Dear Alfonso

AN ITALIAN FEAST OF LOVE AND LAUGHTER

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MARY CONTINI

BIRLINN

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Acknowledgements

To my dearest father-in-law, Carlo Contini. In many conversations and during so many feasts of laughter and love together with family in Scotland and in Italy I learned so much about life. Carlo also wrote a manuscript which has so many details in it that he had never told us before, about his younger years, the hardships during the war and the drama of his immigration. He wanted his story to be told, and would have been thrilled we have had this opportunity to publish his letter to Alfonso, the father-in-law he never knew.

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Eternal love and thanks to the women who led me to my man's heart through his stomach and taught me to cook: my mother, Gertrude Di Ciacca, my paternal grandmother, Marietta Di Ciacca, my mother-in-law, Olivia Contini and the best cook of us all, Annunziata Conturso, Carlo's mother.

Mary Contini, September 2017

Our new friends

Pozzuoli
Carlo's Italian family
Nonna Marianna and Nonno Ernesto (paternal grandparents; lived with Luigi and Annunziata)
Nonna Minicuccia and Nonno Vincenzo (maternal grandparents; lived beside the port at Pozzuoli)
Luigi 1901–75: Carlo's father
Annunziata 1902–89: Carlo's mother
Carlo Contini, 1925–2008
Ninuccia, 1929–2005
Rosetta, 1930–2009
Annetta, 1932–
Antonietta, 1934–
Vincenzo, 1937–1997
Ernesto, 1939–
Peppino, 1946–
Zi' Alf, Carlo's uncle, the shoemaker
Zi' Antonio, Carlo's uncle and hero

Edinburgh
The Crolla family
Alfonso Crolla, 1889–1940
Maria Crolla, 1888–1964
Domenico, 1913–83

Margaret, 1914–99
Vittorio, 1915–2005
Olivia, 1924–2015
Gloria, 1926–
Phyllis, 1927–78

The Di Ciacca family
Cesidio, 1891–1940
Marietta, 1895–1980
Lena, 1917–2004
Johnny, 1919–95
Anna, 1922–2013
Alex, 1923–2013

Where a birth date only is supplied, date of death is not known. A dash but no death date means the person is still alive.

Dear Alfonso,

My name is Carlo Contini. I was born at 7.30 a.m. at the 'Istituto Annunziata' in Napoli on 1st May 1925. I grew up in Pozzuoli, an ancient fishing town just north of the city. My family are carpenters.

When I came to Edinburgh to study English in 1952 I fell in love with and married your wonderful daughter, Olivia. When we first met, she was still very broken-hearted that she had lost you, her darling father, in the dreadful tragedy of the sinking of the *Arandora Star*.

She has told me all about you, thought about you every day, and our constant regret is that you were not with us as you should have been on our lives' journey.

Olivia and I are so grateful that fate guided us to be together; our lives have been wonderful, with many blessings, especially our two sons Philip and Victor, and our beautiful grandchildren. Your great-great-grandson is called Alfonso in your honour.

Your loving family welcomed me as a son and brother and I have made it my own. We have had so many happy times, survived so many set-backs and come through it all with our lives still blessed.

With your brilliant and kind-hearted sons, Vittorio and Domenico, I have helped build up the business, Valvona & Crolla, that was your vision.

Together we have brought the sunshine and the flavours of the south of Italy to the Scots.

Caro Alfonso, my only regret is that I did not have the honour of knowing you and asking your permission to marry Olivia. With all humility, I wish to present my story so you can know who I was and who I became. In it you will learn of the challenges and excitement I have lived through. It has been a blessed life; a feast of love and laughter.

If only you could join us now. Lunch is at one.

Un abbraccio, tuo caro genero,

A warm embrace, your loving son-in-law,

Carlo

Chapter One

POZZUOLI, 1932

'Carlo! Carlo! *Aspetta*! Wait for me!'

Ninuccia sounded slightly distressed. Carlo glanced back to see where his little sister was. He caught sight of her far below, the parcel wrapped in newspapers tightly grasped to her chest as she lifted her short legs to climb each step. Her dark curls were dripping with sweat. She called again, louder.

'Carlo!'

He waved to her, frustrated, encouraging her to hurry. 'Ninuccia! *Forza!* Hurry!'

Two women scrubbing clothes at the water fountain watched the scene unfold. They reproached him, laughing. 'Carlo! Wait for her! She's only three. *Poverina*! Poor thing!'

Carlo shrugged his shoulders, flashed an amiable smile and ran barefoot up the steps. Ninuccia would take too long to climb them to get home. She'd arrive when she did. He couldn't wait; he was too hungry. His sister's calls faded into the distance.

Everyone knew Carlo in Rione Terra. He was Luigi and Annunziata's son, a good-looking boy, taller than average for his seven years, fair-skinned with thick blond hair. His large, dark, almond-shaped eyes illuminated his aquiline face; his sweet cherub lips charmed when he smiled.

Everyone knew Carlo because Carlo knew everyone. He never passed without a call of greeting, a quick word of encouragement or a nod of interest. He had the uncanny knack of seeing everyone as a person, an individual: a fortunate talent. The two women at

the water fountain had known him since he was born, but it was as if he had known *them* before *they* had been born.

Swinging a brown-paper parcel tied with string, Carlo skipped up the narrow *vicoletto*, counting the 178 steps to reach home. It was almost midday and the shaded alleyway was gratifyingly cool in the summer heat. An occasional shaft of light cut through the gloom and lit the way.

The buildings on either side of the steps were four and five storeys high, jumbled and haphazard, so close together that people leaned out and spoke to each other from balcony to balcony as if in the same room. Washing hung shamelessly between the houses creating a spectacle of underwear, slips and vests, towels, sheets and tablecloths. An endless cascade of children's clothes hung outside narrow balconies in ever-decreasing sizes.

On every doorstep, women huddled together in twos and threes, their aprons pulled up onto their laps, full of vegetables to prepare for the midday meal; long mottled *borlotti* beans, fresh pods of pea-green *piselli* or bunches of leafy green *friarielli*. Their bronzed faces were flushed; to help keep the backs of their necks cool, their dark hair was piled up and tied back with coloured rags. Their dark eyes darted from face to face as they engaged in *una bella chiacchierata* as they podded, topped and tailed the vegetables. They tossed the speckled beans and vibrant leaves into their bowls, discarding the stalks and empty pods casually onto the steps.

Other women were darning clothes or carefully embroidering pieces of lace. Ragged children of all ages ran barefoot up and down the steps shouting and laughing or sitting in huddles, miniature imitations of their mothers and aunts.

There was not an inch of space spare, no centimetre unused. Most families lived in one room, a dozen or more people together, with little space for furniture other than a table, some chairs and a bed. There was no such thing as privacy; everyone knew everyone else's business. Windows and doors were thrown open all day so that conversations, confrontations and all manner of canoodling were heard by all.

Life spilled out into the alley, the space and fresh air eagerly enjoyed. The street was each family's living room. Every morning,

on every available spot, tables were carried outside and covered with anything to hand, whether a sheet of newspaper or an embroidered tablecloth. A random selection of odd cutlery, plates and glasses were laid, a candle or lamp, a jug of water, a *fiasco* of wine, ready, anticipating the next mealtime. Toothless, ancient great-grandmothers, too old to help, were already perched at tables, keenly observing the goings-on, patiently waiting to eat. Groups of grandfathers sat in sleeveless vests, absorbed in games of *briscola*, their large bellies a sign of comfort and success to their wives and mistresses.

The ancient fortified settlement of Rione Terra perched with authority above the Bay of Pozzuoli, a four-hour walk along the coast north of Naples. For generations past, for as long as anyone could remember, this pile of crumbling, crowded slums had been home to the very poorest of Pozzuoli. The live volcano Solfatara slumbered at the heart of their town and their consciousness. The land they lived on was moving, unstable. The drowned ruins of the ancient Roman market in the harbour had risen back above sea level in living memory. The continuously gasping Vesuvius loomed menacingly over them.

The people of the town had for centuries had an intrinsic ability to survive under occupation by foreign powers. In order to retain their own identity, they had developed their own language, music and a particular sense of humour that ensured laughter was always at hand to boost courage. Living with the daily grind of squalor amidst the glorious Neapolitan sun and sea they had a profound appreciation of life's blessings. They had very little, and expected nothing. They lived intense, immediate lives. Carlo, like all the children around him, had already learned this philosophy; a wise head on young shoulders.

As he climbed the steps, smells of cooking lingered enticingly in the air. Carlo took deep breaths, savouring the flavour of each scent: luscious fresh tomatoes softening into *sugo* with green oil and aromatic basil; creamy onions sweetly sizzling in olive oil; pungent sardines blackening on a grill; a sharp whiff of singed garlic and *peperoncino* which made him salivate. He loitered a moment to indulge in these aromas, hunger gripping his stomach.

'Madonna, *ho fame*. I'm hungry.'

Suddenly he remembered his sister; she had the food. He cupped his hand over his mouth and called down the steps, yelling to her to get a move on, 'Ninuccia! Ninuuccia! *Forza*!'

'I'm coming, Carlo,' she called back.

Jumping over a sleeping tomcat, Carlo swung around some scraggy chickens pecking in the dust. He nodded '*buon giorno*' to Giuseppe '*Faniente*', the one-legged beggar who always sunned himself in the pool of sunshine at the corner of Carlo's uncle's, Zi' Alf's, cobbler shop.

'Bravo, Giuseppe,' thought Carlo, 'if you need to beg, you may as well beg in the sun.' He admired Giuseppe; he was always at his corner, every day, whatever the weather. 'No matter your job,' observed Carlo to himself, 'you need to put in the hours.'

Spotting Il Professore making his way down from school, burdened with a heavy bundle of jotters, Carlo nipped into a side street. His own book was missing from the pile and he'd rather not have to explain himself right now. He had no time for Il Professore, or for school. In fact, he hated school. He hated the fact that he had to sit in the heat of the day and listen to Il Professore drone on and on about history, science and the virtues of Mussolini.

He detested that after lunch he had to return to school, where Il Professore, now dressed in his *Fascista* uniform, attempted to instruct the class on how to salute, march and handle a rifle. Was the man a teacher or a soldier? Attendance at the Fascist after-school *balilla* was not compulsory but was actively encouraged, especially by his mother. 'Carlo, you get a free pair of boots and a uniform. What's wrong with that?' But Carlo had no time for the *balilla*, Il Professore or even Mussolini himself, for that matter. What was the point of making them all dress up like soldiers, play with guns and pretend to parade? A ruin of an afternoon, that was all it was. He was a lad of the streets, a *scugnizzo*, self-sufficient and street-wise. He was a free spirit and rebelled against constriction and control.

Laughing as he watched Il Professore totter off down the street Carlo congratulated himself, '*Sono una volpe, veramente uno scugnizzo!* I'm a real fox, a real lad of the streets.'

Unexpectedly, he heard his aunt, Zia Francesca, shout from a

top-floor window just above him. 'Carlo, *bello*! *Attenzione*! Awwoo!'

Carlo knew what that meant. He looked up towards her through the flapping array of shirts and sheets just in time to see the water, as if in slow motion, falling down, down towards him. He jumped aside niftily and pinning himself against the side of the wall, just managed to avoid it. Not so fortunate, poor Ninuccia. She had just caught up with her brother, proud for an instant after her great effort, when the dirty, cold water drenched her from head to toe.

Carlo burst out laughing. Zia Francesca burst out laughing.

'*Povera* Ninuccia! *Andiam*'. Poor Ninuccia! Come on, let's go!'

Carlo put his arm round his sister and gave her a hug. He took the parcel from her and, holding her hand, led her up the last, steepest steps to their home.

*

Home for Carlo's family was a room with a window on the top floor of a derelict, crumbling tenement, in the area known since Roman times as Rione Terra, 'the Land'. The highest part, where they lived, was simply called *ngopp' 'a terra*, 'the top of the land'. The Continis were a large family: Carlo's parents, Luigi and Annunziata, his paternal grandparents, Nonno Ernesto and Nonna Marianna, his younger sisters, Ninuccia, Rosetta and a new baby girl, Annetta. Zia Francesca, his mother's sister, lived in another room on the landing opposite, with her husband Zio Paolo and their five children.

Their room was dark, with rough, whitewashed walls and a small fireplace in the corner. There was a large bed against the wall and some straw mats beside it. In the summer the heat in the room was suffocating, a magnet for flies and mosquitoes. In the winter, it was damp and smoky from the fire.

At the far end a wide window opened out to a small balcony, bringing welcome light and glorious fresh air into the room. The view from the balcony was unexpectedly rewarding: an enchanting vision of the glorious azure expanse of the Tyrrhenian Sea. On a

clear day, the islands of Nisida, Procida and Ischia appeared to float in the bay; in the distance, Capri languished on the horizon. Carlo's mother would look out at the magnificent panorama and feel joyous at her luck, thanking God that heaven itself was right outside her window.

On the way up to their home, on the middle landing, was the *gabinetto* for the whole tenement, nothing more than a rough, filthy hole. The trouble was, it was nearly always *occupato*, and nearly always by signor Bruno Cacasotto, who appeared to spend almost all of his life in the lavatory. Carlo had never seen signor Bruno unless he was waiting to go in or just coming out of the *gabinetto*. Carlo made a point of getting up very early every morning, earlier than signor Bruno. It made sense to get there before him. He was passing anyway; every morning his task was to go down to the well in the top square to fetch fresh water. He filled two flagons full, which he would carry up the steps home, splashing on the stairway as he went. He always enjoyed a deep drink of the ice-cool water with its mineral sulphur taste. The water never tasted so good once he had carried it up the stairs and it had warmed in the stuffy room all day.

In the centre of the family's room was a large wooden table. It had six sturdy chairs with woven straw seats that scratched his legs when he sat on them. A chair at the table couldn't always be guaranteed; there were just too many people. Carlo's ambition was to have a chair of his own at the table, like Papà. Now that his mother had brought another mouth to feed into the family, Carlo was worried. Naturally, his mother would feed the new baby herself for a year or two but at some point, the baby would need a plate of food herself, and then she'd need a chair as well.

Annunziata was the wet nurse of Rione Terra, the *balia*. As far as he could recall in his seven years, Carlo could remember his mother giving birth to babies and feeding babies. Sadly, for one reason or another, a lot of her babies hadn't lived very long. Carlo wasn't sure how many, but he was very aware that some babies she gave birth to went back to the Good Lord very soon. Carlo had had four older siblings, but they had all died quite young as he was growing up, leaving him as the oldest child in the family now.

When his mother lost a new baby she had milk she didn't need, so she would suckle other women's babies instead. She had fed Zia Francesca's baby and Zia Francesca's neighbour's baby. She had fed the neighbours' neighbours' babies. Of course, there were always babies crying in this arrangement, but you just had to accept it. Whatever happened, whether they were his mother's babies or not, hungry or not, they cried and sometimes even they died. As his mother always told him, '*Così la vita.* This is life.'

*

Finally, Ninuccia and Carlo rushed into the house, short of breath having raced each other up the last stairs. They were giggling, as they had just passed signor Bruno going into the *gabinetto* again. Mamma was in her rocking chair in the corner feeding Annetta.

'Put everything on the table.'

With a certain degree of pride, Carlo laid the parcels on the table and carefully untied the string. Ninuccia helped their younger sister Rosetta climb up onto a chair and then onto the table to see what they had brought. His grandmother, Nonna Marianna, came across to help them. They opened the first parcel, saving the string and paper for some later use. A wonderful aroma of crusty warm bread filled the room. The kilo of *pane* was about an eighth of the huge *pagnotta* that the baker had cut through for Carlo and then weighed on the scale before writing on the paper what Annunziata would have to pay him later.

'*Cinquanta centesimi,* Mamma,' Carlo told his mother. She nodded.

The thick dark crust on the outside of the bread was charred and blackened by the wood-fired oven. The fragrance made Ninuccia's mouth water as she reached out to take some of the crumbs that had scattered at the bottom of the package.

'*E l'altro?*' Mamma asked.

Carlo looked sheepish.

'*Apri!* Open it!' Mamma raised her voice, slightly agitated.

Carlo opened the newspaper, slowly, looking at his mother to see her reaction. She stretched her head up to see.

Annunziata was a petite, pretty woman of 32 years, with a

swarthy skin lightened by a bright, animated smile. Her jet-black hair was tied back from her face and wound into a tight, severe bun secured by two ebony combs. One frivolous stray strand of hair fell down over her eye, belying the look of maturity she tried to achieve. She couldn't maintain any severity for very long anyway as she had a spontaneous, infectious laugh that reverberated around the walls and out onto the landing.

'Apri!' she shouted again, pulling herself up as high as she could, the baby still attached to her breast. *'Fammi vedere!* Let me see!'

Carlo opened the parcel and lifted it up a bit to show his mother. Inside were five bloodied fish heads: flat, bulging-eyed, tooth-grinning fish heads!

'Ahhi!' she cried, bursting out into uproarious laughter. '*Bravo! Stasera si mangia brodo di pesce!* Tonight we'll eat a good fish soup!'

Ninuccia and Rosetta ran around the table clapping their hands. Everyone loved fish soup. When Mamma was happy they were all happy.

From the window, they heard a familiar whistle coming from the bottom at the quayside, where the small fishing boats went out to sea. Ninuccia ran across to the window.

'Papà's coming! Papà's coming!'

'Good,' said Annunziata, handing the baby to her mother.

'*A mangiare*! Let's eat.'