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Summer at the Villa Rosa

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Summer at the Villa Rosa

Nicky Pellegrino



Prologue

The pomegranate tree stood alone in the centre of the courtyard. How much longer it would stand there no one knew. Long ago its twisted limbs had stopped reaching for the sky and now only tender care kept it alive.

Last year, in October, the old tree began to lean like the Tower of Pisa. It was Carlotta, the gardener's daughter, who noticed first.

'It's as though the fruit is too heavy for it to carry a moment longer,' she said sadly to her father, Umberto. 'It wants to lay down its tired branches and rest them on the ground.'

Umberto stopped sweeping up autumn leaves and leaned on his broom. He looked at the pomegranate tree and saw Carlotta was right. The fruit still hung like lanterns amid the sinewy branches, but the tree was pitching forward to the ground.

'It will have to come down,' he said shortly.

'No, Papà!'

'Carlotta, if I don't chop it down, it will fall by itself,' Umberto argued reasonably.

'But, Papà, it's so very old. You've always told me it's been here far longer than either of us has been alive. You have to try to save it.'

Umberto looked at his daughter, at her sharp, pale face beneath the wide-brimmed straw hat she always wore, and her thin arms pressed to her flat chest in entreaty. And then he looked back at the pomegranate tree.

'It's no good, Carlotta, it's coming down. We have plenty

more pomegranate trees down there.’ He gestured towards the terraces below the courtyard. ‘And look, most of the fruit on this tree is bad, anyway.’

‘Yes, but when you find one that isn’t bad, it tastes so much sweeter than any of the fruit from those younger trees down below.’ She took hold of the broom and pulled it away from her father. ‘I’ll finish sweeping up these leaves if you’ll try to save the old pomegranate tree.’

Half listening to the sound of Carlotta’s broom scratching over the flagstones, Umberto stood and stared at the tree. His mouth hung half open, as it always did when he was thinking hard, so all the world could see there was not a tooth left in his head. Next to his bed, he had a set of dentures in a jar, but he had never taken to wearing them, and besides, he and Carlotta so rarely saw anyone these days it hardly seemed worth making the effort.

No one ever visited the pink house beside the courtyard. It was empty and its dark-green wooden shutters were closed tight, as they had been for years. Umberto received a small wage each month for the work he and Carlotta did in the grounds, and they lived quietly in their cottage just beyond the high walls. They were charged only with keeping the gardens neat and tidy, and no one came to check the work had been done. If he chopped down the pomegranate tree, only Carlotta would notice or care.

‘It wouldn’t take much to get it down,’ he called out to her. ‘I could probably push it over if I tried.’

‘It’s roots may be deeper than you think,’ she called back.

‘We could plant another tree in its place – a sapling. It would grow before you knew it.’

‘It wouldn’t be the same.’

‘Carlotta.’ He was exasperated now. ‘A gardener can’t afford to fall in love with the plants in his garden. He must harden his heart and tear out those that are old or dying or simply no longer look their best. And he must plant afresh.’

Carlotta stopped brushing, but she didn't speak. He looked over and saw she was staring at the tree.

'I can't imagine waking up tomorrow morning and seeing that it isn't there,' she said softly. 'It's been there every morning, every day of my life.'

Umberto threw his hands in the air. 'So how do you suggest I save it?' he asked angrily. 'It's half dead already so how am I meant to keep it alive?'

'It isn't half dead.' Carlotta's voice was measured and patient. 'Its leaves are green and it still bears fruit. But it's old and tired. All it needs is some help to hold its branches up from the ground.'

'All it needs, all it needs,' Umberto muttered, pulling the battered old hat from his head and wiping the sweat from his brow with it. It was warm and all this thinking was hard work. 'You're asking too much of me,' he exploded. 'I don't know how I'm supposed to keep the damn thing from falling over.'

He heard a hiss of impatience as Carlotta threw the broom at him. Two minutes later he saw her disappearing down the stone steps that led to the lower terraces, an axe in her hand. She was puffing when she came back and red in the face, and in her hands there was no longer an axe but a thick, long branch with a fork in it that was wide enough to cradle the biggest of the pomegranate tree's trailing limbs.

'It's a crutch,' Carlotta explained. 'If we wedge it beneath that branch firmly enough, it will support the tree and it won't lean over any further than it has already.'

There was some heaving and pushing, but Carlotta was determined and the tree seemed to know it. Finally, it allowed the crutch to be jammed beneath its deformed limb and let it take its weight.

Umberto stood back and surveyed their work. He nodded his head in quiet approval. 'You're a clever girl, Carlotta. I always said so.'

She smiled at him in reply. 'I'd better go and get that axe,' she said, and he heard the happiness in her voice if not in her words. 'I left it down below.'

'No, leave it,' he told her. 'I'll get it later. And I'll cut another crutch while I'm down there . . . just in case.'

She smiled at him again. 'The tree will be here tomorrow when I wake. And the morning after and the one after that.'

'It will die eventually, though, everything does,' Umberto said bluntly. 'And there is no one here to appreciate it while it does live.'

'Oh, you never know.' Carlotta glanced at the pink house with its shutters closed against the light. 'Perhaps someone will come along one summer and open up the house and sit beneath the pomegranate tree to watch the sunset. Until then it's here for just you and me.'

Umberto clicked his tongue against his gums. 'No one will come, Carlotta. They've forgotten this place even exists. It will be empty for ever.'

I

Raffaella couldn't sleep. She lay on her back in the lumpy old bed she shared with her younger sister and stared into the darkness. The last thing she wanted was shadows beneath her eyes. But her mind was busy with thoughts of the excitement to come and her body was filled with a restless energy. She couldn't lie still any longer.

The sheets rustled as she slipped out from between them, but her sister didn't stir. In the darkness, Raffaella felt her way to the end of the bed, and her fingers found the cedar chest that stood there. Quietly, she lifted the lid and slipped her hands inside.

The embroidered tablecloth lay on top. It was white with silver thread, and there were eight napkins to match. Beneath them was the bedlinen her grandmother had given her when she was ten and the towels she had been presented with a year or so later. And at the very bottom, neatly pressed and swathed in tissue paper, were the flimsy bits of underwear and pretty nightgowns her mother had helped her embroider.

This was Raffaella's bottom drawer. She'd been adding to it since she was a young girl, and everything inside had remained untouched, aside from the odd airing, waiting for the day when she was married.

Tomorrow the cedar chest would be loaded on to a cart with the rest of the things that made up her dowry and taken up the hill to a new home. And one day later, when all the celebrations were over, she would follow it. She would hang the towels on a rail, put the sheets on the double bed and dress in the finest of the nightgowns. And that night her

sister, Teresa, would sleep alone for the first time, while Raffaella climbed into bed with her new husband.

Curled up against the cedar chest, Raffaella rested her head on the stack of linen and imagined what her life would be like. Free to kiss her Marcello's lips as much as she wanted, to lie encircled in his arms and talk late into the night. Free to be together without a member of the family always nearby, free to touch him and be touched in return.

Raffaella was excited by the thought of her wedding day, but she was more thrilled at the prospect of what lay beyond – her life once the cedar chest had been emptied of all its contents and she had become Marcello's wife. Ever since they were children in the schoolroom and she had willed him to choose the desk beside hers, it was all she had wanted.

As the fine linen grew warm beneath her cheek, she tried to imagine the weight of a gold ring on her finger and the new sense of belonging. It was difficult to believe that so much happiness lay in wait for her.

She lifted her head from the linen and carefully closed the lid of the chest, then eased herself back into bed. Teresa continued to sleep soundly. Raffaella listened to her sister's rhythmic breathing and felt the warmth radiating from her skinny body. One more night like this and then it would be Marcello lying there beside her.

She closed her eyes and slowly her mind quietened. At long last she slipped away into sleep.

When Raffaella finally woke, her mouth was dry, her eyes filled with sleep, and her sister's side of the bed empty. There was no sound except the crying of gulls and the lapping of water, but as she blinked and rubbed her eyes clean, she smelled coffee. She sat up in bed and ran her fingers through the tangle of her long, black hair. What time was it? she wondered. How late had they left her to sleep?

Pulling back the curtains, she saw the sun was climbing in

the sky. Her father and the rest of the fishermen must have set out long ago. Now their boats would be nothing more than dark dots on the blue horizon.

The cottage Raffaella had lived in all her life was perched on a rock, overlooking the harbour and the sea beyond. Years ago it had been painted the colour of peaches, but the lash of salt in the wind had quickly peeled the paint from the walls where the sun had blistered it.

The rock was inhospitable, but a few stunted bushes clung on grimly, and at its base, well above the high-tide mark, her father had planted a white statue of Our Lady, who stared out to sea and protected the fishermen and all those who risked their lives riding the waves.

Their little house was built to fit round the curve of the rock. Every room was narrow and cramped, but the narrowest part of all was the kitchen, where the wall was carved into the rock itself. Brightly coloured plates danced across the rough grey slab, and on a high shelf, Raffaella's mother had arranged wine bottles she'd collected, her eye caught by an unusual shape or shade, and jewels of glass she'd found while trawling the beach, fragments worn smooth by the sea and the sand.

What Raffaella loved most about her mother was the way she looked for the play in life. When she had to clean and polish her house, she did it with a song or at least a hum. If she had to shake out the crumbs from a tablecloth, she amused herself by scaring away the seagulls that perched on the narrow ledge of rock below the kitchen window.

Even while she made a simple cup of coffee she was playing, heaping the fine coffee grounds in an impossibly tall pyramid, higher and higher every time, until sometimes it collapsed all over the kitchen table and she had to clean it up and start again.

Her mother's coffee shouldn't have tasted any different than coffee made by someone else's hand, but Raffaella was

convinced it was better. She breathed its scent now as she climbed down the crooked steps from her room at the top of the house.

‘Mamma, what time is it?’ she called out. ‘Why didn’t you wake me earlier?’

‘Ah, Raffaella, you’re up at last.’ She heard a laugh streak through her mother’s voice. ‘The smell of coffee must have woken you. I wondered if it might.’

‘No, you knew it would. That’s why you made it.’ Raffaella stepped into the skinny kitchen and smiled at the familiar sight of her mother pouring a stream of black coffee into two small white cups and spooning in sugar.

‘I knew?’ Her mother looked up and smiled back in reply. ‘Well, perhaps I did.’

Sliding on to the wooden bench pushed back against the hard rock wall, Raffaella reached for her cup. ‘Mmm, that’s strong,’ she said between sips. ‘I’ll miss your coffee when I go. Mine never tastes so good.’

‘And I’ll miss you –’ her mother took up her own cup ‘– much more than you’ll miss my coffee. Why couldn’t you have picked a local boy, eh? A nice boy from around here.’

Raffaella didn’t smile, for she knew her mother was only half joking. All her life she had lived in the southern Italian village of Triento, nestled in the folds and ripples of the mountains where they met the sea. Triento was a divided town. Half of it, Big Triento, clung to the foothills of the mountains, and the other half, Little Triento, perched on the rocks beside the harbour where the fishing boats were moored. A steep and perilous road zigzagged from one half to the other.

When Raffaella married Marcello, she would go up in the world quite literally. She would leave the fisherman’s cottage in Little Triento and head up the steep incline to her new life as the wife of a prosperous merchant’s son.

‘I’ll miss you too, Mamma,’ Raffaella replied. ‘But I’ll still see you, won’t I? Whenever you come up the hill to market?’

Her mother laughed. It was a deep and throaty sound that Raffaella had grown used to hearing countless times each day throughout her childhood.

‘Won’t I?’ she repeated.

‘I suppose you might,’ her mother replied, and then she frowned. ‘Although not every day, Raffaella, I can’t promise you that.’

Raffaella knew how much her mother, Anna, hated climbing the hill. She would do almost anything to avoid it: make ingredients stretch a little further, create a meal out of almost nothing.

But cleverest of all was Anna’s ability to divine when one of the other wives of Little Triento was on the brink of slipping her basket over her arm and embarking on the long, slow walk up to Big Triento to shop for food. Invariably, seconds before the woman left, Anna would land on her doorstep and press a few coins on her, along with a quickly scribbled shopping list. ‘Just a couple of things,’ she’d say breathlessly. ‘You don’t mind, do you?’

Anna was tall with a low voice and a natural air of authority and few of the fishermen’s wives dared say no to her. Beatrice Ferrando, Patrizia Sesto, Giuliana Biagio and the rest, all were a little afraid of her. So they would walk up the hill and carry a heavier basket back down again while Anna slipped off home and pleased herself.

Usually, she would sit with a book in her hand for an hour or so until her shopping arrived on the doorstep and it was time to start cooking dinner for her husband, Tommaso, her two daughters and her only son, Sergio.

Raffaella’s mother rarely walked up the steep hill if she could help it and as a result she was softer of thigh and rounder of belly than most of the other fishermen’s wives. Yet

Tommaso loved her womanly curves, and she loved the stolen hours she had to herself.

But now Anna sighed a little as she sipped her coffee, almost as if she knew the steep hill was beckoning her again.

‘Your brother Sergio often complains that the meat Beatrice Ferrando brings me is too fatty,’ she mused. ‘And last week Patrizia Sesto came back with rotten tomatoes. We had to throw most of them away, remember? I might as well go to the market myself more often.’

‘Yes, I agree. You might as well,’ Raffaella echoed, and she poured her mother another tiny cup of the strong coffee before it grew cold.

Anna tried to keep the frown from her face as she watched her daughter moving about the kitchen, putting away the coffee things. There was so much to worry about. Would Raffaella be happy with this boy she wanted so much? Would marriage be the joyful thing she expected?

Most of the mothers of Triento would be thrilled to have a daughter marry into the Russo family, but Anna didn’t feel that way. She saw how Raffaella hero-worshipped the boy. And she feared that he in turn saw little beyond her beauty. When she woke in the middle of the night, her elder daughter’s future was the thing she worried most about, tossing and turning until dawn.

She prayed fervently that this marriage was the right thing. But if it turned out not to be, if sadness lay in store for Raffaella, then she wanted to be there watching over her.

And if that meant putting her basket over her arm and climbing the hill to Big Triento every other day, then so be it. Anna would miss her stolen hours and hate every moment of the steep walk, but she could see no other way.