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Delicious

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Sunday evenings were the time for romance in the little village of San Giulio. Romance Italian style.

And that is why Maria Domenica Carrozza was strolling down the main street, arm in arm with her mother, Pepina. Her younger sister Rosaria hung reluctantly off Mamma's other arm.

The evening was pleasantly warm and Pepina in no hurry. She took time to show off her daughters, walking them at a leisurely pace past tall, narrow buildings the colour of washed sand and down the worn stone steps in front of the church onto the cobbled piazza below.

'Mamma,' Rosaria whimpered, prodding her mother with slightly grubby fingers. 'I'm tired. Can we go home now? Please?'

'*Basta*, Rosaria,' hissed Pepina, without changing the even rhythm of her very best shoes clip-clopping over the cobbles. 'It's still so early. We'll take a little drink at the *caffe, bellisima figlia*.'

Broad beam swinging, she steered her two dark-eyed, dark-haired daughters towards the bright lights of Il Caffe dei Fratelli Angeli where the pastries were rich and creamy, the coffee strong and the tables always overflowing with friends, neighbours and, who knew, maybe a suitable husband for one of her pretty girls?

For as long as anyone could remember, Caffe Angeli had stood guard over the far corner of the main piazza of San Giulio, a dusty, old village that rose boldly from the empty plains of Campania. There were no hills or valleys for San Giulio to nestle in, no high stone walls to hide behind. The wide, flat tract of land upon which it lay stretched out all the way to the Mediterranean Sea.

But although San Giulio stood open and defenceless, the villagers had somehow managed to hold the outside world at bay. Like most people born in the fertile lands surrounding Naples, here they still

clung tightly to the old ways. Young women married early; old women dressed in black from the day they lost their first loved one; Rita Pavone crooned soothingly from the village's one and only jukebox; and Mamma still knew what was best for her daughters

For sixteen-year-old Maria Domenica, that meant a life spent between the four walls of her mother's kitchen, except for Sunday evenings when she escaped for a few short hours to make *la passeggiata* through the streets of San Giulio.

Maria Domenica had never questioned being made to leave school at thirteen. After all, she was the eldest of six. There was bread to be baked, chickens to be fed, children to be bathed, and Pepina couldn't do it all alone.

As for her father Erminio, he was busy driving his truck laden with peaches and plums across the country. Looking after babies? That was women's work and best that Maria Domenica learn about it early so she'd be ready to bring up her own children when they came along in a couple of years.

It fell to Pepina to find men good enough to marry her daughters. Sunday after Sunday she strolled determinedly through the dusty main street and around the plain little fountain in the piazza, showing the village what she had to offer: nice girls in their finest dresses, good girls who'd have pretty babies and keep the pans in the kitchen bubbling with delicious things.

'Mamma,' repeated Rosaria, nudging at her insistently with her shoulder, 'can I have a Coca-Cola? Mamma, please? I'm thirsty.'

At fourteen, Rosaria was too young to be paraded through the town on a Sunday night, Pepina knew that, but better to show off two daughters than one, especially when there were three more at home growing up fast. Six children and only one of them a son – *porca miseria*. Where had she gone wrong?

'Mamma, Coca-Cola.'

'OK, OK, Rosaria.'

Across the busy *caffe*, Pepina glimpsed Elena Manzoni and waved. Elena had a nice son, Marco, who was around Maria Domenica's age. A good boy, he'd inherit their farm one day and both she and Erminio had agreed their eldest daughter could do worse.

Obediently, Maria Domenica let her mother weave her through the crowded tables of Caffe Angeli. She wasn't a truly beautiful girl. Her legs were too gangly, her skin too freckled, her eyes too deep-set

and her nose too long for real prettiness. And yet she had long, black hair that fell down her back like water and a smile that made old men smile back in reply.

A quick kiss on both cheeks for Elena and her son. Marco wouldn't meet her eyes. His gaze was fixed over her shoulder at apple-cheeked, soft-bellied Rosaria, already sucking up her Coca-Cola greedily through a straw.

Pepina nudged her.

'Marco, come and help me choose a song on the jukebox,' Maria Domenica stammered, jingling the change in her pocket. 'Who do you like? Rita Pavone? Little Tony? Maybe they'll have some new songs on it this week.'

As she moved him reluctantly away from her little sister's orbit, Maria Domenica wished she could say what was really in her mind: 'I don't want you, Marco. You're welcome to Rosaria. Have her, take her now. I'm tired of listening to her whine, I'm sick of watching her eat. She'll be old and fat in a heartbeat and she'll nag you for the next forty years but, if you want her, then take her, Marco, *per favore*, take her.'

Instead she stood quietly next to the boy her mother had picked out for her, uncertain how she was expected to behave.

Marco's full, soft mouth drooped as he ran his eye over the jukebox. '*Merda*. No one listens to this stuff in the city. In Rome, in Naples, they wouldn't put good money in this useless heap of junk.'

'So what if they don't listen to it in the city?' she countered with some spirit. 'That doesn't mean we can't like it here in San Giulio.'

'San Giulio,' he spat bitterly. 'I'm not wasting any more of my life in this place. Don't look for me here next week drinking Coca-Cola with the old women and the children.'

'You have plans?'

'Maybe.'

'Tell me, Marco. Where will you go?'

'To the city, of course, where do you think?'

'What will you do there?'

Frowning at the jukebox, Marco stayed silent.

'Marco, what will you do in the city?' she repeated, her voice growing louder.

'Shut up,' he hissed. 'Do you want everyone to know? I'll tell you if you'll just shut up for a minute.'

It turned out Marco had a cousin living in Rome. A cousin who had a job in a butcher's shop, a rented room in Trastevere and a good line in following the pretty female tourists looking for *la dolce vita* on the Via Veneto. All Marco needed was his train fare.

'I could come with you, maybe? To Rome?' Maria Domenica's black eyes widened, as the possibility of escape occurred to her for the first time.

'Come on, you're a girl,' said Marco, his sulky lips now stretched into an amused grin. 'You're just a girl. And you're not going anywhere.'

Around the room many pairs of eyes were watching Maria Domenica and Marco exchange their few words. Their mothers gazed at them hopefully, keen for any sign of romance. As for Rosaria, her eyes were resentful and dull. Banging her now empty Coca-Cola bottle repetitively on the side of the table, she frowned. What was Mamma doing trying to matchmake those two anyway? Wasn't it obvious who Marco wanted? And if she had anything to do with it, Marco was going to get his wish before the year was out.

From behind the fine Gaggia coffee machine that he worked like a musical instrument, Franco Angeli watched the young couple too. How long before he heard this pair's complaints? he wondered. *There are no Beatles songs on the jukebox. There's no pop music.* Bah! He slammed down a frothing jug of milk on the shining stainless steel counter in disgust.

From the high walls many more Franco Angelis were staring down on the couple just as disapprovingly. When Franco and his brother Gennaro had started II Caffe dei Fratelli Angeli many years ago they'd indulged their passion for Italian art. They'd hired a talented young painter who had spent many, many months balanced precariously on a scaffold, slowly covering the walls and ceiling with reproductions of the brothers' favourite paintings. In the finest Renaissance tradition, the patrons' faces appeared somewhere in every picture.

So here on the ceiling was a surprised Franco Angeli almost touching the finger of a bearded God in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, and there on the wall an admiring Gennaro Angeli watching Botticelli's Venus step out from her half-shell. And behind the counter were a couple of cheeky Raphael cherubs with more than a passing resemblance to photos of the young Franco and Gennaro.

The locals barely raised their eyes to all this beauty any more. Most of the young ones had hardly ever registered it was there at all. In the quietest way, as he served people coffee all day, this broke Franco Angeli's heart.

'Hey, Marco.' Maria Domenica laughed now and raised her eyes to the ceiling. 'If you go to Rome you can go see the real Sistine Chapel. See how it compares to Caffe Angeli.'

Marco rolled his eyes. Beauty was what he saw in the mirror every morning, not a bit of old paint on a wall. 'When I get to Rome I won't be wasting any of my time,' he promised her. 'I'll find a job and once I've started earning I'll buy myself a Vespa like my cousin Antonio's. And then we'll have some fun.'

'Will you ever come back?'

'Maybe, in ten years' time. You'll be married with kids by then, I expect. I'll come by and see you though. You and your sister Rosaria. And I'll take you both for a ride in my Ferrari.' He laughed, turning away from her and the jukebox that had so disappointed him. 'See you in ten years, eh, Maria Domenica? I'll be looking forward to it.'

If anyone had been watching Maria Domenica at that moment they'd have seen an expression settling on her face that she'd never worn in all her sixteen years of being an obedient and conscientious eldest daughter. An expression that spelled trouble.