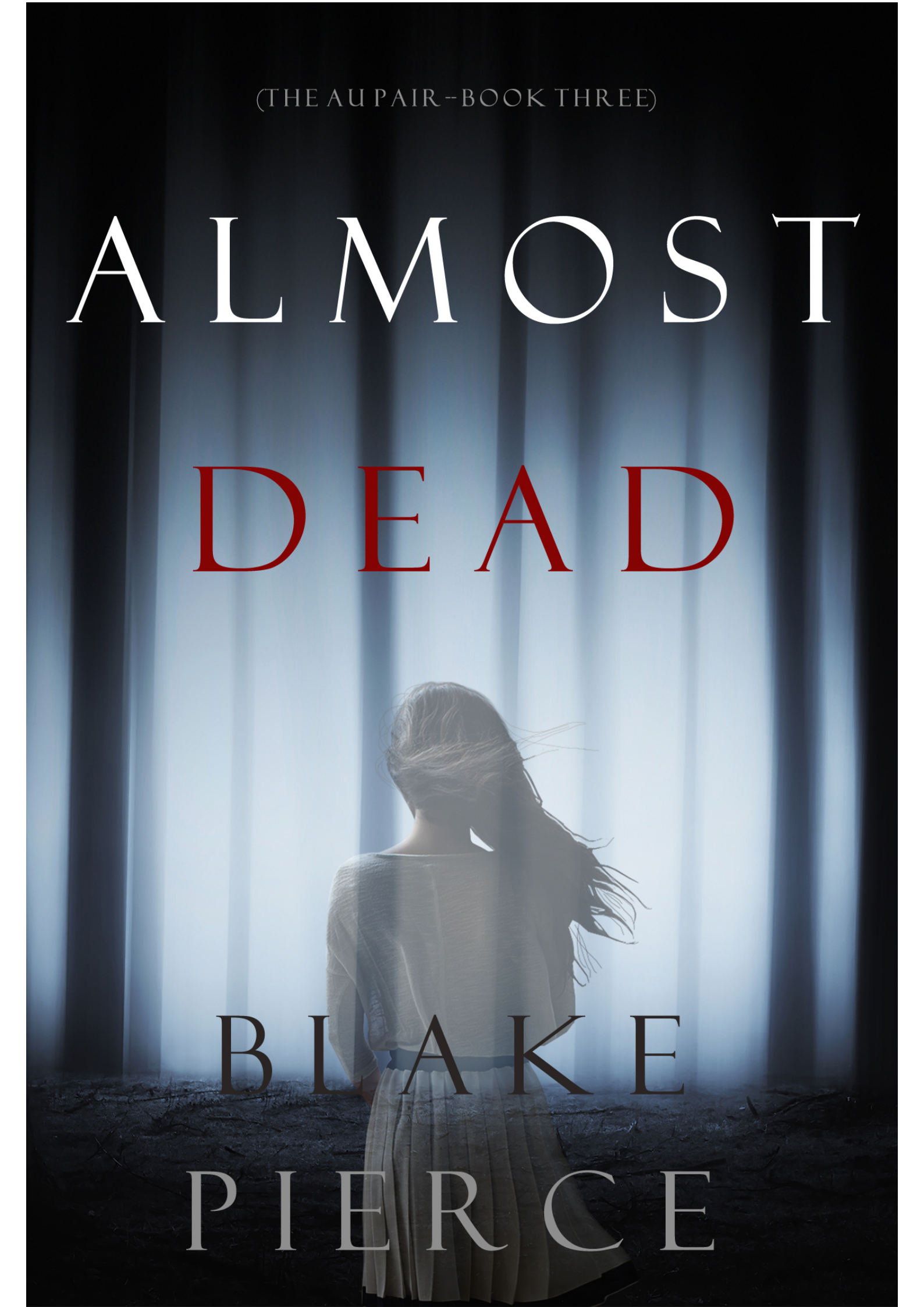


(THE AU PAIR-BOOK THREE)

ALMOST DEAD

A woman with long dark hair, seen from behind, stands in a dark, misty forest. She is wearing a white, long-sleeved, pleated dress. Her hair is blowing in the wind. The background is filled with vertical light rays filtering through the trees, creating a dramatic and ethereal atmosphere. The ground is dark and covered with fallen leaves and twigs.

BLAKE
PIERCE

The Au Pair

Blake Pierce
Almost Dead

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Almost Dead / B. Pierce — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
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ISBN 978-1-09-431077-0

“When you think that life cannot get better, Blake Pierce comes up with another masterpiece of thriller and mystery! This book is full of twists and the end brings a surprising revelation. I strongly recommend this book to the permanent library of any reader that enjoys a very well written thriller.” --Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Almost Gone) ALMOST DEAD is book #3 in a new psychological thriller series by USA Today bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose #1 bestseller Once Gone (Book #1) (a free download) has received over 1,000 five star reviews. After the disastrous fallout from her last placement in England, all 23-year-old Cassandra Vale wants is a chance to pick up the pieces. A high-society, divorced mother in sunny Italy seems to be the answer. But is she? With a new family come new children, new rules, and new expectations. Cassandra's determined to make this one last - until a horrifying discovery pushes her to a breaking point. And when the unimaginable occurs, will it be too late to pull herself back from the brink? Who, she wonders, is she becoming? A riveting mystery replete with complex characters, layers of secrets, dramatic twists and turns and heart-pounding suspense, ALMOST DEAD is book #3 in a psychological suspense series that will have you turning pages late into the night. Book #4 in the series will be available soon.

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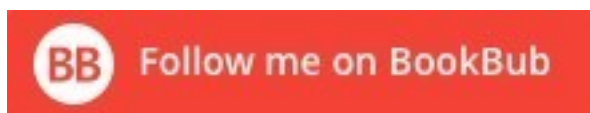
Blake Pierce

Almost Dead (The Au Pair—Book Three)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes sixteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising thirteen books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising six books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising five books (and counting); of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting); of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising two books (and counting); and of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising two books (and counting).

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.



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CHAPTER ONE

Cassandra Vale hurried along the paved street. Cold rain stung her face, and she blinked it out of her eyes. It was getting late, and already dark, and she was worried she was lost. This part of Milan didn't look the way she'd expected it to. She'd ended up in one of the main shopping squares. Shoppers, wrapped in dark, stylish coats and holding carrier bags, thronged the wide sidewalk.

Cassie glanced into the stores as she headed toward the crossroads, wondering if she could ask for directions inside. The brightly lit interiors were oases of comfort and warmth, but in her shabby jacket and wet trainers she doubted she'd be allowed past the door. These names represented the pinnacle of the fashion industry. Emilio Pucci, Dolce & Gabbana, Moschino. The garments themselves seemed as far out of reach as their price tags.

She would just have to rely on her map, which was rapidly disintegrating in the rain. She stopped at the crossroads to unfold it, realizing that her lips and cheeks felt numb. The damp paper tore as she opened it and she pressed the ripped pieces together, trying to make sense of the complex pattern of streets with the unfamiliar, and by now mostly unreadable, names.

She'd come too far. She should have turned four blocks ago. Disoriented in the strange place, she hadn't stopped to check her bearings. Her hands were shaking as she turned the map, trying to puzzle her way back to where she needed to be. A left turn here, three blocks down—no, five—and then another left turn that led into a twisting labyrinth of roads. That was where she needed to be.

Cassie folded the pieces as best she could and put them back in her pocket, even though she knew the map wouldn't survive another outing. She had to concentrate now, and suppress the panic that she would be too late, that the place she needed would have closed by the time she got there, or, worse still, that her journey would end in nothing more than hopeless disappointment.

This was her only chance to find her sister, Jacqui. It was the only lead she had.

Struggling to keep the picture of the route in her mind, she half ran down the streets, noticing that as she left Milan's fashion epicenter behind, the walkways became narrower and the shop fronts less imposing. This was where the cheaper items and knock-offs were displayed, the Euro prices dropping with every block and January sale notices screaming from the shabby windows.

She caught sight of herself in the darkened glass. Her skin was winter-pale, her cheeks flushed from the cold. She'd pulled a lime-green beanie over her shoulder-length auburn hair, mostly for warmth, but also to keep the rebellious waves under control. Huddled in her old blue coat with its broken zipper, she looked out of place in this stylish fashion capital. She felt like an outsider among the immaculately dressed locals, with their perfectly groomed hair and expensive boots and natural sense of style.

When she and Jacqui were young, they had often been forced to wear worn, torn, ill-fitting clothing to school, with their widowed father angrily insisting there was no money to buy them anything better. Cassie had accepted her lot more readily than Jacqui, who had hated looking shabby and poor.

It made sense that her sister would have been drawn to one of the world's fashion capitals, where every piece of clothing was trendy, beautiful, and new.

Gasping for breath, Cassie saw the street name ahead looked familiar.

This was the road she wanted. Now all she had to do was find the shop.

It was called Cartoleria, but she didn't know if that was the actual name or a description. There had been a language barrier when speaking to the clerk on the phone. Cassie had managed to obtain the road name from the increasingly impatient woman, even though the only English she had known were the words "We are closing," which she had repeated several times before finally snapping out, "*Addio*," and slamming the phone down.

Cassie had decided the only way to find out would be to visit the store personally.

It had taken her a week to get organized, and to drive the whole way from Edinburgh, where she'd been staying, to Milan. She'd planned to arrive much earlier, but had been stuck in traffic coming into the city and had lost her way several times before finding a cheap place to park. Her GPS had malfunctioned and her phone's battery was almost dead. Thankfully she'd thought to print the map out earlier. What time did most places close here? Six p.m.? Later?

Anxiety surged inside her as she saw the store ahead of her was already closing up for the day, the shopkeeper turning the sign on the door and switching off the lights.

"Excuse me. Cartoleria. Do you know which way it is?" she asked him, anxious that every second counted.

He frowned at her, and then pointed down the road and said something in Italian that she didn't understand. At least he'd steered her in the right direction, because she'd been about to rush the other way.

"Thank you," she said.

"Signorina!" he called after her, but Cassie wasn't stopping for anyone.

She was breathless with excitement. There was a small chance that Jacqui might actually be working in this shop. Cassie imagined walking in and coming face to face with her sister. She wondered what Jacqui would do. She knew that she herself would scream with joy and hug her as tightly as she could. Then there would be the chance to talk, to find out what had happened and why Jacqui had disappeared for so long without getting in touch.

Even though it wasn't very likely, Cassie couldn't help but dream.

There it was, ahead. She saw the sign, Cartoleria, and broke into a run. They must still be open—they must. This was her chance, her opportunity to reconnect with the only family she still cared about.

She splashed over the rain-soaked paving stones, weaving between the slower-moving pedestrians sheltering under their bulky umbrellas.

Then she stopped, staring at the shop front in disbelief.

Cartoleria was closed.

Not just for the day, but forever.

The windows were boarded up, but through a gap in the peeling covers she could see the dark shell beyond. The sign above the door, battered and dingy, was the only reminder that this store had once been open.

Staring at the bleak, empty space, Cassie realized too late that she had misunderstood the impatient store attendant when she had called a week ago. The woman had been trying to tell her that they were closing up shop for good. If she'd figured that out at the time, she could have called back immediately, asked more questions, and been more persuasive.

Instead she'd driven hundreds of miles, only to be faced with the deadest of dead ends.

Her lead was gone, along with her hopes and dreams. She'd lost her only chance of finding her sister again.

CHAPTER TWO

Staring at the empty store, Cassie felt crushed by disappointment. She knew she should leave, walk away into the dark, damp evening and start the long journey back to her car, but she couldn't bring herself to go.

It was as if turning away now meant giving up forever, and when she thought about it in that way, her feet felt rooted to the spot. She couldn't shake the certainty that there must still be something, somehow, that would lead her to Jacqui.

Looking around, she saw one of the neighboring shops was still open. It looked to be a coffee shop and bistro. Perhaps somebody there would know who the owner of Cartoleria was, and where he or she had gone.

Cassie headed into the bistro, relieved to find shelter from the gusty rain. The interior smelled deliciously of coffee and bread, reminding her that she hadn't eaten today. A massive chrome cappuccino machine stood in pride of place on the wooden counter.

There was space for only four tables inside, and all of them were occupied. There was an empty seat at the bar, though, so she sat there.

The harassed-looking waiter rushed over to her.

"*Cosa prendi?*" he asked.

Cassie guessed he wanted to take her order.

"Sorry, I don't speak Italian," she apologized, hoping he understood her. "Do you know who owned the shop next door?"

The young man shrugged, looking puzzled.

"I can bring you food?" he asked in broken English.

Realizing that the language barrier had brought an end to her questioning, Cassie quickly scanned the menu scribbled on the black chalkboard on the back wall.

"Coffee, please. And a panini."

She peeled some notes from the shrinking stash in her wallet. The prices in Milan were even higher than she'd expected, but it was getting late and she was starving.

"You are *Americana*?" the man sitting next to her asked.

Impressed, Cassie nodded.

"Yes, I am."

"My name is Vadim," he introduced himself.

He didn't sound Italian, but her ear for accents was not nearly as good as his. She guessed he might be from somewhere in Eastern Europe, or perhaps even Russia.

"I'm Cassie Vale," she replied.

He looked to be a few years older than her, which put him in his late twenties, and he was wearing a leather jacket and jeans. In front of him was a half-finished glass of red wine.

"You are on holiday here? Or working, studying?" he asked.

"I've actually traveled here to find somebody."

The confession felt painful, now that Cassie feared she never would.

His thick brows drew together in a frown.

"How do you mean, find? Find someone in particular?"

"Yes. My sister."

"You make it sound as if she is lost?" he asked.

"She is. I followed a clue which I hoped would help me find her. A while ago, she called my friend in the States, and we traced the number."

"So you traced the caller ID and came here? That is some detective work," Vadim said admiringly, as the waiter slid her coffee across the counter.

"No, I was too slow. You see, she called twice looking for me. The first number didn't work at all. I only realized last week that the other call might have been made from a different number."

Vadim nodded sympathetically.

"And now, Cartoleria is closed," Cassie told him.

"The shop next door?"

"Yes. That was where she phoned from. I'm hoping to find out who owned it."

He frowned.

"I know Cartoleria is a chain of stores. There are others elsewhere in Milan. It is an Internet café and sells—pens, pencils, those items."

"Stationery," Cassie suggested.

"Yes, that is it. Perhaps if you call another store, they could help you find the manager of this one."

The waiter returned and set a plate down in front of her, and Cassie dug in hungrily.

"You have traveled here all alone?" Vadim asked.

"Yes, I came here on my own, hoping to find Jacqui."

"Why are you the one looking for her, and she is not looking for you, too?"

"We had a difficult childhood," she told him. "My mother died when she was young and my father didn't cope without her. He became very angry, as if he wanted to destroy everyone's lives."

Vadim nodded sympathetically.

"Jacqui was older than me, and one day, she just left. I don't think she could handle it anymore. His anger, the shouting, broken glass on the floor most mornings. He had many different girlfriends, and there were often strangers in the house."

A dark memory surfaced of herself, hiding under the bed late at night, listening to heavy footsteps coming up the stairs and the fumbling at her door. Jacqui had saved her. She'd screamed so loud that the neighbors had come running, and the man had sneaked back down the stairs. Cassie remembered the terror she'd felt as she'd heard him rattle the bedroom door. Jacqui had been her protector, until she'd run away.

"After she left, I moved out, and then my dad got evicted and had to find different lodgings. I got a new phone. He got a new phone. There was no way for her to contact us again. Now I think she's trying to reach out. But she's scared, and I don't know why. Perhaps she thinks I'll be angry because she ran away."

Vadim shook his head.

"So you are all alone in the world?"

Cassie nodded, feeling sad all over again.

"Can I buy you a glass of wine?"

Cassie shook her head.

"Thanks so much, but I have to drive."

Her car was a forty-five-minute walk away. From there, she had no idea where to go. She'd made no plans for accommodations. She'd been hoping to arrive earlier, and that the shop would provide a clue to Jacqui's whereabouts, and she could then take the next step in her search. Now it was dark, and she had no idea where an affordable inn or hostel might be. She realized she might end up sleeping in her car, in the concrete parking garage.

"Have you accommodations for tonight?" Vadim asked, as if reading her mind.

Cassie shook her head.

"I still have to figure that out."

"There is a backpacker lodge close by. A *pensione*, as they say here in Italy. It might be convenient for you. I pass it on my way home; I can show you where it is."

Cassie smiled tentatively, worried about the price and also the fact that all her luggage was still in her car. Even so, accommodations nearby sounded more appealing than the long walk back to the

parking lot. There was even a chance Jacqui might have stayed in those lodgings, in which case she should at least check it out.

She drained her coffee and ate the last crumbs of her panini, while Vadim finished his wine and sent some messages on his phone.

“Come with me. This way.”

It was still raining outside, but Vadim opened a big umbrella and Cassie walked close beside him, grateful for its shelter. Clearly in a hurry, he marched along so that she had to rush to keep pace with him. She was glad they weren’t dawdling, but at the same time she wondered if this guesthouse was out of his way and if he was making a detour in order to help her.

She caught glimpses of the surrounding buildings as they passed, trying to get an impression of where they were. Names of restaurants, stores, and businesses glowed and flashed in the misty drizzle; the unfamiliar language made Cassie feel as if her senses were overloaded.

They crossed a street and she realized that the traffic had died down. Although she hadn’t checked the time for a while, she thought it must be well after seven p.m. She felt exhausted, and wondered how far away the backpackers’ lodge was, and what she would do if they had no space available.

The sign on their right was a supermarket, she was sure. On the left, perhaps it was an entertainment of some kind. The sign flashed bright with neon. Not the red light district—if such a thing even existed in Milan—but not too far away from it, either.

She suddenly realized that they had gone too far, too fast, and all in silence.

They must have been walking for nearly a mile, beyond what any reasonable person would consider close by.

It was then that her memory caught up.

After the first crossroads, she had glanced left. Distracted and with the rain in her eyes she hadn’t taken in the sign she had seen—not a large, flashing notice but a more modest sign with black lettering on white.

“*Pensione.*”

That was the word Vadim had used. That was the Italian for backpackers’ lodge, or at any rate a close equivalent.

“Why are you slowing?” he asked, and now his tone was sharp.

Ahead, Cassie saw the blaze of waiting headlights. There was a white van parked on the opposite side of the street. It looked like Vadim was heading directly toward it.

He reached out and in a split second of pure terror, Cassie realized that he had sensed her hesitation, and was going to grab her arm.

CHAPTER THREE

Too late, Cassie realized she'd been stupid and talkative and way too trusting. In her need for companionship, she'd shared with this stranger that she was entirely alone in the world and that nobody knew where she was.

Scenarios of kidnapping, trafficking, and abuse spun through her mind. She had to escape.

Even as Vadim's hand closed around her wrist, she pulled it away, and instead he caught hold of her jacket sleeve.

Fragile and worn, the fabric ripped, leaving only a shred of polyester lining in his grasp. Then she was free.

Cassie turned and sprinted back the way she had come.

Head bowed against the rain, she fled across the road as the light changed. Shouts and curses from behind told her that the large umbrella was proving more of a hindrance than a help to Vadim. She ducked left into a side street as a bus passed behind her, praying he hadn't seen where she had gone, but another shout behind her told her that he had, and was following.

She made a right turn onto a busier street, and as she weaved through the slow-moving pedestrians, she tugged her jacket and beanie off, in case their colors would help him to spot her. She bundled the garments up under her arm, and reaching another crossroads, she glanced behind her as she turned left again.

Nobody seemed to be following, but he might still catch up—or, worse still, anticipate where she was going and be waiting there.

Ahead of her, a beacon of hope and safety, she saw the “*Pensione*” sign she'd spotted earlier. She couldn't see Vadim anywhere.

Cassie sprinted toward it, praying that she could get inside, and out of danger, in time.

*

The blare of music from the guesthouse was audible from street level, where a flimsy, white-painted security gate stood ajar.

Pushing it open, Cassie thudded up the narrow wooden staircase. Voices, laughter, and the aroma of cigarette smoke wafted down to meet her.

She glanced behind her but the stairway was empty.

Perhaps he'd given up on the chase. Now that she'd gotten away, she wondered if she had exaggerated the threat. That parked van might have been a coincidence. Vadim could just have wanted her to come back to his place with him.

Either way, he hadn't done what he'd promised, and he had tried to grab her as soon as she'd hesitated. Fresh terror surged inside her as she remembered how she'd only just managed to pull away.

She'd been such an idiot to blurt out to him that she was alone, that nobody knew where she was, that she was on a wild goose chase for a person who might never be found. Breathing hard, Cassie chastised herself for her appalling stupidity. It had felt like such a relief to share Jacqui's story with a stranger who would not judge her. She hadn't realized what else she might be sharing, too.

The security gate at the top of the stairs was closed. It led into a tiny foyer, which was unoccupied, but a button on the wall had a printed sign taped below it.

The words were in several different languages with English at the top.

“Ring for Service.”

Cassie rang, hoping somebody would hear the bell, because the music was deafening up here.

Please answer, she prayed.

Then the door at the other side of the foyer opened, and a strawberry-blonde woman of about Cassie's age walked in. She looked surprised to see Cassie standing outside.

"Buona sera," she greeted her.

"Do you speak English?" Cassie asked, praying that the woman was bilingual and would understand she needed to be let in quickly.

To Cassie's relief she switched to German-accented English.

"How can I help you?"

"I need lodging urgently. Are there any rooms available here?"

The strawberry-blonde woman thought for a moment.

"No rooms," she said, shaking her head, and Cassie felt gutted with disappointment. She looked over her shoulder, worried she'd heard feet on the stairs, but it must have been the thudding of music from somewhere inside the lodge.

"Please, can I at least come inside?" she asked.

"Of course. Are you OK?"

The woman buzzed the door open. Cassie felt the cold metal vibrate in her hands as the lock released and she closed it so that it clanged firmly shut behind her.

Finally, she was safe.

"I had a bad experience outside. A man said he'd walk me here but we ended up going a different way. He grabbed my arm when I realized there was something wrong, but I managed to get free."

The woman raised her eyebrows, looking shocked.

"I am glad you escaped. This part of Milan can be dangerous at night. Please, come through to the office. I think I misunderstood your question. We do not have a room open; all the single rooms are booked. But we do have a bed available in a shared dormitory, if you would like to take it."

"Thank you so much. I would."

Weak with relief that she didn't have to go out into the dark streets again, Cassie followed the woman through the small foyer and into a tiny office with a notice on the door: "Hostel Manager."

There, Cassie paid for the room. Again, she realized the price was uncomfortably high. Milan was a costly place and there seemed no way of living cheaply.

"Do you have luggage?" she asked.

Cassie shook her head. "It's in the car, miles away."

To her surprise the other woman nodded as if this was a common occurrence.

"In a shared room, you will want a toiletry pack then."

The toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, and cotton sleep shirt looked to be a life saver and Cassie handed over yet more Euros in exchange.

"Your room is down the corridor. Yours is the bed closest to the door and it comes with a locker."

"Thanks."

"And the bar is that way. We provide our guests with the cheapest beer in Milan." She smiled as she placed the locker key on the counter.

"My name is Gretchen," she added.

"I'm Cassie."

Remembering why she was here, Cassie then asked, "What about a phone? Internet?"

She held her breath as Gretchen considered the question.

"Guests may only use the office phone in emergencies," she said. "There are several places nearby where you can make a call and use a computer. They are listed on the notice board next to the bookshelf, and you will also find a map there."

"Thank you."

Cassie glanced behind her. She'd seen the notice board on her way in, propped on the top of the shelf. It was a large board, covered in cut-out scraps of paper.

“We also list jobs on the board,” Gretchen explained. “We search all the sites daily and print out the ads. Some places even contact us direct if they need part-time help, such as waiting tables, shelf packing, cleaning. Those jobs are usually paid by the day, in cash.”

She smiled at Cassie sympathetically, as if she understood what it was like to be short of money in a foreign country.

“Most of our guests are able to find work if they want it, so if you are in need of a job, let me know,” she said.

“Thank you again,” Cassie said.

She headed straight for the notice board.

There was a list of five nearby places where phones and internet could be used, and Cassie held her breath as she saw Cartoleria’s name was there, but had been recently crossed out with a note, “Closed.”

That was a hopeful sign, so Cassie decided to ask Gretchen if she could check the guest list. She headed to the lounge, to find that the manager had just opened a beer and was sitting on a sofa among a laughing group of people.

“Here’s another customer.”

A tall, lean man with an English accent, who looked even younger than Cassie, jumped up and opened the fridge.

“I’m Tim. What can I get you?” he asked.

Seeing her hesitate, he said, “There’s a special on the Heineken.”

“Thanks,” Cassie said.

She paid, and he passed her an ice-cold bottle. Two dark-haired girls who looked as if they were twins moved up on one of the other couches to make room for her.

“Actually, I came here because I was hoping to find my sister,” she said, feeling a pang of nervousness as she spoke.

“I wonder if any of you might have known her, or if she stayed here. She has blonde hair—or it was blonde when I last knew her. And her name is Jacqui Vale.”

“You have been apart a long time?” one of the dark-haired girls asked sympathetically.

When Cassie nodded, she said, “That is very sad. I hope you find her.”

Cassie took a sip of her beer. It was icy cold, rich with malt.

The manager was scrolling through her phone.

“We have not had any Jacqui here in December. Or in November,” she said, and Cassie’s heart sank.

“Wait,” Tim said. “I remember someone.”

He closed his eyes, as if thinking back, while Cassie stared at him anxiously.

“We don’t get many Americans here, so I recall the accent. She didn’t book a room, she came in with a friend who was staying here. She had a drink and then left. She wasn’t blonde; her hair was brown, but she was very pretty and looked a bit like you. Perhaps a few years older.”

Cassie nodded encouragement. “Jacqui is older.”

“The friend called her Jax. We started chatting when I served her, and she told me she was staying in a small town. I think it was an hour or two from here. Now, of course, I can’t remember the name of the town.”

Cassie felt breathless to think that her sister had actually been here. Visiting a friend, going about her life. It didn’t seem as if she was broke or desperate or a drug addict or in an abusive relationship, or any of the other worst-case scenarios that Cassie had worried about whenever she thought of Jacqui, and wondered why she’d never been in touch.

Perhaps family just hadn’t meant that much to her and she hadn’t felt the need to reconnect. Although they had been close, it was adversity that had forced them together, having to survive their father’s rages and the unstable home life. Jacqui might have wanted to put those memories behind her.

“I didn’t know your memory for faces was so good, Tim,” Gretchen teased. “Or is it only the pretty girls?”

Tim grinned, looking abashed. “Hey, she was gorgeous. I was thinking of maybe asking her out, but then I found out she wasn’t staying in Milan, and thought she probably wouldn’t be interested in me anyway.”

There was a chorus of protest from the other girls.

“Silly! You should have,” the girl next to Cassie insisted.

“I didn’t get the right vibe from her, and I think she would have said no. Anyway, Cassie, if you give me your phone number, I’ll do my best to remember which town it was. I’ll message you if I do.”

“Thank you,” Cassie said.

She gave Tim her number and finished her beer. It seemed as if everyone else was ready for another round and would carry on talking until past midnight, but she was exhausted.

She got up and said goodnight to them before heading off to have a hot shower and climb into bed.

It was only as she pulled the bedcovers back that she remembered, with a shock, that her anxiety meds were still in her suitcase.

She had suffered the consequences of skipping tablets before. It was difficult to sleep if she was behind on her medication, and she was more likely to have vivid nightmares. Occasionally, she ended up sleepwalking, and Cassie felt nervous if that should happen in this shared dormitory.

She could only hope that her own exhaustion, together with the beer she’d had, would keep the bad dreams away.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Quick. Get up. We need to leave.”

Someone was tapping Cassie’s shoulder, but she was tired—so tired she could hardly open her eyes. Fighting her exhaustion, she struggled awake.

Jacqui was standing by her bed, her hair a glossy, perfect brown, wearing a stylish black jacket. “You’re here?” Excited, Cassie sat up, ready to give her sister a hug.

But Jacqui turned away.

“Hurry,” she whispered. “They’re coming for us.”

“Who’s coming?” Cassie asked.

She thought immediately of Vadim. He had grabbed her sleeve, torn her jacket. He’d had plans for her. She’d managed to escape, but now he had found her again. She should have known he would.

“I don’t know how we can get away,” she said anxiously. “There’s only the one door.”

“There’s a fire escape. Here, let me show you.”

Jacqui led her down the long, dark corridor. She was wearing trendy ripped jeans and high-heeled red sandals. Cassie padded behind in her worn trainers, hoping that Jacqui was right and that there would be an escape route here.

“This way,” Jacqui said.

She opened a steel door and Cassie recoiled as she saw the rickety fire escape. The steel stairs were rusting and broken. Worse still, the stairway only went halfway down the building. Beyond that there was nothing but an endless, dizzying drop to the street far below.

“We can’t go out that way.”

“We can. We must.”

Jacqui’s laughter was shrill, and staring at her in horror, Cassie saw that her face had changed. This wasn’t her sister at all. It was Elaine, one of her father’s girlfriends, the one that she had hated and feared the most.

“We’re going down,” the evil blonde woman screamed. “Down you go, you first. Show me how. You know I always hated you.”

Feeling the rusty metal tremble as she touched it, Cassie began to scream, too.

“No! Please, no. Help me!”

Shrill laughter was her only response as the fire escape started to give way, breaking under her. And then other hands were shaking her.

“Please, wake up! Wake up!”

She opened her eyes.

The dormitory light was on, and she was staring up at the dark-haired twins. They were looking back at her with expressions of combined worry and annoyance.

“You have been having many nightmares, screaming. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I’m sorry. I have bad dreams occasionally.”

“It is disturbing,” the other twin said. “Is there anything you can do to stop this? It is not fair on us; we are on day shift and have to work twelve hours today.”

Cassie felt racked with guilt. She should have realized that her nightmares would cause major disruption in a shared room.

“What’s the time?”

“It is now four-thirty a.m.”

“I’ll get up,” Cassie decided.

“Are you sure?” The twins glanced at each other.

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m so sorry for waking you.”

She clambered out of bed, feeling dizzy and disoriented from lack of sleep, and quickly pulled on her top in the dark. Then, grabbing her purse, she left the room and closed the door quietly.

The lounge was empty, and Cassie sat down on one of the couches, curling her legs up on the cushion. She had no idea what she should do now, or where she should go.

It would be inconsiderate to risk disrupting her roommates' sleep another night, and she couldn't afford a private room even if one became available.

Perhaps she could if she got a job. She didn't have a working visa, but from what the others had been saying last night, if the work was for less than three months, nobody in Italy minded too much if it was done on a tourist visa.

Working would make her stay here affordable and buy her some time. Even if Tim didn't remember where Jacqui was staying, her sister might try to contact her again.

Cassie headed to the notice board to see if there were any jobs available.

She hoped to find a waitressing job, as she was experienced in waiting tables and would feel confident applying. However, to her dismay, she found these jobs all stipulated that applicants must be fluent in Italian. Other languages were an advantage but not essential.

With a frustrated sigh, she scrapped the idea of waitressing.

What about dishwashing? Cleaning?

Scanning the board, she couldn't find any such jobs. There were a few store assistant jobs, but again, Italian was required. Then there was a bicycle courier job that sounded interesting and was well paying, but you needed to have your own bicycle and helmet, and she didn't.

Those were the only opportunities available, and she didn't qualify for any of them.

Discouraged, Cassie returned to the couch and plugged her phone into the charger. Perhaps she could look online and see if there was any other work available. It was still very early, and after her interrupted night she felt heavy-eyed with tiredness. On the couch, she slipped into a light sleep, and was woken a couple of hours later by the twins leaving.

People were up and about, and she could smell coffee brewing. Cassie unplugged her phone and scrambled off the couch, not wanting anyone else to know that she'd slept there instead of in her designated bed.

Following the aroma of coffee, she found Gretchen, wrapped in a dressing gown, pinning two more job notices to the board.

"These have just come in," she said with a smile. "And coffee is for sale in the kitchenette down the passage."

Cassie looked at the two new job cards. One was another advertisement for a waitress, which again was no use to her. As she looked at the other, she felt a chill of nervousness.

"Au Pair Required. A divorced mother of two requires help for 3 months, starting asap, to care for two girls, aged 8 and 9. English speaker preferred. Luxury accommodation provided. Please call Ottavia Rossi."

Cassie closed her eyes and felt her spine prickle with gooseflesh.

She didn't think that she could handle another au pairing job. Not when the first two had gone so horribly wrong.

Her first assignment, in France, had been working for a wealthy landowner. It was only after arriving at the chateau that she realized how dysfunctional he and his fiancée were in parenting the three traumatized children. Each of them had rebelled against his brutal authority in their own way, and Cassie had borne the brunt of their behavior.

The job had become a nightmare, and when his fiancée had died under suspicious circumstances, Cassie had narrowly escaped being arrested as a murder suspect.

The landowner—Pierre Dubois—had ended up being charged for the crime, and his trial was ongoing. Whenever she saw reports in the news, Cassie scanned them anxiously. With the legal teams

putting up a fierce fight, the most recent article had stated that the verdict would only be given in February.

She'd fled to England, desperate to lie low in case his legal team decided to subpoena her to testify—or, worse, managed to manufacture enough evidence to prove she was the guilty one.

In England, she had run straight into the arms of a charming and attractive man who'd presented himself as a divorced father, urgently needing help with his kids. Cassie had fallen hard for Ryan Ellis and believed every word he'd told her. Then her idyllic world had crumbled around her as lie after lie was exposed, and the situation had unraveled into horror.

Cassie still couldn't think of that experience without feeling panic boil up inside her. Turning away, she almost bumped into Gretchen, who was busy updating the notice board and removing some of the older jobs.

"Sorry," Cassie said.

"Have you seen anything to suit you?" Gretchen asked.

"I'm not sure. The au pairing job sounds interesting," Cassie said, just to be polite.

"That's on the outskirts of Milan. It's a wealthy area. And live-in, I see, so your accommodations would be included."

"Thank you," Cassie said. She photographed the ad, even though she knew that she was going through the motions, without any intention of taking the job.

She glanced at the books for sale. They were an eclectic mix of fiction and nonfiction, and there were two on the shelf which she saw would be helpful to her. One was an Italian phrase book, and the other was a beginner's guide to the language. The books were tattered and well-used, but they were also cheap. Glad that she could make a start at mastering Italian, Cassie headed to the office to pay for them.

After she'd bought the books and a mug of coffee, she set off to find her car. Although the city looked very different in daylight, she managed to find the way back to her car with only a couple of wrong turns along the route.

Along the way she couldn't stop thinking about the au pairing job.

Beggars couldn't be choosers, and she desperately needed to stay in the city for a while. After all, Tim the barman might remember the name of the town where Jacqui worked, at any time.

A live-in job meant she wouldn't disturb her fellow travelers, and she wouldn't risk having another frightening experience in the city, similar to what she'd had the previous night with Vadim.

Plus, she'd be working for a woman. A divorced woman. Cassie could make sure to confirm this was true before she made the final decision. She didn't want to work for a man again. It didn't sound like there was a man in the house at all, only a woman and her two girls.

She could ask. There was no harm in finding out more, was there?

Even so, remembering her previous experiences, Cassie felt sick as she dialed.

The call connected, and then it rang and rang, with Cassie's nervousness growing as the seconds ticked by.

Finally, it was answered.

"*Buongiorno*," a woman said, sounding breathless.

Wishing she'd had the chance to study her phrase book, Cassie replied nervously.

"Good morning."

"This is Signora Rossi's phone, and it's Abigail speaking. How can I help?" the woman continued in English. In fact, Cassie thought she sounded English.

She tried to swallow down her nerves and speak confidently.

"I'm phoning about the job. Is Ottavia Rossi there?"

"The job? Please hold on. Ms. Rossi is in a meeting."

Cassie heard the woman conferring with somebody else. A moment later, she was back.

"I am so sorry but that job has been taken."

“Oh.” Cassie felt surprised and deflated. She was unsure what to say next but the woman made the decision for her.

“Goodbye,” she said, and cut off the call.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cassie couldn't understand why the au pair job was no longer available if it had been advertised so recently. She felt disappointed that this opportunity had come and gone before she'd even been able to attend an interview.

Now she had no idea what she should do. She was tempted to get in her car and drive in a random direction for an hour or two, in the hope that she would end up closer to her sister, or even, miraculously, in the same town.

Cassie knew in this densely populated country, which was studded with towns and villages of all sizes, that was not just unlikely, but impossible.

She opened her trunk, rummaged in her suitcase, and took out the tablets she'd missed last night, plus her morning dose.

Then, seated in the car, she drank them down and called her friend Jess.

Cassie had spent a week's holiday with Jess over Christmas and New Year. Jess's employer had given her time off, with money to travel, and Jess had invited Cassie to come along to Edinburgh.

Jess had paid for the accommodations, and Cassie had done all the driving. They had rented an apartment on the outskirts of the city, and spent the days sightseeing and the nights partying. During that time, they'd had the chance to chat, so Jess knew exactly what Cassie had gone through, and the soul-shattering truth about her last two assignments.

"Hey, stranger!" Jess answered almost immediately. "Have you found your sister yet?"

"Not yet. I found someone who spoke to her recently. He said she was staying in a town an hour or two away from Milan, but he couldn't remember the town's name."

"Oh, no." Jess sounded horrified. "That's like—so close but so far. What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to try and stay here for a few weeks because he said he'll message me if he remembers. I phoned about an au pair job, but it had already been taken. Do you know of anyone in Milan, or in Italy, who might need a helper?"

Cassie had serious respect for Jess's networking capabilities. The tall, friendly blonde seemed to have a natural talent for picking up strategically placed connections. That was how Cassie had gotten her last job, even though it hadn't turned out well; and it was also how they'd been able to secure their holiday apartment at an affordable rate.

"In Milan?" Jess sounded thoughtful.

"Or anywhere nearby," Cassie reminded her, hoping to widen the net.

Jess sighed.

"Not offhand. Milan's in the north of Italy, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"So even something in Switzerland, or southern Germany, would actually be doable too, wouldn't it? I guess you don't want to go back to France right now."

Or ever, Cassie thought.

"I'd rather steer clear of France."

"Let me ask. Everyone's jetting off skiing at the moment and my employers know some people who own ski chalets. You could work as a chalet maid. The money's not great, but you get to ski for free."

"Please ask them," Cassie said.

"Meanwhile, pester that guy who spoke to your sister," Jess advised. "Don't be shy. Tell him to sit with a map in front of him and look at all the towns until the right name jogs his memory."

She laughed, and Cassie found herself laughing along with her.

"I've got to run," Jess said. "Dental appointment. For the children, not me. Chat later, Cassie, good luck!"

As Cassie disconnected, her phone rang again. She found herself speaking to Abigail, the woman who had answered when she called about the au pairing job.

"Hello, I am speaking on behalf of Ms. Rossi. You called about a job earlier, is that correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Which job was it, please? Was it the junior fashion designer, or was it the au pair position?"

"It was the au pair position."

"Please hold for a moment."

The woman sounded anxious and Cassie could hear a whispered conversation in the background.

A few moments later, she spoke again.

"I am so sorry. Please accept my apologies. I did not know about the au pair position. Ms. Rossi has confirmed that this job is available, and it is the designer one that was filled. She has asked me to find out if you are still interested."

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"Ms. Rossi will be available for interviews this afternoon at her home, from two-thirty p.m. onwards. The first successful candidate will be hired, and will be required to start immediately. Can I message you the address?"

"Please," Cassie said, feeling worried all over again. It sounded as if she'd have to make an instant decision about whether the job was right for her or not. She wondered what the children would be like, and that thought made her feel nauseous with nerves.

She couldn't take the job without meeting the children, she decided. They were the ones she would be spending every day with. Their mother sounded like a wealthy woman and from Cassie's limited experience, this meant the children might be spoiled or neglected.

When her phone buzzed again and the directions came through, she decided to drive there immediately.

After all, if she wasn't first in the interview queue, there wouldn't be a decision to be made at all.

*

Cassie reached the neighborhood just before noon. The streets were quiet and immaculately maintained, with large houses set far back from the road among well-treed gardens. Cassie guessed that in summer, when the trees were clothed in greenery, the houses would be invisible from the road.

She was surprised at the amount of security that she saw present. Every house was fenced or walled, with tall automatic gates. Cassie wasn't sure whether the wealthy valued their security and privacy, or whether there was a crime problem in this affluent area. She suspected it was probably the former.

Driving through the streets in her small, elderly runabout, Cassie noticed a few of the locals in their brightly colored sports cars and dark SUVs peering at her suspiciously. She and her car looked out of place in this area, and people were noticing.

A few blocks further down, she found a coffee shop. She was too nervous to be hungry, but forced herself to eat a cornetto and drink a bottle of water.

Remembering that this woman obviously worked in the fashion world, and that the neighborhood was very affluent, Cassie was eager to give a good impression. She detoured to the restrooms, where she smoothed her hair down and checked that there were no crumbs on her top after eating the flaky, mascarpone-filled pastry.

Then she headed for the house and pulled up outside the ornate wrought-iron gate at exactly two minutes to two.

She was shaking with nerves, and wishing she was more confident about her own ability to decide if the job was right for her. She would have to make a snap judgment about it. There would be a lot of variables to consider and what if she missed the important ones?

It felt like a huge leap of faith to even think about going back into au pairing after the experiences she'd had. If she hadn't been so determined to stay in the area and find out what had happened to Jacqui, she would never have considered taking this job.

Forcing herself to breathe deeply and stay calm, Cassie leaned out the window and pressed the gate buzzer.

After a pause, the gate swung open and she headed up the paved driveway which wound its way through the gardens.

She parked under an Italian olive tree, next to a triple garage, encouraged to see that there were no other cars parked nearby. Hopefully that meant she was the first applicant to arrive.

Cassie walked up the pathway to the enormous wooden front door. She rang the doorbell and heard it chime far away in the house.

She'd expected that the door would be answered by a parlor maid or assistant, but a few moments later she heard the click of high heels, and the front door was opened by a woman who looked to be about forty years old, with an unmistakable air of authority.

She was at least half a head taller than Cassie, but much of her height was thanks to an exquisite pair of peacock blue leather boots with tall, curved heels. Her dark hair was artfully styled in waves over her shoulders. A heavy gold chain gleamed around her neck, and gold bracelets jangled on her arms as she opened the door wide.

"*Buongiorno*," she said. Her voice, too, had an authoritative ring to it. "You must be here for the au pair interview?"

"Good afternoon. Yes, I am. My name's Cassie Vale. I'm early, I know. The lady I spoke to said two-thirty but I was worried about being late."

Aware she was babbling nervously, Cassie closed her mouth in a hurry.

But the woman seemed pleased about her timekeeping. Her perfectly lipsticked mouth curved in a smile.

"Punctuality is a politeness. I insist on it, for myself and everyone who works with me. So I thank you for the courtesy. I am Ottavia Rossi. Please come inside."

Overwhelmed that she'd already made a positive impression, especially since she found the woman's presence intimidating, Cassie followed her in.

Walking into the spacious atrium, Cassie noticed a number of colorful art and décor items on display. The bright paintings, vases, and vibrant rugs stood out and made the home look like a modern, yet welcoming, art gallery.

Ahead of her was a high staircase of white marble, leading up to the top floors.

Cassie's attention was drawn to a waist-high model of a bright red stiletto-heeled shoe which was set on a plinth to the right of the staircase. The shoe's design was daringly exquisite.

Ms. Rossi smiled as she saw the direction of Cassie's gaze.

"That is our 'Nina' model which propelled Rossi Shoes to international fame in the seventies. The design was decades ahead of its time, and as for the color, people were shocked by it—but not too scandalized to buy."

"It's beautiful," Cassie said.

She guessed Ottavia Rossi must be the owner of this international company which, if it had been operational in the seventies, was most probably a long-established family business.

Ms. Rossi led her around the staircase and down a corridor. Craning her neck, Cassie glimpsed archways leading into a large modern lounge, and a gleaming kitchen where a cook was working.

Further down the corridor was a closed door. She opened it and ushered Cassie inside.

This elegant space was Ms. Rossi's study. She sat at the curved white table and waved Cassie to a seat on the other side.

Cassie suddenly realized that she had arrived empty-handed. She hadn't prepared a resume, or even printed out her personal details and made a copy of her passport and driver's license. This woman was a businessperson and would surely expect it. Cassie felt horrified that she had forgotten to do this.

"I'm so sorry," she began. "I only recently arrived in Italy and I haven't updated my resume yet. This job opportunity was so unexpected that I rushed here wanting to know more."

To her relief, Ms. Rossi nodded.

"I understand. I traveled extensively myself in my early twenties—you look to be that age now, if I am correct?"

Cassie nodded. "Yes. I've got my actual passport on me if you'd like to take a look."

"Thank you."

Ms. Rossi took the document and paged briefly through it before handing it back to Cassie.

"Now, you may give me a brief outline of the work you have done," she said.

On hearing this, Cassie felt sick, because she realized that she could not even give references for any of the work she claimed to have done since being in Europe. Her first employer was involved in a murder trial and would have nothing good to say about her—in fact, Cassie was sure that he would immediately try to pin the blame on her, and insist he had been wrongfully accused.

Her second employer was dead, murdered while Cassie was in his employment. Nobody in that family could possibly give her a reference. This wasn't just a disaster, it was a catastrophe.

CHAPTER SIX

Cassie sat in silence, with her mind racing. She knew Ms. Rossi was waiting for her to speak, and that any hesitation would raise questions, but she had no idea what to say.

The word “murder” would be enough to put any potential employer off. Regardless of the circumstances, they would decide it wasn’t worth the risk.

Cassie couldn’t blame them. She was beginning to wonder if she herself was the bringer of bad luck—or else whether her own decisions had caused these horrific incidents to occur.

Her only option was to gloss over her recent experience, and focus on the work she’d done back in the States.

She cleared her throat and began speaking.

“I left home when I was sixteen and I put myself through college, working mostly as a waitress,” she said.

She didn’t elaborate on the reasons why she had left, but hoped that being independent and self-sufficient would win her favor in Ms. Rossi’s eyes. To her relief, the business owner nodded approvingly.

“I did some tutoring during that time, helped younger children with their studies, and I also worked at a daycare center for a short while, to cover for someone’s maternity leave. I was fully cleared and got all the necessary approvals to work, which I can show you on my phone. I also have a reference from the restaurant where I worked for two years, saying that I am a reliable and hard worker who always went out of her way to make customers happy.”

Fortunately, those documents had formed a part of her first au pair application and she had the copies saved online. Even though the restaurant work wasn’t relevant, it was her only real reference.

“Excellent,” Ms. Rossi said.

“Since being in Europe, I’ve traveled quite a bit. I started out au pairing for a family in Paris. The children then moved to the South of France, so I spent some time in the UK over December.”

Cassie’s face felt hot. Her story was riddled with holes. If Ms. Rossi questioned her version she would quickly find that Cassie hadn’t told her the full truth. But, to her surprise, the businesswoman seemed satisfied, and spoke in turn.

“I will give you some background on my situation. I was divorced a few months ago, and while I was able to work from home for a while, the business has become too busy now. We have expanded into a number of new markets and acquired more brands. We planned for this growth, of course, but it’s happened faster than we expected. My mother is going to move here to take care of the children, but she needs time to prepare and pack up. So I will need you for three months. It will be live-in, of course. The children are well behaved, and we have a cook and a driver, so it will not be too onerous a responsibility.”

Cassie swallowed.

“What are the children like? Could you tell me more about them, please?”

“Two girls, aged eight and nine. Nina is the older, and Venetia the younger. They are well behaved.”

Since Ms. Rossi did not seem to have much more to say about the children, Cassie gathered her courage to ask.

“Could I meet them, perhaps? See how we get along, before I decide?”

She had no idea whether Ms. Rossi might think this question rude, after she had vouched for her children’s behavior.

The businesswoman nodded.

“Of course. They will be back from school by now. Follow me.”

She stood up and swept out of the room with Cassie hurrying behind.

Cassie felt awestruck by this woman's air of authority. If this was what it took to run a successful international company, she couldn't imagine herself ever doing the same. Not in a million years. She was not the caliber of person and did not have the same commanding presence.

Luckily, she felt that Ms. Rossi seemed to like her. At any rate, she didn't seem to have an inherent dislike for her, which was what she'd sensed with her French employers.

They headed to the marble staircase and upstairs. The house was built in the shape of a horseshoe, with two main wings. The children's rooms were upstairs and to the right of the horseshoe.

The click of Ottavia Rossi's heels on the tiled floor was loud enough to signal the children that she was arriving, and Cassie was impressed to see the two dark-haired girls come out of their bedrooms and stand side by side, waiting, as they approached.

They were wearing smart, long-sleeved dresses that looked identical except for the color—one was yellow, the other blue. Their brightly colored moccasins made Cassie wonder whether Rossi Shoes had a children's range and if so, whether this was part of it.

"Children, I would like you to meet Cassie," Ms. Rossi said. "She is here for an interview, and might be looking after you for the next few weeks. Perhaps you would like to greet her, and answer her questions?"

"Good afternoon, pleased to meet you," the children said in chorus, and Cassie was surprised that their English was excellent.

The taller girl stepped forward.

"I am Nina."

She held out a hand and Cassie took it, surprised by the formal greeting.

"I am Venetia," the younger girl said.

Cassie shook her small, warm hand. Although this setup felt rather awkward, and standing formally in the corridor was not the ideal place to chat and relax, she knew she needed to prove that she was a friendly and likeable person.

She smiled at the children.

"You both have beautiful names."

"Thank you," Nina said.

"Did you go to school today?"

Venetia seemed eager to reply.

"Yes. We do our homework in the afternoon. That is what we are busy doing now."

"Wow, you are very good girls. What is your favorite subject at school?"

The two girls exchanged a glance.

"English," Nina volunteered.

Venetia paused.

"I like math."

Cassie was amazed. Clearly, this was what it took to be successful—discipline and a love for studying from a young age. She could see already that these girls were following in their mother's footsteps and could envision the golden path of their future.

She guessed these girls would have opportunities that she herself had never been able to dream of. For a moment, Cassie wondered what it must be like to be born with a love for studying, and to be the heirs to a fashion empire.

"What about your activities? What do you like to do outside of school?"

Again the girls exchanged a glance.

"I enjoy my singing lessons," Nina said.

"I like to ride horses. We both go for lessons on Sunday," Venetia added.

"That sounds amazing," Cassie said, and her impression of their lives broadened. Not only were these young girls driven, motivated, and academically inclined, but they were able to pursue activities Cassie had only ever dreamed of being able to afford.

She realized that this family, in their modern yet gracious house, was similar to the ones she read about in the glossy magazines at the hairdresser. They were the elite of society, and it was exciting, and rather overwhelming, to be associated with them.

The only flaw in their perfect life must have been the divorce, and Cassie wondered what Ms. Rossi's husband had been like. Presumably, seeing the Rossi empire was headed up by her side of the family, she'd either gone back to her maiden name after the divorce or had never used his name. She wondered if the children had been traumatized by the divorce, and if they spent any time with their father. These were all questions that she needed to ask Ms. Rossi, or even the children themselves, but not now.

With a shock, Cassie realized that she was thinking ahead, as if in her mind she'd already decided to take the job.

The children were looking up at her expectantly. They hadn't moved from their positions. It was as if they were awaiting her permission to leave, and she was impressed all over again by their self-control.

"Thank you so much for talking to me," she said. "It's been a pleasure to meet you. Do you need to carry on with your homework now?"

"Go, children," Ms. Rossi said, and they disappeared into their bedrooms.

As they walked back down the passage, Cassie couldn't help but praise them.

"They're amazing. I've never known young children who are so obedient and well disciplined. And with such a love for studying as well, you must be very proud of them."

Ms. Rossi sounded pleased as she replied.

"They are a work in progress, as I believe every child is," she said. "They have a business to inherit one day so I am striving to instill the correct values in them."

They descended the tall staircase and returned to the study.

"So, now that you have met the family, we will talk about the position," she said. "You are the first to arrive—after Abigail's mess-up with the jobs, there were not many other candidates we were able to contact. You seem competent, and the children appear to interact well with you. If you would like the assignment I can offer it to you. You will be required to spend time with them after school, and on Sundays. School hours are from eight until one-thirty unless they have afternoon activities."

Cassie took a deep breath. She felt complimented that Ms. Rossi thought she was a high enough caliber of person to look after her two exceptional daughters. She hadn't even asked for phone numbers to check any of Cassie's references.

"I believe every opportunity opens a door," Ms. Rossi continued. "If you are capable in this role, there may be future possibilities ahead. We regularly have intern positions opening up, so if you would like to stay in Italy longer after this assignment ends, and work in the fashion world, it can most probably be arranged."

Cassie's heart leaped. This was more than just a temporary assignment. It might even be a future career direction, and a way to improve her chances of finding and reconnecting with Jacqui.

She imagined herself and her sister, both with successful jobs in the fashion industry, renting a gorgeous apartment in a scenic and upmarket neighborhood. In the evenings, they could chat about their day's work and take turns cooking, before heading into town to dance and party.

The more Cassie thought about it, the more thrilled she was that this assignment had come her way. Given that it was so much more than a simple au pair job, there was no way she could turn it down. She needed to put her heart and soul into it, and make sure she did it perfectly, because it represented a life-changing opportunity.

"An internship sounds exciting and it's something I would love to do in the future. I'll be delighted to accept the au pair role now. Thank you for offering it to me," she said.

Ms. Rossi gave a small smile.

"In that case, you are hired. Do you have your belongings with you?"

“They’re in my car.”

“One of the maids will help you take everything to your room. Tonight, the children and I are visiting my mother, so we will dine at her home. It’s our cook’s night off, but we have a food delivery service available. There are menus in the kitchen drawer. Order whatever you like and call from our landline. They deliver within half an hour, and will add it to our account.”

“Thank you,” Cassie said.

“One important rule I must share with you.”

She leaned forward and Cassie found herself doing the same.

“Please don’t let anybody into the house unless you have confirmed who they are. We live in a wealthy neighborhood but unfortunately, crime is everywhere. We have been targeted by robbers and burglars before. With two young children, kidnapping and trafficking is always a threat, so I need you to be aware. Unless you are expecting a delivery, do not let strangers inside. Do you understand?”

Cassie nodded, feeling nervous at the thought of the children being targeted. Thanks to her recent experience in central Milan, she knew that this sort of crime was a real risk.

“I understand. I’ll be very aware,” she said.

“Good. I will see you tomorrow,” Ms. Rossi confirmed.

She picked up an intercom handset, pressed a button, and spoke briefly and rapidly in Italian before replacing it.

“The maid is on her way,” she told Cassie.

At that moment, Ms. Rossi’s cell phone rang.

“*Ciao*,” she answered, sounding impatient.

Sensing that it would be rude to listen in to the conversation, Cassie got up hurriedly and headed to the door to wait for the maid outside.

As she left the room, she heard Ms. Rossi say, sternly, “Abigail?”

Cassie remembered this was the woman who had mistakenly told her that the au pair job was filled.

There was a pause and then Cassie heard her speak again, her voice loud and filled with anger.

“You messed up, Abigail. That is not acceptable, and nor is your apology. You will not come to work tomorrow. You are fired!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cassie edged away from the office door, hoping that Ms. Rossi hadn't realized she'd overheard. She felt deeply shocked. The young employee had been fired over a misunderstanding about a job ad?

That couldn't be the whole story. There must have been other things she'd done wrong. At any rate, Cassie hoped so. She realized with a chill that perhaps this was what it took to build an empire and that was why so few people succeeded in doing it. Mistakes and excuses were not acceptable. That meant that she would have to be on her toes at all times, and try her hardest not to mess up.

Imagine if she did something wrong and Ms. Rossi spat those vicious words at her, telling her to pack her bags and get out. She'd sounded furious, like a completely different person. Cassie couldn't help feeling sorry for the luckless Abigail, but reminded herself that it was not her place to judge the situation, and she knew nothing about the background between them.

Cassie was glad to see the maid arriving, and to be able to move away from the angry one-sided conversation that she could still hear from inside the office. The uniformed woman was Italian speaking but they were able to communicate via hand gestures.

They walked out to the parking lot, and the woman then showed Cassie where she should park, in a covered bay behind the house. She gave her a front door key with a remote control that operated the gate, and then helped her carry her bags upstairs.

Cassie automatically turned right, heading toward the children's rooms, but the maid called her back.

"No!" she said, and Cassie was glad that this word was the same in Italian.

The maid pointed down the corridor, to the opposite end of the horseshoe.

Cassie changed direction, confused. She'd assumed that her room would be near the children's so that she could attend to them if they needed her at night. At the opposite end of this enormous house, she wouldn't be able to hear them if they cried. Ms. Rossi's room, in the center of the horseshoe, was actually closer.

Still, she had already seen how independent the girls were for their age, and perhaps that meant they didn't need any help at night—or if they did, that they were confident enough to make their way through the house and call her.

Her large bedroom with an en suite bathroom was located all the way at the other end of the horseshoe. Looking out the window, Cassie saw that the rooms overlooked a garden and courtyard, with an ornamental fountain in its center.

Looking across, she could see the children's bedroom windows and in fact, in the light of the late-afternoon sun, she could make out the dark head of one of the children who was seated at a desk and busy with her homework. Since the two girls had identical ponytails and were similar in height, she couldn't work out which one it was, because the back of the chair blocked her view of the dress, which would have clued her in. Even so, it was good to know that she could view them from her faraway room.

Cassie wanted to walk all the way around that horseshoe and get to know the children better, so she could be sure of getting off on the right foot with them.

However, they were doing their homework and were then heading out with their mother, so she would have to wait.

Instead, Cassie unpacked and made sure her room and cupboards were neat.

Ms. Rossi hadn't asked her if she took any medications, so Cassie hadn't had to tell her about all the anxiety meds that kept her on an even keel.

She stashed the bottles out of sight, at the back of her bedside drawer.

Cassie hadn't expected that her first night in the house would be spent alone, making her way down to the empty kitchen and looking in the drawers until she found the menus.

The fridge was full of food, but Cassie had no idea if it was reserved for future meals, and there was nobody she could ask. All the staff, including the maid who had helped her, seemed to have left for the day. She felt self-conscious and awkward at the thought of ordering food in for herself on the family's tab, on her very first night, but she decided it would be best to follow Ms. Rossi's orders.

There was a phone in the kitchen, so she called one of the local restaurants and ordered a takeout lasagna and a Diet Coke. Half an hour later, it arrived. Not wanting to go into the formal dining room, Cassie did some more exploring. The downstairs area had many smaller rooms, and one of them, which she supposed was a children's dining room, had a small table with four chairs.

She sat there and ate her food while studying her Italian phrase book. Then, exhausted after everything that had happened that day, she went to bed.

Just before she fell asleep, her phone buzzed.

It was the friendly barman from the guesthouse.

Hey, Cassie! I think I remembered where Jax was working. The town's name is Bellagio. Fingers crossed this helps!"

Hope flooded through Cassie as she read the words. This was the town—the actual town—where her sister had stayed. Had she been working there? Cassie hoped that she'd been staying at a lodge or hostel as this would mean she could be traced. She would begin her investigation as soon as she had time, and Cassie felt confident that it would bring results.

What was the town like? The name sounded charming. Why had Jacqui chosen to travel there?

There were so many unanswered questions bubbling in her mind that Cassie took much longer than she'd expected to fall asleep.

When she finally did, she dreamed that she was in the town. It was quaint and scenic, with winding terraces and buildings in honeyed stone. Walking down the street, she asked a passerby, "Where can I find my sister?"

"She's there." He pointed up the hill.

As she walked, Cassie began to wonder what was up there. It seemed a long way from anywhere. What was Jacqui doing there? Why hadn't she come down to find Cassie, since she knew her sister was in town?

Finally, breathlessly, she reached the top of the hill, but the tower had gone, and all she could see was a huge, dark lake. Its murky waters lapped at the dark, crumbling stone edges that surrounded it.

"Here I am."

"Where?"

The voice seemed to come from far away.

"You're too late," Jacqui whispered, her voice husky and filled with sadness. "Dad got to me first."

Horried, Cassie leaned over and looked down.

There was Jacqui, lying at the bottom of the dark, cold water.

Her hair swirled around her and her limbs were white and lifeless, draped like seaweed over the sharp rocks, while her sightless eyes stared up.

"No!" Cassie screamed.

She realized this wasn't Jacqui at all, and she wasn't in Italy. She was back in France, staring over the stone parapet at the sprawled body far below. This was no dream, it was a memory. Dizziness overcame her and she clutched at the stone, terrified that she was going to fall, too, because she felt so weak and helpless.

"That's what dads are for. That's what they do."

The taunting voice spoke from behind her and she staggered round.

There he was, the man who had lied to her and misled her and destroyed her confidence. But it wasn't her father she was looking at. It was Ryan Ellis, her employer in England, his face twisted with contempt.

“That’s what dads do,” he whispered. “They hurt. They destroy. You weren’t good enough, and now it’s your turn. That’s what they do.”

His outstretched hand grabbed her shirt and he shoved with all his might.

Cassie screamed in terror as she felt herself lose her grip, the stone slipping from her grasp.

She was falling, falling.

And then she landed, sitting up, gasping, cold sweat chilling her even though the spacious bedroom was warm.

The layout of the room was unfamiliar, and she spent some time fumbling around before locating her bedside table and then, finally, the light switch.

She turned it on and sat up, desperate to confirm that she’d escaped her nightmare.

She was in the large double bed with its ornate metal headboard. On the opposite side of the room was the big bay window with its golden brown curtains closed.

To her right was the bedroom door, and to the left was the door of her bathroom. The desk, the chair, the bar fridge, the wardrobe, everything was as she remembered it.

Cassie let out a deep breath, reassured that she wasn’t still trapped in her dream.

Although it was still dark, it was already a quarter past seven in the morning. With a start, she remembered that she hadn’t received any instruction about what the children should be doing. Or had she, but it had slipped her mind? Had Ms. Rossi said something about school?

Cassie shook her head. She couldn’t recall anything and didn’t think she had mentioned the school times.

She climbed out of bed and quickly dressed. In the bathroom, she tamed her auburn waves into a tidy look that she hoped would be acceptable in this fashion-focused home.

As she stared into the mirror, she heard a noise outside.

Cassie froze, listening.

She picked up the faint sound of footsteps, scrunching over gravel. The bathroom window’s frosted glass faced outward, toward the gate.

Was this one of the kitchen staff?

She pushed the window open and peered out.

In the deep gray of the early morning, Cassie saw a dark-clad figure sidling around the house. As she stared, astonished, she made out the shape of a man wearing a black beanie and carrying a small dark backpack. She caught only a momentary glimpse, but saw he was heading toward the back door.

Her heart accelerated as she thought of intruders, and the automatic gate, and the security cameras.

She remembered Ms. Rossi’s words and the clear warning she had given. This was a wealthy family. No doubt they might be a target for robbery, or even kidnapping.

She had to go and investigate. If she thought he looked dangerous, she could raise the alarm, scream, and wake the household.

As she hurried downstairs, she decided on her plan of action.

The man had headed round the back of the house, so she would go out the front door. There was enough light now to be able to see, and the cold night had left frost on the grass. She would be able to track his footprints.

Cassie walked outside, locking the front door behind her. The morning was still and freezing cold, but she was so nervous she barely noticed the temperature.

There were the footprints, faint but clear in the frost. They led around the house, over the neatly trimmed grass, and onto the courtyard bricks.

Following them, she saw they led to the back door, which was standing wide open.

Cassie crept up the steps, noticing the distinctive shoe prints on each stone stair.

She paused in the doorway, waiting, straining to hear any suspicious noises over the hammering of her own heart.

She could hear nothing from inside, although the lights were on. A faint smell of coffee wafted toward her. Perhaps this man had been a driver, dropping off a delivery, and the cook had let him in. But then, where was he, and why couldn't she hear any voices?

Cassie tiptoed into the kitchen but found nobody there.

She decided to go and check on the children and make sure that they were all right. Then, once she'd confirmed they were safe, she would wake Ms. Rossi and explain what she'd seen. It might be a false alarm, but better safe than sorry, especially seeing the man seemed to have vanished into thin air.

It had been such a fleeting glimpse that if she hadn't seen the shoe prints, Cassie would have believed she'd imagined the furtive character.

She jogged up the stairs and turned toward the children's bedrooms.

Before she reached them, she halted again, clapping her hand over her mouth to stifle a scream.

There was the man—a slim, black-clad figure.

He was outside Ms. Rossi's bedroom, and was reaching for the door handle with his left hand.

She couldn't see his right hand, because it was held out in front of him, but from the angle, it was obvious that he was holding something in it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Needing a weapon, Cassie grabbed the first item that her panicked eyes could see—a bronze statuette on a side table near the stairs.

Then she ran toward him. She was going to have the advantage of surprise, since he wouldn't be able to turn in time. She'd bring the statuette down first on his head, and then on his right hand to disarm him.

Cassie leaped forward. He was turning—this was her chance. She raised her makeshift weapon.

Then, as he turned to face her, she skidded to a halt. Her cry of surprise was drowned out by his outraged shout.

The short, slender man was holding a large takeaway mug of coffee in his hand.

"What the hell?" he shouted.

Cassie lowered the statue and stared at him incredulously.

"Were you trying to attack me?" the man blustered. "Are you out of your mind? You nearly made me drop this."

He looked down at the coffee, which had splashed up through the vent in the lid and onto his hand. A few drops had spilled onto the floor. He reached into his pocket for a Kleenex and bent to mop it up.

Cassie guessed he was in his early thirties. He looked immaculately groomed. His brown hair was fade-cut to perfection and he wore a short, well-trimmed beard. She picked up a hint of an Australian accent in his voice.

Straightening up, he glared at her.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Cassie Vale, the au pair. Who are you?"

His eyebrows rose.

"As of when? You weren't here yesterday."

"I was hired yesterday afternoon."

"Signora hired you?"

He emphasized the last word and stared at her for a few seconds, during which Cassie felt herself grow increasingly uncomfortable. She nodded wordlessly.

"I see. Well, my name is Maurice Smithers, and I'm Ms. Rossi's personal assistant."

Cassie gaped at him. He didn't fit her picture of what a personal assistant was like.

"Why did you sneak into the house?"

Maurice sighed.

"The front door lock is difficult to open in cold weather. It makes an unholy noise and I don't like to disturb the household when I arrive early. So I use the back, as it's quieter."

"And the coffee?"

Cassie stared at the mug, still feeling blindsided by the strangeness of his appearance and his purported role.

"It's from an artisanal brewery down the road. It's Signora's favorite. I bring her a mug when we have our morning meetings."

"So early?"

Although her tone was accusing, Cassie was feeling embarrassed. She'd believed she was being heroic, acting in the best interests of Ms. Rossi and her children. Now she was discovering she'd made a serious mistake, and had gotten off on the wrong foot with Maurice. As her personal assistant, he was obviously an influential figure in her life.

Her visions of a future internship were suddenly looking less certain. Cassie couldn't bear to think that her dream might already have been compromised thanks to her own foolhardy actions.

“We have a very busy day today. Ms. Rossi prefers to start early. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to give this to her before it gets cold.”

He tapped respectfully on the door and a moment later, it was opened.

“*Buongiorno*, Signora. How are you this morning?”

Ms. Rossi was dressed and perfectly made up. She had a different pair of boots on today; these were cerise, with big silver buckles.

“*Molto bene, grazie*, Maurice.” She took the coffee from him.

The Italian pleasantries seemed to be a formality before the conversation switched to English, Cassie realized, as Maurice continued.

“It’s chilly outside. Shall I go and turn the heating up in your office?”

Up until now, Cassie hadn’t known that Maurice could smile, but now his face was stretched in an obsequious grin and he was practically fizzing over with the desire to please.

“We won’t be there too long. I am sure the heating will be adequate. Bring my coat, will you?”

“Of course.”

Maurice took the fur-collared coat from the wooden stand near the bedroom door. Following close behind her, he began talking animatedly.

“Wait until you hear what we have in the pipeline for Fashion Week. We had an excellent meeting yesterday with the French team. I’ve recorded the whole thing, of course, but I also have the minutes and a summary prepared.”

Cassie realized that Ms. Rossi hadn’t said a word to her. She must have seen her standing there, but her attention had been completely focused on Maurice. Now the two of them were heading toward the office where Cassie had been interviewed the day before.

She didn’t think Ms. Rossi was deliberately ignoring her—at least, she hoped she wasn’t. It was more as if she was completely distracted by work, with her full attention on the business day ahead.

“I have the sales reports for the past week, and there was a reply from the Indonesian suppliers.”

“I hope it is good news,” Ms. Rossi said.

“I think so. They’re requesting more information but it seems positive.”

Maurice was practically fawning over Ms. Rossi and Cassie had no idea whether he was ignoring her unintentionally or doing it deliberately, perhaps to show how much more important he was in her life than Cassie was.

She followed them to the office, trailing a few steps behind, waiting for the moment when there would be a gap in the conversation, so she could ask about the children’s schedules.

It soon became clear there was going to be no gap. With their heads bent over Maurice’s laptop, neither of them was giving her as much as a glance. Cassie became certain that Maurice was ignoring her on purpose. After all, he knew she was there.

She thought about interrupting them but felt nervous to do so. Their attention was so focused, and Cassie didn’t want to make Ms. Rossi angry, especially since the conversation she’d overheard yesterday proved that the businesswoman had a short fuse.

She’d been on top of the world after being hired, commended and praised by this influential woman. This morning, it was as if she didn’t exist to Ms. Rossi.

Turning away, Cassie felt discouraged and unsure. She tried to push the negative thoughts away, and firmly reminded herself that her role was to look after the children and not to monopolize Ms. Rossi’s attention when she was so busy. Hopefully Nina and Venetia would know what their schedule was.

When Cassie went to the girls’ rooms, she found them empty. Both beds had been immaculately made, and their rooms were tidy. Guessing that they must have gone to have breakfast, Cassie headed to the kitchen and was relieved to find them there.

“Good morning, Nina and Venetia,” she said.

“Good morning,” they replied politely.

Nina was sitting on a chair while, behind her, Venetia wrapped a hair tie around her ponytail. Cassie guessed that Nina had just done the same for her sister because Venetia's hair was already neatly tied.

Both girls were dressed in pink and white school smocks. They had made toast and orange juice, which was set out on the counter.

Cassie was struck by how they seemed to behave as a unit. From what she'd seen so far, they had a harmonious relationship; there was no sign of squabbling or even teasing. She guessed being so close in age meant that they were more like twins than older and younger sisters.

"You two are so well organized," Cassie said admiringly. "You're really clever at looking after yourselves. Can I get you anything to put on the toast? What do you usually have? Jam, cheese, peanut butter?"

Cassie wasn't sure what was in the house, but guessed these staples must be available.

"I like plain toast with butter," Nina said.

Cassie assumed that Venetia would agree with her sister. But the younger girl looked at her with interest, as if considering her suggestions. Then she said, "Jam, please."

"Jam? No problem."

Cassie opened cupboards until she found the one with the spreads. They were on a high shelf—too high for the children to reach.

"There's strawberry jam and fig jam. Which do you want? Or else there's Nutella."

"Strawberry, please," Venetia said politely.

"We are not allowed the Nutella," Nina explained. "It is only for special occasions."

Cassie nodded. "That makes sense, since it's so delicious."

She passed the jam to Venetia and sat down.

"What are you girls doing this morning? You look all ready for school. Must I take you there? What time does it start and do you know where to go?"

Nina finished her mouthful of toast.

"School starts at eight, and today we finish at two-thirty as we have a singing lesson. But we have a driver, Giuseppe, who takes and fetches us."

"Oh."

Cassie couldn't hide her surprise. This setup was far more organized than she had expected. She felt as if her role was redundant and she worried that Ms. Rossi would realize she could do without her, and might not require her for the full three-month assignment. She needed to make herself useful. Hopefully when the children came back from school they would have homework that she could help them with.

Mulling over her strategy, Cassie got up to make herself some coffee.

When she turned around, she saw that the girls had finished their breakfast.

Nina was stacking the plates and glasses into the dishwasher, and Venetia had pulled one of the kitchen stools over to the cupboard. As Cassie watched, she climbed onto it, and reached as high as she could to put the jam back where it had come from.

"Don't worry. I'll do that."

Venetia looked wobbly on the stool and Cassie hurried over, foreseeing that this could end in disaster.

"I will do it."

Venetia clung to the jam jar tightly, refusing to let Cassie take it from her.

"It's no problem, Venetia. I'm taller."

"I need to do this." The younger girl sounded intense. More than that, she seemed desperate to do it herself.

On her tippy toes, with Cassie anxiously hovering behind her ready to grab her if the chair fell over, Venetia replaced the jam, pushing it carefully back into the exact spot where it had been before.

“Well done,” Cassie praised her.

She guessed this fierce independence must be part of the girl’s character and upbringing. It seemed unusual, but then she’d never worked for a high-caliber family like this before.

She stood and watched while Venetia maneuvered the stool back into its precise position. By then, Nina had put the butter back in the fridge and the bread in the bin. The kitchen looked immaculate, as if breakfast had never been eaten there at all.

“Giuseppe will be here soon,” Nina reminded her sister. “We must clean our teeth.”

They left the kitchen and headed upstairs to their rooms, with Cassie watching in amazement. Five minutes later they returned, carrying their school bags and coats, and headed outside.

Cassie followed them out, with thoughts of security still uppermost in her mind, but a white Mercedes was already driving toward the house. A few moments later, it stopped in the circular driveway, and the girls climbed in.

“Goodbye,” Cassie called, waving, but they couldn’t have heard her, because neither child did so much as wave in response.

When Cassie went back inside, she found that Ms. Rossi and Maurice had also left. No other household staff seemed to be on duty at that time.

Cassie was entirely alone.

“This is not what I expected,” she said to herself.

The house was very quiet and being here alone felt unsettling. She’d assumed that she’d have far more to do, and much more involvement with the children. This whole setup felt weird, as if they genuinely didn’t need her at all.

She reassured herself that it was early days, and she should be thankful for some time on her own. Probably this was the calm before the storm, and when the children got back home she’d be run off her feet.

Cassie decided she would use the time to follow up on the lead she had received yesterday. The unexpected free morning she was enjoying now might be her only chance to find out where Jacqui was.

She didn’t have much. The name of a town was not a lot.

But it was all she had and she was determined that it would be enough.

*

Using the household’s Wi-Fi, Cassie spent an hour getting to know the town where Jacqui lived—or at any rate, where she’d told Tim the barman that she’d been living, a few weeks ago.

In her favor was the fact that Bellagio was a small town, not an enormous place. A small town meant fewer hostels and hotels, and there was also a better chance of people knowing each other’s business, and that a beautiful American woman might be remembered.

Another advantage was that it was a tourist destination—a scenic place bordering Lake Como that offered dramatic views, as well as numerous shops and restaurants.

As she researched, she imagined what it must be like to live in that town. Quiet, scenic, bustling with tourists in the peak of summer. She imagined Jacqui staying in one of the small hotels or rental apartments—probably a small place, overlooking a cobbled street, accessible from a steep stone staircase, with a window box filled with colorful flowers.

It took two hours before Cassie had properly familiarized herself with the place, and made a comprehensive list of the lodges and backpacker hostels, the numerous Airbnbs, and the rental agencies that let out apartments. She knew there were probably a few places she’d missed, but she hoped that the odds would be in her favor.

Then it was time to start calling.

Her mouth felt dry. Compiling the list had built up her hopes. Every name and number represented a new chance. Now she knew her hopes would be broken down again, as the list of places where Jacqui might be staying grew smaller and smaller.

Cassie dialed the first number, a guesthouse in the town center.

"Hello," she said. "I am looking for a lady by the name of Jacqui Vale. She's my sister; I lost my phone, and I can't remember where she said she was staying. I'm in Italy now and want to meet up with her."

Although this wasn't the truth, Cassie had decided it was a plausible reason for her phone calls. She didn't want to embark on a long, complicated story as she feared that the guesthouse owners might grow impatient, or even suspicious.

"She might have booked in under Jacqueline. It would have been within the past two months."

"Jacqueline?" There was a short silence and Cassie felt her heart accelerate.

Then her hopes crash-landed as the woman said, "Nobody by that name has stayed here."

Cassie discovered this was a long, frustrating, and time-consuming task. Some of the guesthouses refused to help at all due to privacy concerns. Others were busy so she had to make a time to call them again.

She worked her way down the list of options until she'd almost reached the end. Only three numbers were left, and after that she would have to admit defeat.

She dialed the third-last number, feeling frustrated, as if Jacqui's elusive presence was taunting her.

"*Posso aiutarti?*" the man on the other side of the line asked.

Cassie had learned this phrase meant "Can I help?" but the man didn't sound helpful. He sounded impatient and stressed, as if he'd had a bad day. Cassie guessed he would be one of those who would tell her that he couldn't disclose any details for confidentiality reasons. He'd say it just to get her off the line, because he had guests waiting, or was heading out himself.

"I'm looking for a Jacqui Vale. She's my sister. I planned to meet up with her while I was in Italy, but my phone was stolen yesterday and I can't remember where she was staying."

Cassie had upped the drama level of her story, hoping for more sympathy.

"I'm phoning around to try and trace her."

She heard the man tapping a keyboard.

Then Cassie nearly fell off the chair as he said, "Yes, we did have a Jacqui Vale staying with us. She was here for about two weeks and then she moved out, into a shared apartment, I think, because she was working nearby."

Cassie's heart leaped. This man knew her—had seen her, spoken to her. This was a huge breakthrough in her search.

"I remember now, she had part-time work at the boutique around the corner, Mirabella's. Would you like Mirabella's number?"

"This is amazing, I can't believe I'm going to be able to find her," Cassie gushed. "Thank you so much. Please give me the number."

He looked it up for her, and she wrote it down. She felt giddy with excitement. Her search had resulted in success. She'd found the place her sister had recently worked. There was every chance that she might still be there.

With trembling hands and feeling short of breath, she dialed the number he'd given her.

It was answered by an older Italian woman, and Cassie felt a pang of disappointment that Jacqui herself hadn't picked up, because that was what she'd been imagining would happen.

"What can I do for you?" the woman asked in strongly accented English, as soon as she'd established that Cassie was not Italian.

"Am I speaking to Mirabella?"

"You are."

“Mirabella, my name’s Cassie Vale. I’m trying to contact my sister, Jacqui. I lost touch with her a while ago, but I found out that she has been working for you. Is she still there, by any chance? If not, could you pass on her number to me?”

There was a pause.

Cassie imagined Mirabella beckoning Jacqui over to the phone and she was disappointed when the woman herself spoke again.

She sounded brief, regretful, and businesslike.

“I am sorry, but Jacqui Vale is dead.”

There was a click, as she disconnected the call.

CHAPTER NINE

Cassie dropped the phone. Rather, it fell from her hand and clattered onto the desk. She didn't even notice. She was paralyzed by the brutal shock of the words.

The boutique owner had just told her Jacqui was dead.

She'd said the words with harsh, bald certainty. No room for doubt or misunderstanding, no details or explanation. Just the cold hard facts, followed by a swift disconnection.

Cassie felt sobs rising inside her, so deep and visceral that she was fearful of letting them out, because she knew her grief and guilt and self-blame could not be stopped.

Her sister was no longer alive.

What had happened? Confusion filled her as she remembered that she'd been alive just a few weeks ago. Both Tim, the friendly barman, and the hostel owner in Bellagio had confirmed it.

Had she been sick, suffering from a deadly disease? Or had her death been accidental, a swift, unavoidable tragedy; her body mangled in a road wreck or suffocated in a gas leak or caught up in a mugging or robbery?

Cassie clutched her forehead. Her temples were throbbing with stress. She'd been so close. She'd come within a hair's breadth of finding her sister, only to discover that she was gone forever.

"Oh, Jacqui," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I tried; I really did."

As the shock of the words sunk in, grief followed, and Cassie found herself wailing uncontrollably.

She buried her head in her hands, and for a while, all she could do was endure the pain as she cried. The loss seemed unbearable. The agony of it was as sharp as a knife wound. The woman's words had opened up raw edges of grief inside her that she feared would never be able to heal.

It seemed like a long while later that Cassie raised her head again. She felt weak and drained, and for now, she had no more tears to cry.

She went to the bathroom, splashed water on her face, and rubbed her eyes. Looking at her swollen-eyed reflection, she realized she had moved past the stage of shocked acceptance. Now, her mind was filled with questions.

How recent was the death? Was there a funeral, had Jacqui been buried? Who had taken charge during this tragic event?

Another important question—why had Mirabella slammed the phone down on her after delivering that devastating news? Why hadn't she stayed on the line and talked to Cassie, and explained what had happened? After all, Cassie had introduced herself as Jacqui's sister. Mirabella had known she was speaking to family.

Now that Cassie had started thinking more clearly, she couldn't come up with a valid reason for Mirabella's behavior. It was irrational, confusing, and had been extremely cruel, too.

With a surge of fright, Cassie wondered if she'd misremembered the conversation.

What if the woman had actually explained what had happened to her sister, and in the stress of the moment, Cassie had suffered from a memory blank and had forgotten what had been said?

That made sweat spring out on her palms, because she knew it was possible, it had happened to her before, and it was usually triggered by extreme stress.

The kind of stress that a person might feel when told their sister had died.

There was only one way to find out. She would have to call Mirabella again and ask for more details on her sister's death.

She picked up the phone again, feeling sick with dread, and dialed the number.

To her confusion, Mirabella did not answer the call. It didn't even go through to voicemail, but just rang and rang.

She ended the call, wondering if there had been a faulty connection. While she redialed, she tried her best to gather her thoughts.

She wasn't going mad. She was sure she hadn't misremembered the conversation. And she was convinced that her sister couldn't be dead. Not in such a short timeframe, when she'd been alive and well so recently.

Perhaps Mirabella was sick of people asking for Jacqui, perhaps Jacqui had a persistent ex-boyfriend who was driving everyone nuts, or maybe she'd left the boutique on bad terms, and in a fit of temper Mirabella had decided to say that dreadful thing.

This gave Cassie a glimmer of hope, but the only problem was that she couldn't confirm it. Yet again, the phone rang unanswered, and then the click and scrape of the front door opening told her that the children were home.

After her lonely morning, and the shocking discovery she'd had to deal with, she was glad to see Nina and Venetia. She was grateful for their company, which provided a distraction from her frantic thoughts.

"Did you have a good day at school?" she asked.

They looked as neat and trim as they had when walking out the door. Cassie had vague memories of her own school days, where she'd arrived home in a state of disarray, having lost her hair tie or broken her bag or mislaid her jacket.

"My day was good, thank you," Nina said politely.

Venetia was more talkative.

"I did a math test and came first in my class," she said, and that prompted Nina to speak again.

"We have a spelling competition tomorrow. I'm looking forward to it, because our team won the last one."

"Well done for your math test, Venetia, and Nina, I'm sure your team will do well. I can help you practice later if you like. Now, have you both had lunch?"

"Yes, we have," Nina replied.

"Then why don't you change out of your school uniforms. And then, shall we find a fun activity to do for a while, before it gets dark?"

The girls exchanged glances. It was something Cassie realized they did often, as if they needed to check in with each other before saying yes.

"All right," Nina said.

As the girls filed obediently upstairs to get changed, Cassie felt perplexed by their overly formal behavior. She had expected that by now they would have relaxed into their normal personalities. It was as if the girls were constantly keeping her at arm's length, and she was worried that they might resent her presence, although she didn't know why.

This also made it difficult to interact with them; it was as if they were two small, perfectly obedient robots. The only real conversation they had offered so far was to talk about schoolwork.

There was only one person who could change the situation, and that was her. No doubt these children were not used to being looked after by ordinary people, who weren't highly intelligent specialists or business leaders, but she could only be who she was.

The thought of helping them with homework crossed her mind, but homework was a boring task, and in any case the girls seemed to prefer to do their chores independently and without help.

How about playing a proper game with them, Cassie thought. That was what seemed to be missing in their overly serious, high-powered lives. Brilliant and destined for success they might be, but they were still only eight and nine years old, and needed playtime.

Pleased by having thought of an activity that they would enjoy, where she could contribute her own energy and imagination, she headed upstairs to put on her jacket.

"It looks like it might rain soon, but it's holding off for now, so shall we go and play in the garden?" she asked Nina.

Nina looked up at her politely.

"We don't usually do that," she said.

Cassie's heart sank. These children were pushing her away.

Venetia appeared at Nina's bedroom door.

"I would like to play," she said.

Cassie saw that on the shelf above Nina's bookcase, there were a few toys. They were too high up for the children to reach, but there was a beautiful doll which looked like an expensive collector's item, rather than a toy, a puzzle in an unopened box, and a soft, colorful ball.

"Shall we go and play catch outside?" she suggested, reaching for the ball.

Again, the girls exchanged a glance, as if reaching a decision.

"We are not allowed to play with those toys," Nina said.

In the frustration of the moment, Cassie almost lost her temper and screamed at the girls. She was emotionally shattered after the discovery of Jacqui's death, and she was starting to feel that this stonewalling was a personal attack.

On the point of exploding, she managed to grab a final tattered thread of self-control.

"OK," she said, injecting as much faux cheerfulness into her voice as she could muster. "You're not allowed to play with those toys, but would you like to play a game anyway?"

"Yes." Nina nodded, showing some enthusiasm for the first time, and Venetia jumped up and down, beaming with excitement.

Cassie was relieved she hadn't snapped. Most probably they didn't have anything against her personally, but were just shy, and extremely aware of their house rules.

"Are there other toys anywhere? Or else we could play a game without toys."

"Let's play without toys," Nina said.

Cassie racked her brain for the best idea as they trooped downstairs. What would be most fun, and bring her and the children together?

"How about a game of tag?"

Cassie decided to keep it simple, as the clouds were looming, and she didn't think they would have very long outside before it started to rain.

"What is tag?" Nina asked curiously.

Cassie had no idea of the Italian word, so she decided a quick explanation would work best.

"We can run anywhere in this garden. As far as the wall on that side and the flower bed all the way over there. I'll start by being 'it' and will give you the count of five to get away."

The children nodded. Venetia was looking excited, while Nina appeared puzzled but intrigued.

"OK, let's go." Cassie turned away from them and counted down dramatically.

"One, two, three, four, five!"

She spun round and gave chase.

Nina sprinted off, but Venetia was slower, seeming not to understand the game. As Cassie ran toward her she appeared to realize she was in trouble and backed away.

Cassie just had time to realize that she looked genuinely scared, before she lunged at her.

"Tag! Got you!"

Instead of the screams and laughter she had expected, Venetia flinched back and Cassie saw she was fighting tears.

She stopped, dismayed by the child's unexpected reaction. None of her ideas seemed to be working out.

"Are you upset? Everyone gets to be 'it.' You just have to tag someone else now."

When Venetia clamped her lips together and shook her head, Cassie had another thought.

"Did I hurt you? I'm so sorry. I think I tagged you harder than I meant to. Can I see?"

As she grasped Venetia's hand, she noticed that the young girl's nails were bitten down to the quick. She was wearing a pink, long-sleeved velveteen top, and Cassie pushed the soft fabric up her arm.

"I can see a mark. It looks as if it's bruising already. I'm really sorry."

Staring down at the faint purple-red welt on Venetia's arm, Cassie felt filled with horror that the first thing she'd done was to cause injury.

"It's starting to rain," Nina said, as the misty drizzle turned into a chilly shower.

"Let's go in and play another game," Cassie said, desperate to make amends for her clumsiness. She hadn't tagged Venetia that hard, but again, she had been expecting her to run and not just cringe fearfully away.

She was starting to think that under her well-schooled exterior, Venetia was a sensitive child, both physically and mentally.

"Have you played hide-and-seek before?" she asked the children when they were safely in the hallway, with the front door closed.

They both shook their heads, but they looked eager, rather than doubtful.

"Let me explain. You can hide anywhere in the house. Anywhere at all. I'm going to close my eyes and give you the count of fifty to find a hiding place and then I'm going to shout, 'Coming, ready or not!' When I find someone, it means the game is over and then that person gets to do the finding in the next game. Do you understand?"

Nina nodded. Venetia seemed to have recovered from her earlier trauma, and smiled excitedly.

"All right, I'm closing my eyes." Cassie placed a hand over her eyes to show they were really closed. "And now I'm counting down."

She finished her count and shouted, "Coming, ready or not!"

Pacing through the tiled house, Cassie said aloud, "I wonder where these girls are hiding. My goodness, they have hidden well. I can't find them anywhere. Perhaps they've managed to make themselves invisible. I really thought I would have found Nina by now, after all, she's taller."

She checked under the dining room table and walked into the lounge. Her eye was immediately drawn to the large velvet ottoman at the far end. It was a brilliant hiding place and she was sure she'd find one of the children there.

Cassie paced toward it, drawing out the tension of the moment.

"I think I'm about to give up. These clever girls have hidden so well. But wait, there's one last place I think I might look!"

She grasped the ottoman's lid and opened it.

Inside, curled into the tiniest of balls, was Nina.

She uncurled herself, squealing with excitement, as Venetia jumped out from behind one of the elegant dark blue curtains.

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