

Chapter 1

It all started when I received a letter on very bleary January day, just as I was feeling the post-holiday blahs at a time of year when a lot of people are dealing with the consequences of over-indulging in food and drink and underexposure to Vitamin D. I was in a funk and having another drag-me-down-in-the-muck-woe-is-me Saturday. The kind where I could barely get myself out of my lime-green flannel pajamas, a Christmas gift from my well-intentioned mother who was sending me an unmistakable message about her lack of confidence in my ability to ever find a man again after my divorce six years ago.

My roommate and best friend, Kate, was on a weekend getaway with one of her paramours, and I was sitting in the kitchen of our apartment, drowning my sorrows with a bottle of flat Veuve Clicquot left over from yet another unmemorable New Year's Eve, and a Costco-sized tub of Häagen-Dazs coffee ice cream. Michael Buble's *I Just Haven't Met You Yet*, the theme song for everyone who hasn't completely given up on finding their soul mate, was blasting through the apartment.

My lousy mood was compounded by even lousier weather. It was one of those very rare dead of winter days when a snow-storm dumps a foot of snow on New York and virtually brings

the city to a screeching halt. How the courier got through to me I'll never know, but the letter I received was about to change my life. It was postmarked Perugia, Italy, and there were no two ways about it. I was super excited. I had never received a couriered personal letter before, let alone one all the way from Italy.

The sender was a certain Dottore Gian-Paolo Borromeo, *Avvocato*. My Italian was rudimentary back then. I only spoke a few words of my mother's dialect, which she had taught me as a child, but it was enough to know that the person who had sent the letter was a doctor of some sort and that he had something to do with the legal profession. As I carefully opened the envelope and unfolded the pages, a business class airline ticket and two other documents dropped to the ground. I picked up an itinerary and a letter that was written in English, on hand-milled paper in a beautifully ornate and flowing script, like we just don't see very often anymore in today's age of everything electronic. I spent a few moments fingering the delicate paper that felt as lovely to the touch as clean, crisp linen. The note read:

Signorina Cassidy,

It is with great sadness that we inform you of the death of your great aunt Sofia Buonarroti. Your presence is requested at the reading of the will on January 15th at 11 o'clock at Via Mazzini, 24. A driver and car will pick you up at Florence Amerigo Vespucci airport where you will arrive via Milan, Malpensa.

*With the expression of my deepest sympathy,
Dottore Gian-Paolo Borromeo
Avvocato*

Sofia Buonarroti? I had never heard the name before. My mother's maiden name was Pulitti, and the only Buonarroti I was aware of was Michelangelo, the Renaissance painter who gave the world the Sistine Chapel and The David. But I was quite certain we weren't related. At least my high school art class grades didn't reflect the possibility of a lineage of any sort. More to the point, I had never heard my mother make mention of any Buonarrotis in our family. There were endless stories about the village feuds between the Stronzis and the Cavallos, yet nothing I could recall about anyone else. The only thought running through my head, as I held the letter in my hand, was that surely this was all just a big mix-up. A case of mistaken identity. Things like long lost relatives and mysterious letters simply didn't happen to me.

With nothing going as planned in my life, in a dead-end job where I provided concierge services to senior executives at the communications firm BPM/NYC from an anonymous cubicle on the 45th floor of a generic skyscraper, I found myself thirty-nine years old and facing the big 4-0 squarely in the face. I had pretty much resigned myself to being single forever, and, to the end of my working days, just another worker bee in the buzzing and overcrowded hive that is Manhattan. I was well on my way to waking up one day at the age of seventy, wondering where my life had gone. How it could have all slipped by so quickly without any significance, without a legacy of some sort. Just me and a houseful of rescue dogs – I much preferred dogs over cats – whiling away my lonely existence. Have I mentioned my flair for the dramatic? So, what did I have to lose by jumping on a plane to Italy, as the letter instructed me to do, and flying off to a place to which I had up until then never been, despite my Italian heritage and great longing to travel the world?

I picked up the phone to call my mother. She was spending the winter in Florida like she did every year. I needed to tell her

about the letter and ask her about the mysterious relative I knew nothing about.

“Hi Mom, I just got the weirdest letter,” I started right in without inquiring how she was. Asking her anything remotely close to “how’s it going?” would have meant hearing about her gall bladder, which always gave her grief after the indulgences of the Christmas holidays, her bunions, made worse by her love of four-inch Manolos, and how Mrs. Berman in 24c had conveniently outlived yet another wealthy husband.

I didn’t have time for idle chitchat. So, without the usual exchange of pleasantries, I came right out and asked, “Can you tell me who Sofia Buonarroti is?” Before I could finish, I heard a big gasp at the other end. I continued, “A lawyer in Italy wants me to attend the reading of her will. Did you know her? Are we related? Is this for real? I was thinking of taking a few days off and heading over to Italy. You know how I’m always wishing for more adventure in my life, and this sounds like my chance for that.” Nothing but deadening silence followed. I had to repeat everything twice before getting any kind of reaction out of my otherwise not usually so quiet mother.

She started off with a big intake of breath. Then, she burst out with a resounding, “I want you to have nothing to do with this. Promise me Adriana you won’t go there.” Another huff and then admonishment. “Stay away from those people! I will never speak to you again if you go there. Never! Never! Never! And be careful what you wish for, young lady. You may live to regret it!”

I could practically see the exclamation marks jumping out of the receiver, then heard a click. My mother had hung up on me. I attempted to call back, but the line was busy and remained so for the next two weeks. It was no use to keep trying. My mother was not one to use email or texting. She was prone to the dramatic and had hung up on me before, so I was inclined to not take her threats too seriously. This time, however, it felt like she really

meant it when she said she wouldn't speak to me again. She had last reacted this way when I announced my divorce. Marriage was a sacred institution to my mother, and she had been so disappointed in me that I couldn't make things work with my ex-husband, Jason, that I didn't hear from her for over a month.

So, what was all this mystery surrounding the Buonarrotis and Aunt Sofia? If I hopped on the plane to Italy and returned a few days later, my mother would never have to know. I just had to find out what the scoop was. It felt really important. I knew my mother was estranged from her family in Italy, but we never talked about it. The topic was simply taboo. When someone once mentioned something about the family secret at a Thanksgiving dinner, the look of harshness on my mother's face in response to the comment was like a sharp dagger that could have carved the turkey into a million pieces. It was never spoken of again.

Defying my mother's wishes, I determined the trip to Italy would be the perfect opportunity to unearth something which had been buried for many years and perhaps mend some unhealed wounds. I daydreamed about discovering a family who, with open arms, would welcome me, the offspring of the prodigal daughter from America, into their world. That world, I fantasized, would be a place full of elegant and well-dressed relatives who made their own wine, grew olives and feasted on lavish five course meals *al fresco* on a wisteria-covered patio every night.

They would see to it that I was married off to a charming bachelor in their midst, preferably a fabulously successful businessman, or possibly a count with an established pedigree, and with whom I would live out my days under the Tuscan sun. Or why not the owner of a prominent and prosperous vineyard? A most satisfying daydream for a lover of wine like me. No one could say that I wasn't good at conjuring up fantasy scenarios worthy of a Hollywood script.

“Are you kidding me, Ade?” Kate, my consultant in all life matters said when I told her about the letter. I had called her right after my mother hung up on me, despite my promise that I wouldn’t interrupt her weekend in the Berkshires with her latest beau. But this was an emergency, so I figured it would be okay just this once.

“You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into, but if you’re hesitating for one minute about going, you’re crazy. If nothing else, this is a free ticket to Italy,” Kate said. “Besides, I’d personally kill for a good excuse to not talk to my mother. You have to go, Ade. You simply must! Be careful, and call me the minute you get there. Promise? And remember what I’ve always told you.”

Then she proceeded to quote her favorite author, George Eliot, “It’s never too late to be who you might have been.” Eliot, a woman writing under a male pseudonym, scandalized 19th century England by living with a married man. It was exactly what Kate would have done had she lived during that time.

Despite Kate’s repeated efforts and eagerness to help me, I just never felt ready to make a life-altering change that would have allowed me to become who I might have been. Kate was not only my best friend, but she was also a life coach and a life saver. I had moved in with her after my world fell apart post-divorce, and we had been living together for the past six years. Every once in a while, Kate would try to work her coaching magic on me, but letting her delve deep into my psyche, rummage around in there and have her pull out all the broken pieces so that I could make a big change was just way beyond my comfort zone. It would have meant laying bare the fears and insecurities buried in the deepest crevices of my soul and doing something so very unlike me. Acting out of character was just way too scary without the certainty of a good outcome. Until the day I received the letter from the Italian lawyer, that is.

So, on January 15th, following Mr. Borromeo's directions, I arrived in Italy a little worse for wear, having barely slept on my Alitalia flight from JFK to Milan Malpensa. I probably shouldn't have had more than one glass of champagne. Should have stopped at the third one, in fact. It was just that a lot of doubts about the trip kept creeping into my sleep-deprived mind, and it seemed a pity to let the open bar in business class go to waste.

I simply couldn't resist anything offered up by Mario, the most attractive flight attendant I had ever seen. Charming, debonair and heart-meltingly continental in his demeanor, Mario persisted in asking, "Arrr you angry, *Signorina* Cassadee?" It took a while for me to figure out he was in fact asking whether I was hungry and not enquiring about my state of mind. Hungry just sounded like angry in his most delightful accent-tinged English. All I wanted to do was listen to his wonderful voice all night long and pretend that I, and I alone, was the object of his attention. Never mind that there were a dozen other passengers around me on whom Mario also lavished his attentiveness.

When my in-seat entertainment system failed in the middle of watching *This is Forty*, my mind began to do backflips again. Was this an omen? Should I never have agreed to fly all the way to Italy? Was the plane about to go down? Or worse. Was I about to walk right into a trap laid by mad men, or one man in particular, Gian-Paolo Borromeo? What if he was into human trafficking? Italy had a reputation for those sorts of things, didn't it? Could the Mafia be involved? What if there was more to the family secret than overreaction on my mother's part, and I was about to alienate the only person who really loved me? And what had Kate meant when she told me to be careful?

When the captain announced our descent into Milan, I was both relieved and once again distracted by Mario, as he scurried about the cabin getting ready for landing. He had exchanged his service apron for the uniform blazer, which made him look

distinguished and elegant. Every time he breezed down the aisle I caught a whiff of his disarming aftershave, and in my jet-lagged state I swooned some more. With a flash of his gorgeous smile he waved me off with an “*Arriverderci Signorina Cassadee*” as I disembarked. Still tipsy from the free-flowing champagne, I set foot on Italian soil for the very first time.

After a quick change of planes in Milan and feeling more than a little queasy, I arrived in Florence, relieved to be met by a driver, just as Mr. Borromeo’s letter had stated. Before I knew it, I was whisked away in a black Alfa Romeo sedan where I sank into the comfortable back seat, inhaling the new-car scent of luxurious leather. I must have nodded off as the two-hour drive seemed to take no more than a few minutes, and I awoke to the rocking of the car as it veered off the highway near an isolated little village, by the looks of the few farm houses that dotted the countryside. A sign indicated that we were in Morra.

From there, we followed a winding gravel road up a slight hill. The path was lined with softly swaying Cypress trees standing twenty feet high, like proud soldiers of another era watching for foreign invaders. I rolled down the car window to let the fresh morning air seep into my lungs in the hopes of perking up a bit. I wanted to be awake and alert for a meeting I was sure would be important and would involve a language I did not understand. As the vehicle made a final turn, the smoke-tinged breeze hinted at the presence of a wood-burning fireplace somewhere nearby. It was then I got my first glimpse of the 18th century villa, which, unbeknownst to me at that moment, would become my very own Tuscan retreat.

“*Signorina Cass-a-dee*. We have been expecting you. Please allow me to welcome you to Ee-ta-lee.” The man, who would eventually introduce himself as the emissary of the letter, which had summoned me to the country of my mother’s ancestors,

stretched out his hand to greet me. With a gentle lift, I was helped out of the car.

He was a handsome man in his late forties or early fifties. Hard to tell as he appeared to be in great shape and had a youthful demeanor about him. His olive complexion looked tanned, perhaps from the Tuscan sun, which can, even in winter, impart a warm glow. Salt and pepper hair, neatly styled, with the exception of a stray mane that blew over his forehead ever so casually, yet seemingly on cue, had this been a scene from a Harlequin Romance, framed his face. A five o'clock shadow at eleven-thirty in the morning gave him a relaxed air, despite his business attire that included a pale pink shirt, silver and purple striped tie and a gorgeous navy, expensive-looking suit. I was tempted to touch the gray cashmere scarf that was draped loosely around his neck to feel the softness of the fabric against my cheek.

"Conduct yourself like a grown woman for goodness sakes, Ade," I had to repeat under my breath. Where had the impulse to caress a perfect stranger's clothing come from? I wasn't only sleep deprived but clearly also slightly depraved after my transatlantic trek, and I was acting like a complete idiot. He did smell divine, though. As Mr. Borromeo bent to kiss my hand, a subtle mix of spicy lavender and amber met my nostrils. The man had good taste in aftershave in addition to being a good dresser.

"Pull yourself together. Get a grip," I thought to myself. "He is a professional, and you're behaving like an adolescent with a schoolgirl crush." At that moment, I felt a tug and realized that part of my trench coat had caught itself up in the seatbelt. I nearly stumbled into Mr. Borromeo's arms as I tried to exit the car. Great way to make a first impression. I smiled awkwardly, embarrassed at my not-so-elegant entrance.

Mr. Borromeo didn't seem to notice my little trip-up. Or, at the very least, he was polite enough to not make a big deal of it. He pointed to the large oak double doors flanked by two

oversized pots of blooming hawthorn. Flowers in January. This was paradise. Mr. Borromeo dismissed the driver and motioned for me to enter the house.

“Pleez. Pleez this way, *signorina*.” As he smiled the corners of his eyes crinkled ever so slightly, and his mouth turned up charmingly.

I stepped into the villa and was ushered down a vaulted-ceiling hallway into the living room. A faint smell of mustiness and the sensation of dust hit my nostrils. I rubbed my index finger under my nose to avoid sneezing. With a tendency to produce loud emanations, I was eager to avoid any further displays of inappropriate behavior, lest the man who had summoned me to Italy think I was a totally uncouth American. Especially when he was about to reveal the reason behind my journey.

In the living room my eyes were drawn to the worn silk brocade drapes in a faded red that framed the windows and French doors. There was a distinct old world grandeur to the room, but the stuccoed ceiling showed deep cracks, signs the place had seen better days and that those days had long passed. Threadbare Persian carpets were scattered across the terra cotta floors, and two walls were covered in gorgeous tapestries, one of which depicted a colorful scene of a society ball. The details on the ladies’ dresses, right down to the embroidered fleur-de-lis, were remarkably vivid and strikingly beautiful.

Mr. Borromeo offered me a seat on the sofa covered in well-used stamped velvet. A roaring fire raged in the hearth and created a warm glow that cast shadows behind the dark oak furniture, which filled the room. The sofa cushions gave way under me as I lowered myself down, requiring Mr. Borromeo to come to my rescue a second time in less than ten minutes. He caught me under my left arm, just as I started to slide off ungracefully, providing another opportunity for me to end up in a resolutely unladylike position. Our eyes met, and I cocked

my head apologetically, giving Mr. Borrromeo a sheepish grin while he looked at me rather bemused, yet as if to say, "These things happen."

"*Signorina*, I thought we would do the reading of the will here at the villa instead of requiring you to travel to my *ufficio*, my office, in town. This way you can get some rest and enjoy your time in Italy. I hope this is fine with you." Mr. Borrromeo's English was excellent and despite my jetlag I didn't have to strain too much to understand the ever-so-slight accent. "I have asked my son, Alessandro, to join us later, and he will show you around. But first, let me begin, if I may. You are ready, yes?" he continued. I nodded in agreement and felt my head start to pound, a result of the one or two glasses of champagne too many on the plane, and my lack of sleep.

Ideally, I would have preferred a moment to freshen up. Probably not something a man would think of. But I knew I would be able to keep it together for a few more minutes, and I was relieved I didn't have to get back into a moving vehicle of any sort any time soon. I just wondered where everyone else was. Surely others should have been present for the reading of the will. Then, a maid dressed in a crisp light blue uniform, adorned only with a lace apron tied around her lithe waist, appeared out of nowhere. She placed a tray with coffee and biscuits in front of me. Hearing my stomach grumble, I gladly accepted the refreshments.

"*Signorina*, let me start by saying welcome to your home." Mr. Borrromeo took on a more somber tone as he got right down to business. "This villa has been bequeathed to you by your great-aunt. You are the only surviving relative she wishes to acknowledge, and she has asked that all her worldly goods, with the exception of a few sentimental items she would like the help to have, go to you. In addition to the villa, you will receive the sum of three million Euros. Your great-aunt has requested this

money be kept in Italy as much as possible to benefit the community where she lived her entire life. Also, she has asked that Fiorella, her faithful maid and companion of fifty years, who you just met, be kept on until it is her desire to no longer work here. Her husband also will remain here. He is the caretaker, and they both live on the grounds, just down the road." Then Mr. Borromeo paused for a moment. "*Signorina* Cass-adee, are you alright?" he asked, as I felt the color drain from my face.

There was no reason why a single drop of blood should have remained in the upper reaches of my body. What I had heard would have sent anyone into a state of total and utter shock. If I had understood Mr. Borromeo correctly, I had just inherited a crumbling, yet still magnificent, estate, had become the chatelaine of a Tuscan villa and had taken on a housekeeper and her husband, not to mention a considerable sum of money I quickly calculated to be equal to nearly four million dollars. Was it any wonder that I was on the verge of passing out? I could hardly catch my breath to respond that I was fine, if a little dazed.

"But how is this possible Mr. Borromeo?" I was barely coherent. "I did not know Sofia Buonarroti. I'm not even sure we're related. How did she know about me? And why wouldn't she have left this place to my mother and her siblings? They would be the rightful heirs, I would think, not me."

I looked up towards Mr. Borromeo as he stood over me pouring himself a cup of coffee before lowering himself back into the desk chair. "There are just so many questions I need answers to. Can you help me understand, *Signore* Borromeo?"

"Gian-Paolo. Please call me Gian-Paolo, Miss Cassadee," he said in a relaxed tone of voice. I was surprised he was doing this so shortly after our meeting but was grateful for his offer. "Unfortunately, I do not know very much." He rose slowly from his seat and walked towards the fireplace. Picking up a photograph of an elegant elderly lady who looked the spitting image

of my mother, he continued, “Your great-aunt came to me about a year ago. She must have known she was nearing the end of her life and needed legal advice to settle her estate. She mentioned she had some business to take care of with a relative in America and asked me to make some inquiries. That is how I found you. Once I had provided her with information about your existence, she revealed no more to me. My job is to do as my clients ask. That is all. And that is why we are here today.” He stopped speaking for a moment to allow me to interject.

“It seems strange to me that one of my relatives would be so wealthy,” I confessed, prompting me to remember how my mother always spoke about how poor everyone was. Her brothers and sisters, like her, had all left Italy to find their fortunes elsewhere. I had heard plenty about them, but certainly no aunt was ever mentioned. “Where on earth would all the money have come from? Please Mr. Borromeo – I mean Gian Paolo – please can you help me get some answers?” I begged.

“Well, Miss Cas-a-dee, the value of land in Umbria and Tuscany has increased very much over the last few years. You know, many foreigners come to these parts to purchase vacation properties. It is the dream of so many people. Especially since that woman from California wrote about moving to Cortona. Mayes, I think her name is. Frances Mayes. Delightful woman from what I understand. Maybe you have read *Under The Tuscan Sun* or seen the film? I believe this has helped drive up the prices. Your great-aunt may have sold some of the land over the years. Perhaps this explains her wealth. If you like, I can check the registry office for additional information, but I don’t think we will find out much.” Gian Paolo looked a little exasperated at his inability to provide more details.

For the first time during the course of our conversation I felt tension in his voice, and with that I realized I was not going to get anything further out of him. By then, the weight of my

eyelids was more than I could fight, and seeing me stifle a yawn, Gian-Paolo suggested I lie down upstairs.

“Fiorella will show you where you can take a rest, Miss Cassadee.” Before I had the chance to tell him to call me Adriana, the housekeeper reappeared in the living room to show me upstairs.

“*Venga signorina,*” she nodded and gestured for me to go with her.

I followed the slight woman to the foyer and up the grand staircase. The broad stone steps were set wide apart and it took me a moment to get the rhythm of each rise. I held firmly onto the ornate wrought iron railing and dragged my carry-on upstairs. The bag felt like a ton of bricks. I had tried to pack light thinking I’d be gone just a few days, but not knowing what to expect, I ended up throwing whatever clean clothes I could find into my suitcase. A decision I now regretted.

Upstairs, Fiorella opened one of the doors leading to a bright corner room with a large four-poster oak bed. She closed the shutters, assuming I would want to keep the midday sun at bay to allow me to catch up on my sleep in darkness. All I wanted to do was take a much-needed shower and flop into bed. It didn’t matter that I could feel each and every spring of the well-worn mattress and that a noticeable smell of mustiness wafted through the air. I just needed to be horizontal for a couple of hours, and I would be right as rain.

Little did I know I was embarking on a new chapter in my life and that this chapter would involve a lot more excitement than I could ever have wished for. Then again, who would ever think their new life in a foreign country would involve a shakedown by the FBI, complete with hovering helicopters, searchlights, police dogs, and the arrest of an international fugitive, who also happened to be my ex-husband, getting arrested on their very own doorstep? But I’m getting way ahead of myself.