

CHAPTER ONE: Ellie

April

You had no choice but to be content in the midst of such utterly ordered landscape; lines of mop-headed fruit trees and vines, lines of vertical cypresses, lines of ploughed fields - all casting deep shadow in the afternoon sunlight. Ellie had been driving in air-conditioned comfort through the Tuscan countryside. Alone and early, she had time to use as she wished. On a whim, she left the high winding road from Volterra and with stones skittering up into the car's undercarriage, plunged along a gravel track. At its end she found a deserted settlement. The French would call it a *domaine*, what the name was in Italian she didn't know. Ellie left the car, smiled and stretched expansively in the warmth. It took her ten minutes on foot to find the church; to look up a flight of steps into the darkness of its arched doorway; to be reminded of Andrew. She felt the pressure of heat upon her head; the spiky grass poking through her open sandals - and was overcome by loss.

Her mood so suddenly rearranged, she sank down on the wide steps and fumbled for a cigarette. The warmth of the stone through her cotton skirt was comforting. Inhaling deeply she tried to concentrate on the real, exterior world; the Magritte clouds in a cobalt sky, the bees clustering in the wild rosemary, the ants in the cracks of stone.

Ellie arrived at the Palazzo via a winding lane that climbed past terraced olive groves. It felt like home when she saw the silver-green foliage and the creviced trunks. Turning sharply right, away from the groves, she nudged the car through the open half of a pair of forged gates. Swinging hard right again, she came to a halt in the corner of a gravelled courtyard. Geese scratched and stabbed at the grit in the shade of the trees where she halted. In this veiled light even the shadows had colour, a singing violet-blue. Other cars were also parked in the cool - a battered Renault and a smart hire car, deluxe class; heat was still rising from its paintwork.

Silence always helped Ellie to move slower. She always felt compelled to respond to people; to smile the widest, to fill in the awkward gaps in conversation, to be seen to be doing. At this moment however she felt a joy that she had missed for a while, of being comfortable in her own skin. She walked past a small pool bordered with pots of rosemary. Someone had abandoned a pair of secateurs on the ground, had left midway through the task of shaping the plants into perfect globes. The clippings released a strong aroma into the still air of the courtyard. A small jet of water spurted from the middle of the pond, barely disturbing the outer regions of the basin but producing a lascivious dribbling that, coupled with the warmth and the scents, unexpectedly stirred Ellie. She raised her head guiltily to see if anyone had observed her. Far above on a balcony she saw the fleeting outline of a man. He was slipping out of a shirt as he walked back through some French doors. Ellie was conscious of her body freezing as she tried to make sense of the brief encounter; amazing, how a human was programmed to read so much from a passing glance.

She pulled her attention back to the long flight of stone steps up to the Palazzo. At the top was an outsize pair of wooden doors with several glass panels framed by timber mullions. She climbed. The doors wouldn't yield, so she squinted through the glass. At first the adjustment from sun to dark interior proved too great and she rested her eyes in blackness. A hazy amber light materialised like ectoplasm; it came from a silk lampshade set atop a marble table. By the lamp was an impressive flower

arrangement - confident, beautiful but somehow not the emotionless confection of a professional florist. White lilies reflected the small amount of light back to the eye. Dark foliage stood, turgid and glossy, casting soft shadows on the wall behind. The wall, its undulating surface a mix of plaster pink and copper shades, seemed to rise up for ever, the ceiling way up where heaven should be. As Ellie gazed up her hand was on the bellpush; almost simultaneously a small dark figure crystallized from the shadows to open the door.

'Ciao!'

'Oh. Hello, I'm Ellie Carroll.'

'Ah yes, with the Garden Group.' The girl smiled widely.

'Yes.' Ellie felt relieved that as yet she hadn't needed to stumble through rusty Italian with this kindly girl - well, she was probably in her late twenties and most likely one of the family that ran the Palazzo. Hadn't it said in the blurb that the family had owned the place for more than six hundred years? What must it be like to have your home invaded by B and B-ers, course-takers and retreat junkies?

'I am Francesca. It is my uncle who owns Palazzo Michele and will be teaching the course. You will meet him later when you have had time to relax. Have you some bags?' Ellie gestured down to her car, across the head of a young man who had now resumed the rosemary clipping.

'Good, Marco will bring them up for you. He's the gardener but he'll do most things for me.' Ellie was tempted to touch the peach of her cheeks.

The whole domestic business was smoothly choreographed. Carrying her smaller items of luggage herself, Ellie walked past the once more discarded secateurs, up the steps and into the cool interior. She signed her name into a leather-bound book while Francesca smiled over her. Ellie's room was large and opened off the main hallway; the bed huge and draped in crisp white cotton. The windows were shuttered against the heat and a dim bulb glowed on the bedside table. Magically her cases were already there, placed reverently on a carved *cassettoni*.

Francesca handed her the key. 'I'm afraid this one is a little stiff in the lock,' she smiled at Ellie, 'but most people aren't locking their doors. We hope everyone feels like it is their home.'

Ellie smiled back. 'Am I the first to arrive?'

'No, there was a man. He arrived just a few minutes before you. You can meet him at seven if you should like to have some tea or drinks on the terrace.'

Ellie nodded; while her mind was reviewing the earlier sighting, her body was ahead of her, her face flushing. Thank the Lord, the girl didn't seem to notice.

'I think I'll go and have a lie down then. I'm a bit tired.'

Francesca waved her off solicitously.

When Ellie awoke she had slept for an hour. In the crepuscular room she fumbled for the lamp and felt the click of the switch echo around the space. There was a comforting dampish smell to the plaster walls rather like the garden-shed she'd retreated to as a child. To have slept so spontaneously was a rare event for Ellie; she was generally kept awake by thoughts of mistakes past or woken early by thoughts of duties ahead. Looking at her pale skin in the low light she thought of the 'lilies that neither toil nor spin' and smiled to herself. Pushing open the shutters she saw the light going, pausing at the moment where it would slip into darkness. As she showered to complete her renaissance she thought of what they'd be doing back at home but let the thoughts drip off her like the water. It was seven; time to venture out.

Perfumed and relaxed in new linen she stepped out into the darkness of the

terrace. Chairs and tables were touched with pools of light from lanterns; there must have been places for a dozen or so people but, so far, only one was taken by the man. He was involved in pouring himself a drink from the tray beside him but looked up at the sound of Ellie's footfall and smiled.

'I was wondering how long I'd have to wait before I met one of my fellow intellectuals!'

Ellie watched his smile in the half-light, instantly measuring him by some lifetime system of calculation that she hardly understood. Early thirties, casually but expensively dressed, dark-haired like herself; the kind of good looks that in her youth had scared her off.

'I'd hardly call myself that. Fellow stumbler or fellow pleasure-seeker perhaps?' said Ellie.

'Definitely that,' he said raising the bottle to her and indicating another glass. 'Can I pour you one of these?'

Ellie lowered herself into the chair across the table from him and said, 'Yes you can - as long as I know who's pouring.'

'Max. Max Penman-White.' He didn't offer his hand but glossed his fingers over hers as he handed her the glass. It was so quick Ellie barely knew if it was intentional. But that touch moved her more than it should have.

She straightened in her chair. 'And I'm Ellie Carroll.'

'Well, I suppose this is our chance to find out about each other.' Max reclined and looked at her through lowered eyelids.

'I'm not giving out any confidential information like birth date!' Ellie tried to respond lightly.

He laughed. 'As if I would ask a lady that. You're obviously old enough to have seen life and young enough to see plenty more. Much the same as myself.'

Ha, I've a decade on you, thought Ellie. Nevertheless his chat-up lines were having a calming effect on her. After nearly two years when the only men around treated her in careful brotherly fashion she was enjoying his attention.

'That's about right,' she laughed.

As the wine went down the talk became easier. He was here to do the course on Italian gardens, History and Design, because it was going to be a relaxation from his pressured life in London. It wasn't a million miles away however from his work; he headed up a firm of florists.

'Sounds a nice romantic business to be in doesn't it?' said Max. 'Not a bit of it. As I left the knives were really out - suppliers giving us a hard time. I can tell you I'm glad to be here.'

Now Ellie did recall the name, *Penman-White's*, 'the big society 'floral artists'. They'd done more than a few Royal functions. Max went on to say that given half a chance he'd ditch the whole business now, get out and design himself a nice country garden with an Italianate feel. Ellie watched him talking; he had a right to be confident but she didn't read him as showy. He was simply aware that he had achieved things. He reminded her of Dom somehow. Ellie would like it if her son grew into this kind of sureness.

And her? She swooped into the deep end and found strangely that she had breath to say that she was a widow; her husband had been rather older than herself and he'd died of a heart attack aged fifty-eight. And after Ellie had said all this, Max was sincerely interested. He asked her more details about Andrew and how she lived now. So she told him of her two children and her cottage in the Cotswolds.

'How old are your kids?'

'Twenty-two and twenty-one.'

'At least they knew their father when they were adults.' Max hesitated. 'I never knew my dad, gone before I was born. Dead,' he looked at Ellie with a bright smile. 'I've had a stepdad since I was eight, and worked for him since I was eighteen.'

Ellie didn't want to lead Max along the path of regrets, she feared it would take her too soon into her own dark territory.

'Oh, so he's the Penman-White of floristry fame, is he?'

Max laughed. 'Yes I guess you could say that. Although between you, me and the box of bricks he started life as a plain old White. The Penman got added for extra class.'

Ellie smiled. The slight superciliousness she had divined in their first exchanges seemed to have disappeared entirely.

'So, how long have you been on your own?'

There, he wouldn't let her evade the subject. Well, thought Ellie, he had shared a part of his life with her so why couldn't she. He listened quietly as she told him that Andrew's death had only been two years ago and that she was only now beginning to feel able to function alone. This was her first solo adventure. In fact she wasn't sure she would have come except a great friend said it would be good for her. She'd said something like 'Feel the fear and do it anyway.' Max was consoling and said how true it was what her friend had said. And wasn't Italy the land of the Renaissance anyway.

The silence had just congealed comfortingly around them and Ellie's senses had shifted to a position slightly to the rear of her when through the thick air there loomed a hat. A large hat decorated with iridescent feathers. And beneath it was a figure with the deportment of an Indian Runner duck; a wiry, agitated frame, beak lifted, eyes alert but rather distracted.

'Is this where we're meant to be?' she addressed no one in particular. Ellie felt later that she would look back upon that first meeting with Lady Nerine Temple as life-enhancing. 'Only just breathed in my room when that girl said I should come and have a drink out here before dinner. Seemed a sensible idea.'

Max was on his feet drawing up a chair.

'Sit down, let me pour you a glass of wine,' said Ellie, looking at Nerine's racehorse ankles and bony wrists. She had the pared down elegance the elderly sometimes possess.

'Oh thank you, but I'd quite like a nice whisky to pick me up after all that fighting with Italian transportation. Have they got any?' The beady eyes swept around the tables.

'Doesn't matter if they haven't, I have!'

Francesca appeared with perfect timing and a tray of bottles and tit-bits. '*Buona sera*. I know that there are more of you to come but I shall tell you of the arrangement for drinks from our bar now, I think. There is a place to help yourself in the library. When you have come and seen, you will be able to tell the others.'

'And when exactly are we going to see these others?' Lady Nerine squinted up at Francesca from under a trailing feather.

'The Dottor Hunter and the Signora Clements are arriving soon. The others will be arriving very early in the morning, it is a night flight they are getting.'

'So it's just cosy old us for now,' said Max. 'Very intime.' He said it slowly and as Ellie turned to look at his face he winked at her. She smiled back feeling comfortable; the fears she'd had of new places, new people melted away.

At dinner, in a panelled dining room with doors open on to the terrace, they sat together and talked of nothing very consequential. Nerine was too much of a

performance to be ignored and entertained them with her total enjoyment of things new. Max told them about his loft conversion on the river. He loved city living but he hankered after a bit of rural life; probably advancing age, he laughed, but also he'd spent some time in the country in his childhood. Out of the floating facts of the night, that drifted up on cigarette smoke, what Ellie remembered later was Max describing a log pile. He'd seen it on a trip to Bavaria and was struck by its orderliness; it filled a whole garage and was sorted and labelled according not only to size but also to date of harvest. What she saw was real pleasure in his face. Ellie settled back; she was savouring the badinage, relishing her first impressions of these people but - most of all - enjoying painting a picture of herself for them that was entirely within her control.

Later they met Salvatore Uccello. As they sat over their smoky *caffè* he asked if they would mind if he joined them. He probably wasn't much older than Ellie but he had that kind of reserve that is described as great 'bearing'. Ellie could not imagine him sharing confidences. He was tall and genteel; patrician - that was the word that came to Ellie's mind. In this case entirely accurate. The Palazzo had been his family's home since 1400 and he had lived there from birth, although he had obviously learned his immaculate English somewhere abroad. Oxford, whilst reading philosophy, it turned out. That conversation led to asking about everyone's educational background and Ellie had to admit to studying in Florence in the seventies, as part of her Art History course. Not only did that give her age away (she watched Max but there was not a flicker) but it also revealed that she had learnt some Italian.

'Ah, Signora Carroll, when I see you alone, the conversation will be of things artistic and only in Italian.' Salvatore smiled and laid a manicured hand briefly on her shoulder. She smiled up at him and agreed, saying that perhaps he could enlighten her on some philosophical points that she had never really understood.

It was Max's turn in the spotlight and he worked at getting them all laughing. With much expansive gesturing and crossing and uncrossing of his legs, he described his studies at the University of Life. Now, he said, he was thinking of stopping his many business interests to do some kind of degree for a while. Nerine simply tossed out that she had been to the Slade in the thirties. Ellie's antennae twitched.

'Do you still paint, Nerine? Because I do too. At least, I'm trying to find myself a style at the moment.'

'Lord no, I can't be carrying all that oil stuff around at my age. But I do have my sketchbook and I've just got one of those digital cameras. Great fun and very liberating, dear.' Nerine patted Ellie's hand. 'You should have a go, it might open a few windows.'

'We will begin tomorrow, not too early in deference to our fellow students, at eleven a.m. in the *salotto* - drawing room.' Salvatore said, standing up to leave. 'I shall outline your studies for you and then we will begin by understanding Italian people, a very important prerequisite.' He smiled, almost bowed and blessed their night's rest with a *Che Dio vi benedica*.

Ellie rose too, the harsh scrape of her chair on the terrazzo floor jarring the atmosphere. Everything had taken on a misty rose tinge; the polished plaster of the walls diffused the reflection of the candle flames like Indian red watercolour seeping across wet paper. She felt slightly heady; comfortable with Max and Nerine and simultaneously anxious that the dynamic might be changed by the arrival of the others.

'Good night then, fellow students!' She walked out into the entrance hall with their voices bidding her sweet dreams. She passed Francesca at the desk signing in a

tired looking couple. His head was bent over a credit card slip. Maybe Doctor Hunter and Mrs Clements she thought. Not wanting to break the spell she just sent a glancing *buona sera* in their direction as she passed by. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Mrs Clements' head turn up sharply. Ellie felt the appraisal on her retreating back like cool fingers as she slipped into the sanctuary of her room.

Salvatore walked back through the olive groves in the darkness. This late in April there was still an edge to the temperature at this time of night, but in the day he'd felt the potential of the heat. It was his custom to spend time alone in reflection before he headed for bed. He got there around midnight. He took his notes with him to glance over before sleeping. Salvatore knew his subject well but always liked to refresh his mind or see if some new insights would come to him in dreamtime. The three students so far seemed interesting. He wouldn't have immediately imagined them as kindred spirits but they had become bonded ex-patriate English within a few hours of leaving home. He had a fondness for the race from his time there. The young man worried him a little. But maybe all young men did these days. What he might have called energy in the past he now labelled brash. He liked the ladies. Nerine felt familiar; his mother the *Marchesa* had had the same spirit. Ellie was gentle. The way she pushed her trailing hair to peer out with those clear eyes betrayed a certain lack of confidence. No, that was not exactly right. His instincts told him she did have confidence, although buried deep, but she had no wish to assert her will on others.

Salvatore sifted his papers, written out in a careful longhand with the fountain pen given to him by his father. As he scanned the familiar words he hoped for some spark to ignite this group of people. He prayed this course would not become a chore; that this would not be a time when he went through the motions merely. Salvatore drew his hand over the top of his head, feeling the thinning hair. Life did have times when one just had to keep going but it could also bring surprises. This time, before a course began, was always filled with the excitement of anticipation. Would this group work as an entity? Would they be responsive participants? The dynamic of the course so depended upon the response when you were giving day after day. He often wondered if students knew what a responsibility they had; to give back, to pour water into their teacher's well. Salvatore laughed gently to himself; it was more like pouring water into a bottomless bucket in this place.

At last in his bed he sat upright against the mahogany bed-head, book in hand. It had been a while since he had read these letters by Marsilio Ficino. Something that lady, Ellie, had said about her studies in Italy had caused him to come back to them; she had been baffled by Neoplatonism. 'How,' she asked, 'could pagan and Christian philosophies be in harmony. Where's the link between Humanism and religion?' He wanted to give her the best possible answer and so here was his research. The heavy calf-bound volume of letters weighed in his hand; he turned the rough paper and read; the words were in elegant, rhetorical style, imbued with authority.

You have heard that proverb... Nothing is sweeter than profit. But what man does profit? He who takes possession of that which will be his. What we know is ours, everything else depends on fortune. Let small-minded men envy the rich, that is those whose coffers are rich but not their minds. Warn your fellow students to beware of... the attractions of pleasure and the noisome fever of the mind given to opinion rather than knowledge...

The tree of knowledge, even if it seems to have rather bitter roots brings forth the sweetest possible fruit. Let them remember too that there will never be too much of this fruit because there is never enough... In feeding the mind we ought to imitate

gluttons and the covetous, who always fix their attention on what is still left. What is there further?

The Lord of life says 'No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is worthy of reward.' You have heard too of that woman who, because she turned back, was changed into a pillar. You have also heard how Orpheus, when he looked back, lost Eurydice; in other words his depth of judgment. Ineffective and empty handed is the hunter who goes backwards rather than forwards.

The last sentence was true, he thought, but fatigue was claiming him. He must sleep, for the rest of the group would be here early in the morning. Dousing the light he turned in the empty bed and welcomed oblivion.