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Casa Colonnata, the Verduccis' villa, had the better view; the Baldinis' had a more conspicuous use of marble. Both were set on an elevated promontory reached by a narrow and precipitous road. The Verducci terrace caught the golden promise of the rising sun and the crimson drama of its rays sinking over the horizon. It encompassed an infinite and breath-taking panorama of the Mediterranean below and the rugged forested lands above. Standing at the balustrade, Liddy felt as though she were poised on the rim of the world. She placed her palms on the rough warm stone and drank in the sensation of time stilled, of being in paradise.

Her charges, three-year-old Roberto (Bobo) Baldini and his six-year-old sister, Sara, had woken from their siesta and clamoured for the beach. She'd assembled the necessary equipment, the buckets and spades and towels and sunhats, the bottles of water and tanning lotion and Sara's doll, and they'd wandered next door. The children had run inside and Liddy was enjoying the moment's peace. She had been here scarcely a week, but from the moment they'd skimmed across the bay of Naples and disembarked at Ischia Porto, it was as if they'd stepped into a world switched to a different time zone, a world where you wouldn't know they had clocks at all if it hadn't been for the chiming of a church bell tower. Buses pulled away from their stops with a sound like a slow snore; Lambrettas buzzed around corners like drowsy wasps; even the bars where customers stirred sugar into velvety espressos had a sleepy feel.

She was startled by a squirt of sun cream between her shoulder blades. A hand massaged it into her back with tender circling strokes. She knew it was Helena; she'd caught the scent of her. Rive Gauche by Yves Saint Laurent was just the perfume Helena would wear: light and jazzy and – what was the word? – insouciant. Liddy was still experimenting, hadn't yet found her signature fragrance.

'I didn't hear you coming.'

'You were miles away. Is it as sore as it looks?'

Helena had been in Italy long enough to acquire a honeyed glow; Liddy had freckled and peeled. 'Not really. But that feels nice; don't stop. It's so perfect here, isn't it?' She drew in and let out a long luxurious breath. 'At least, while we're minus the kids. Where've they got to?'

Helena rubbed a fresh quantity of cream on to her skin. 'They're fine. Rosaria's stopping their gobs with strawberries.' She hadn't exaggerated the families' affluence: in addition to the boat and secluded beach, the villas came with a housekeeper who cleaned and cooked and topped up the fruit bowls daily with cherries, apricots and nectarines.

Neither Maresa Baldini nor Gabriella Verducci was at home. Sisters-in-law – Gabi was married to Maresa's brother, Fabrizio – they shared long indolent holidays while their husbands negotiated property deals. They spent their days seeking therapies – Gabi suffered from intermittent eczema – immersing their bodies in mud or salt crystals and bathing in the foaming hot springs. They crooned to their children and smothered them with kisses but were too self-absorbed to attend to them for long.

A thin piercing cry rippled through the french windows, spoiling Liddy's sense of harmony. 'Sara,' she sighed. 'Mental-boy Bobo'll be tormenting her again.'

'Just leave them be.'

'It's all right for you. You got the cushy deal.'

Helena's hand slumped to her side. She replaced the cap on the tube. 'Oh Liddy, please don't start.'

Liddy bit her lip. Her room was a dream of white wicker and marble, her balcony swathed with the starry flowers of summer jasmine. And she liked Maresa. You couldn't help warming to Maresa: although she could be capricious and demanding, her generosity was lavish and her sense of enjoyment infectious (she always carried a transistor

radio around so she could sing along to the songs). Bobo, however, was frustrating. *‘Il mio piccolo mostro,’* Maresa called him, watching indulgently as he scribbled over Sara’s picture-books or dismembered her soft toys. He was difficult to settle at bedtime and woke frequently in the night. Liddy hadn’t realized, when Helena had talked her into this venture, that she would be responsible for two children. Their cousin, Massimo (Mimmo) Verducci, only a few months older than Bobo, was much more compliant and eager to please. Helena had engineered for herself the easier option and, despite their glamorous surroundings, it was beginning to rankle.

There came a light patter of feet across the terrace; a pair of brown legs sprang on to Helena’s hips, reedy brown arms wrapped themselves around her neck. She tickled the sides of the child’s chest and he wriggled like a little lizard. *‘Madonna mia!’* she said. ‘Who is this wild creature?’

‘Massimo! *Sono io!*’

‘*Chi?* Do I know this person?’

The little boy giggled and poked his face under the wide brim of her sunhat. ‘Mimmo! *Adesso mi riconosci?*’

Helena swept off the hat and placed it on his dark curls as he vaulted from her back to the ground. ‘It really doesn’t make any difference, Liddy,’ she said. ‘We’re all in this together. Come on now. Call the others and let’s get down to the beach.’

The twisting flight of steps led directly on to a jetty where the boat was moored. It wasn’t as grand as the yachts floating in the harbour, only a dinghy with a pair of oars and an outboard motor, but it was good enough for fishing purposes and for ferrying the children to other coves along the shore for a change of scene. Bobo led the way. Even though he had to stamp on every tread, he seemed to plunge down the cliff face as if it were a water chute. Mimmo, close behind, followed him on to the jetty where they both stopped short.

‘Well now,’ said Helena. ‘Looks like we’ve got company.’

A young man was lying asleep on the coarse sand, tawny hair spread around his face like a lion’s mane. He was wearing jeans and a short-sleeved shirt, but no shoes.

‘Where on earth did he come from?’

‘*Dài*,’ Helena nudged Bobo. ‘Sprinkle water on his toes.’

Bobo ran at once to fill his bucket. His idea of sprinkling was to flood the sleeper’s feet in a torrent of seawater. The young man jerked upright but didn’t show alarm. He drew up his knees, reached into his top pocket and tapped a cigarette from a squashed packet of MS. As he lit it, the smoke wavered and rose.

‘Oh my God,’ said Liddy. ‘It’s that guy from the club. James Knight.’
‘Actually, he prefers to be known as Jake.’

They’d sampled the Vesuvio – ‘So hot it erupts,’ Helena had mocked – at the weekend. The club was proud to have a genuine English disc jockey spinning records on its turntables – though he confessed to Liddy that he wasn’t really a DJ. He was trying to get into films and had been hanging around Cinecitta studios for months, in pursuit of work and contacts. Helena already knew this because she’d met him previously through a flatmate in Rome.

‘Oh, right. Do you think he’s looking for us?’ Liddy hoped he was. She’d been impressed by his confident manner, the deft movements of his hands at the controls, that dazzling Hollywood smile. ‘And he hasn’t even yelled or lost his temper. I’d have wanted to throttle Bobo if he’d done that to me.’

‘You’re forgetting,’ said Helena, ‘that he’s an actor.’

‘You mean he’s only pretending he’s not bothered? Really he’s steaming?’ It had struck her at their first meeting that he showed enviable self-possession. If a scorpion rather than a lizard ran over his foot he’d probably just laugh. But she wondered whether, beneath this casual stance, she could sense a nervy twitch.

‘No, darling.’ Helena hopped on to the beach, unfurling her towel like a flag beside her. ‘I mean that actors want to be liked. That’s their motivation, isn’t it? *Like* me. *Laud* me. *Love* me if you will – and I shall be as sweet as pie until you’re eating out of my hand.’

‘That’s nonsense,’ said Liddy. ‘Everybody wants to be liked. I know I do. You too.’ Actually she wasn’t certain of this. Helena was abrasive rather than accommodating; provocative where others would hold back. She was provoking at this very moment: strolling over to Jake Knight to tell him off for trespassing, yet squatting beside him in a manner that was oddly intimate.

Liddy called to Sara to hurry up. She was dawdling from stair to stair with her favourite Barbie doll, stopping at intervals, where a platform gave a breathing space, to assess how much further she had to go. Feeling obliged to wait for her, Liddy sat down beside her basket. Bobo was already filling another bucket, his stocky legs planted like stakes in the shallows. Jake finished his cigarette and buried the filter. He and Helena were speaking in an undertone.

With a shriek of triumph Sara completed her descent and announced that she wanted to build a spa like Mamma's for her doll. Liddy wondered how anyone could enjoy being packed in mud and scoured with pumice and subjected to intense humidity, but according to Maresa: 'It repairs the condition of the skin. Also the function of the lung.' The women had remedies for nearly all ailments. They sounded like witches casting spells when they offered up their lists of ingredients: the camomile, the fernet, the evening primrose, the belladonna. 'She could open a health shop,' Helena had said of Gabi's bathroom cabinet. 'Pity she can't zap the eczema.'

Liddy helped Sara over the boulders and headed to a patch of damp sand where she scooped out a hollow into which Bobo helpfully tipped the contents of his bucket. 'It runs away,' Sara complained as her pool drained to a soggy slush.

'We should line it,' said Liddy. 'Find something plastic.'

Behind her, Jake rose to his feet. He reached out to Helena and pulled her up also. 'Liddy,' she called. 'We're going to take the boat out.'

Sara was ferreting in the beach bag. Bobo was crouched a few metres away, smashing mussels. He liked the way the viscous tissue shrivelled on contact with the air, and the fact that the shells didn't shatter instantly but required much manly pounding. Liddy rocked back on her haunches. 'Oh, okay. I suppose the kids will have to get their shoes on again.'

On a calm afternoon earlier in the week they'd crammed into the dinghy and chugged idly round the reef of rocks. At the tiller, Helena had negotiated the gullies between volcanic tufa columns that soared skywards like a Gothic cathedral, steering them through the dark shadows and back into the light. Liddy'd had to quell her nerves. She'd fixed Bobo on her lap and her arm around Sara's waist so she

wouldn't tip out as she searched for mermaids. Eventually the gentle slap of water against wood had lulled her into repose. Second time around it might be easier.

'I didn't mean with the kids.'

'What?' She had misunderstood something here. Surely Helena didn't intend to leave the children behind?

Jake came over and hunkered down beside her. 'Look,' he said. 'I know we're being utterly selfish, leaving you holding the fort like this, so if you don't want us to go just say so.' He rested his hand on her forearm. His touch made her start because it felt scalding, like a poultice.

'Holding the fort?' she repeated, mystified, but seeing how churlish it would be to turn them down. 'What's all this about?'

'Something we need to discuss,' said Jake. His hazel eyes seemed to change colour according to the strength and position of the sun. 'We won't be long.'

He winked and went over to the mooring to untie the boat. Behind his back Helena mimed exasperation. Then she leapt in and sat at the prow. Jake pulled at the cord until the motor sparked into life and water churned beneath its blades. Sara jumped up and down on the spot. 'I want to go with them!' she cried. 'Take me. Take me too.' But already they were out of earshot.

The two boys were playing in the lee of the rocks, lining up lumps of fallen shale to create opposing squads for battle. They were keeping to the shade, Liddy was glad to see, even if their aim was to obliterate each other. Sara was burying her doll. Liddy tried to help but she couldn't focus on creating the series of underground caverns. Her hands shook and her mind kept returning to Helena and Jake in the boat, to her own sense of abandonment. What did they need to discuss that was so private? They hardly knew each other. When they'd met in the Vesuvio, Liddy had been enchanted to find someone she could speak English with; Helena demurred.

'Have you got something against him?' Liddy had asked.

'No. Why?'

'You seem, I don't know . . . rather cool.'

'Maybe I'm just wary of that whole expat instant soulmates routine. Like freshers' week all over again, cosyng up to types you wouldn't

give the time of day if you met them in the pub at home. Know what I mean?’

‘But not *him*. He’s lush.’

‘Christ, you’re smitten already.’

‘No I’m not.’

‘Wouldn’t you rather grab yourself a sexy Italian? Dark eyes you can drown in, neat little arse but hung like a stallion. Declarations of passion in the language of romance.’ There was a mischievous gurgle at the back of her throat. ‘All that sort of thing.’

‘I’d rather have a guy who understands what I’m saying.’

Someone was calling her name. She blinked and turned to Sara who was building a massage table, grunts collecting in her throat as she concentrated. She looked upwards, to the terrace of the villa, to see if Maresa or Gabi had come back. She suspected they’d long finished their therapy sessions and had been enjoying an extended late lunch, flirting with the waiters. No one was leaning over the terrace wall or signalling from the top of the cliff, so she swung her gaze to Bobo. To be honest, she’d recognized his high-pitched roar all along.

She was standing in the glare of sunlight. Both boys were in deep shadow and she had to shield her eyes with her hand. As she adjusted her gaze she saw that they had climbed on to a ledge a few feet up. Each had a stick in his hand and was attacking the other in mock combat. ‘*Guarda, Leeddy!*’ Bobo called again, flourishing his weapon. ‘*Come sono bravo!*’

‘Get down at once!’ Liddy yelled back. From this angle she couldn’t tell how wide the ledge was, but she didn’t want to take any risks. ‘*Subito!*’

They ignored her, of course. She shouldn’t have to manage all three of them alone. That wasn’t part of the deal. She felt another rush of resentment that Helena expected her to cope, although (to be honest, again) her resentment – the maggot that was burrowing into her perfect summer and tainting it – was largely because she’d pretended not to have the slightest interest in Jake and yet had now gone off with him.

‘Get down,’ Liddy repeated. ‘Finish your fight here, on the ground.’

Bobo was shorter but heavier than his cousin; he had also chosen a stouter stick. Mimmo’s was as long and thin as a fencing rapier.

Despite his agile footwork, it snapped under Bobo's hammering and he was left holding a stub. His response was to swish and thrust it in a series of stabbing motions but he was hampered by his lack of reach. Bobo swiped his make-believe sword through the air and lunged at Mimmo's chest. The latter tried to jump backwards but lost his balance. Liddy watched, helpless, as the little boy toppled from the rocks in an arcing somersault.