

*Three Gold
Coins*

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ALLEN & UNWIN

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1

Lara

Lara Foxleigh felt the slight tremor in her legs with every step through the narrow cobblestoned street and knew it wasn't just from the jet-lag; every moment since she'd arrived here yesterday had tested her confidence. Of the many times in her life she had imagined herself in Italy, it had never been for the reasons she was here now. She could only hope this had been the right thing to do.

She stumbled on the uneven ground and nearly fell. Cars with tinted windows beeped in frustration and a swell of people diverted around her and continued on their way, a human river gushing towards the mighty Trevi Fountain, whose splashing water she could already hear in the distance. She righted herself and hurried forward. As she did she caught sight of an old man ahead of her who also stumbled at that moment. She felt an instant wave of empathy for him.

His snow-white hair was brushed neatly to one side and he was stooped, a noticeable hunch between his shoulders. With his right hand he worked the end of his walking stick between the cobblestones.

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A young woman in flashy gym gear held on to his other arm, steadying him as he lurched through the push of tourists and the swift Vespas that wove impatiently through the cramped space. The man seemed so out of place here.

But then so was she.

He tripped again and his companion righted him. It wasn't done unkindly, but it wasn't loving either. Lara couldn't explain why, but there was something about him that made her want to stay close; perhaps it was just her affinity with someone who needed help to navigate this world.

The old man and his companion turned the corner around a tall building, a large family bustled their way in front of Lara, and the narrow street gave way to a wide space with the fountain commanding the arena. Blue sky stretched above her, and bright sunshine beat down on the Fontana di Trevi and the hundreds of people packed into the square.

All she could do was stare. She'd seen photos of it, but its sheer size was staggering. Corinthian pillars—three storeys high—with a towering sculpture of the god Oceanus in the centre stood over imposing waves of sculpted water. Muscular, bearded tritons thrashed from the sea, taming winged horses. Clear water roared over shelves of white stone and plummeted into the pool below.

For a few moments she stood there, allowing herself to forget the reason she was here, on the other side of the world.

People squeezed past each other to get closer, the lucky ones sitting on the edge of the pool, smiling for pictures and tossing coins backwards over their shoulders. Lara felt a small, unexpected smile flutter to her lips. The fountain was mesmerising. The cacophony of pummelling water muffled the hum of her anxiety.

A flash of red caught her attention. It was the old man's shirt. He was leaning hard on his young attendant, lowering himself to the edge of the pool, wedged between a man sporting a Union Jack tee

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and a young Japanese girl with a Hello Kitty bag. His assistant said something to him and he waved her away. She melted into the crowd. He gazed around to the fountain's pool behind, its light blue floor littered with silver and brass coins, and Lara did the same.

The water was beautifully clear, calling to her, a relief from the tenacious summer heat that was holding strong into September. Maybe it would wake her up, two espressos having had little impact on her jet-lag. She inched closer. At the very least, she could cup some water in her hand and wash her face or wet her hair as so many others were doing.

'*Mi scusi*,' she said, needling her way through and down the steps. Simply by chance, she found herself a few steps from the old man, who sat quietly, his head bent. She kept her eyes averted, conscious she'd been staring at him.

At the edge of the pool, the water reflected the clouds in the sky above. She cupped her hands under the water then threw it over her hair. It trickled down the back of her neck. She breathed deeply.

I am in Rome.

It was ludicrous.

Lara splashed herself some more, then straightened and reached into her bag for three gold euro coins. She turned and threw them, one at a time, over her shoulder. The first to ensure her return. The second to bring new romance into her life. The third to guarantee marriage. She imagined that each landed in the water with a tiny *plink*. Undoubtedly the ritual she'd read about online was all rubbish, but it did seem to be the thing to do.

Nearby, the old man rested his cane against his thin leg. He moved his veiny right hand over to join his left. With great gentleness, he touched the gold ring on his finger.

Lara watched, sadness welling, her emotions always just under the surface. He pulled the ring easily off his bony finger and lifted it to his eyes, studying it as though reading an inscription. Then he kissed

the ring and flung it back over his shoulder. It made barely a splash before sinking to the bottom of the pool, just one more shiny object among hundreds of others.

Lara lurched forward, leaning over the edge, splashing into the water, trying to catch sight of the ring. But it was hopeless.

‘Your ring!’ She turned to him, bending to his level. He faced her, his eyes blue and bright, though he seemed to look right through her.

‘Why did you do that?’ She searched the water again, her eyes darting. Tourists with backpacks and bulky cameras jostled her and tried to wedge between them to pose for photos.

‘Leave it,’ the old man muttered.

She opened her mouth to argue but stopped; he had clearly done it deliberately and she had no right to tell him what to do. But, still. It seemed wrong.

‘Leave it,’ he repeated, with a British accent.

‘You’re English!’ She squatted down beside his knees, looking up into his face. ‘We’ve still got time to find someone who can help us get your ring back, if you want to.’

‘No.’

‘They collect the money every day. Someone will be able to get it. There’s a policeman over there. He’s busy right now but there’ll be another. We need to report it if you’re going to get it back.’

‘Are you deaf? I said no. I wouldn’t have thrown it if I wanted to keep it.’

Lara was taken aback. ‘I heard you.’

The lines on the man’s face were deep and there was a shake in the hand that held the cane at his knee. She didn’t know if these things were normal, or if it was because he was angry, or maybe even because of the heat. She straightened to scan the crowd for his assistant, but couldn’t see her anywhere. She lowered herself to the man’s level again, this time resting on the edge of the pool, angling her body towards his.

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‘Where is your . . . person, the woman who was with you when you arrived?’

He looked at her sharply. She assumed he was wondering how long she’d been watching him, and discomfort prickled under her cotton shirt along with beads of sweat. She forged on regardless. ‘Is she a relative? A carer? Can I call someone for you?’

The man looked away from her; she’d been dismissed.

‘Okay,’ she said, ‘I’ll leave you alone.’

She stood and walked away, feeling the air hit the backs of her legs where they’d been sweating on her uncomfortable perch. Sidestepping and ducking through the crowd, she reached the very edge of the throng, over near the gelateria, and turned for one last look.

He was still alone, a small, solitary, vulnerable figure; she couldn’t leave him there until she was sure he’d be alright.

She kept her eyes on him, letting them roam occasionally to look for the young woman who’d disappeared, or to wave away yet another street vendor trying to sell her bottles of water or a selfie stick. Hordes of people hustled her from her spot as they ordered their gelato. But still she hovered.

It was only after the heat had risen into mid-morning and the crowds thickened more, when the old man had wiped the sweat from his brow and temples, once he’d started to look up and stiffly position himself to peer first to the left and then to the right, when he’d checked his phone several times, and when he’d made two attempts to get to his feet, his hand shaking terribly on his cane, that Lara pushed her way back through the crowds, down the steps and to his side.

He looked up at her and closed his eyes for a moment as if trying to control his frustration.

‘Let me help you,’ she said, in a tone that made clear there would be no arguing.

‘If you must,’ he said softly.

2

Far out, he's not a lost dog.

Lara smiled at Hilary's text message. It would be late in the evening at home in Brisbane, but her friend was still trying to wrangle her three children into bed and had texted Lara for some moral support. It had been either that or vodka, she'd said. So Lara had told her about Samuel.

You can't just take an old man home to your apartment in Rome. Now there's a sentence I never thought I'd say.

But he needed help.

Lara turned on the air conditioning in the living room. She'd already put it on for Samuel in the bedroom. The old man had grudgingly lain down on the queen-sized bed.

It was crazy hot in the city, his carer had disappeared—and had taken all the

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money from his wallet—and
I couldn't think straight in the crowd.
He looked in danger of collapsing.
I had to do something.

So you just bundled him into a taxi and
took him home?

Pretty much. It felt like an emergency
or something.

Something like finding a dehydrated, weak kitten abandoned on the side of the road. A kitten with a fierce tongue, as it turned out. Her new house guest was none too pleased that his paid carer had filched all his cash. But after an initial burst of outrage over the theft, Samuel had deflated, apologised for his obscenities and allowed Lara to take him by the elbow and help him into a taxi, where he sat in silence till they got to the flat.

Lara could have tried to call a doctor, but she didn't know anything about the medical, welfare or aged-care systems in Italy and she certainly didn't have enough Italian to work it out quickly.

You're such a kind person.

Lara took a moment to consider Hilary's summation of her personality. It was generous, really, given she'd handed Hilary her resignation notice out of the blue, without enough time for her friend—pretty much her only friend these days—to find a replacement for Lara's role as property manager in her boutique real estate agency. But there'd been no time; she'd had to get as far away from Brisbane as she could.

In reality, it was no great loss for Lara. She'd only taken the job last year because she needed the money, it was local and part-time, and she hadn't wanted anything too taxing. Unfortunately, chasing rent, filling in forms and delivering eviction notices had been slowly killing her. The job was filled with conflict, which made her queasy and sleepless (well, *more* sleepless) and made her scratch at

the inside of her left wrist until it was red and raw. The only good thing about the job was that she'd made a new friend in Hilary, her first friend in a long time. Plus the money she'd earned had largely gone into her bank account and stayed there, meaning she could now be here in Italy with no pressing financial worries. She had a bit of time up her sleeve to work out a proper plan.

Despite Lara's abrupt and unexplained departure, Hilary, bless her, still seemed to love her. Although Hilary didn't know everything about Lara, she knew enough. Her eyes had quickly spotted the red claw marks on Lara's wrist when she came to say goodbye, and she had asked no questions.

I've got to go. The kids are destroying the house. Text me updates.

Lara looked around. What was she doing? She'd only arrived at this flat around ten last night. It was a great Airbnb apartment, on the top floor of a copper-coloured five-storey building. It had an expansive balcony running down one side, and her host had taken her out there to show her the sea of lights, with the dome of St Peter's immediately recognisable nearby.

He'd shown her where everything was and how to use the numerous keys to the lift door, which opened right into the apartment, and the ones to the metal grate doors that opened onto the balcony, and the gates at the front of the building. As soon as he left, she'd collapsed into a deep, exhausted sleep.

But right now there was no sign of jet-lagged weariness, because adrenaline had spiked her blood. What had she done? What was she going to do with the elderly man resting in the bedroom?

She pulled shut the large wooden-framed windows against the heat outside. She was just considering phoning Sunny, waking her up and asking for advice when a sound startled her.

'I, er . . .'

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Lara turned to see Samuel in the hall, stooping, one hand on the wall to prop him up.

‘Oh, hi, I thought you were having a rest.’ She stepped towards him till she was within reaching distance in case he fell.

‘I need help,’ he said. His gaze was directed at the floor, whether from embarrassment or because it was just physically easier she wasn’t sure. She winced, looking at him. It must be so uncomfortable, painful even, to have that sort of curvature in your spine.

‘What can I do?’ she asked, uneasy. She had no idea about aged care. Was he hungry? Did he need help to go to the toilet? Had he wet the bed?

Until two days ago when she left Brisbane, she’d been living with her mother and sister, helping to raise Sunny’s children, Daisy and Hudson. With those two kids around, there wasn’t a bodily fluid she hadn’t wiped up at one point or another. But could she do the same for an elderly stranger?

‘I need to get home,’ he said.

‘Oh, of course.’ *Relief*. ‘I can get us a taxi, or an Uber. I’ll come with you,’ she said. She would make sure he got home safely and then leave him be.

‘My home is in Chianti,’ he said, lifting his chin to make eye contact. It was a strong chin; his face had good bones beneath that papery skin. The colour of his eyes, even at his age, was stunning.

‘Okay, great,’ she said, reaching for her phone so she could book the Uber car.

‘Chianti is south of Florence,’ Samuel said.

‘Florence?’

‘I came down to Rome on the train this morning. Reeba came with me. I hired her through an agency in Florence. She’s from Algeria, a student on a gap year, travelling her way over to the US, or so I was told.’ He paused. ‘I didn’t realise she’d use my trip to Rome as her passage to get one step closer.’

'I'm so sorry that happened to you,' Lara said. 'It's very unfair and not your fault—'

He cut her off. 'The theft is an insult, but not my biggest problem. I need to get home by this evening. I'm needed there.'

'Are you sure? You've had a shock and an already stressful day by the sounds of it.' She inched a chair closer to him while she talked.

He huffed at that but leaned further into the wall.

'I . . .' He started to speak, then closed his eyes as if the idea of asking for help was excruciating. 'I need help to get to Termini and then find an ATM so I can pay you for a cab. But I also need help to walk,' he said, the words bitter.

'Do you think it's wise to get on the train again today? It takes a couple of hours or so to get from Rome to Florence, doesn't it? Train stations are crowded and tiring, in my experience. Is there anyone who could pick you up from the station at the other end? Do you have some family, a neighbour, a friend . . . ?'

'No one,' he said, haltingly, as though only just realising the true difficulty that lay ahead of him, having to manage on his own. His words hung in the air.

No one.

Sadness washed over her. She had no knowledge of his life, of course, of how or why he'd ended up so alone, and certainly no idea why he would come to Rome for nothing more than to throw away his wedding ring. But here he was, a vulnerable man who needed help, certainly, but also one with fierce determination to get on with his life, no matter how challenging it might be. She respected that. She wanted to help him get home again. It was just that right now, she was a stranger in a strange land. She had no idea how to catch a train here, let alone drive on Italian roads. She had no connections here. No home of her own. No food in the house. No plan.

But she looked at Samuel, at the tremor in his legs as they fought to hold him up. She remembered him throwing his ring into the

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Trevi Fountain and wondered what awful thing had happened to make him do that.

‘I’ll drive you,’ she said, allowing the words to tumble out of her mouth before she could think too much about them.

He looked at her again, decades of pride still fighting with the greater need to accept help. Even he must have known he was reaching his limits for the day.

‘I could hire a car, um, I suppose. I’ve got nothing else to do, really, no plans or anything. I haven’t even unpacked yet. Not that I need to, as I organised myself into a carry-on bag only. I’d hoped to see more of Italy and head up to Tuscany anyway,’ she went on, nervous but determined to help. ‘I could start my sightseeing today.’ She smiled, encouraging him to accept her motives.

Samuel looked back down and nodded once. ‘I’ll pay you, of course, for your time, the petrol—’

‘No. Definitely not. Consider it my good deed for the day.’ She wiggled her shoulders in some sort of attempt at jolliness, whether for his benefit or hers she wasn’t sure.

Samuel gave a small shrug.

Lara manoeuvred the chair closer to him still. ‘It will take me a bit of time to organise a car and finish up here, so rest your legs while you’re waiting, if you like.’

She was relieved when Samuel lowered himself heavily into the chair. She pulled her phone from her pocket to google rental cars in Rome. Samuel would know the way, she assumed, but she’d better get a satellite navigation system to help. And she’d need more coffee before getting behind the wheel to tackle Italian roads. As well as the challenge of driving on the opposite side of the road, during her few short hours in the city she’d witnessed the loose observation of traffic rules.

Oh dear. Lara tried to conjure up Sunny’s capable, practical nature and fearless attitude to life. Or even her mother’s organisational skills

and steady calm under pressure. Any of those qualities would be welcome right now.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, counted to five on the inhale, six on the exhale. Then she gave herself a rousing internal speech. She could do it. She *had* to. This man was depending on her. She was his lifeline! She was practically a *hero*, for goodness' sake, the one thing standing between him and . . .

'Wait, what is at home that you need to get back to, if you don't mind my asking?'

'Goats.' He smiled for the first time since she'd met him. 'I need to get home to milk my goats.'



Goats!

She was driving the scariest roads she'd been on in her life, Fiats whizzing past her at sickening speed, buses and trucks overtaking her with rude hand gestures, all for goats with huge udders waiting to be milked. Sitting beside her, Samuel had refused to put on his seatbelt, claiming it wasn't the done thing in Italy.

She was on her own in a foreign country, making it up as she went along, Samuel sitting tensely and mostly silently beside her in the passenger seat, occasionally arguing with the prissy navigation system, which called itself Liesel. According to Samuel, Liesel was intent on taking them through industrial estates and traffic congestion on roads that any local with half a brain knew you should avoid.

They made it out of Rome proper and onto the motorway, where hopefully they could stay all the way to Chianti. They settled into an easier rhythm and Lara even managed to peek occasionally at the scenery sweeping by, blue-grey mountain ranges and endless fields of crops broken up by rows of cypress trees. They climbed the winding mountain roads towards Chianti as the day stretched

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into late afternoon. At last they arrived at a steel automatic gate and Samuel gave her the numbers for the keypad so they could turn into the driveway.

Lara's heart rate slowed and she loosened her white-knuckled grip on the wheel as they crunched slowly over the gravel and pulled up next to his seventeenth-century stone villa and parked under the trees.

'Oh, wow,' she murmured, admiring the tall peach-washed walls and the red geraniums spilling out of terracotta urns.

Samuel struggled with the car door.

'Here, let me help you,' she said, unclipping her seatbelt and jumping out, rushing around to his side.

'I can do it,' he snapped, stabbing at the ground with his cane.

'I'm sure you can, but let me help anyway,' she said, reaching under his armpit and helping him to his feet. 'You must be tired.'

Once he was steady, she stepped back, but not too far, smiling at him. In truth, she felt like a freaking champion right now, a tiny girl who'd conquered a mountain.

He looked at her. She looked at him, waiting for something, anything from him to acknowledge her tremendous achievement. But nothing came.

'Well,' she said, squirming inside. She wanted to make sure he got into the house okay; also she very much wanted an invitation to take a look inside the two-storey villa and at the grounds, and maybe even to meet his goats. She also needed to visit the bathroom after all those coffees.

Hell, an invitation to stay for dinner wouldn't be too much to ask, would it? After all, she'd just dropped everything to bring him here. Her adrenaline was falling fast, and suddenly she was exhausted.

She reprimanded herself silently for thinking he owed her anything. She'd come here willingly—in fact, she'd practically bullied him into letting her help him. She'd given her help with no strings attached.

It was just that the view from this villa—the strict rows of grapevines, the lines of cypress trees spearing into the sky, the grove of

olive trees nearby, the blue mountains and the hazy sky—was exactly like every movie about Tuscany Lara had ever seen. She was dying to stay a bit longer.

‘Are you going to stand there all day?’ Samuel asked.

‘Oh, right, of course.’ She stepped to the side and automatically reached for him as he began to walk.

‘I’m fine,’ he said, shrugging off her hand.

She shut the car door behind him with a click. Just then, she heard some cranky bleating.

‘I’m coming,’ Samuel called, shuffling across the grass and heading around the back of the villa towards the noisy goats. Some irritated banging on the stable gate came in reply. They sounded stropic, rather like their owner.

‘Can I come and meet your goats?’ Lara asked, excited now to see them. After all, they were the reason she was here.

Samuel didn’t answer her. Lara trotted behind him, her travelling boots steady on the ground. She could see the animals, two brown bodies with straight horns, standing up on their hind legs with their front hooves all the way over the top of the wonky wooden gate. Their barn was a homemade job for sure, with odd angles and gaps between boards, and a rusty metal roof.

As Samuel arrived at the barn, the goats’ insulted bleating reduced to mellow grumbling. Lara was instantly seduced by their sweet faces.

‘Oh, look at them!’ They stretched out their soft noses and lips to inspect her hands. Their yellow eyes with horizontal pupils were inquisitive. Their coats were the colour of maple syrup, with black legs and faces. She looked down and could see their full udders waiting to be milked; that didn’t look comfortable at all.

Samuel struggled with the wooden slide bolt. ‘Blast!’

‘Here,’ Lara said, jumping in to help. This time, Samuel didn’t argue. She was pleased to see he had a lot more colour in his face now that he was back home.

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The wooden slide snagged, then released, and the gate swung open. The goats cheered and made a dash for freedom, shouldering Lara out of the way.

She squealed. 'No, no, no, come back,' she pleaded helplessly as they skipped away, tails in the air. One of them lifted her head, sniffed, then let out a loud snort.

'I'm so sorry,' she began, but Samuel entered the barn, leaving his cane at the gate, and lunched around collecting buckets and a three-legged milking stool.

'They'll come back,' he said. 'Leave them.'

The goats were happily stationed under an olive tree, plucking at its green-grey leaves, wagging their tails with glee.

It was evening now and the light was falling, but not quickly. It was a beautiful soft light, making everything appear muted and romantic.

'Here.' Samuel thrust a metal bucket at her. 'Rattle that. They'll come running.'

She took the bucket and watched as he set himself up on the stool near a squarish wooden structure set out from the wall with an odd shape cut from the middle. It was some sort of vice, she realised, something to clamp around the goat's neck and keep her still while she was milked.

'What are their names?' she asked, reaching into the bucket and scooping up cylindrical pellets of food.

'Meg and Willow,' he said.

She turned around and shook the bucket, the pellets rattling against the metal sides. 'Meg! Willow! Come for dinner!'

She didn't need to ask twice. Both goats galloped back, their pendulous ears flapping as their hooves drummed across the earth. The one with the pink collar got through the gate first and shoved her head into the bucket, nearly knocking it out of Lara's hands. The other goat, this one with a blue collar, wasn't far behind and rammed her body against the first goat so she could get to the pellets too.

‘Over here,’ Samuel said, pointing to a small trough on the other side of the wooden vice.

Lara wrestled the bucket away from the goats—with more difficulty than she would have liked to admit—and poured some pellets into the trough. Both goats followed and tried to get their heads through the vice.

Samuel tutted at them. ‘Only one goat in the crush,’ he said, drawing the blue-collared one away. The first goat calmed and ate from the trough in peace. Samuel pulled a metal lever and the crush closed loosely around the animal’s neck. The other settled into eating from the bucket beside Lara’s legs. She ran her fingers through the animal’s hair.

‘Gosh, they love their food,’ she mused.

‘They’re Italian.’

Lara laughed out loud at Samuel’s dry humour. ‘Which Italian mamma is this?’ she asked.

‘Willow,’ Samuel said.

‘Hi, Willow,’ Lara said, scratching her neck. To her delight, the goat murmured back as if saying hello.

Lara looked up, beaming, to see Samuel watching her.

‘She likes you,’ he said, a note of surprise in his voice.

‘I like her,’ she said, running the flat of her hand down Willow’s spine. Willow wagged her tail and let out a noise that was almost a purr—a big, creaky goat purr.

‘Did you hear that?’ Lara said, amazed.

Samuel sniffed and turned back to Meg, placing a bucket under her udder. ‘The chickens need feeding too,’ he said.

Lara shook her head at the audacity of this old man. He had his back to her now, his hands working rhythmically and expertly under the goat to send needles of milk spitting into the bucket at his feet. He rested his head heavily against Meg’s side, using her for support and working by feel, not sight.

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Lara opened her mouth to say something, to get him to acknowledge she'd just made a huge effort to save his backside, but stopped. Instead, she inhaled the smell of the grassy hay at the back of the stable, wood smoke somewhere in the air, and the distinctive but not unpleasant aroma of goat.

'Fine,' she said, with a touch of petulance, and left the stable in search of the chickens. She couldn't imagine they'd be hard to find. And sure enough, as she walked down the hill, passing the house, there was a large chicken coop, partially built into the hillside, with its roof the same height as the top of the hill. She could hear them as she got closer, murmuring and clucking, settling themselves for the night. The coop door was in the same rustic, handmade style as the goat barn, and stood wide open.

She assumed the door needed to be shut to protect them from foxes and roaming dogs, and dragged it closed behind her. It dragged over the ground. She could fix that, she realised; she'd just need a shovel to dig out some earth to give it room to swing.

A few chickens of varying colours strutted out from their roost, clucking with interest to meet the new person, their feet making swishy noises through the straw.

'Dinner's coming.'

She looked around for where the feed might be and saw a toolshed nearby, also built into the slope of the hill. She wandered down to it, simultaneously aware of her need for a bathroom and in complete awe of the view, and stepped inside. She paused in the dimness, waiting for her eyes to adjust. She could make out various shapes of tools and hardware, a shovel and two metal drums. Bingo.

Inside the first drum she found a bag of mixed grain. It was heavy, but she pulled it up as high as she could to check the packaging. She noted the Italian word for chicken, *pollo*, and a picture of a rooster. She worked a metal scoop into the grain, then straightened and turned.

There, standing in the doorway, was a man.

Lara jumped, one hand flying to her chest, and spilled some chicken feed on the concrete floor.

The man held up a silhouetted hand in apology.

Lara recovered herself, embarrassed. 'It's okay, you just startled me—too much coffee.' Regaining her wits, she quickly assessed the man as best she could in the low light. He was a bit taller than her, with curly hair pulled up loosely in a man bun at the back and soft facial hair. He was possibly mid-thirties, a few years older than her, though the beard made it tricky to tell. He was dressed in a holey old green t-shirt and shorts, with blue socks and rubber shoes.

'You sp-sp-sp—' he paused, his eyes blinking and his head bobbing, lost in a moment of rigid stuttering, '—speak English?'

'Si,' she said. She'd dropped her eyes while he struggled with his words, but now raised her gaze to meet his dark eyes.

'Matteo,' he said.

'Lara,' she said, and held out her free hand. '*Ciao*.'

'*Ciao*.' He took her hand in his. It was warm and strong but not too strong, and roughened, but not too rough.

'I am looking f-f-for Samuel,' he said.

'He's with the goats.' Lara gestured up the hill.

'Are you the n-n-n-new *badante*?' Matteo asked.

'*Badante*?' She had no idea what that was. 'No, I just . . .' God, how could she explain the day? 'I gave him a lift home.'

Matteo tilted his head as though not sure what she was saying.

'I drove him home. In the car.'

'Ah, si' He didn't seem in any hurry to finish this conversation and she was trapped here, by virtue of the fact that he was blocking the doorway. She glanced down at the scoop of chicken feed she was holding, wishing he would move out of the way. She was wrung out and stiff from driving and still had to feed the chickens before she could find a loo.

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But since he wasn't moving, she asked, 'How do you know Samuel?'
'He is my great-uncle.'

'Uncle? But he told me he had no family,' she said, suspicious now, on edge.

Matteo lifted his shoulders defensively.

She returned the motion, feeling spontaneously proprietorial towards Samuel. She'd only known him for half a day but she felt like she'd rescued him—from a thief, dehydration, falls in the street, perhaps further robbery or even assault, hunger—when no one else was there to do it. He'd been defenceless. What sort of family left their elderly relatives to travel across the country with unscrupulous carers?

'Do you know he was in Rome today, all alone?'

Matteo frowned.

'He was robbed. I had to drive him back.'

Matteo lifted his chin, considering her. Then, as her unexpected surge of self-righteousness fell away and she realised he was likely in no way at fault, she felt starkly vulnerable.

No one knows where I am.

A cold sweat beaded on her neck.

'I'm sorry,' she said, wanting to take back her words, unoffend this man—this man who had her trapped in a dim shed halfway around the world from anyone she knew.

Stupid, stupid Lara. You should know better.

Matteo opened his mouth as if to respond, but just then there was a crash from up the hill, bleating from the goats, and a yell of pain from Samuel.

Matteo turned and ran up the hill. Lara dropped the chicken feed and followed suit.

Inside the barn, Samuel lay on the ground, the buckets of milk spilt over the straw bedding. He was on his back, holding his wrist, his face screwed up in anguish.

3

Sunny

Sunny Foxleigh—or ‘Foxy’, as more than one boyfriend had tagged her, thinking he was the first genius to come up with it—lay awake in her bed, her two young children asleep in the room next door. She could hear Hudson’s snoring through the wall. It clearly didn’t bother Daisy. Her daughter could sleep through an earthquake, her earnest, busy mind probably just as busy during sleep, with no time for distractions.

Sunny covered her face with her hands, trying to will sleep to come. The rough edges of paint on her fingers brushed against her nose.

The handle of Eliza’s door *scratched* and the hinges creaked. Soft footsteps padded along the passage. Her mother obviously couldn’t sleep either.

Sunny flung off the bedcover—a light blanket, all that was needed in September in Brisbane—and followed Eliza to the kitchen, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the light. Her mother was reaching

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up on tiptoe, into the top cupboard where the tea and coffee were kept, along with the Milo which had to be stored out of reach to stop Hudson eating it with a spoon.

Eliza jumped as Sunny approached, and clutched the tea canister to her chest.

‘Couldn’t sleep?’ Sunny asked, grateful to have someone else awake in the middle of the night. It made her own anxiety about *him* easier to bear.

Eliza squinted, lacking her glasses. ‘I was worrying about Lara, alone on the other side of the world.’

Sunny’s shoulders slumped. ‘Me too, among other things. That, and Hudson’s snoring.’

‘It’s rattling the walls,’ Eliza said, moving to the kettle and flicking the switch. She held up the tea canister, questioning.

‘No, thanks.’ Sunny leaned against the bench, catching sight of the red paint stains across her navy cotton pants. She didn’t care much for clothes and had never been one for pyjamas, happy to simply fall into bed in whatever she was wearing. She’d slept quite soundly on many couches in many people’s homes wearing her jeans. Sleep had never been an issue for her. Until the past week, anyway.

Sunny did love the winter pyjama sets on her children, though. Somehow, her estimation of her mothering efforts inched up a notch when she got the end part of the day down pat—dinner, bath, pyjamas, teeth, stories, bed. Regardless of the chaos two active five-year-olds could create throughout the day, the world was restored to some sort of order in the blissful, relieving silence that fell once they slipped into dreamland.

And then Hudson started to snore.

She studied Eliza’s hair as her mother moved about the kitchen. It was flattened on one side and Sunny wondered if she could suggest a newer, trendier haircut—something shorter, a close crop that showed all the different colours of ageing with pride—rather

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than the slightly too long misty-grey bob Eliza had been wearing for so many years.

She blinked, rousing herself, and voiced her greatest fear.

‘Do you think he knows?’

The kettle clicked off and steam floated gently across Sunny’s neck.

Eliza looked away, jiggling her chamomile teabag.

‘God, I hope not.’

4

Lara

Lara woke at dawn, opening her eyes to see the thick wooden beams that held up the terracotta roof tiles above. A welcome cool breeze blew through the open double doors of the villa's balcony, shifting aside the curtain to give her a glimpse of a sky not long emerged from darkness. The unfamiliar house was quiet. She eased herself up off the achingly hard mattress and stood to stretch and massage out the kinks and knots. Her feet were silent as she crossed the floor and stepped out onto the balcony to drink in the sight of dawn over the Tuscan valley.

Yesterday evening, before a goat had darted under Samuel's feet and sent him to the ground, she'd only been able to capture the view in broad brushstrokes—mountains, trees, vineyards. Now, with the sky turning a gentle rose colour, she could pick out the details of the many properties that made up the bowl of the valley in front of her. From her vantage point up on the ridge, she could see a mustard-coloured villa to her right that loomed over its yellow fields, next to

a white church with a belltower. To her left, four white villas nestled close together, overlooking a slope planted with rows of green vines. On the other side of the valley, a road wound through clutches of ancient cypress trees, cars zooming between the trunks. And then there was the imposing villa up on the highest hill, a dull grey colour, neglected perhaps, but at least double the size of Samuel's.

She stood there for a moment, remembering all that had happened last night. Samuel's accident. The short trip to the hospital in the nearby village of Fiotti-in-Chianti, the three of them in her hire car because Matteo's truck was only a two-seater and someone (Matteo) had to sit beside Samuel to hold ice on his arm. The doctor telling Samuel he had a broken wrist and would have to stay in hospital overnight. In rapid Italian, with Matteo translating for Lara, the doctor had lectured Samuel about needing help at home, telling him that he couldn't go home without someone to care for him. The word *badante* had come up several times.

Carer. The young woman Samuel had been with in Rome had been his *badante*. But she hadn't done a lot of caring as far as Lara could tell. Lara had stared at Matteo, waiting for him to say that he or someone else in the family could care for Samuel. But Matteo had turned away from her, murmuring something to Samuel. Samuel shook his head and patted Matteo's arm in reassurance.

'I can do it,' she'd heard herself say from the corner of the hospital room. Matteo's shoulders had dropped with relief; his eyes had softened.

Samuel had accepted. But only because he said it wasn't enough notice for the usual agency to help him and, besides, he would never trust them again after Reeba. Then he worried about his goats; they would need milking in the morning. So Matteo had said he would stay overnight at the villa and teach Lara how to milk.

As cute as they were, Lara was robustly horrified at the idea of having to milk the goats, but hoped she'd managed to hide that from Samuel.

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Through these conversations, she'd started to gather tiny pieces of information about Samuel's life. For the past fifteen years, since his wife had passed away, he'd slept in the downstairs bedroom, unable to ascend and descend the stairs safely anymore. Samuel had told them to find themselves rooms upstairs but not to go into the first bedroom on the right because that had been his and his wife's.

His wife's name was Assunta.

Now, with dawn's misty optimism moving gently across the balcony and into her bedroom, Lara was still coming to terms with the fact that she'd landed in Rome only a little over twenty-four hours before and had spontaneously offered to care for an elderly man in a four-hundred-year-old villa in Tuscany. The world sure moved fast when you weren't busy chasing late rental payments for Hilary, or watching *Dora the Explorer* and building skyscrapers with Daisy and Hudson. She missed them already.

When they'd left the hospital, around midnight, she had asked Matteo to drive. Too bad about the insurance risk for an unlisted driver; she could barely keep her eyes open. At the villa they'd climbed the stairs together, Matteo carrying Lara's bag for her. She was too tired to take in much, feeling as though she'd covered a week's worth of experiences in one day. They'd stopped at the top of the stairs, Matteo so close that she could smell the antibacterial soap he'd used to wash his hands at the hospital. The door of what must have been Samuel and his wife's bedroom was closed. She'd looked up from the round brass handle to Matteo's face. His dark eyes reflected the moonlight streaming through the window on the landing.

He broke eye contact first and stepped away. Her gaze followed his back as he moved to the other two bedrooms, switching on the lights inside.

'Your choice,' he said. She could see how weary he was too, his face pale.

'It doesn't matter, truly. I'm a stranger here. You pick one, please.'

Matteo shrugged and pointed at random. 'Thank you,' he said, holding her gaze for a moment. 'My u-un-cle was lucky you were there for him today.'

'You're welcome,' she said.

He passed her the bag. 'Well, goo-d-d-d night.'

'Night.'

Their bedrooms were on either side of the bathroom, which had a deep iron bathtub, some missing tiles and a dripping tap.

She should go there now, actually, and try to freshen up. She wheeled her whole carry-on bag to the bathroom, as it seemed easier than fishing around in it for what she needed.

Her mother had urged her to pack lightly. 'Sarah from work had her luggage go missing once on an overseas trip and it took three weeks for them to find it and forward it on,' Eliza had warned, sitting on the back steps of the house and watching Daisy and Hudson play in the sandpit under the leopard tree. 'She was home again before they found the suitcase. She'd spent her whole holiday without her clothes or medicines or shoes.'

Lara had been hanging out her washing, running through mental lists of things to organise before she left—copies of her passport and travel insurance, tiny bottles to take on the plane until she could find proper supplies in Italy, prescriptions filled and medicines packed, a doctor's letter, a good pair of travelling boots. Sunny had helped, booking her the apartment in Rome, printing out her flight itinerary and labelling her luggage. Lara's nerves had been bad that day, she remembered. A late season westerly had aggravated the raw skin on her wrist.

Later that night, Sunny had come to Lara's granny flat in the backyard while Lara had been laying out shirts, dresses and pants on her bed. Sunny's long blonde hair was piled on top of her head. She was wearing one of the many handmade aprons that she collected from op shops to wear while painting, preferring the softness of

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well-worn cotton to some hot, plastic material. Each piece became a work of art in its own right as layer after layer of paint splashes was added to it. That night, Sunny reached into the front pocket of the yellow gingham apron and presented her little sister with a tube of paw paw ointment for her wrist. That simple, caring touch had almost undone Lara. Her eyes had filled, but Sunny had taken her by the chin and spoken sternly to her.

‘You can do this, Sprout.’

Lara *had* done it. She’d got on the plane, and now here she was in a villa in the Tuscan hills.

She found a towel in the rickety wooden chest of drawers in her room, which stood below an oversized framed print of Raphael’s angels, and took it to the bathroom, where she showered, standing in the deep old tub, and cleaned her teeth. She dressed in a pair of ultra-light white cotton pants and her favourite flowing three-quarter-sleeved shirt. V-necks always served her well, making the most of her bounty—a bounty every woman on her mother’s side of the family shared, except for Sunny. Her older sister was slim and toned, with small breasts that were annoyingly perfect for every style of clothing.

In the mottled bathroom mirror, Lara looked weary and washed out, obvious shadows under her dark brown eyes. Her chestnut hair was wet from the shower, but she didn’t have a hairdryer, so all she could do was comb it out to air dry. She fished around in her toiletries bag for her tablets, which she took first thing every morning, and swallowed them with a handful of water.

Matteo’s bedroom door was still shut.

The concrete steps with the wrought-iron railing allowed her to go quietly downstairs—that was the beauty of a stone house as opposed to the Foxleighs’ wooden home back in Brisbane, which creaked and popped with movement day and night.

The staircase snaked fully back on itself so that when she reached the ground floor she was confused as to where they’d come in last

night. As she wandered, she got lost several times, with the house seeming to twist her around and send her out into yet another courtyard or entranceway. One door that seemed to lead to a bedroom actually opened onto what must have once been the receiving room, with huge double-wood doors to the outside and a marble fireplace.

A short hallway led to a large L-shaped living room, with several couches and a shiny black Steinway & Sons piano. The room's alcove held another deep fireplace, with green velvet upright chairs, footstools, walls lined with shelves of books, both Italian and English, on music, food and art, piles of sheet music, an old record player, a large tobacco pipe collection, metal servants' bells and red woven rugs. More doorways, more windows and more confusion for Lara. There seemed to be double wooden doors everywhere she turned, leading to yet another room or opening to the beautiful outdoors.

Beneath the house was a dusty, cluttered one-bedroom flat, with a spiral staircase leading up to the kitchen. And it was the kitchen that fired her imagination.

It was easy to visualise generations of women bathing babies in that wide stone sink, filling it up with just enough water for the baby to splash. They'd chop onions, garlic and tomatoes on a wide board on the wooden kitchen table. Maybe a dog lay on the terracotta tiles at their feet. A young girl, learning to cook alongside her mamma and nonna, would carry in potatoes and carrots, stored produce from the vegetable garden; perhaps she caught the baby's hands as he reached a little too far over the edge of the sink.

Another girl would be on the other side of the kitchen's half wall, bent over the fireplace where centuries of meals had been cooked. Maybe she'd be hanging a cast-iron pot over the flames and boiling water for those potatoes. From outside would come the sound of an axe falling rhythmically into logs, the sharp crack as the wood split; the son carried it inside, complaining that he was hungry.

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This was a home built for big families, life spilling out of every corner.

‘Buongiorno.’

Lara spun on the tiles, startled by Matteo’s sudden appearance—the silence of this house worked for others too. He stood tall and offered no smile.

‘Buongiorno,’ she managed to reply.

‘Is there c-c-coffee?’ he asked, coming closer to her. He was still in yesterday’s clothes, though his socks and shoes were missing. He peered around the kitchen.

They rummaged around in silence, looking for the coffee. Matteo found ground beans in a terracotta pot near the salt and pepper.

‘Thank God,’ he muttered.

Lara laughed. ‘You need a coffee?’

‘I cannot th-think straight without one. I make no sense until the caffeine has reached my b-b-brain.’

‘I think you’re doing okay,’ she said, with just the tiniest edge of flirtatiousness, she was appalled to note. She felt heat rush to her ears.

He looked at her sideways, just quickly, while spooning coffee into the pot. ‘Did you sleep well?’ he asked.

‘I did, thank you. I was so tired. I don’t think anything would have woken me.’

Matteo added water to the pot and set it on the stove. ‘I am very grateful that you are able to st . . . ay and h-h-help Samuel. I feel . . . not good enough that I am not able to do more.’

‘Do you work?’ she asked, then felt ridiculous. Of course he would have responsibilities, a job and maybe a family of his own.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘and there is no one else in the family who will help him.’

Lara wondered at his use of the word *will*. Was that intentional or a slip of translation? His English did seem exceptionally good. But families were complicated; she knew that better than most.

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‘I’m sorry if my uncle was less than gracious to you yesterday. He can be . . .’ Matteo rocked his head from side to side, a cheeky glint in his eye. ‘. . . I think the word is *contrary*?’

‘That’s probably the right word,’ she said, grinning in agreement. ‘Your English is excellent.’

‘I s-s-studied at university,’ he said, rubbing one eye with the palm of his hand, still struggling to fully wake up. Suddenly, he looked down at his clothes from yesterday. ‘I need to get changed. The coffee will be ready soon. Perhaps we should talk over breakfast.’

‘That sounds like a good idea,’ she said, and firmly told herself to ignore the fluttering of attraction she felt watching the back of his neck as he walked away. As if her life wasn’t complicated enough right now! Fantasies of romance were the last thing she needed.