a few hours out?

"You realise we've met before?" Her voice sounded too bright in her ears. She twisted the wine glass round in her hands.

It tumbled out, the story of the old man spitting at the poster and the way the younger men had kicked him to death. How she'd fainted, and Roberto had helped her. She made light of it, tried to make it an entertaining story only of course it wasn't funny. Someone had died. She didn't mention the kiss.

He looked shocked as though he found her amusement distasteful. If only she could start the story again – make clear she wasn't some daft, hysterical woman who fainted for no reason. But he seemed to be casting around for someone more interesting – or less deluded – to talk to.

"Don't you remember?" she found herself saying. She tried hard to keep the note of annoyance out of her voice.

His eyes met hers for a moment. "Now you mention it, I think I do. Well, I'm glad to have been of some help. How extraordinary you should remember."

"Not at all," she said, feeling the colour rise in her cheeks. "I have a good memory. I remember most things."

He smiled. "That's quite a gift. I'll have to be careful what I say to you."

She'd obviously made him feel uncomfortable because he was shifting away. Anger swelled in her chest. Their encounter meant nothing to him. Over the years when she'd imagined meeting him again, he'd never been so polite or indifferent.

She wanted to run after him and tell him what she thought of him, taking advantage of her trauma and kissing her while she was recovering from the

shock of witnessing a murder. She ought to let Irena know what sort of person he was.

Instead, she turned and walked away.

Over the next few weeks, she saw Roberto several times with Irena. Now that Irena had moved back to Santa Zita, he was becoming a regular visitor.

“Oh, Martina loved that film too,” Irena said once. And “That’s just what Martina says.” And “How funny – Roberto had a similar experience when he was a child, didn’t you?”

It should have been easy to form a friendship, to put that silly incident out of her mind and get past the awkwardness to a stage where they could laugh, even invite Irena to laugh with them at the ridiculousness of it all. But somehow, he made that impossible. While Roberto fell comfortably into conversation with most people he met, he remained aloof when talking to Martina as though he didn’t trust her.

What did they have to talk about after all? The more time he spent with them the more obvious it was – they were opposites. All they had in common was the fact that she’d once fainted, and he’d helped her – which being a doctor he would naturally do. And then he’d kissed her, which was grossly unprofessional.

He was clearly embarrassed by the incident now. No wonder he pretended not to remember. It was painful for her too, thinking about her overblown reaction, how she’d let it occupy her thoughts and constructed this ridiculous fantasy. But the fantasy had never been about him, not really. It had been about her feelings for Gianni, but it had somehow taken on a life of its own. Now she didn’t have either of them and she was losing her best friend, too.

Martina

In January the Allies made a renewed offensive but seemed to hit another stalemate. The weather improved slightly but most of the time an icy mist hung around the village.

“We were saying it reminds us of that Pascoli poem. You know the one?” Irena said when Martina joined them on a walk.

She had to admit she didn't. Irena was at her most irritating when she was like this, trying to shut Martina out. Perhaps she and Roberto were better suited with all their talk about art and books. But the thought only lasted for a moment.

Irena carried on, “You know – when he talks about the valley submerged in a vast grey sea, no waves, no beaches...”

Roberto stopped, his hands dug into his coat pockets. “Oh yes and something about the echoing footsteps, neither slow nor quick, alternating, eternal...”

And, laughing, they both said at the same time, “Down I stared but I saw nothing, no one looking back...”

Martina curled her hands into fists inside the sleeves of her coat. Was he blind? How could he not see? Just because someone remembered something someone else had written didn't make them an interesting person.

They carried on ahead not even registering that was she no longer with them. It was happening more and more these days – making her feel like an intruder. They swung hands as they walked. Irena lay her head on his shoulder. Where was the old Irena? Martina didn't much like this new one.

March 1944

Martina's insides curdled as she caught up with the news. The Germans under threat were showing resisters no mercy. In Rome a partisan bomb hit a column of SS policemen who were marching and singing through the city. As the death toll rose to thirty-three, the Germans retaliated by rounding up at random three hundred and thirty-five men and boys – including shopkeepers, artists, teachers and students – and taking them away to be executed.

The Nazis made it plain that similar reprisals would be carried out on any town that showed disloyalty and at the same ration of ten civilians for every soldier killed. Could something like that happen in Santa Zita? It was too awful to contemplate.

“What are you doing with that?” asked Irena, as Carlo tried to slip the Dictaphone back into the biscuit tin. “I’ve been looking all over for it. Someone’s been moving my things about.”

She looked suspiciously in Cass’s direction. Carlo had sensed his mother’s mood as soon as he walked in. She had that closed look sitting bent over in her chair as though she were withdrawing into herself, gazing at a point on the floor, not acknowledging him. He made several stabs at conversation, but she waved him away as if he was an annoying insect.

“Are you too hot in here?” he asked. “I can open the window.”

She shook her head. “I’m fine. You know I can’t stand being cold.”

“I was wondering if you’d like to come out for a drive?”

Her face furrowed. “Whatever for?”

He sighed. “Because it’s a beautiful day and we’re going to be run off our feet in the restaurant at the weekend. The azalea festival’s started. Thought you might like to come along?”

She turned away. “Not today. I’m too busy.”

He tried to conceal the smile in his voice. “Busy doing what?”

She huffed and waved her arm as though she wouldn't know where to start.

He handed her a couple of books. "Cass thought you might like these detective stories. She loves Michele Giuttari."

She stared at him in bewilderment. "Who's Cass?"

After a while he tried to kiss her cheek, but she ducked away. "Well, I'd better go. I'll bring you an azalea. It will look nice by the window."

He wasn't sure if she'd heard. She was humming an old tune *un bacio a mezzanotte*. She stopped, frowning. "What happened to that girl?" "What girl?"

"Poor thing looked terrified. Said it was something she ate. I told her I might be old but I'm not stupid. I didn't tell anyone, though – I've never told. Has she had the baby?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know who you mean."

She clicked her tongue. "That's the trouble – you never listen." And went back to humming the tune, oblivious to any more questions.

Giftbooks4u.com

FIFTY-ONE

Martina

1944

Creeping out onto the balcony well after curfew, Martina saw three men arrive at the priest's house directly below the villa. An hour later only two of them came back. They'd been carrying something when they arrived but left empty-handed. Food, she supposed. And yet the priest still had the

nerve to come to the villa asking for her apples and oil as gifts for the evacuee children in his care.

In the early hours of the morning another group left the priest's house, walking past the villa and up towards the ridge. One of them looked a bit familiar by the way he walked. For a moment she wondered if it could be Gianni coming back home at last. But what would she and Gianni have to say to each other after all this time? The only reason he'd come back now would be to ask her to leave.

The men weren't close enough for her to make out their features but from the height and build and the way they moved she could tell as they got closer that Gianni wasn't among them. A sudden fear gripped her. Were these enemies of Gianni coming to take out their revenge on his family for something he'd done? She retreated further into the shadows.

It wouldn't be so unusual – an elderly couple had been shot because they had patched up a wounded soldier they found on their land, a young woman hanged from a tree for having an affair with a German soldier. Another had her tongue cut out because she was seen talking to a partisan.

The German soldiers would shoot partisans they caught, but not before gouging their eyes out.

The Nazis had become more vengeful now that they were forced into retreat. They'd made it clear they'd take ten civilian lives for each one of their own. Martina shrank back against the wall, feverishly assessing possible hiding places, listening for sounds of the men breaking in. As the footsteps died away, she wept with relief and then rage that she could be made to feel so vulnerable in her own home.

Martina

The sense of euphoria Martina felt when the Allies recaptured Rome in June 1944 gave way to terror as she heard about atrocities closer to home. At the end of June following a clash between soldiers and partisans, German soldiers stormed into the village of San Pancrazio south of Florence. They rounded up the men and boys and took them to a farmhouse cellar. The local priest pleaded for their lives. He was the first to be shot.

That same day a hundred and seventy-three people in nearby villages were killed. In Santa Zita everyone was on edge. It would only take one moment of madness to trigger something like that.

Hearing Cesare come back from the bar she pushed the paper out of sight. She wasn't in the mood for another row. He stormed into the kitchen, red-faced and panting.

"What's wrong?"

He could barely speak. "You know what they're saying down there?" He searched her face for signs that she already knew. "Gianni's alive."

She didn't know what to say. "I heard a rumour. But I'm sure that's all it is. Please don't get your hopes up."

But Cesare was pacing furiously round the room. "My son's been fighting with the partisan scum near Florence. Now he's up in the hills around Santa Zita. You knew about this and didn't think to tell me?"

"It's just gossip," she said. "Someone must have mistaken one of the partisans for Gianni. These stories get out of hand."

He shook his head. "It was the Giacomini lad. He's known Gianni for years. He was at school with him. He wouldn't make a mistake."

She'd never seen Cesare so worked up. He was shaking all over. "How could he put us through this? Let us think he was dead? Three years we've been mourning him. We thought this was all we had left." He picked up the photograph off the piano and hurled it across the room. "And all this time he's been living like a savage."

His face was red. His breath came out in rasps. "That my own son was prepared to undermine everything his brother died for – this is worse than hearing he was dead."

Martina jumped back as he picked up another photo and threw it across the room.

"The grief nearly killed his mother. Do you know that?" he shouted. "What does this make him? A traitor. A coward. All the things he was brought up not to be."

"I'm sure there's no truth in it," Martina said. "If it was true he'd have come here."

But Cesare shook his head. "He hasn't got the guts. I tell you this, if I ever, ever set eyes on him, I will kill him with my own hands."

"Come on, you don't mean that."

"I do." He clutched his side as a spasm of pain crossed his face. "I'll kill him."

"Are you all right?"

He was taken over by a coughing fit. Rusty coloured spit dribbled down his chin.

"Please. You need to calm down. Let me get you a glass of water."

He was struggling to breathe now. He braced his back, fists on knees trying to get more oxygen but it didn't seem to work. His face was flushed and panicky. She loosened his shirt and tried to calm him. A vision shot through of the old man dying in the piazza, the same helpless look in his eyes. This couldn't be happening. Not again.

Martina

“Stay there,” she said, jumping to her feet. “I’ll get help.”

Down in the piazza, the doctor’s wife said her husband was out visiting other patients but there was another doctor who might be able to get there more quickly – a younger chap, very well-educated, knew his stuff. She’d get a message to him. Martina ran back to check on Cesare. Her was lying on the floor, trying to push himself up, struggling to breathe and panicking now.

“Someone’s coming,” she told him. “Try not to worry.”

He was looking around, asking for Elena. “She’s out walking with Sonia. She’ll be back any minute.” Martina should go and look for them. Elena would get a terrible shock finding him like this. What if it was too late? But she couldn’t leave her father-in-law alone in this state.

A knock on the door made her heart leap. She ran to the door and flung it open. “Oh. It’s you.”

The last person she expected to see was Roberto. For a moment, she couldn’t think what he was doing there but of course it made sense now. She’d been in such a panic earlier it hadn’t occurred to her that he might be the doctor.

“I’ve come to see your father-in-law. I was told it was an emergency.” He brushed her aside, asking about Cesare’s symptoms. She led him into the kitchen, and he crouched down to examine the patient, asking questions and giving encouraging responses.

Between them, they moved the old man to his bed and sat him up against the pillows. “It’s a good job you were here,” he said as they stepped out of the room.

Thinking about how worked up Cesare had been over the rumours about Gianni, she felt a sweep of guilt. If she'd told him earlier, could she have prevented this?

"What's wrong with him?" she asked.

"Pneumonia. The problem is I don't have anything to treat it with. There's a new serum that might help if we had it."

"We can pay." She looked around her. What did they have left that they could sell?

He shook his head. "Money won't help, I'm afraid. We can't get hold of any medicines."

"Then what can we do?"

"We'll just have to wait until the fever breaks. Keep him sitting up and give him lots of fluids. Brandy if you have any. I've given him something to ease the pain and help him sleep."

"Will he be all right?"

"The next few hours are crucial, but I think so. I'll come back in the morning and see how he's doing. If there's any change, come and get me."

Roberto had been back to the house a few times to check on Cesare. Now that Elena was there, Martina wasn't needed beyond showing the doctor in and out of the house. From down the corridor, Martina heard him speaking gently to the old man, listening to his breathing, and asking how he'd been in the night. Before he left, he gave Elena some tablets, with instructions and promised to be back the following day. "I'll see myself out." "No, no. Martina will see you to the door," Elena insisted.

They walked briskly to minimise the awkwardness. There were only tiny sounds – the swish of her skirt, the crackle of her stockings and the soft creaking of his shoe leather on the marble floor.

"I think he'll pull through," he said. "He's lucky to have you. You're very good to him."

She shrugged. She'd only done what any decent person would have done. Why did he find that so surprising? When they reached the door, she opened it. He turned to face her and stood there on the step, with his hand on the door looking at her quizzically.

"Have I done something to offend you?" he asked at last.

“Why would you think that?” And then without meaning to, she mumbled, “You couldn’t make it any clearer that you can’t stand being anywhere near me. You seem to want to avoid me at all costs.”

He put his hands in his pockets, took a deep breath and acknowledged the point with a nod. His voice came out sharply.

“And why do you think that is?”

“I really have no idea.”

He fixed his eyes directly on hers for the first time in as long as she could remember.

“Look, it’s because I’m in love with you.”

Giftbooks4u.com

Irena

Irena spoke softly into the machine. It was late and she didn't want Carlo or that interfering wife of his to come and ask what she was doing. Someone had taken this thing the other day. She'd driven herself mad looking for it. Now she'd found it she wasn't going to let it out of her sight again. She stopped and started a few times unhappy with the way things came out. It was painful even now to remember.

I think if I'm honest I did see something that evening when Martina came to the party. It wasn't anything major, nothing that was said or even an obvious silence or a look that passed between them. More of a tiny shift in the air, something you could never put your finger on, that should have alerted me.

I chose to ignore it. Told myself it was nothing. I wonder now, would things have worked out so differently if I had said something?

When he and I were dancing I asked him if he thought Martina was beautiful. I can't think why I did that now. I can only think it must have been to torture myself.

"She is," he said.

And yet the way he said it, he could have been commenting on a piece of furniture. It felt as if he was paying her the compliment to please me, recognising how important our friendship was to me.

She wasn't his type. They were chalk and cheese. He must be able to see that. Our love was about philosophy, books, the way people think, the meaning of life. We came from the same families, had the same roots. I'm embarrassed now, thinking back to how superior I felt to others around us,

believing they could never have what I had with Roberto. What a naïve fool I was.

I think I might have glimpsed a distraction in him that evening. I don't know – perhaps he wasn't holding me quite as closely or carefully as he had done – but I didn't really take it in. I was too blinded by his presence and the simple fact that he'd chosen to be with me – not just for that evening but forever. I had the ring to prove it.

I was only too ready to believe that what I glimpsed between those two was mutual admiration, nothing more. I must admit, it gave me a certain pride knowing that for the first time Martina's life and mine were reversed. For once it was she who was envious of me. Because I did feel that. I sensed her looking at me as though she couldn't quite fathom how I'd hooked this extraordinary person.

If Roberto hadn't just asked me to marry him things might have been different. I might have been more anxious. But I truly believed we were going to spend the rest of our lives together with Martina as our dear friend.

It sounds daft now. I even started to have this idea that after the war when he and I bought a house in the town where he could run his surgery, we might rent rooms to Martina and Sonia. I had to get them away from Villa Leonida. It had nothing to offer them now and I couldn't bear the thought of Martina being left to look after Elena whom she had never got on with.

I thought she could get some training, make something of herself – perhaps learn some secretarial skills. Then she could get a job and turn her life into something interesting. There would be all sorts of opportunities after the war if she could just hang on until then. Of course, it wouldn't be easy being a single mother but there were plenty of war widows about. I'd be able to keep an eye on Sonia at school. It was all taking shape.

Until everything shattered.

Irena switched off the machine, her hand shaking along with her voice.

Martina

The next morning when she opened the door to Roberto, she told him her father-in-law had had a peaceful night. Her words were coming out too fast, tripping over each other.

“It wasn’t him I came to see today.”

When she was younger, much younger, she used to climb the rocks by the river and dive off. She could still recall that feeling of having reached the top and be standing there with that sudden pang of fear in the pit of her stomach. Afraid to let go but knowing she couldn’t turn back now. Did he feel the same?

Wordlessly, she showed him through to the drawing room at the other end of the villa from Cesare’s bedroom. The villa was quiet. Cesare was asleep and Elena had taken Sonia into the woods to pick some garlic. Anyone seeing Roberto walking up to the house with his doctor’s bag would have had no reason to be suspicious. It was well known that Cesare was ill.

“What I said yesterday,” he began as though he were about to deny it in some way.

She walked slowly towards him. The next moment they were in each other’s arms. This was wrong. It was madness. She stopped, catching her breath and pushed him away.

He looked shocked. His arms dropped to his sides. He brought one back up to his head, clutching his hair.

“Did I misunderstand you? I thought...”

She turned away biting her lip. She’d surprised herself. It went against everything she was feeling. She sat down, trying to ignore the tremble in her legs.

“You didn’t misunderstand. It’s what I want too. But we can’t, can we? I mean you and Irena...”

He looked wounded. He shook his head. “I made a mistake, Martina. You know that. Any fool can see it.”

But it still wasn’t right. Not so long ago she’d thought her biggest mistake was falling in love with a man – no, the idea of a man – she’d met for a few moments who could no longer remember her and was marrying her best friend. But this...

“I promised her...”

He nodded. “I promised her too. And I meant every word. I never expected to see you again or to fall in love with you when I did – but it’s happened. It has, hasn’t it?”

“You don’t really know me,” she said.

He laughed. “That’s where you’re wrong. I know everything about you. Probably more than you want me to know. You’re Irena’s favourite subject. She talks about you all the bloody time.”

He sat down next to her and took hold of her hands and studied them. She wished they weren’t so rough, and the veins didn’t stick out.

“I’ve tried to ignore it,” he said. “Tried to pretend it wasn’t happening. I avoided you whenever I could. I even tried to make myself hate you. But it didn’t work.”

She looked away. He brought his hand up to her face and gently twisted it back towards him. “You feel it too. I’ve seen it. We can’t go on like this. It will make us all miserable.”

Perhaps hearing these words was enough. Just knowing what could have been. To know she’d been right after all. She hadn’t imagined it.

“Look, we’ve wasted so much time already,” he said. “I’ve never forgotten you.”

She looked at him, disbelieving.

“I came up here during my first leave and asked about you.” Of course. The time she thought she saw him by the fountain.

“They told me you were married. I thought they were lying but then I saw you pushing a pram and thought it must be true. I’d sort of expected it, but I was still crushed. I didn’t want to embarrass you, so I left.

“I tried to forget. Got on with my life. Never expected to see you again. But when you turned up at the party, I recognised you straight away. I

couldn't believe my bad luck. It was excruciating, everyone congratulating me on the engagement just when I'd found you again. I tried to ignore the effect you had on me. I've been trying for weeks but I can't do it anymore." When she didn't reply he went on.

"War's changed me. Seeing people die every day – people who shouldn't be dying. Not being able to help them. Young men with...I'm sorry." He stopped himself and took a deep breath before continuing. "You get one chance – that's what I learned out there. I thought, if I ever get back, I'm not going to be an observer anymore, taking what life throws at me. From now on I'm going to make choices."

She thought about it, her heart racing. "But what can we say to Irena? It will break her heart."

"She doesn't have to know. We can move away."

"I can't do that."

"Face facts," he said gently. "Your husband's not coming back. For whatever reason. It's been three years. I know what people are saying but even if it's true he could have got in touch with you if he'd wanted to. You must move on."

She bit her lip. On that at least she was clear. But what she said was, "I don't know if I can."

"You can. This is your chance to change your life or carry on the same forever. What do you want to do because it's your decision?"

She still didn't reply, a thousand thoughts running through her head. Seconds passed. It seemed like hours.

"Fine. I'll wait. As long as it takes for you to change your mind."

"But how do you know I'll ever change it?"

That look again – so sure, so intense. "You will, when you decide to start living again."

The front door slammed. They sprang apart. Sonia's footsteps pounded down the hall. She ran through the door clutching a handful of yellow flowers. Elena's steps went the other way up the stairs towards the bedroom. Through the ceiling, they could hear her chatting to Cesare, asking what the doctor had said. Roberto got up to talk to her about Cesare's condition.

“I’m going back to town tomorrow,” he said to Martina before he left. “Doctor Serafini will take over his care. I’ll be at the Caffé Napoleone in town on Thursday at 11. Meet me there if you want.”

He wrote down the address on a scrap of paper and pressed it into her hand. Before she could answer he said, “It’s your choice. If you don’t come, I’ll be there again the following Thursday.”

“Who was that man?” asked Sonia after Roberto had gone.

“He’s a doctor,” Martina said, taking the child into the kitchen and putting the flowers in water. “He’s making Nonno better.”

But the thought kept going through her mind – what was she going to do?

Giftbooks4u.com

Martina

Martina clutched the address as she walked, pushing her bicycle along the last street. Her heels echoed on the paving stones and the bicycle wheels hissed through puddles. She caught fragments of conversation from people she passed, a sea of faceless figures emerging out of the mist. With her swing coat and beret, she stood out among these shuffling, weary folk in their drab clothes on their way to shops, banks or offices. She was alive with anticipation. Her mind was made up.

A piercing breeze swept along the street sending dried leaves scuttling. The cold air stung her legs through her thin stockings as she passed boarded-up shops, ancient churches and abandoned palaces. Deep in thought she almost walked straight past the café. She stopped and turned back, craning her neck to read the engraved gold lettering. The clock opposite told her she was too early. Should she walk around outside for a bit? No, it was too cold for that. She propped the bicycle up against the wall opposite.

An immaculately dressed doorman greeted her. Stepping inside the cafe, breathing in the smell of wood, brass polish and coffee, she realised she'd been here before with her grandmother as a child. Then the glass cabinets had groaned with cakes and biscuits, and fruit boats made from light-asfeather pastry, but today the shelves were empty.

The waiter showed her to a table near the window, which gave a good view of the piazza. She twisted off the gloves, glad to be inside a warm building, and looked around her. Her face smarted from the sharp wind. The place had a sense of permanence, of indestructibility. Once a popular meeting place for socialist artists and poets, it now served well-heeled

businessmen and German soldiers. At the surrounding tables, deals were being struck, acquaintances made, reunions formed, all discreetly masked by the soft notes of the piano playing in the corner.

She felt conspicuous sitting there on her own. What if Roberto didn't come? She studied her reflection in the large gilt mirror on the wall. The face that looked back at her was a theatrical mask, the rouge, red lips and carefully lined arched brows barely concealing the hollow cheekbones and anxious look in her eyes. She rubbed her cheeks with her fingertips to tone it down. Would he turn up?

But then there he was, strolling across the piazza, carving a path through the pigeons, his coat open, flapping in the wind. He held his hat on with one hand.

His eyes were searching for her as he stood in the doorway. Now he was making his way to the table. She wanted to jump up and run into his arms, let go all the pent-up fears, frustrations and missed opportunities of the last three years. Instead, she let him kiss her on the cheek.

"I wasn't sure if you'd come," he said.

"I said I would."

The waiter arrived. Roberto ordered coffee. She had tea. They talked about safe things – how cold it was outside, how they'd spent the week, Cesare's health. Neither of them mentioned Irena. She jumped as she felt his knee brush hers under the table. She didn't move hers away.

"How long can we keep this up?" he said at last. And it all came out in a rush. "I can't think about anything else but you. I can't get you out of my head. Look, I know it's wrong but I'm never going to let you go again."

They left the café and walked down the road arm in arm just as they had in her imagination years before. He unlocked the door of a building in a quiet street. Wordlessly they climbed the stairs, which smelled of damp and old stone. He opened the door of the apartment.

"We can come here whenever we want," he said when they were lying on the bed together afterwards. "It belongs to a friend. He's moved up into the hills because of the air raids. I've said I'd look after it for him."

The room was sparsely furnished with an old iron bed and a marbled topped dressing table. The clock face of a tower filled the window. Voices floated up from the street below, and they heard footsteps and the fizz of bicycles wheeling along the damp pavement. The air smelled of

tobacco as they shared the last of the cigarettes she had been given by the German soldier.

At last, she swung her legs down onto the cold terrazzo floor. "I have to go."

"I know."

He smoked another cigarette as he watched her dress.

"Will you come again?" he asked as he held the door open for her.

"Yes."

She stepped out onto the street, wrapping her coat around herself, she set off down the road, keeping her face down to avoid the biting air, carrying with her the touch of his lips on hers, his breath on her skin. There could be no going back now.

Giftbooks4u.com

Martina

Cesare's death hit her hard. For a while he'd seemed to be getting better but died in his sleep a week later. Despite their differences, Martina found herself grieving. How ironic that she and Elena who had never seen eye to eye were left together in Villa Leonida to bring up Sonia as best they could.

It had been easy to avoid Irena while Cesare was ill. She hardly dared trust herself to speak to her. Irena knew her so well she'd be sure to spot some tell-tale sign and besides Martina was just too ashamed.

There was nothing remarkable about the night Gianni came back. There was no letter, no message – he just appeared, tapping softly at the kitchen door as though he had only popped out for some firewood.

For a moment, she didn't recognise this bearded, gaunt, dishevelled person. He put his hand over her mouth to stop her crying out.

"Missed me?"

She could only mumble in reply, hiding her thoughts in an embrace. This was her worst nightmare. He drew back and ran his eyes over her, then pulled her towards him again. She twisted her head so that his lips met her cheek rather than her mouth, but he held her face so that she couldn't do it a second time.

She tried to ignore the unwashed smell, the coarseness of his skin, the scratchy beard and the fact that he was probably crawling with lice, trying to reconcile this person with the old Gianni who had left with such strong ideals even if they had been misguided.

"Where have you been?" she asked to avoid answering his question.

He just laughed. His teeth were in an awful state. If anyone had to do a magic trick and reappear from the dead, why did it have to be Gianni? He pulled out a chair, wincing as he did so, indicating a shoulder wound.

“What happened?” she asked as he sat down.

“I got shot.” The way he said it made the question seem stupid and pointless. “It’s a long story.”

She removed his shirt, trying to disguise the shaking in her hands. She felt him looking at her and shuddered. What was he expecting from her? He was painfully thin. The wound in his shoulder had become infected and was a foul mess. So, this was why he’d come back. That at any rate was a relief – she could cope with being a nurse. She’d cared for Cesare for a long time and was much less easily repulsed by blood and vomit these days.

“I can get a doctor,” she said, her head still swimming with questions. “He’s trustworthy.”

He clutched her arm. “No. I can’t risk word getting round. I’ve already put your life in danger coming here. You must be able to get me something for it though. Most of all I just want to sleep in a real bed.”

She must talk to Roberto – get something to stop the infection spreading. He’d ask questions of course but she’d think of something.

She ran a bath for Gianni, and he bathed and shaved. She cut his long hair and removed all the lice she could. Afterwards he looked more like his old self, but he seemed to have grown an extra layer that was hard and impenetrable. Despite this being his family home, he seemed to be the intruder.

She fetched fresh clothes for him, gingerly examining the ones he had taken off. She felt herself colour as she caught him watching.

“Where did you get these?” she asked.

“From someone who didn’t need them anymore.”

She cooked him the meal she’d been planning for the following day – a soup with cabbage and beans. Elena would want to know why their supplies had run out, but she’d deal with that tomorrow. “How long are you staying?”

He lifted his head from his soup. “A week or two. Until I can fight again. I’m no use to them like this, and there’s not enough food to go round for people who can’t pull their weight. They might decide to shoot me like an old dog.”

She looked at him appalled. “Would they do that?”

He gave a short laugh. "Why not? It's been done before. You can't trust anyone from one day to the next. We're all there for different reasons – communists, Jews, foreigners, gypsies. People with beliefs and people with no beliefs. The only thing we have in common is that we've run out of choices."

She shook her head. "That's mad."

"It's not perfect but it's better than the alternatives. I'm not going to prison. I'm not going to do slave labour in Germany and I'm not going to join those fascist bastards. I need to get better. Then I'll go back."

"I don't understand," she said. "What is it you believe in now?"

His dark eyes bore into her, making her shrink. "I believed in you. It was all I had left."

Her heart exploded. He couldn't know about Roberto. And even if he did, what did he expect? It had been three years since he 'died,' and he'd done nothing to let her know he was alive.

"Then why didn't you write to me? Tell me what was going on?" She couldn't keep the anger out of her voice.

He took a drink and wiped his mouth. "At first, because I was afraid of tempting fate. Every time someone sent a letter back home, they got killed the next day."

For a minute she thought she hadn't heard him properly. "And that's your reason for letting me think you were dead? It's been three years. Three bloody years."

The look he gave was sheepish, just a trace of the old Gianni there, the one who could win her round in any situation.

"I said I didn't send them. But I wrote them, didn't I? Alvaro gave them to you. He promised he would. He said he'd tell you everything."

"Alvaro? No, wait a minute. He didn't mention any letters. He told me you were dead." She thought back to Alvaro standing in this room, breaking the news. His nervousness, his reluctance to look her in the eye. Had it been anyone else it might have struck her as suspicious, but Alvaro had always been odd.

Had he hated her that much? Did he still blame her for some silly trick she'd played when they were children? She went over the conversation in her head. She'd known he was holding something back.

The look of bewilderment on Gianni's face seemed genuine. He didn't seem to know whether or not to believe her. But in a way what did it matter whether Alvaro had told her or not? She'd heard the rumours anyway. And there must have been countless other occasions when he could have got in touch.

"Why haven't I heard from you since?"

He stared into the fire. "I didn't want to put you in danger. I'd deserted. Families get shot for that."

"You could."

They sat in silence for some moments. What was the use of going over it all now? He didn't seem to remember things the way she did.

"Your father died," she told him. "A few weeks ago. I'm sorry."

He nodded, obviously already aware. Someone had been keeping him informed.

"How's my mother?"

"She's – your mother."

He grinned, then looked serious. "She can't know I'm here."

Martina ran her hand down her face. This was getting worse and worse. How could she keep such a colossal secret from Elena in her own house? "Why did you do it? Why did you desert?"

He gave a short laugh. "Because I didn't want to die." He pushed his bowl away. "It wasn't for any principle, if that's what you're asking. I did it because I was terrified of being killed. That might sound feeble, but I wasn't ready to become a hero."

"Is that why you behaved so strangely on our honeymoon?"

He winced and rubbed his shoulder. "It was starting to sink in, what was expected of me. I knew that even if I survived, I'd probably lose all this," he said gesturing. "And you."

She picked up his bowl and turned away.

"I'm different now though. I've changed, Martina. I've learned so much."

She couldn't keep the sharpness out of her voice. "We've all changed." She washed up the bowl with quick, angry movements.

"A Greek family saved my life," he said. "They hid me after I deserted. I was in shock. I'd lost all faith in fascism after seeing what Mussolini's men did to ordinary villagers. I joined their partisans. Being with them taught me a lot. I discovered there are two types of fear. One that paralyses you and

one that makes you act even if you know it's hopeless. I gradually realised I had choices. I didn't have to wait to be rounded up and shot or sent to a camp.

"And it's working. Florence is free. We all will be soon. The Allies don't know this territory like we do."

A wave of fear crashed over her. "We've heard what it's like down south. Is that what's going to happen here? People forced to live in caves and cellars while their towns are flattened. When they come back to their homes, there's nothing left. And there's no water, no electricity. Children, grandmothers being raped by soldiers. Is that your idea of freedom?"

"It's war," he said. "Some soldiers get out of control. They're savages. And their commanders shut their eyes to it all. But we're getting there. Once they've done their job, we can start to rebuild our lives."

"What lives?" It was getting harder and harder to envisage a future now that she wanted to be part of.

Her mind was reeling. Did Gianni really expect to walk back into her life and pick up all the pieces just as he'd left them? What would it be like having him back in the house after all this time? A stranger to Sonia. A stranger to her. And what about Roberto? Why should she give him up now she'd finally found him?

"I'm going to Hell, Martina," Gianni said. His voice sounded strangely distant. "I've seen things – done things – I could never have imagined. But I have to carry on now – see it through."

She let out a sigh of relief. She couldn't help it.

"The child mustn't know I'm here either." Her heart squeezed at the mention of Sonia.

"She thinks you're dead."

He nodded. "Good. It's safer that way. Is she asleep? I just want to see her."

She wanted to say no. She didn't want him anywhere near Sonia. Her stomach twisted at the thought of how clean her little girl had smelled lying in the bed when she kissed her goodnight. Normally she would creep in beside Sonia and enjoy the warmth of her silky hair and her soft skin as she read her a story. She couldn't stand the thought of him touching her daughter, breathing over her – but what could she do?

"Please?"

They climbed the stairs in silence. He faltered outside the room where Elena was sleeping but then passed on.

He sat on Sonia's bed, gazing at her angelic face. He reached out but didn't touch – just traced her soft features in the air. His eyes glistened. Sonia's cheek flickered and he backed away.

They slept in the marital bed. He didn't try to make love to her. He was feverish. He flinched in his sleep and grimaced from the pain in his shoulder when he tried to turn over. Martina lay awake, listening to the unfamiliar sound of his breathing. How was she going to get out of this situation?

The weeks that followed were unbearable. Terror gripped her every time she left or entered the house in case someone was watching. Concealing Gianni's presence from Elena filled her with guilt, but he was adamant his mother mustn't know he was there. Besides, who knew how she might react, after what the truth had done to Cesare?

Martina set up a bed for Gianni in the cave inside the chestnut drying tower. It was too much of a risk, having him in the house. The tower was cold, but he insisted the conditions were luxurious compared with what he'd been used to. If anyone came looking for him, she could disguise the cave entrance with boxes and barrels. It wasn't perfect but it would have to do. She told him not to leave the building during the day. He said he wasn't stupid.

When he was well enough, she let him have sex when he asked for it. She couldn't think of it as making love. She sensed he knew how much she disliked it and that he was doing it mainly to punish her, to dare her to tell him about Roberto but she wasn't going to do that. But all this time she had no way of getting word to Roberto to explain her absence. He would be waiting for her in the café. Or perhaps he would have given up by now. She wriggled away from Gianni's sleeping body. If only he would leave. And if he didn't leave, how could she make him?

Giftbooks4u.com

Martina

“It’s snowing.”

Giant white flakes buoyed by the wind floated around the piazza. Sonia tried to catch them as they danced around her. But it wasn’t snow, only paper. Martina picked one up and read it.

“What does it say?” Sonia asked.

She felt her face tighten as she tried to smile. “Nothing important.”

More threats. Last week they’d found leaflets from the Allies with a different set of rules. Whatever they did, they were putting themselves in danger from someone.

The house was filled with piano music when they got in. Sonia clambered up onto the stool beside her grandmother, planting her hands on the keys until Elena told her which one to press and when.

“I saw Gianni last night,” Elena said as she played.

“I’m sorry?” Martina felt her face blanch.

Her mother-in-law continued to tickle the keys. “He was standing by my bed as large as life. He said, ‘I’m fine mamma. Don’t cry about me anymore.’”

Martina froze. She had no idea what to say.

“It felt so real. I could have reached out and touched him.”

Her heart squeezed tighter. “And did you?”

Elena frowned. “Did I what?”

“Did you touch him? Did you try to touch him?”

“Of course I didn’t. I was dreaming, not mad.”

At the first opportunity Martina ran to the chestnut tower. “What were you thinking of? You’ll get us all killed.”

Gianni laughed. "She thought she was dreaming. Don't tell me what to do."

But she suspected Sonia had seen him too because the little girl had started to ask questions about seeing a strange man in the garden. Martina grabbed her chin and spoke close to her face.

"You did not see anyone. It was your imagination. Don't tell anyone about this. Do you understand?"

Sonia nodded, tears sliding down her face. Martina pulled her towards her and enveloped her in a hug. This was Gianni's fault. He was doing this to them. She felt like killing him.

When eventually the gun wound had healed and the infection gone, he announced he was leaving.

"Will you come back?" she asked.

"Not now. I've got to go where I'm needed." When he reached the door, he stopped. "But I will be back when we've finished the job. This is my house, don't forget. And you are my wife."

She locked the door behind him and slumped to the ground. She wanted to hurl things, smash things, slice open his head with an axe. Instead, she bit her hand until she could taste blood. How could she ever feel free again?

Giftbooks4u.com

FIFTY-NINE

Sonia

NOW

After the cool, dark interior of Santa Maria del Fiore, Sonia stepped out into blinding sunshine and a cacophony of sound. She was hemmed in on all sides, surrounded by voices, music, car horns, and the bells from Giotto's

campanile. A huge crowd had gathered around the piazza. People jostled and surged to get a better view but were held back behind barriers by police with megaphones.

Between people's heads, she glimpsed the gleaming gold painted horns of the white oxen with garlands of flowers around their necks as they pulled the brightly painted cart towards the Baptistery.

On the stroke of noon, the priest released the sacred *colombina*, the dove-shaped rocket. It shot down the wire to the cart and ignited the fireworks, creating a spectacular display above the cathedral square, symbolising new life, new hope. Processions in medieval costume followed the fireworks, and a magnificent display of flag throwing.

"Beautiful!"

Lorenzo and Francesca exchanged a look.

"All right, I admit it – Easter in Florence is spectacular," she said, laughing.

In Santa Zita at this moment, the priest would be releasing real doves from the steps of the church. The piazza would smell of sweet pastries and chocolate, and everyone would be dressed up, especially the children in their white dresses and ribbons. But it was relief to be here, anonymous amid the crush.

Making their way back to the flat for lunch was hard work. Clutching Flavio's arm, she weaved in and out of groups of that seemed to be in no hurry, past artists and street vendors selling watches and sunglasses and poor-quality prints of *The Birth of Venus*. They had to keep stopping to avoid photo bombing other people's holiday snaps.

"Chaos," she murmured, but from the corner of her eye caught her son and his girlfriend exchange another look. Was she so predictable? She'd better bite her tongue from now on.

Francesca carved a passage through the bodies, long, chestnut hair fluttering in the breeze. She looked round with her big, un-self-conscious smile, motioning for them to follow. As usual, she looked effortlessly smart in her silk dress amid all the jeans and shorts and trainers, her three-inch heels bringing her almost up to Lorenzo's height.

It was a relief to get over the bridge and into a quieter district of the Oltrarno. They stopped at a little patisserie to pick up a beautifully packaged dessert. The pain in Sonia's stomach was creeping back so she couldn't face eating anything, but she made appreciative noises.

The lift to Lorenzo's flat was broken so they puffed up the stairs. The flat at the top was very small but the roof terrace had a charming view over a piazza where people were milling about, exchanging kisses and walking their dogs. A group of small boys booted a ball across the space.

"We're going to be looking for somewhere bigger this year." Lorenzo glanced at Francesca again. "That's what I wanted to tell you about."

Of course. New life, new hope. Sonia felt herself smile. But her chest burned as another thought struck her. New lies.

Giftbooks4u.com

SIXTY

Sonia

Sonia watched her son uncork the Prosecco on a rooftop in Florence. The breeze ruffled his black hair and white linen shirt, and his face glowed with excitement. This was one of those moments they'd always remember – her son telling them he was going to be a father.

Lorenzo handed Francesca an orange juice and planted a kiss on her nose. For them the future was exciting, happy, an adventure. Sonia pretended to rummage in her bag while popping another a tablet in her mouth.

"I'm sorry we didn't tell you straight away," Lorenzo said. That impish smile transported her back to being a new mother.

"We wanted to tell you in person, not just over the phone," he said, "and Francesca was really sick for the first few weeks, so she didn't feel like going anywhere."

“Congratulations. I’m so proud of you both.” Sonia threw her arms around her son, not wanting to let him go, and hooked Francesca into the embrace. She wiped away tears, laughing. “Look at me. I can’t help it.”

But Flavio had tears in his eyes, too. He took her in his arms, laughing and scolding her but squeezing her tenderly. She knew what was going through his mind. If only this wasn’t so complicated.

All those pregnancies that had come to nothing. Losing one baby after another had been agonising, especially when cheerful blue or pink rosettes were popping up all around on neighbours’ front doors announcing their good news. Time after time her hopes were raised and then dashed. Each time the bleeding started she would lie still for days with her legs raised praying that it would stop, and this would be the baby she held onto.

Sonia had tried to stay philosophical but in her fragile state it was impossible to hold back the doubts. She couldn’t help thinking about what her mother had done. This must be nature’s way – perhaps even God’s way – of ensuring that nobody else would inherit the bad blood.

She couldn’t believe how resilient she became. Eventually, Flavio said they should stop trying. But then Lorenzo came along. She knew she fussed over him more than she should. If he was out of sight for too long, she panicked. If he had a snuffle, she called the doctor in the middle of the night. But she couldn’t risk anything happening to him.

And here he was now, a grown man, about to be a father himself, laughing and joking, so pleased with himself and proud of Francesca.

“Thought of any names yet?” asked Flavio.

Francesca laughed. “We’re always arguing about it. We don’t agree on any so far. Lorenzo’s choices are so old-fashioned. I want something special and different.”

Lorenzo rolled his eyes. “Yours are all foreign celebrity names,” he protested. “We want something with a bit of class.”

Francesca looked at Sonia. “What would you choose?”

For one crazy moment she almost said Martina. But this child deserved a new start, not a millstone. This child, born in Florence, would be free of the past. “How about Maria?”

And yet the birth would bring new anxieties. Francesca looked radiant, bubbling with excitement about being a mother, but who knew what genes she was carrying, what might be revealed later in a screening or a DNA test and where that would lead?

“Are you all right, Mamma?” Lorenzo’s concerned tone brought Sonia back to the roof terrace in Florence on Easter Day.

“Of course I am. I’m so happy for you.”

“You looked like you were miles away.”

“I was just thinking how quickly time goes.”

If anyone could make her see the lighter side of a situation it was Lorenzo. If only he could now. If only he had an idea where to begin. But it wasn’t his problem. It must never be his problem. His life had been so wonderfully simple and straightforward. Why burden him now with this knowledge? The old debate started up in her head. Wouldn’t telling him really be a selfish act, more of a release for her than a help to him?

For the next hour, she busied herself in their kitchen. This lunch, this Easter Day, could be their last together as a family. Who knew how things would be next year? She stabbed back the thought and forced herself to concentrate on cooking the lunch, refusing offers of help. After all, she had things to do.

As the laughter and chatter continued from the roof above, she slipped out of the kitchen and across the stairs to the bedroom. Her heart thumped as she pushed open the door, startling a tabby cat that leapt off the bed and rubbed against her legs. She felt like a thief going through their belongings. How would she possibly explain if one of them popped back down for something and found her?

Lorenzo’s bedside cabinet had a stack of Scandinavian noir novels and a glorious picture of him and Francesca on a beach. Francesca’s was clear, but the dressing table smelled of her perfume, a distinctive mix of marine and herbal notes, and was crammed with bottles and jars.

The cat eyed Sonia as she lifted the lid off a slim white box. Her fingers trembled as she picked through earrings of every description, a couple of gold bracelets and various Murano glass pendants. From the town came the sounds of bands leading the processions before the Medieval football game.

Feverishly digging through, she lifted out a gold chain, but it wasn’t the one she’d been looking for. Where else could it be?

Sliding open the lingerie drawer she gingerly lifted garments, so pretty and so tiny – forcing back mental pictures of her daughter-in-law wearing these things or worse Lorenzo undressing her in this room.

Her heart leapt into her mouth as she heard footsteps on the stairs. Francesca’s voice. “Be right back.”

But a different door closed with a thunk. She'd only been going to the bathroom. Sonia released her breath. Her fingers closed around a scrap of tissue. Unfurling it, she held the shooting star pendant up to the light, watching the diamonds in its tail sparkle. She had a sudden vision of the girl in the church leaving the pendant with the baby before she ran away. And the television showing an identical one that had been found on one of the bodies discovered at Villa Leonida. With the new baby coming along, protecting the truth mattered more than ever now. If someone recognised this pendant, they could make the connection, and she couldn't risk that. "Mamma?"

Her heart catapulted. She stuffed the pendant into her pocket. Lorenzo's face, as he came through the door was full of surprise.

"Your cat was stuck in here," she said. "Isn't she lovely?"

He grinned and scooped up the tabby. "She is, isn't she? I don't know how she'll take to the baby. She's used to being queen around here."

Sonia's hands curled around the pendant inside her pocket. An awful thing to do, stealing from your own child. But it had to be done. Perhaps some time in the future when the talk had died down again, she'd be able to slip it back in among Francesca's belongings.

Getting into the car at the end of the day, she felt her stomach spasm with pain once more. It felt as though a shard of glass was stuck inside her. If Lorenzo were to find out the truth about his birth, this could be the last time he'd want anything to do with her. Francesca too – she'd wonder what sort of family she was marrying into. She might even change her mind about the whole thing.

"Look after yourself," she managed to say, giving Francesca a kiss.

Francesca patted her stomach and laughed. "Don't worry – I will."

There were jokes about how she'd take full advantage, spending the next few months with her feet up, being waited on and pampered. Then they were gone, strolling along the road back to the flat, hand in hand, blissfully ignorant.

Sonia lay awake staring into the darkness. The usual nightmare. It was hardly a surprise that the girl had come back again in her dream, finding her way

into the house and taking the baby. Only this time she spoke too. Or at least whispered.

"I'll tell."

Giftbooks4u.com

SIXTY-ONE

Martina

Martina found the door of the building open. She pushed it back and clattered up the stairs, her heart racing. He was waiting for her at the top – must have watched her coming down the street from the window. He pulled her inside and kicked the door shut.

He kept talking as they were kissing and undressing.

"Where have you been? I thought you'd changed your mind. I've been going out of my mind thinking something had happened to you."

If they'd known that last day that it would be the last, would they have spent it differently? What would they have said to each other? She would always wonder.

"It won't always be like this," he said letting her hair run through his fingers as he lay with her head on his chest. "I want us to be together properly."

"What about Sonia?"

"She can come too."

It all seemed so easy. She no longer had any doubts. She still didn't know him as well as she wanted but that only added to the attraction.

Afterwards, as she left, she looked back up to the window. He blew a kiss and mouthed something. Was it 'I love you'?

The plane roared above. Probably one that had strayed off course. No, the sound was getting louder, so loud she couldn't think. In that second the bomb struck, his face flashed with a brilliant whiteness, his eyes silver, his smile frozen. She didn't so much hear as feel the blast, caught up in an explosion as the building erupted. She felt herself being lifted through the air and hurled across the street, crashing through glass but not feeling a thing. Falling into darkness.

In that split second her world changed. She woke up lying on the ground in a dark world, choking on dust. The darkness was so intense that when she first opened her eyes it made no difference, and she thought she'd been blinded. Her nostrils were filled with dust and another smell she didn't recognise. She couldn't breathe. For some moments she thought she was stuck in a dream. She lay there waiting for it all to stop. But the realisation gradually came – she couldn't wake up because she was already awake. This was reality and it was worse than the worst nightmare she'd ever had.

In the dense darkness that swirled around her she went over in her mind what she'd been doing before she found herself here. She'd been in the apartment with Roberto. They'd made love. They'd talked about everything. She'd seen Roberto's face light up. Then the world had disintegrated.

Where was he?

She cried out but couldn't make herself heard over the ringing in her ears. It bored into her head. For a long time, she thought she was alone. How would anyone find her? Elena had no idea she was here. But as the dust began to settle, she could make out shapes of people moving, stumbling about, hauling wreckage away as though in a silent film. As her ears popped, she noticed the soundtrack to this film was a ghostly chorus of moans and screams. Wait. Was one of those voices hers?

Her cheek hurt. When she touched it, she found it was slippery, coated in a sticky substance. At the same time as she began to feel the pain, she realised her hand was soaked with blood.

Gradually the picture became clearer. Part of a building had collapsed on top of her, but she wasn't crushed. She wasn't trapped. She could get up, get away.

I can't die here.

She tried to get to her feet. Pain shot through her ankle, as if it had snapped. She sank back down. No, she couldn't stay here. With a gargantuan effort she forced herself up again, calling out for Roberto although she already knew it was hopeless.

She kicked something by accident. Looking down she saw it was an arm lying there on its own. For a while she stood staring at it, transfixed. She could make out the body of a woman with red hair lying twisted at a grotesque angle and an old man except that part of his face was missing. Someone said something about the building being unsafe. She must get out.

A ghost was walking towards her. She stopped, staring, running a hand bewilderedly through her hair. The ghost stopped too. She found herself staring past her own figure caked in dust to the café interior where she and Roberto had sat drinking coffee on several occasions. Recognising her, the waiter sat her down and brought her a glass of water.

“A whole house has disappeared. Luckily the owner's away.”

Thoughts raced through her mind. I have to get back. I have to get away from here. I can't let anyone know I was here. But the words started to slide as everything went dark.

Giftbooks4u.com

Irena

Irena rummaged for the machine. Thoughts had been crashing around in her head for days. She had to get them out.

“Martina knew. She knew how much he meant to me. She of all people knew that he was my first, my only, love. It wasn’t as though I had a different boy every week. He was everything to me. And she took him. Simply because she could.

“So, instead of planning for my wedding I found myself organising my fiancé’s funeral. I so hoped Martina would come with me but was told she’d had a fall and was recovering in bed. I was too distraught and bound up with my own grief to find this odd. I hadn’t seen much of her lately, what with her father-in-law being ill and then dying. I kept away out of respect. I never imagined she’d been spending time with Roberto.

I should be even angrier with him. He turned out to be shallower than the rest of them – proposed to me one night, fell in love with my best friend the next.

“But somehow, I always saw Martina’s betrayal as the worst – she’d known me for years. And Roberto of course paid the price. You can’t heap that much hatred onto someone who died that way, can you?

Carlo turned up the volume. He sensed he was getting close now.

It happened on such an ordinary day I can’t even remember what we were doing or what the weather was like. There was some incident down in the town. Some German soldiers had beaten a shopkeeper for swearing at

them. Later that day, one of the partisans retaliated by shooting a soldier. We knew they weren't going to overlook it.

The Nazis were aware the partisans were up in the hills, but they hadn't been able to find out where they were hiding. That incident changed everything.

It was Dieter, the young soldier who flirted with Martina, who told us about the reward. They were offering money – a substantial amount – for information on the partisans and their hiding places. He urged us to tell them anything we'd heard. "We know there's a cell around here. We just need to know where they are."

He was very persistent. Anxious even. I got the impression he wanted to persuade us for our sakes as well as theirs.

"You know you'd be putting German lives at risk by not telling," he said. "You know how seriously that would be taken. I don't want to see any harm come to you."

He sounded like he meant it. But we both denied knowing anything. He gave Sonia some chocolate before he left. He looked behind him several times as he went, giving us the chance to change our minds but we still said we had nothing to tell.

For a few days nothing happened. We went about our business, but it was always there, an undercurrent running through everything we did, every conversation we had. We were all holding our breath, wondering who would break. I still couldn't tell if Dieter had said what he did out of concern or as a threat, but we weren't stupid. We knew if they didn't get their information through bribery they had other methods. And we knew it was only a matter of time before their patience ran out.

"It's Gianni's fault," Martina kept saying. "As long as they're up there in the hills doing stupid things they're making us a target for revenge. We need to get them to go."

If the Nazis found the partisans, perhaps they'd deal with them and leave our village alone. Someone had to explain to the Germans that we had never asked them to come. They were nothing to do with us. Then they might see there was no sense in taking it out on us.

If Gianni was gone Martina wouldn't have to worry about her future anymore. And Sonia's future. And Villa Leonida.

Carlo felt a trickle of fear between his shoulder blades as he sensed what was coming.

Giftbooks4u.com

Martina

From the balcony at Villa Leonida, Martina saw the tanks before she heard them. It was rare for there to be so many vehicles. In the piazza people gathered to watch, then dispersed and vanished.

It looked at first as though the convoy would carry on past the turning to Santa Zita through the valley to a village further north where there had been lots of trouble. But it stopped. Martina held her breath. The vehicles were turning round. They filed back along the road towards the town. One by one they disappeared from the road, and she could tell by the revving and stalling that they were swinging around the first bend that led up to Santa Zita.

As the engines sound grew louder, shutters banged closed. People called their children inside and retreated into the shadows of their homes. Some figures ran across the piazza and up into the hills. Others tumbled out into the fields.

By the time the soldiers arrived the place looked deserted. The engines cut. A group of men went into Bernado's bar, where they were used to singing and exchanging jokes with the barman. They came out with him in silence. He looked up towards the villa. Martina retreated from the balcony and closed the French doors.

Between the slats of the shutters she saw the soldiers spreading out, knocking on doors. Some of them were coming on foot up the hill towards the house. This was going to be worse, so much worse, than she had expected.

"We need to go," she said to Elena.

Elena's mouth was set firm. "I'm not going anywhere. Where would we go?"

"We need to hide. One of the barns or the chestnut tower."

Her mother-in-law refused to move. "This is our house. We've done nothing wrong."

"Do you think that makes a difference?"

"You go if you want to. They're looking for those fools up in the hills. They won't harm us."

Martina ran back to the window. She could see the young, broad face and silver eyes of the first soldier. It was Dieter, the one who gave sweets to Sonia. She heard someone giving orders in the familiar clipped accent. She closed her eyes. It couldn't be happening. Not like this.

She waited, pressing herself against the wall. Perhaps Elena was right. They had nothing to fear. But if she was caught running it would look as though she had something to hide.

The soldiers passed. More steps, a blur of bodies passing the shutters close enough for her to reach out and touch them, boots clattering on the cobblestones. Then, for a very long time nothing. She knew where they were headed. It wouldn't be long now. It was too late for anyone to get a warning to the men up there. Anyone who tried would certainly be shot or hanged.

From a long way off she thought she heard a sudden shout and a shot. Then another. Then a volley of shots and shouting. Perhaps the soldiers had walked into a trap and the partisans were shooting at them or perhaps the partisan had been overpowered.

Below someone left the priest's house and sprinted down into the woods. Another shot. Shouting, rushing feet, more orders delivered in German. Something had gone horribly wrong.

"Mamma?" Sonia's voice was soft. She knew something was going on. "Can we play cards?"

Martina scooped the child in her arms, hugging her close, savouring the feel of her soft hair, the orangey scent of her skin. "Let's play hide-and-seek. We'll hide together. Show me your very best hiding place, Sonia." "But who'll find us?" asked the child, puzzled.

"Nobody. That's the point. Nobody must find us." "Can Nonna play too?" Sonia asked.

Martina shut her eyes for a moment and shook her head, remembering Elena lying in bed. They couldn't afford to be held up. "Nonna's asleep. We mustn't wake her."

Surely, they wouldn't harm an old woman lying in bed? Anyone could see she was no threat. One glance around the house would show framed pictures of the King and Mussolini, evidence of her loyalty to the fascist state.

"I know a great place," Sonia whispered with an impish smile. "No one will ever find us there."

Sonia took her mother's hand and led her to the chestnut tower.

At the back where the tower had been built up against the rock was a sizeable cave used as a cantina for their wine. It might just work.

"Quickly," Martina urged. She grimaced as she shunted some boxes.

"Not here," said Sonia. She pointed above her head. "Up there."

Martina looked up. There was a ledge above her and a narrow, dark space like a chimney. Sonia climbed up with ease. Martina nearly fainted.

"You go up. I can't. But stay there, Sonia. Stay there until I call you. Don't come out for anyone else."

Where could she go now? There wasn't time. If she left the building someone might see her.

Sonia poked her head back out. "You can do it, Mamma – it's bigger once you get up here. Look."

"How did you know about this?" Martina whispered.

"The man showed me. The one with the beard in my imagination that you said I was never allowed to talk about."

Martina's heart twisted at what Gianni had done for them, making plans for an event like this. But there wasn't time to think about it now. If Gianni could make it into that space, she must be able to. She had to try. She'd been so angry when she discovered he'd been leaving the tower visiting Elena at night and talking to Sonia, but there was a chance that in showing her this place he'd saved their lives. Sick dread trickled through her as she thought of the danger he was in.

She heaved herself up, slipping back twice, bruising her shin and taking the skin off her shoulder. There was space enough to sit with her legs drawn up, but the space was very small. How long would the air last? She had

dragged the box back across the opening but had she in doing so sealed them into a coffin?

Even as a small child she had been afraid of the dark and panicked in tight spaces. The more she thought about it the harder it was to breathe. Hours passed. It was impossible to say how long. She heard Elena calling. She didn't reply. Sonia looked at her quizzically, asking permission to shout but Martina shook her head firmly, making ready if necessary to clamp her hand over her daughter's mouth.

Engines revved below them. Reinforcements must have arrived. There was noise, movement everywhere. They must be making their way through the village, house by house. Martina shrank as she heard doors being kicked in, windows smashing, people screaming. She could picture the scene, though she didn't want to. She'd heard enough accounts from elsewhere. Old people being dragged out of bed, children pulled out of hiding places. Houses set on fire and soldiers standing outside to gun people down as they tried to escape the flames. Others coming out of their homes voluntarily, knowing it was only a matter of time and wanting to preserve as much as they could of their dignity and their possessions. Made to gather in the piazza....

"This isn't a game, is it Mamma?" Sonia whispered. Her eyes were huge and luminous in the dark space. "What will they do to us if they find us? Will they take us away like the Palmieris?"

Martina buried her face in the child's hair, "I love you," she whispered over and over again, like a mantra. And "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

Their hearts jolted as they heard their own front door being pounded. A crash as it gave. Shouts. Boots. Elena whimpering. She must have decided to get out of bed after all. Perhaps she thought she could reason with them. Martina hugged Sonia to her more closely to shield her ears.

Furniture being hurled out of the windows. Elena pleading. Thank goodness she didn't know where they were so she couldn't tell but Martina wouldn't let herself imagine what they were doing to her. More noise and movement and then something very quiet.

So quiet she almost thought she'd misheard. The exchange of weight from one foot to another. An inhalation. Her heart sank like a stone. Someone was standing in the chestnut drying tower. They hadn't heard him come in.

Could he sense that people were here even without seeing them? Were they trained in the army to tell such things? Had Martina left some sign, some stupid infantile clue like a trail of footprints across the floor? Her heart thumped as she relived those feverish moments when Sonia still thought it was a game. Had they dropped one of Sonia's toys?

The feet slipped slowly into the room, heel-toe, heel-toe, moving systematically around the tower. The rustle of a great coat against jack boots, the grating sound of boxes being shifted aside. A light was cast beneath them. It swung around, presumably catching different parts of the room in its glow. *Do they know we're here? Are they just waiting for us to come out?*

A slow grinding sound as more wine flasks and boxes were moved. So quietly done. Another beam of light. Then a voice chillingly soft: "Come out. I've seen you."

She almost fell for it. For a moment she just wanted it all to be over. But even if she had wanted to move, she couldn't. She'd lost all feeling in her legs in those cramped conditions. Someone would have to drag her. Or shoot her.

More footsteps. "Anyone?" asked a voice. She'd picked up just enough German from the time she spent with Dieter and his friends to understand what they were saying or at least the gist of it.

"Rats," replied the first at length. "Come on."

"Someone's been here. It smells of piss," said the other.

Martina realised for the first time that she'd lost control as well as Sonia. She had thought she was simply bathed in sweat. Now she was terrified that it had trickled down the wall and would be as visible as any signpost.

The other laughed. "You and your fucking smells. Well, they're not here now. That old cow probably tipped them off. She's not as ill as she makes out." The feet moved away. She heard them going back over to the house. There was a brief exchange with some others. A gun was fired. Silence.

Sonia's face was frozen into a mask of horror. It must mirror her own. She had forgotten how to breathe. Then something extraordinary. The sound of their piano being played. Quite well. These men who had almost certainly killed Elena were now playing her piano as though they had popped round on a social visit.

Martina and Sonia stayed in the hiding place for hours, long after the piano stopped. She suspected another trick and was too terrified of what

they might see when they came out. They clung to the only certainty they had which was each other. Sonia seemed asleep, she was so still. Only the rhythmic movement of her ribcage against Martina's assured her that she was still alive.

More time passed. She was in such excruciating discomfort crouched in the suffocating space that she thought she would pass out. If she were on her own, she would give in to it. But then what would happen to Sonia?

Sonia started to slip from her arms. She grabbed her and hauled her back up to the ledge. The idea of being back there was unbearable but the alternative was worse.

They heard more footsteps coming up towards the house, more orders being given. "Keep walking. Shut up. Look where you're going."

Then the screaming. She couldn't work out where it was coming from, but it was real and terrible.

Powerless to do anything now, Martina covered Sonia's ears, but she couldn't drown it out. She could hear a baby's cries long after the rest had fallen silent, and the air was filled with the smell of burning. The crying must have stopped at some point, but she already knew she would never stop hearing it.

What had she done?

Giftbooks4u.com

SIXTY-FOUR

Irena

I was in the school when the soldiers came. We heard the vans draw up outside; heard the whispers that were going round. We'd been expecting

trouble ever since the German officer had been shot in town, but this still seemed to come from out of the blue.

I told the class to close their books. We would sing songs instead. I just kept thinking they wouldn't do it, not to children, especially not ones who were singing patriotic songs. The door burst open. Some of the parents rushed into the room to get to their children. Those who were left clung to me wanting to know what was happening and where their own parents were. I still didn't think we were in danger ourselves but thought they might see something horrible, so I urged them to hide but before they all had the chance a soldier came in and ordered us all to get out and join the others in the piazza. They dragged out any they found hiding and pushed them out too.

I think it was going through all of our minds – would we ever be coming back?

Giftbooks4u.com

SIXTY-FIVE

Irena

They filed like robots out into the piazza. There were some moments of confusion as two armoured vehicles had to be moved out of the square to accommodate them all, and a silence, a strange formality among the people as they gathered. A ripple of movement crept through the crowd as people pushed their way along the lines, to get into a preferred position or be next to people they knew – swapping places over and over as though taking part in some bizarre silent dance. A command was shouted. They stopped moving.

The Nazi officer in charge read out a statement conveying his disappointment and anger that this village had chosen to obstruct them in their quest. His voice was measured, reasonable, the tone injured.

Someone had been so arrogant as to think they could pick an argument with no less than the Fuhrer. And someone had shot dead a fine and noble German soldier. For that, everyone must surely understand, a price would have to be paid.

It wasn't as if they didn't know – it had been well enough publicized, the co-operation expected by the Italian people, and that cooperation was left wanting here.

There was silence as he read. People looked down, looked away, looked straight ahead, terrified to in any way antagonize the soldiers or draw attention to themselves. They had an idea of what was coming.

At last Irena stepped forward pleading for the lives of the schoolchildren to be spared.

“Shut up,” shouted an officer.

Someone pulled her back into the crowd. She stood trembling, unable to believe that an exception couldn't be made for children. The soldiers moved along the crowd, picking out people at random – first Bernardo, then the two brothers from the restaurant. Some went defiantly, most shuffled; some broke down.

Irena felt her knees give way as she was called out. She wrested her hand out of her mother's, then stepped out, her head down. How was she going to be able to walk?

A teenage boy burst out of the crowd.

“Not her. Not my mother. You can't take her.”

A shot rang out. The boy slumped to the floor. There was an intake of breath and a muffled cry of anguish from his mother who tried to tend to him, but she was pushed roughly on.

Irena watched the blood spill onto the cobbles. She couldn't take in what she had just seen. She was shoved forward. They made their way up the street, barely aware of who was among them. As they were ordered up towards the villa, she found herself being pulled back by one of the soldiers. “Wait.”

He said it so quietly it could have been in her head. She looked up. It was Dieter. His eyes were fixed ahead, his body blocking the view of the rest of

the people as they continued up the path. He indicated the alleyway to his left. "Down there. Go"

She went without a word, not daring to thank him or even knowing if it was right to. Slipping down the cobbles, waiting all the time for a bullet in her back. It didn't come. She rounded the bend and flattened herself against the wall, her breath coming in stabs as she tried to shut out the sounds of the rest of the party moving on up the hill. Then she sank down to the floor, hugging her knees. It might not be over. He might be coming back for her.

In the tight, high-sided courtyard behind the chapel the residents had no chance of making a run for it. All they could do was wait. Cowering in the streets below, Irena thought she could hear music, a piano being played beautifully from somewhere up above her.

An order was given. Bullets pumped. Human beings turned to a heap of rubble.

Giftbooks4u.com

Irena

Gianni was hanged in front of us in the piazza along with the two other partisans. I was only glad his parents weren't there to see it.

Carlo was sitting in the empty restaurant. The Easter rush had fallen off a bit but takings this lunchtime had still been good. He poured himself a brandy and drank it too quickly. His mother's voice was frail and bewildered. The air crackled as she sighed.

At first, I didn't believe Martina had started all this. She was my friend. I trusted her. I didn't speak to her for a long time after. It was too painful to look at her and think about what she had done.

You want to know why, don't you? The thing is *amore*, you don't have to be a bad person to do a terrible thing.

Carlo stared at the device, willing her to go on but at the same time afraid of what he was going to hear.

They promised us they would guarantee our safety if we told them where Gianni and the rest were hiding. Martina trusted Dieter. Maybe she had good intentions – planned to be generous with the money. We were all starving, you see. But that's hard to accept when your family and so many good neighbours have been slaughtered.

Carlo sat staring at the machine. There was something about his mother's story that didn't ring true. He didn't want to confront it, but he had to.

He found her in her usual chair sitting with her back to him looking out at the cloud formation over the mountains opposite. A sixth sense must have alerted her to his presence because she swung round. He caught the startled look on her face as she spotted the device in his hand.

"What is it? What do you want?"

He was trying not to brandish it at her and put her on the defensive. Her face blanched.

"I told you not to touch that. It's mine. You had no right." But her tone was resigned rather than indignant like last time.

He played the last section back to her. They sat together and listened to it not looking at one another. He pressed the back of his fist against his lips.

"Was it really Martina who betrayed everyone?"

Irena's eyes glistened as she gripped his hand. She shook her head. All these years and she was finally on the point of letting go of the truth.

"I didn't think they would do it to us," she whispered. "I trusted them. I was stupid. I wanted vengeance for what she'd done to me, but not like that. Not like that."

It took a while to absorb what he'd just heard. Outside in the piazza came the sound of laughter and footsteps – a group of teenagers walking through, the new generation keeping Santa Zita alive.

"It was you," he said. "You told the Nazis about the partisans. That's why they let you go." He wanted to get it clear in his own mind. "Why?"

She looked at him aghast. Her voice shook with anger and indignation. For a moment he thought she was going to slap his face. "I did not tell them."

Madonna. Was this one of those conversations that was going to go round in circles? He tried to control his voice but there was a sharpness to his tone he couldn't suppress.

"Well, if it wasn't you who was it?"

"It was Alvaro."

"Alvaro?"

"Yes, yes, you remember – the boy she bullied at school."

“Of course I remember but what did he have to do with it?”

She smiled and shook her head. “People always look for the big thing that leads to the catastrophe but sometimes it’s lots of little things that add up over the years.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“Gianni was no better than Martina was. He lied to Alvaro. Promised him all sorts of rewards for covering for him when he deserted. But Alvaro didn’t get anything that I’m aware of.”

No wonder he resented both Martina and Gianni for the way they had treated him. But even so... He shook his head in confusion.

“He was so messed up by then. Addicted to stuff. He was easy to bribe. He probably didn’t even know what he was saying. And he had become invisible – no one noticed him. I spotted him talking to the Germans that evening, sitting on the bench outside the school. I’d gone back to get some books.

“Dieter lifted his head, and I saw something register in his eyes. And I knew then something very bad was going to happen.”

Carlo digested this. “So why didn’t you tell everyone? Give people the chance to escape? Or at least hide?”

She looked at him as though he were a child. “There was nowhere to escape, *amore*. Nowhere to hide. If we’d all made a run for it, the consequences would have been even worse. I didn’t know exactly what would happen or when or how. We were all expecting something, remember.”

She sighed and drew her cardigan around her shoulders. Her mouth hardened. “And to tell the truth I thought things might work out for the best.”

Carlo felt he was talking to stranger. “How can you even say that?”

She didn’t seem to hear him. She got to her feet, her arms shaking as she leant on the sides of the chair for support. He watched but didn’t help her. She walked over to the window and started rearranging the ornaments.

“I wanted Martina to know what it felt like. To have something, someone, of hers taken away.” She was as calm as if she had been discussing what to put on her shopping list. “Taking Roberto from me. Getting him killed. She destroyed me.”

Irena moved the azalea, knocking over a porcelain figurine, which crashed to the floor. She stared at the window, leaving her reflection to talk to Carlo.

"I wasn't thinking clearly. I just wanted to hurt her as much as she'd hurt me. I knew Gianni was up there with them, leaving Martina free to eye up other men. I heard rumours that he'd been down to the villa, not that she ever told me. She and Gianni didn't care about anyone but themselves.

"I wanted him to be frightened. And her to be frightened for him. It was both of them, you see, who destroyed me. Him fooling about with the partisans and her helping herself to Roberto.

"I wanted justice. But not like that. I didn't think it would end the way it did."

Carlo shook his head. "But if it was Alvaro who told them..."

She smiled. "Then what did I do? What was my vengeance? The answer is nothing. Let's just say I heard someone and then someone else say that it could have been Martina who talked. That she'd been seeing another man, had been flirting with a German officer and that she wanted to keep the villa but without Gianni. And I let those stories spread. And never set the record straight."

Carlo felt sick. All those years his mother had stood back and let her best friend be treated as a pariah.

"What happened to Alvaro?"

She shrugged. "I never saw him after the massacre. Perhaps he's living in a grand villa on the riviera smoking fat cigars and drinking fine wine, surrounded by the things he bought with the reward money. But it's just as likely he died that day. His house was burned to the ground like so many others."

She was silent for a while, no doubt revisiting the scene.

"How did you know Martina was seeing Roberto?" he asked at last.

She laughed softly. "Someone saw them together. Someone always does, don't they? The waiter from the café where the two of them used to meet lived in the road where the bomb went off. He was dating a girl from the village and word got round.

"You know – losing Roberto was unspeakably painful. But finding out they'd been together at the time was even worse. It made a mockery of my

feelings for him and what we had had. You see, we did have something. We did!"

She watched a dog run around the piazza, chased by two small children.

"I wished it was Martina who died in that bomb blast. But I was glad they weren't together at the end. They didn't deserve that privilege."

She turned to face him again. "As it was, she had that scar from the broken glass for the rest of her life, disfiguring her face so that people forgot she had ever been beautiful. They say you get the face you deserve by middle age, don't they? Well, she certainly did. Her appearance was an accurate reflection of her soul: ugly and twisted. She left me with nothing."

He got to his feet. "Enough. I can't hear any more of this."

She had an odd smile on her face. He couldn't look at her. Something else was coming.

"Except for one thing. What neither of them knew, of course, was that I was expecting Roberto's baby."

Carlo turned slowly and closed his eyes. He should have guessed. Perhaps he had known for a long time but never let himself acknowledge it. The face in the photograph. She reached out towards him, but he pulled back.

"So, in a sense you see I never lost him."

He walked back slowly and sank down in the chair. "Why did anyone believe Martina was the traitor?"

She laughed and waved her arm dismissively. "Oh, they knew what she was like. She made it easy for me. Martina was the obvious choice when you think about it. They knew she'd been abandoned by Gianni. They'd seen her talking to the Germans in the town, Sonia accepting sweets from Dieter, him passing her little gifts.

"And of course she was unharmed in the massacre. No one saw her. She turned up the following day in the piazza, holding Sonia by the hand, as right as rain except for the injury to her face and that was starting to heal. I'll never forget it. They were greeted with kisses. Two more survivors. A miracle.

"I didn't need to say much. Gradually people started to ask questions. Why weren't they found at the villa by the Germans? Why hadn't they been killed like Elena? And everyone knew she and Elena didn't get on. Now Martina had that big villa all to herself.

“You let her take the blame all those years?” he said, appalled.

For a while he didn't think she was going to answer.

“You know, I think she wanted to.”

“Really? How do you make that out?” He wanted to shake her, his own mother.

“She could have defended herself, pointed the finger at me. But I think she wanted to atone for what she'd done to me. That was the way I saw it.”

He dropped his head, staring between parted fingers at her pink, velour slippers, so incongruous with her coldness.

“And you never spoke to her since?”

“Barely. We avoided each other if we could. Once we came close to talking about it, but she said something like “You're dead to me now.”

He was at a loss for words. He didn't trust himself to say too much. “What about Sonia?” he asked finally. “Didn't you think she had a right to know?”

Irena eyed him steadily. “I still think that Martina was responsible for what happened. What I did was a result of what she did. That's why she took the blame. She understood. I'm sorry for Sonia of course I am, I loved her as a child, I'd have done anything for her – but I don't owe her anything.”

“You don't owe her anything?” Carlo could barely look at his mother. “What about having to grow up as the daughter of a traitor? What about -”

“I've made it up to Sonia in my own way,” Irena said. “I've kept a secret for her for many years - probably the one that means more to her than anything else in her life. Do you really think Lorenzo is her child?”

“What? What's that got to do with anything?”

So, they were back to that pregnant girl his mother mentioned last time. But what business was it of anyone's if Sonia's miracle birth was really a surrogate arrangement? He couldn't listen to her anymore. He had to get out.

Sonia

Sonia climbed the stone steps to the doctor's surgery. She was in no hurry to reach the top. The staircase was dark and cool after the warmth of the piazza and smelled of cleaning fluid. She pushed open the door at the top and chose a seat. It was a formality as far as she was concerned. It would be no less than confirmation of what she already knew.

It was terminal, sure to be by now. She had ignored it too long. First the gnawing pain, then the dark, tarry stools, the distended stomach, the weight loss and confusion. Now the retching producing those dark red coffee granules. All the time, she'd mistaken it for stress – the discovery of the bodies at the villa last year and the villa coming up for sale again this year had only masked the symptoms. God's final cruel joke. Perhaps this thing had been lying dormant for years just waiting for the trigger.

Stupid. So stupid. She should have faced up to it sooner. Now she just wanted to get the diagnosis out of the way. She sat in the little waiting room overlooking the park, watching the fir trees dancing in the breeze, trying to fix her thoughts on immediate things, not daring to look into the future. She was only vaguely aware of the clicking of knitting needles, the rustling of pages of a magazine and a mother reading quietly to a small child.

"Who's next?" the doctor asked, popping his head out of the door.

A cold fear crept over Sonia, chaining her to her seat.

The young mother nodded in her direction, but she shook her head. "No, no – after you." The doctor raised his eyebrows at Sonia. She couldn't make herself move. She smiled and waved her hand indicating she was in no hurry and the child was obviously growing restless.

When the door was closed, she got up and made her way quietly down the stairs.

No, it wasn't the right day to hear it.

Back home she rummaged for writing paper and a pen. Sitting on the balcony at the back of the house she wrote the letter that had been forming in her mind for weeks. It seemed strangely formal to be writing to her son. When had she last done so? It must have been when he was on school camp. It had probably been a brief description of her day and some words of affection and encouragement, a reminder to wash his hair in the shower and use the deodorant she had packed for him. Thinking about it now, she had never talked to him about anything very serious.

Whichever way I say this it's going to come as a shock but you need to know that we are not your biological parents. I always meant to tell you, but it never seemed to be the right time, and I'd come to believe that it was irrelevant anyway. We couldn't have loved you any more than we have, and although I wish that I had given birth to you, I wouldn't have wanted you different in any tiny detail. You were always, as far as I am concerned, our son.

It isn't a straightforward situation. I am not a baby snatcher. In all those years of waiting and hoping and having my hopes dashed, I never looked at anyone else's child and felt the urge to take it. I wanted my own. But when I saw you there, given up to God, it was as though I was being given a gift. One thing I am absolutely sure of is that you would have died if you had been left there. You were very weak as it was.

I know it will be hard for you to understand and I would have chosen never to tell you, although I know you have a right to know, but times have changed and science has made it necessary for you to have the information in case it's ever needed. Not that I can give you the details of either parent. All I can assure you is that the girl was very young, far too young to be a mother and in all probability your father never even knew you existed. I doubt she would have told him. I've always hoped what I did gave her a second chance at life as well as you. I wish I could pretend you were conceived in better circumstances.

I believed genuinely at the time that she had abandoned you and had left you in the hope that someone would adopt you. I felt I was that person, called upon by God. It fitted perfectly with everything I had prayed for.

I had no idea that she would come back and look for you or what it would lead to. I don't know for certain if the deaths at the villa were connected with me taking you. It's something that has haunted me ever since the bodies were found at the villa last year. All I know is that after what she must have gone through the girl clearly couldn't have been mentally stable and wasn't capable of looking after a baby.

I know this will come as a shock for you but what makes me ashamed is the fact that I was too cowardly to tell you in person. That I am not there to comfort you as you read this or to answer your questions. But I thought I had so much time and suddenly I realise I haven't anymore. I hope you can understand this, and one day forgive me...

She read it through several times, sealed the envelope and wrote his name on the front but put no address. She set off downstairs to the cantina where she kept the box of small treasures she had packed for him, that contained some of his hair, his first tooth, first shoes and of course the locket she had stolen back from Francesca. Nobody would look in there until well after she was gone.

The door slammed. She bit her lip as Flavio called her name. No chance of going down there now without making him suspicious. She shoved the letter in her handbag and greeted Flavio with a smile, banishing imagined scenes of father and son reading the letter while grieving.

Now she had written it she felt curiously relieved, released from the burden she had imposed on herself for so long. In the end, you just had to trust, she told herself. And if she couldn't trust Lorenzo, what was the point of any of it?

Giftbooks4u.com

Sonia

Sonia woke in the night, the sheets around her soaked in sweat. Her stomach was on fire. The pain was so intense she could barely breathe.

“What is it?” Flavio’s voice was full of concern.

She couldn’t reply. At first, she lay curled in a foetal position, concentrating on taking shallow breaths without causing more pain. She was vaguely aware of him helping her to the bathroom, but the movement made the pain worse. The accidental touch of his hand on her stomach made her scream although she was barely aware the noise came from her.

His voice sounded far away and unfamiliar. Something about “Be right back. Calling the doctor.” But she couldn’t tell if he was still in the room. She had to retch. The next moment she was aware of she was staring into a basin full of blood - so much of it, shockingly red against the white china.

She didn’t know how she ended up in the ambulance, just became aware of the cool air on her face as she was carried out on the stretcher. She thought she was alone but then Flavio was beside her.

His face was full of fear, and she could hear the pleading in his voice as he spoke to the medical team but not the words. She wanted to reassure him, but she couldn’t. A kaleidoscope of images crowded her mind: scenes of happiness – riding along a coastal road on a Vespa with Flavio in their courting days. Lorenzo as she had seen him most recently on the roof terrace of his apartment and then as a small boy wrapped in a towel, still pink from his bath, hair sticking up in tufts, those serious dark eyes looking into hers, his hug, the smell of his skin, the feel of his kiss planted so determinedly, his little hands clasped around her head.

Now she was back at Villa Leonida, dancing with her mother on the moonlit terrace to an old tune on the gramophone, being whirled around

and feeling her skirt spin out about her. Looking up and seeing the sky peppered with stars. She saw a young girl in the bar. The girl handed her a baby. But it wasn't Lorenzo – it was Lorenzo's baby.

No, that wasn't right. How could it be Lorenzo's baby? That was a memory that hadn't yet happened. She wanted it so much. So very, very much. She had to hold on. The images were crowding in on her, then going their own way, dissolving and changing. Slipping away.

Sounds permeated through to her and blocks of light reformed themselves into shapes. How long had she been in limbo, not knowing if she was alive or dead? She became aware of touch, of Flavio's hand around hers, warm and knobby. She heard his voice, smelled the familiar cigarettes and coffee on his breath and the wood smoke on his shirt. As his face came into focus, she saw he had tears in his eyes. Recently, especially since his heart attack, she had thought he looked old, but now she felt much older than him, and at the same time as young and helpless as a baby.

"How long have I been here?"

"Four days. God, you had us all worried - but you're going to be fine," he told her, stroking her hair. "It was an ulcer. Perforated your stomach. If only we'd known earlier - that heartburn you kept talking about."

It took some time to process. An ulcer. Not cancer?

She didn't really hear the rest of his words: something about infection, major surgery, antibiotics, very serious - it was all words. She noticed the flowers, beautiful colours. It took a while to sink in - she wasn't dying.

But the girl. She thought she saw her standing by her bed holding Lorenzo's baby. Had she really been there? Did it happen or was it one of those dreamlike fragments of thought that she had experienced as she slipped in and out of consciousness?

Over the next few days Flavio sat by her bed waiting for her to get stronger. He kept her up to date with the news, both local and global, brought messages from Lorenzo and a copy of her favourite magazine. They laughed together over pictures of a show-jumping cow and a philandering film star caught out with his secretary in Milan while his wife and children were holidaying on the coast.

Perhaps things would be all right after all. There was no need for Flavio to know. Her time with him was too precious to throw away.

“By the way, I had to check through your bag for your phone to see if you’d had any messages and appointments I needed to cancel,” he said.

“There was a letter in there for Lorenzo.”

Oh God. The letter. Her heart stopped. She waited.

“Don’t worry – I sent it on to him.”

She wrenched herself up on her elbows. She must get up. Must phone Lorenzo, tell him not to open it. But a new wave of exhaustion and nausea hit her. She sank back and closed her eyes. It was finished. She was too tired to keep down the truth any longer.

Flavio kissed her head. “I’ll leave you to sleep.”

Giftbooks4u.com

Sonia

Flavio was sitting by her bed again. He had the letter in his hands, the one she had written to Lorenzo.

Here it comes. Best to get it over with. She had had time, too much time to think about it. Yes, Flavio must be angry. Hurt. He might hate her. But it was the practicalities that mattered now. Could he live with it? Could he live with her? They were both old. They needed each other. It was too late to turn back the clock. She couldn't expect forgiveness, but couldn't they stay together and support each other despite what she'd done?

"You silly girl," he whispered, squeezing her hand. "Did you really think I didn't know all this time? I've always known."

The words swirled round her head. "You knew?"

He nodded. "Almost from the first moment I saw him. I thought it was something we silently agreed never to mention."

"I didn't snatch him," she said. She had to make him understand that at least. "He was abandoned. At least I thought – I truly believed..."

"I know he was," he said. "And I know who by. I saw her – the girl from the villa – stumbling along the path towards the church carrying a bundle. I was up in the trees. It didn't really click then what she had in her arms. It was only later that I made the connection."

His words took a while to sink in. All this time he'd kept the secret for her. Allowed her to lie to him, to everyone, been complicit in the crime of covering up Lorenzo's real identity and without ever saying a word to her.

"And you know, I've got a lot more to feel guilty about than you, my love."

What was he talking about? Had he understood this thing at all?

“Who do you think hid those bodies at the villa?” he asked. She felt a chill pass through her. Surely, he hadn’t been involved?

“What are you talking about?”

He sat with his elbows on the bed, hands clasped as if in prayer, pressed against his mouth. Eventually he said, “I was working in the woods around the villa as usual the day after you brought Lorenzo home. I knew he wasn’t ours, but I tried not to think about that. I put all my energy into logging and clearing. I just kept telling myself it must be real even if it didn’t seem to be. I’d lost count of how many times you had got pregnant, and I thought we’d missed our time, but I told myself it must be right.

“I was felling trees up by the waterfall or I probably would have heard the commotion. It started raining so I had to give up using the chainsaw. On the way back, I spotted some strange marks on the stones outside the drying tower. When I got closer, I could see it was blood – lots of it turning the stones pink.

“I could tell something awful had happened before I got inside the tower.”

He pushed his thumb and forefinger into the space above his eyes. “God it was a gruesome sight. Terrible. That poor family.”

He paused, recollecting. “I examined the bodies – or what was left of them. There was nothing anyone could have done. I saw a baby’s dummy on the floor and a pile of nappies. But no sign of a baby.

“I backed away and ran to the house. I hammered on the doors and windows but got no reply. I forced the French doors open. I was shouting, running through the rooms, looking for the rest of the family. There was no one.”

“Why didn’t you go to the police?”

He nodded. “That was my first thought. But I started to panic. What if they thought I’d done it? I had no way of proving I hadn’t. The one who discovers the bodies is always the first suspect, aren’t they?”

All those detective programmes they’d watched together. And all these years she’d had no idea what he knew or what he had done. “You didn’t think I killed them?”

He laughed at the implausibility, squeezing her hands more tightly than ever. “Of course not. I know you’d never harm anyone. But I thought, supposing the girl had brought the baby to you, asked you to get him out of the way and keep him safe.

“You’d have taken him. Of course you would. He was alive, he had a chance. The parents were dead. Whatever terrible thing had happened to them nobody could give him a better home than us. I understand, Sonia. You rescued him from hell.

“If you remember there was trouble with some hawkers at the time. I thought it was probably they who had killed the people at the villa. But if we went to the police and told them what we’d found they would take the baby away from us – place him with some young couple they deemed more suitable. And I couldn’t bear that to happen, knowing what it would do to you.”

“So, you hid the bodies?”

“I had to. I couldn’t risk them being found and our secret being discovered.”

She stared at him, incredulous. What he must have gone through – how could she not have known? How could she have been living with him, sleeping in the same bed and not have had any idea? But then it came to her.

Because of Lorenzo, that was why. In those early weeks, lost in the fog of feeds, nappy changes, dressing and soothing, she had swung between euphoria and exhaustion. The world could have ended, and she wouldn’t have noticed.

“I didn’t have to dig a grave,” he said. “The tower was built up against the rock and there was a cave at the back. I’d discovered it years ago when I was foresting and used it as a wood store. I pulled the wood out and dragged the bodies in. I nailed some planks over the entrance to the cave and dragged lots of things in front of it.

“I burned all the clothes and things. Then I hosed everything down as best I could and went home and got straight in the shower. It wouldn’t have struck you as odd because that’s what I always did after being in the woods. I was always filthy.” She

nodded. He had been.

“It would take me days to get rid of all their things from the house, but I had days. I had weeks. Nobody ever went there. It was months, perhaps years, before anyone mentioned the people at the villa – said they must have moved on. It didn’t surprise anyone.”

Sonia cupped his face with her hand. She couldn’t stop the tears. So, he had known – known more than she did. But she told him her story from

beginning to end – how she had found the baby in the church, not in the chestnut tower, how she had known nothing about the bodies until last year, had had no idea that anybody else knew about the baby although of course she had always dreaded the truth coming out.

“I know just how you feel,’ he said. “When I heard about the bodies being discovered at the villa last year, I thought the stress would kill me. The police questioned me about whether I’d seen anything, and I kept thinking that at any moment they would connect the baby to the bodies, but it didn’t happen. Then just as I thought it had all gone away, I heard a rumour that the villa was for sale again. It was too much.”

Of course, the reason for his heart attack. The agonies he must have gone through.

“I can’t believe we were both going through this together but alone,” she said. He kissed away her tears and they stayed in each other’s arms for a long time.

“What about Lorenzo?” she asked, hauled back to the present. “Has he read the letter?”

Flavio nodded. “He has. I’m sorry, I had no idea what it was, or I wouldn’t have given it to him, not like that, but perhaps it’s for the best. It was a shock, obviously. He’s getting used to the idea. It might take him a while to come to terms with it, but he’ll be fine.” He must have seen her doubts in her face because he added, “Come on Sonia – this is our son we’re talking about.”

Giftbooks4u.com

Carlo

“We’ll take it.” Standing on the loggia of Villa Leonida, Carlo almost asked the viewers to repeat what they’d said. He’d assumed they were just another set of curious people adding Villa Leonida to their list of things to see that holiday, but they needed no persuasion. It was the right house in the right location, and they were getting it at a good price. Their offer was low, but he had little doubt that the owners would accept it. They’d be fools not to.

The couple sat with him in I Tre Fratelli restaurant while waiting for the answer from the owners in Switzerland, the older man drumming his fingers on the table, his partner twisting his hair nervously. When it came Carlo opened a bottle of Prosecco, which they insisted he share with them as he ran through the buying process. The last of the lunch crowd had gone and he was in no hurry for them to leave.

“Carlo, it’s your mother,” said Cass running in from the kitchen. “I’m so sorry – I think she’s had a stroke.”

He made his excuses and ran to the door. Cass had already called the ambulance, and he could hear the siren clanging as he reached her room.

Irena looked shrunken and pale. One side of her face had slipped but otherwise she looked peaceful. He’d barely spoken to her since she told him the truth about Martina – he’d felt too angry. But looking at her now it was hard to stay angry.

Later in hospital he sat by the bed, held her hand and talked to her for many hours about the good things he remembered from his childhood. And for want of filling the silence he recounted many of the stories she had told him over the years. Speech was difficult for her, but he hoped she understood. At times she looked as though she was going to add a detail or

contradict him like she usually did but it was beyond her and she closed her eyes, listening to him.

Hopefully, her mind was alive with scenes being replayed from the stories he was telling but with the benefit of familiar faces and voices, truer colour, smells and sensations than he knew how to portray.

“I’m so sorry,” whispered Cass. “You were right. I shouldn’t have tried to stop you. It’s good that you’ve spent so much time with her recently. I know how much she appreciated it.”

“Thank you.”

He loved her for not saying what she could have done – that making Irena confront these memories was what had brought this on. Couldn’t he have left the past alone?

On the fourth or fifth morning when he arrived Irena was agitated, and it was obvious she had something on her mind. Despite her inability to speak she was able to indicate the Dictaphone.

“What do you want me to do with it?” he asked.

By asking a series of questions he was able to ascertain that she wanted him to give it to Sonia. Perhaps she guessed the end was near and she wanted to do this one thing before it came.

“Are you sure?”

She groaned in assent. He turned the device over and over in his hands, knowing it must contain her confession, perhaps even a plea for forgiveness. Probably the last thing she had done before having the stroke. He kissed her cheek and assured her he would do it. Although there was no reason to know it, he knew he wouldn’t see her again.

Driving away from the hospital, he switched on the radio and found it was playing his mother’s old favourite, *Un Bacio a Mezzanotte*. He imagined her dancing to it with Roberto. He turned the music up loud enough to drown his emotion.

As he drove questions crowded his head. How would it really help Sonia now to know the truth? She was very sick apparently, in the same hospital as Irena – might not even make it herself. Did she really need the added stress of being reminded about the past?

But Irena had trusted him. She had faced up to what she had done. How could he let her down?

Memories make us what we are. If memories were what defined people, where did that leave Sonia whose whole life up until now had been built on

false memories? Yet, she had survived, found a way of muddling through. Why bring it all back up?

When he got as far as the arched bridge, he pulled over. He walked onto the bridge and looked down at the green water, as smooth as glass. He considered for a few moments. Of course he should give this recording to Sonia. It was the right thing to do. But he wasn't perfect and sometimes the right thing was just too difficult. He raised his arm ready to hurl the device into the water.

No. At the last moment he stopped himself. He had come back to Santa Zita to get to the truth. Now that he had found the truth he had to face it, however difficult. Something Cass had said came back to him: it's our choices that make us who we are. He got back in the car.

Giftbooks4u.com

Sonia

Baby Graziella was born on October 1. Holding her granddaughter for the first time, Sonia was transported back to the little church below the villa, watching the girl setting down the baby in front of the painting All those years of guilt. But if she'd to make the same decision now, knowing what she knew, knowing Lorenzo as she did, she'd still have made it.

Graziella opened her eyes and turned her unfocused gaze on Sonia. This was such a different baby – plump and strong, born to loving parents, a happy home.

Since the villa had been sold talk had moved onto other things that were going on in the world – an earthquake, a political scandal, a shooting spree in an American school. The talk would return of course. Perhaps Lorenzo would one day want to find out about his birth mother, why she had abandoned him and what had happened to her afterwards but for now he had enough on his plate looking after a baby. A baby who would grow up free of the guilt that Sonia had carried for so long. It was time to put it to rest. Perhaps someone one day would make the connection but that was a problem for another day.

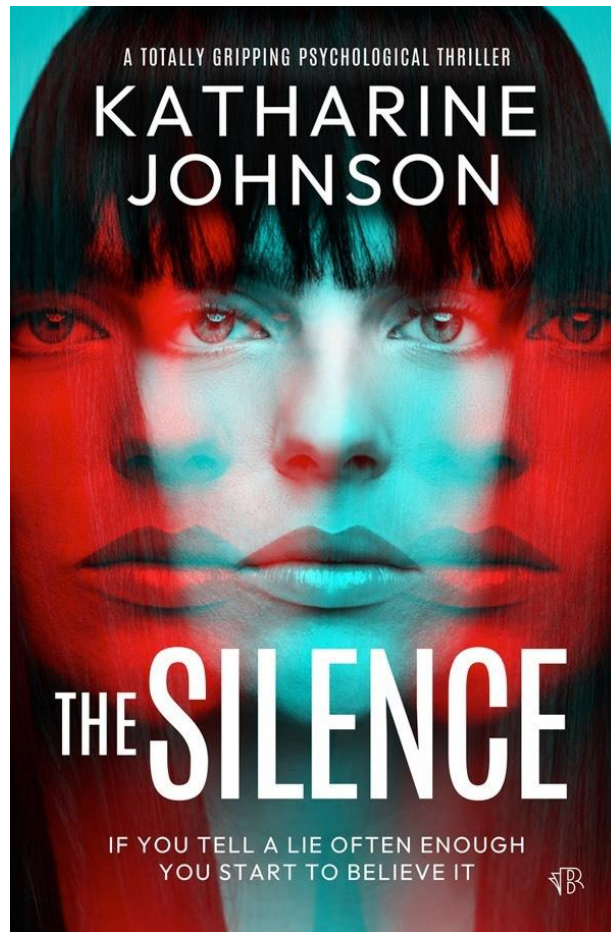
“She’s got your nose.” Lorenzo checked himself, remembering that wasn’t possible. And yet she did.

Sonia handed him the little box containing the pendant that Francesca had agreed they must give Graziella when she was old enough.

The past was what it was – they couldn’t change it. But they could move forward together.

Giftbooks4u.com

Also by Katharine Johnson



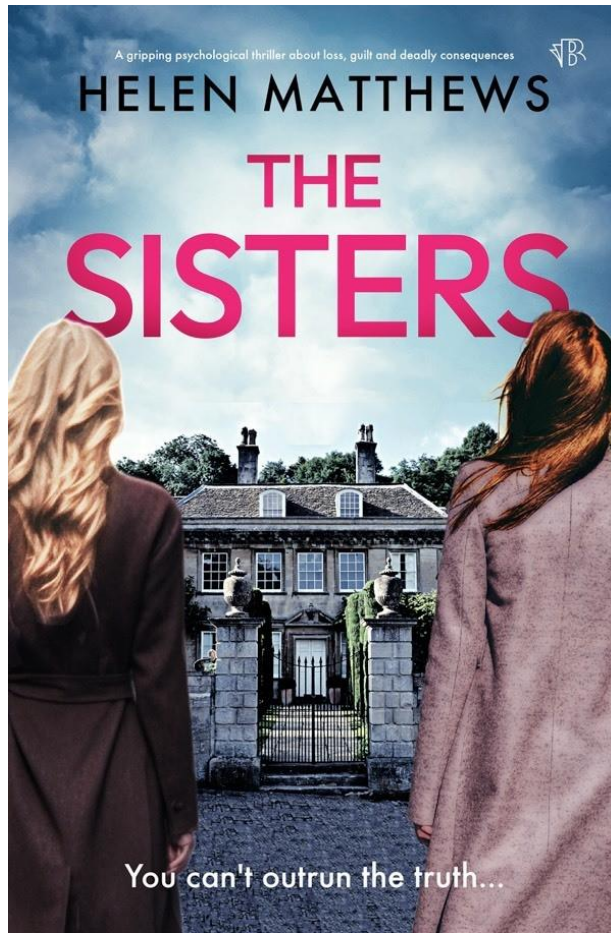
The Silence

To hold onto the people she loves, she must make sure they never find out what she did.

[BUY NOW](#)

Giftbooks4u.com

You will also enjoy:



The Sisters by Helen Matthews

A drowned child. Estranged sisters. A home steeped in sorrow. *The Sisters* is a gripping tale of loss, guilt, and the deadly consequences of unspoken truths.

[BUY NOW](#)

Giftbooks4u.com

LOVED THIS BOOK?

FALL IN LOVE WITH OUR
OTHER PAGE TURNERS WITH
OUR NEWSLETTER

[SIGN UP HERE!](#)



BLOODHOUND
BOOKS

Giftbooks4u.com

A note from the publisher



Thank you for reading this book. If you enjoyed it please do consider leaving a review on Amazon to help others find it too.

We hate typos. All of our books have been rigorously edited and proofread, but sometimes mistakes do slip through. If you have spotted a typo, please do let us know and we can get it amended within hours.

Giftbooks4u.com