

AN ITALIAN SUMMER

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AN ITALIAN SUMMER

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For Tessa Hilton
With love and thanks

January, 2017

Sandy had been rifling through her mother's desk for stamps when she found the letter tucked into a cubbyhole between a small red address book and some left-over Christmas cards. Her mother could only have written it weeks earlier when she was still able to come downstairs. The writing was familiar but shaky and the envelope not properly addressed. Thinking perhaps she should finish the job and post it for her, Sandy leafed through the little book, noting how many names were crossed out and initialled with a big D. Death had claimed so many of her mother's friends before her. But there was no Anna Viglieri among them, alive or dead, and no one who lived in Naples.

When the nurse had finished washing her mother and giving her fresh sheets, Sandy returned upstairs, taking the letter with her. Miriam was lying propped up on a mountain of pillows, her face pale and gaunt, eyes half-open. She managed the slightest of smiles. Sandy sat close where she could be sure to be heard.

'Mum, I found this. Shall I post it?' She held up the envelope where her mother could see it. It seemed important to keep up a pretence of some kind of normality, although it hardly mattered now. 'Who do you know in Naples?' She

took the bottle of Chanel No. 5 from the side and dabbed a little on her mother's wrists: the perfume her mother always wore and that Sandy associated with her all her life.

A flicker of recognition, a movement of Miriam's head. Her mouth moved but the words were so faint Sandy had to guess at them.

'Find her?' she said, leaning forward to catch a sound as her mother's lips moved slightly. 'Who is she?'

But the drug being pumped into her mother's thigh to ease the pain had reclaimed her. Death wasn't far away.

Sandy looked at the envelope again. *Sra Anna Viglieri. Naples.* While her mother slept, she went downstairs to make a cup of tea. The nurse was in the kitchen, putting the sheets in the machine.

'How long, do you think?' asked Sandy, a tremor in her voice.

The young woman looked up, kindness in her eyes. 'You can never tell. Maybe a couple of days, but I couldn't say definitely.' She slammed shut the door of the washing machine.

'Tea?'

Having made them both a cup, Sandy left the nurse alone while she went back upstairs. She paused by the front door to open the face of the grandfather clock, take the crank from the plate on the hall table and put it into the winding holes one after the other. This was a ritual her father then her mother had performed for as long as she could remember. It felt good to continue the tradition; steadying. That's all she had to hang on to now the last link to her past was about to

be broken. Her relationship with her mother had never been easy. How she had envied her schoolfriends with their warm kitchens and mothers who were always there for them, cooking and caring. But that was long ago, before she was sent away to school, and now she was the only family member left to see Miriam out of this world. She went back upstairs, her limbs heavy, walking on the sage-green carpet that was faded with age, past the pictures that had always hung in the shadows of the dark stairway. Back in the bedroom, she took up her knitting, and began to talk softly. This might be her last chance to say anything important.

‘Why did you push me away, Mum? Perhaps, if you hadn’t, we might been closer instead of having this strange sense of duty towards one another.’ She paused. ‘You must have felt it too or you wouldn’t have been there for me when Matthew died.’ She thought of her husband with the habitual longing that still haunted her. When she had been blindsided by his unexpected death, her mother had come good for her at last: cooking, doing her laundry, tending her garden, tidying the house, caring for her – all those things that she had no energy for herself. And now, only two and a half years after his death, she was losing her mother. ‘But we did love each other, despite everything. I know we did.’

Her mother didn’t respond. Just the rattle of her laboured breathing filled the room.

‘They say a person’s hearing is the last thing to go, but how does anyone know that? Am I really just talking to myself?’ Sandy felt the tears stinging as they had so often over the last week as her mother drifted in and out of

consciousness. The two of them would never make up for lost time now. Everything between them was over. ‘There’s no point in having regrets,’ she went on. ‘They say that too. But I do have them – in spades. Why wouldn’t you talk to me about your family instead of clamming up or changing the subject? In the end I gave up asking. Just accepted.’ She reached over to pull the pot of deep-red tulips, the ones her mother loved, to a position where she might see them. ‘I should have insisted.’

Four hours later, she was still sitting there, having made another cup of tea and moved from her knitting to the crossword although her brain wouldn’t compute any of the answers. Her mother’s favourite music flowed softly from the ancient CD player: Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra and Billie Holiday. Staring out of the window at the flat grey sky, Sandy hummed along to ‘Cry Me a River’ under her breath, wishing Matthew had been able to die at home. This end to a life was so tranquil compared to the incessant hubbub of a hospital ward. He hadn’t known where he was, of course, but all the same she would have liked him to die in peace. It was starting to drizzle when she heard a movement behind her. She spun round. Miriam’s eyes were open, her fingertips touching the envelope Sandy had left on the bed. ‘Anna,’ she whispered.

Sandy leaned over her again.

‘Who’s Anna, Mum?’

But her mother’s eyes had started to close.

‘Mum! Who’s Anna?’ She was overwhelmed by frustration and sadness.

The thin white lips moved again. 'Find ...' Then nothing. Just breath. Perhaps that was not even what she had said. There was no way of intuiting what might be going round her mind so close to the end, especially when she was under such heavy sedation. But more than anything Sandy wanted to believe that her mother knew she was there and wanted to tell her something.

'Find her,' she said, taking the envelope. 'Is that what you meant? Well, I'll try. God knows how but I will try.' She slid her hand into her mother's and gently squeezed it. In return, she felt her mother's fingers tighten round hers. She had heard her.

Twenty-four hours later, her mother was dead.

1

Rome - August, 2017

Rome's Termini station was loud, crowded and confusing. Sandy gripped the handle of her case, staring at the unfamiliar signs, until she saw one that would take her out to the side of the station. A man approached her and took her case, flinging it into the boot of his car.

'Dove si va?'

'Hotel Cecilia in Trastevere.' The unfamiliar words felt like cotton wool in her mouth. She held out the piece of paper with the full printed address.

The taxi driver smiled, adjusting his back-to-front baseball cap. Thick black hairs covered his arms. He held the door open for her then slammed it shut.

In the back of the cab, Sandy tried to point out that he had forgotten to turn on the meter. She had been warned always to check. 'Fleecing dim unquestioning tourists is a national sport.' Steven's words rang in her ears. She thought of him with a pang and tried to dismiss it. She couldn't be missing him already. These two weeks away were meant to be time during which, among other things, she could work out how serious her feelings were for him. Was she ready to commit herself to another man?

The driver turned to look at her, his eyes dark, threatening. 'Thirty euro. Same for everyone.'

'The meter,' she insisted, gripping the door handle, aware she was risking losing her luggage.

He banged his fist on the steering wheel, letting loose a volley of incomprehensible Italian before getting out. He opened the boot, took out her case and dropped it on the pavement, shouting at the other drivers, gesturing towards her, arms waving.

Sandy took her case, and walked back into the station, heart pounding. Confrontation was not something she enjoyed. If Matthew were with her, he would have sorted everything out. But he had been dead almost three years and besides, she reminded herself, if he were alive she probably wouldn't be here. He had admitted himself that he had been irrational in his refusal to travel abroad. He felt there were plenty of underrated and unexplored places to go in Britain. Because she loved him, and because she was frightened of flying, Sandy went along with it and he was grateful that she understood. In return, she insisted that he made all their travel arrangements, which were often complicated. It was only after his death that she'd found the emails to the travel agent on his computer, enquiring about travelling by train to Italy the following summer. Had he been thinking of going back on everything he'd said and surprising her? She'd never know. But what a surprise it would have been.

Matthew's death had nearly broken her. But, with time, she had learned to live with her loss. She was on her own now, although she suspected grief had weakened her,

made worse by the subsequent death of her mother. Since then she had felt bereft, untethered, unsure of where she was going. Nevertheless she had no choice but to deal with those feelings. She looked around her, heart pounding. People dashed by, whistles blew, the fancy shops were crowded. *For heaven's sake*, she reprimanded herself. As a woman of a certain age who could run a classroom of thirty pupils, she ought to be able to find her way to a hotel in an unfamiliar city. How hard could it be?

She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and walked out of the front of the station, past a homeless man sleeping by the plate-glass window and into a vast open space busy with traffic. She saw a Taxi sign where an official was directing people into the crowd of white vehicles. She joined the queue and, when it came to her turn, she took the one she was shown to.

She was relieved to see the driver put the meter on straight away. He was pleasant and spoke enough English to ask her where she came from. What was the weather like in St Albans? 'You will like Rome,' he said. 'Good food, lots of sunshine.'

As they drove down the hill from the station, she stared out at the grandiose shuttered buildings, the plethora of tourists, the signs she couldn't understand. Through the window, she could hear a cacophony of traffic noise and car horns that seemed to beep for no reason. The sun was shining and she felt light-headed, excited. They swept past an enormous white monument with tourists swarming up and down its steps, a bronze chariot crowning each end of its

imposing pillared façade. ‘Vittorio Emanuele,’ said the driver, as if she’d understand. He turned off the road running by the wide-flowing river and over a bridge into a very different neighbourhood of narrow cobbled streets, ochre- and terracotta-coloured buildings, busy outdoor restaurants and streets teeming with more people. When they pulled up at the Hotel Cecilia, the fare was eighteen euros. A frisson of satisfaction ran through her as she over-tipped him.

She pressed the button at the side of the large iron gate and a small gate within it clicked open. She walked down the passageway as the gate swung shut behind her. She had arrived.

*

Her room was painted a soft yellow with a stencil of branches laden with oranges running round the top of the walls. There was a bare minimum of furniture but everything was clean. The sheets looked inviting and the loo paper folded into a triangle made her smile.

Matthew would have joked about it. For a second or two, she imagined the conversation she might have had with him.

Looks bloody uncomfortable. Are we meant to refold it, every time we go?

Don’t be such an old fossil.

We-ell. He’d rub the end of his nose and give his endearing squint smile. *You know.*

And she usually did.

She turned her mind to her fellow travellers. ‘A Taste of Italy: small group tours’ the advertisement in the local paper had said. ‘No more than ten,’ the man at the end of the phone who took her booking assured her. But suppose she didn’t like them? Suppose they didn’t like her? She wasn’t sure which would be worse. For some reason that hadn’t been a consideration at the time. It had sounded perfect. Her grief for her mother had subsided to a manageable level and she wanted to do something new, something that would test her. She couldn’t feel sorry for herself forever. By the end of the summer term, she had desperately wanted to get away. By then she felt strong enough to think about looking for Signora Anna Viglieri, her mother’s friend.

While clearing out her mother’s house, dismantling her life bit by bit, she had found various things that surprised and touched her. There were mementoes of her own childhood that her mother had stashed away – school reports, childhood games, postcards and letters she’d written home. They made Sandy realise that she must have meant more than she sometimes believed. But more puzzling was the travel journal found in a box at the back of a drawer in the spare room, long forgotten. Her mother was twenty-one and writing about a journey she’d made to Italy, at first as a companion to a Mrs Robson and then joining an Anna in Naples.

Was this the Anna Sandy was looking for?

She took the journal out of her bag, opening it at the first page, now able to picture the scene her mother wrote about much more clearly.

This journal belongs to Miriam Mackenzie
Italy 1952

Rome station was hellish. Mrs Robson in a panic that no one would come to meet us. Flapping and shouting. Nightmare. And so embarrassing. Luckily someone from the hotel eventually found us and mounted a rescue. Mrs R calmed down in the car ... the hotel is as smart as I'd hoped it might be. Mrs R likes her comforts, thank the Lord. We're very central, near an enormous square called the Piazza Navona ... more later.

Miriam Mackenzie, May 3rd 1952 - Rome

Sandy recognized the chaos of the station – nothing ever really changes, she thought wryly. A couple of days later:

Mrs Robson is rather too demanding. She wants me at her beck and call all day long but I'm determined to get out of the hotel on my own. I'm going to try to sneak out when she's having her siesta. Ignazio, the barman, has said he'll take me to Trastevere ... I've got to see the side of the city that Mrs R might not appreciate.

The entries began enthusiastically then became shorter until they petered out all together. The young woman writing was so unlike the mother she knew, Sandy found it hard to believe they were the same person. And now here she was, following in her footsteps, staying in the city her mother had visited so long ago.

A Taste of Italy offered guided tours round the main sights of Rome and Naples. ‘At least you won’t have to do all that queuing for tickets,’ Steven had pointed out. ‘And plenty of leisure time to explore the rest for yourself. Look, you’ve even got an optional cookery course thrown in.’ It had looked ideal, thrilling even, and just what she needed after so many months as principal carer to her mother as well as getting her Year 12s through their A-levels. But now, with the prospect of spending two weeks with a group of strangers very much a reality, who they were seemed of paramount importance. Well, she reminded herself, if nothing else, she’d have something interesting to write in her diary – just like her mother.

She tapped her fingers on the guidebook to Rome that Steven had given her and that she had yet to read. He had been so kind and supportive during her mother’s illness. A rock. Since they’d met in the choir, he had become the most steadfast of friends and latterly her lover. The first time they went to bed together, she had to exercise all her will power not to call him Matthew. He was the first man she’d made love with since her husband and it had felt strange and unfamiliar although things had improved with practice. Recently he had occasionally made the odd suggestive

remark such as ‘When we can be together’ or ‘How we might go away at Christmas’ or ‘There’s a wonderful pub with rooms that I’ve found in Oxfordshire’.

But, but ... she still missed Matthew. He still influenced her mind and memories.

Her mother, too.

The last time she had seen Steven, a few days before she left, he had pressed the book on her, insisting how much she would love Italy. All she had to do was ask, and he would have jumped at the opportunity to come with her. But that would have been a mistake. She needed time away. Time for herself. Time to think and regroup. And she was grateful he hadn’t pushed. Committing herself to him seemed like a huge leap and, even after all this time, such an act of disloyalty to Matthew, even though Sandy knew he would want what made her happy. But would it? That’s what she had to work out.

Besides, there was her mother’s letter, tucked safe inside Sandy’s suitcase, a stranger’s name on the envelope. She had promised she would try to deliver it and this holiday gave her the chance. Anna Viglieri lived somewhere in Naples. Was she wondering why she hadn’t heard from Miriam? Sandy realised she would be delivering the news of her mother’s death as well.

She checked the time. Almost six-thirty. That was when the ‘small group’ had been asked to meet in the hotel bar where they would be introduced over drinks and have the timetable for the next few days explained to them. Seven days in Rome and then on to Naples. At the thought, her

heart lifted. Nothing would stop her enjoying herself – on holiday for the first time in ages.

Before joining them, she had to choose what to wear. She stared at her clothes, hanging limp and uninteresting in the wardrobe. Clothes spoke volumes about a person but what would these say about her to the others? Surrounded by the business and clatter of Rome, the sunshine, she wished she had chosen differently. What would give the right first impression? Definitely not the yellow dress she had bought on a whim: too much of a statement. Her walking trousers were too utilitarian; her tan Capri pants just too tight; her olive-green skirt and white blouse too reminiscent of school. In the end she chose her black linen dress with blue swirls, a scoop neck and cap sleeves: sophisticated but summery. She pulled her sandals from the case and put them on, curling up her toes, glad she'd decided on that pedicure. She reached for her lipstick and drew it across her lips, rubbing them together, enjoying the easy slide of them. A quick squirt of something Jo Malone (Steven again) to give her that extra confidence, and she was ready.

Standing at the corner of the cloister surrounding the hotel courtyard, she spotted the group immediately. They were sitting outside around three circular tables that had been roughly pulled together, most of them holding a virulent orange drink rattling with ice. They were sheltered from the sun by huge cream parasols and several orange trees, burdened with fruit. A slim woman, elegant in grey linen, her hair in an elfin cut, sat by a grey-haired man who was equally trim, wearing chinos, a navy-blue shirt and deck

shoes – her perfect match. They were having what looked an awkward conversation with a small plump middle-aged man, hair on end, a neat goatee, his face flushed. To one side, a much younger woman wearing a short figure-hugging dress, blonde hair scraped back into a scrappy little ponytail, was poring over a set of papers, separating them into piles. A diamond flashed on her ring finger. Was she their guide? She didn't look authoritative enough. Was this all of them?

For a minute, Sandy froze. Fright battled with curiosity. Should she turn tail now? Run back upstairs to her room? But curiosity won. As she was about to take a step towards them, someone came up behind her.

‘Are you part of the Taste of Italy trip too?’

She turned to find a pleasant-looking, generously proportioned woman of about her own age flanked by a man who was glancing around him, distracted. She couldn't help the passing thought that he must have been very good-looking once. ‘I am. I'm a bit nervous though,’ she confessed.

‘Don't be. We've done this sort of thing before. It usually works out, doesn't it, darling? I'm Alice by the way, and this is my husband, Mark.’

He looked at her. ‘What? Yes, usually.’ As he straightened his glasses, Sandy noticed his right pinkie was awkwardly bent at the first knuckle. He looked straight at her with sharp blue eyes. ‘And there's always plenty of free time so you can escape if you want to.’

That was another thing she was going to have to deal with. In her present state of mind, the idea of being let loose

in a foreign city filled her with panic. This was one of the reasons for joining a group in the first place. 'I'm Sandy and I haven't been abroad for years,' she confided in a rush despite having promised herself she wouldn't admit that to anyone.

'There's nothing to worry about.' Alice's voice was reassuring. 'We'll make sure you're OK, won't we?' The question was asked as if accompanied by a gentle nudge.

Sandy could see Mark's attention had drifted from them again although he did manage a distant, 'Of course.' Making sure anyone was 'OK' didn't look as if it was his sort of thing at all. And why should it be, Sandy reminded herself. After all, they were all on holiday. Then, she remembered her mother's white envelope upstairs: the one aspect of this trip that was not holiday at all.

'Come with us.' Alice smiled at Sandy as they crunched over the pebbles to meet the others.

'Welcome!' said the young woman sorting out the papers. She stood up, her face shiny in the heat. 'I'm Gilly. I'm going to be travelling with you for the next two weeks. And you are? In fact, stop! Let me get you a drink and then we can all introduce ourselves. Aperol spritz?'

Sandy nodded, with no idea what it was, but when in Rome ...

'Actually...' Mark waved a hand to get Gilly's attention. 'I'd prefer a whisky.'

'Are you sure, darling?' Alice sounded concerned.

'Quite. Thanks.' He gave her a tight little smile.

Gilly raised her hand to summon the waiter and gave the order. ‘Now. Are we all here? We’ve got two more joining us later who are on a late flight from Germany.’ She tallied the group up, pointing at each one of them with the end of her Biro.

God, thought Sandy, *this is like being back in the school playground*. She consoled herself with the thought that at least she wouldn’t be back at school for another three weeks. Here, she could be herself or indeed, anyone she wanted. She could shake off all the constraints that made her Mrs Johnson, Head of History. Seconds later, the waiter was back and putting one of the orange drinks in front of her. She picked it up, curious.

‘*Grazie*.’ Steven and she had gone through the basics in his old phrasebook together, laughing as they wondered when she would ever have to ask the way to a watchmaker’s. She poked at the ice in the drink with the black plastic straw.

‘We’re still missing someone,’ said Gilly. She bent to consult her notes as another woman emerged from one of the rooms in the cloister, smiling, her hand up in a wave, ‘Hi everyone. *Buona sera!* Sorry I’m late.’ She let the door slam behind her.

Sandy heard the voice and looked up from the bitter but not wholly unpleasant Aperol spritz. It couldn’t be. But she recognised the slight southernised Brummy twang with an uplift at the end of a sentence that took her straight back to her last school assembly. It couldn’t possibly be. But there was no mistaking the cropped red hair, the smile that Sandy knew from experience was not as genuine as it was wide,

and the same irritating way in which she stood on the balls of her feet as if she was about to bounce off. All Sandy's effort was focused on keeping her face in neutral as she gazed at the newcomer in disbelief.

Lia French. Head of Computer Science at Ecclesworth School. Her school.

As Sandy tried to recover her composure, Lia turned and noticed her for the first time. Her smile slipped for a second before it reasserted itself. Shock. Her eyes hardened. The hands stilled for a second. Then, 'Sandy! What on earth are you doing here?' Her eyes darted from Sandy to the rest of the group and back again with that intent-on-mischief look with which Sandy was only too familiar.