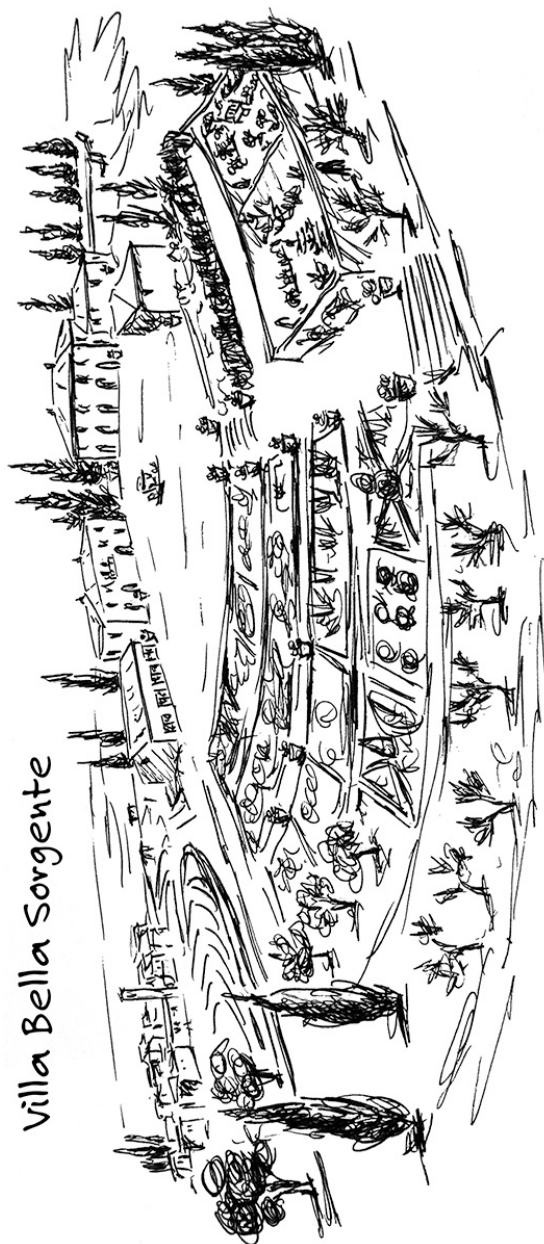


Ms Mia
and
Murder
at the
Italian
Villa



Jennifer Branch



Villa Bella Sorgente

Ms Mia
and
Murder
at the
Italian Villa



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Ms. Mia and Murder at the Italian Villa

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A Grand Adventure

"Are you sure that seat's all right?" Judith fussed over her daughter, as the private jet roared high above the Atlantic Ocean. "I think there's a draft coming from that vent. Wouldn't you be more comfortable next to me, dear?" She patted the empty place by her in invitation.

Francesca refrained from rolling her eyes, but couldn't stifle her exasperated sigh. "I'm fine, Mom. Just tired." She pulled the cozy plaid blanket up to her neck, covering her ankle length flowered dress. Her wavy dark hair effectively hid her face from her family, shining like a raven's wing in the soft lights of the plane. "I'm all tucked in, see? I'm just going to sleep the rest of the trip." Deliberately closing her eyes, she shut out further conversation.

"If you're sure, darling," Judith turned to Mia, shrugging her socialite thin shoulders in apology. "I would have expected Francesca to be more social, since you're letting us borrow your company jet, but she's still so upset about everything." Her pink lips compressed.

"Maybe she's just tired," Diane suggested. Her sensible gray slacks were singularly unflattering to her silhouette, and a baggy paisley polyester blouse was unsuccessful at camouflaging her comfortably plump stomach, made worse by her slumped shoulders. Her only concession to makeup was a brief slash of a neutral lipstick, but her ruddy cheeks needed no blush. Rather, a touch of powder would have benefited them greatly. She leaned forward and sipped her drink, her no nonsense, thick brown hair swinging with the movement, and her soft brown eyes worried. Soothing the older woman at a hushed tone, almost below the noise of the engine, she added, "Francesca hasn't been getting much rest lately. Just let her sleep, while she can."

"Francesca will be fine, once she adjusts to the situation," Judith pronounced with authority. "Better to find out her husband's a thief now, than after they have children. It's a lot easier to get rid of him now." She raised an elegantly arched dark eyebrow, causing faint lines to briefly appear in her smooth oval face.

Mia remembered when Judith had been stunningly beautiful, the belle of every gathering. Now, she was best described as well preserved.

"Can you imagine?" Judith complained. "I'm so grateful she can get a divorce from that fraud before he

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goes to jail. She's back home safe with me, just as if nothing had ever happened. We're lucky everything came out when it did—they were only married a few months, after all. It will be easy for her to forget him, after she gets over the shock." Her beautifully manicured hands clenched on the chair arms, then deliberately relaxed. She added in carefully modulated tones, "We all need to simply forget about the entire distasteful incident."

Diane added sadly, her wide mouth twisting, "She did love Ryan very much, poor girl." She glanced at Francesca, quickly averting her eyes before the young woman felt her stare. "And they're both so young."

"Love a thief?" Judith said sharply, superciliously arching her eyebrow. "Nonsense. She's much better off without him." She repeated, as though convincing herself, "Much better off."

Mia quickly looked over at Francesca, who appeared to be fast asleep under her dark curtain of hair. She hoped the girl wasn't listening to their discussion of her disastrous marriage—she'd been through a lot in the last month. She didn't need to hear it all rehashed.

"I'd hope I brought her up better than that," Judith added. "My daughter would never stoop so low as to stay married to a thief, and one who stole from the family, at that." She nodded decisively, the matter settled to her satisfaction. "She'll forget he ever existed. I won't let him ruin any more of her life than he already has."

Mia said tactfully, "A big family vacation will take her mind off her troubles. Italy in early summer is too beautiful to worry about anything."

Diane's eager smile widened in anticipation. "I was so grateful that Kathleen set everything up for us in Italy—it's hard to plan a really interesting trip in a foreign country, when I don't speak the language. All the guides steer you to where everyone else goes. I want to completely immerse myself in the real Italy." She chuckled, a soft round sound, "I've been practicing my Italian like crazy. I'm sure I'll pronounce everything wrong, but I'm going to try, at least!"

"Diane, you're wasting your time," Judith said, with amusement, her brow lifting. "The Italians will all speak English, since they deal with tourists every day." Judith picked up her book, a must-read from some celebrity's reading list. She turned a page desultorily, marking travel time.

Diane shrugged uncertainly, saying to Mia, "I know it doesn't really matter, I just think it's polite to be able to say hello and thank you to people."

Mia agreed warmly, "Ciao and grazie go a long way towards making new friends. I always think it's just polite to learn a few essential words when you're visiting a country."

"Such as 'where's the bathroom?'" Judith sniffed a little, leaning towards Mia, finger marking her reading place. "You never do know what kind of place you're going to actually get when you're booking overseas. I've heard some dreadful stories," Judith added. "But

Kathleen set it all up for us when I told her we desperately needed a family vacation to distract Francesca. I absolutely insisted on seeing her photos of the place." She tapped her finger on her book with satisfaction, "Kathleen's, mind you, not the rental agency's. Her photos looked like the place would be all right. The Villa Bella Sorgente, she said. It makes such a difference, knowing she checked it out for us." She paused and added, "Of course, Kathleen doesn't," she coughed, "exactly go by the same standards as we do. She's lived too much in uncivilized places, for her job." She looked significantly at Mia, her still beautiful, wide set dark eyes skeptical. "I really can't answer for what little problems might arise."

"Italy is always beautiful in the summer, isn't it?" Mia said cheerfully. "I absolutely love the Veneto—some of the best food and scenery in Italy. Those stunning ancient towns." She sighed, "I'm looking forward to immersing myself in the real Italy also."

Diane beamed enthusiastically, "And flying there by private jet, thanks to Mia! Such a wonderful start to our adventure." Her red lips curved with happiness, and she lightly stroked the butter soft leather armrest. Her unpolished nails were neatly cut across broad, capable fingers. She added ingeniously to Mia, "I've never flown by private jet before. It feels like utter luxury."

"Such a convenience, not having to deal with all the airport annoyances." Judith's expensively dark head nodded graciously to Mia, her exquisitely made up eyes showing no expression—and no wrinkles whatsoever.

Mia thought to herself that Judith had a very clever botox doctor. Of course, Judith's expressions had always been micro, restrained by her natural reserve.

"It's so nice you could join us as well, dear. Quite like the old days." Judith smoothly recrossed her legs, the heavy silk of her ivory designer pantsuit swishing. She tapped her book with a discretely pink nail, darting a concerned glance at Francesca's apparently sleeping figure.

"I was happy to come along; I haven't seen Kathleen in ages. The company plane would just have been deadheading to Italy in this direction—much better that we go along for the ride." Mia smiled benevolently, looking around the sleek Gulfstream IV jet with pleasure. "I'm looking forward to our Italian adventure. I haven't been in," she thought a minute, "almost two years. Too long to stay away."

"Francesca needs a nice long trip, surrounded by her family." Judith looked lovingly at the sleeping figure. "She's been through such a lot, thanks to that brute. My lawyers can handle her divorce while she's here. She can sign on the dotted line when she gets back, not have to deal with the—" she paused, "messiness." She leaned towards Mia, lowering her voice. "She's handled it all for weeks, boxing up her things and packing up wedding presents. Crying her eyes out the whole time, my poor little girl. She needed to get away from all that. Take some time to recover." She nodded in emphasis. "My lawyers assure me it will all be finished by the time we

return. She and I can go back to our old life without any further problems."

Francesca's dark lashes lay lushly on almost translucent pale cheeks, closed eyes ringed in purple circles. Her soft dark hair fell around her face. If she wasn't actually asleep from utter exhaustion, she was giving a very realistic imitation. Mia said aloud, "She'll feel like herself again after two weeks in sunny Italy. We'll all be better for it." She patted Judith's elegantly manicured hand sympathetically. "Don't worry, dear, delicious cuisine, and lots of walks through those charming old towns will perk her right up."

"I agree," Judith said, her narrow shoulders relaxing slightly. "And I've organized everything for our fresh start when she gets back home. I've arranged for her things to be moved to my guest house. They're repainting it in her favorite colors while we're gone." Her pink lips uncompressed into a small smile, and she smoothed her silk slacks, resettling their elegant drape to her satisfaction. "It will be just like she never left home."

Diane frowned, but said nothing.

"I can't wait to see Kathleen again," Mia said, redirecting the conversation. "She's been working in Padua for how long?"

"She's been there for about a year," Diane told her. "We've missed her quite a lot." Her expressive mouth twisted minutely. "I always looked forward to her coming for Sunday dinner. She'd have such interesting stories to tell us about her projects." She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

"Something to do with olive trees?"

"Oh, yes, an awful fungus that's attacking the olive trees in the Veneto. Such a terrible shame, some of those trees are a thousand years old, can you imagine? Kathleen's been putting in some long hours, but she tells me they're making some real breakthroughs," Diane said proudly. "She thinks they'll be able to save most of them with a new spray they're testing."

"That's a relief," Mia said. "The olive trees are such an integral part of Italy. And the villa is near Padua?"

"Yes, a tiny little town named Belruscello. It's not even on most maps as more than a crossroads. Kathleen's always so clever about that kind of thing," Diane added with a smile. "She finds the most interesting places to stay, in the middle of nowhere. Remember that house on the beach in Puerto Rico? That was lovely, like a dream."

"Like a sanitation nightmare," Judith bluntly broke in, telling Mia with a disgusted look, "There were lizards crawling in my room. Actual lizards." Her brow arched. "No glass in the windows, just that netting stuff. Anything could have gotten in. Anything at all. The diseases we were exposed to," she shuddered and took out her phone, stabbing at it with agitated fingers. "It was a miracle that everyone didn't get sick. This place better be more like the photos she sent."

"I fell asleep every night to the sound of the ocean," Diane remembered wistfully. She leaned back into the soft leather.

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Judith said firmly, speaking to Mia, "Don't worry, I was very clear about my expectations for accommodations this trip."

"I'm sure it will be very nice," Mia said. And she was sure it would be.

Mia loved staying in interesting, out of the way places, just as much as she enjoyed the more obvious luxuries of Spinel Resorts, her family's hotel chain, founded by her late husband. She smoothed her perfectly coiffed ash blond hair. "And it's so lovely your family can all join us. I can't believe young Kevin," she smiled back at him, "is all grown up with a kid of his own. I remember when he was a teenager washing cars for the football team fundraiser. And now he's built a thriving business, from what I hear."

Kevin heard his name, and grinned at her in proud acknowledgment of her compliment. "Doing just fine, Ms. Mia. Just fine."

"Oh, Kevin is doing very well now," Judith added, with a bright, encouraging smile. "He didn't want any part of the family business. It completely crushed Harold at the time—you know how Harold and his brother, John, built up Parker Perches—we do most of the big stadium seating now— from absolutely nothing. They wanted to make it a family legacy, but Kevin insisted on going out on his own." Her smile thinned. "Kevin was dead set on his little plumbing business, so Harold loaned him the money to start, anyway. I gave him a lot of helpful advice, of course," she added. "It's so difficult for small businesses to get started without capital, you

know, and of course banks don't want to loan new businesses money. They want a proven track record before they loan a penny at a decent rate."

Kevin's lips straightened, and his brown eyes narrowed slightly as he cut in, "We now have fifty people working for us. The largest plumbing company in our county." His shoulders pulled back proudly, and his big hands gripped the leather armrests, his knuckles whitening. He had grown from a gawky teen to a well muscled, tall man, with thinning brown hair he clipped short to soften his bald spot.

His wife, Candace, looked up at him with adoring, wide blue eyes, "Kevin's done so well, working all hours and weekends." She tossed her long, corn silk blond hair over her shoulders, carefully arranging it. Her mascara spiked eyes fluttered their laden lashes. Her ridiculously curvaceous figure was outlined with tight white slacks and a fuzzy pink sweater. She looked like a walking Barbie doll, Mia thought with an inward smile.

"Fifty people employed, just imagine," Judith bragged. "Quite a small business success story for our family, even through it's just plumbing."

"He hasn't taken a vacation in two years," Candace continued, with a brittle smile on her candy pink lips. She patted Kevin on the knee with long nails that gleamed like armor, and snuggled up against him. "He really needs some time off to relax with family."

"Can't stop for long when it's going well, honey," Kevin smiled down at her. "I don't want to lose momentum."

"You need to spend some time with Ben too," she urged. "He won't be home with us much longer. Little birds have to fly the nest sometime." She wafted her cotton candy pink nails vaguely in her offspring's direction.

Judith looked with disinterest at her nephew slouched in the rear of the plane, glued to his phone, then her eyes returned to Francesca's sleeping figure like a homing pigeon. "Sometimes, they come back," she murmured to herself, with a complacent smile.

Ben Parker hunched down in his seat, gangly legs shod with enormous neon sneakers, stretched far out into the aisle. Mia didn't know what his voice sounded like yet, since he hadn't uttered anything except teenage grunts. He was in high school, not a talkative age for most boys. He'd grow out of it in a few years.

The last member of their party was Miss Savannah Parker, Judith's niece and marketing director at Parker Perches. She had installed bulky headphones over her ears as they sat down, carefully removing large silver hoop ear rings to do so. Her long, dark hair was looped into a seemingly casual bun, low on the back of her head, and a tiny silver nose ring pierced her right nostril. She wore formfitting black Lululemon pants and a slouchy soft cashmere sweater, also in her signature black. Her lips were painted in so dark a red, they also might be considered black. Her dark eyes were rimmed in heavy kohl—black—and glued to her phone screen. The only note that jarred her wan Goth persona was her warm, tan skin. It made her look far too healthy.

"So what have you been doing lately, Diane?" Mia asked.

"Not much," Diane said, her mouth turning down. She ran a hand through her heavy brown hair, faintly streaked with whispers of silver threads. "You know, I took care of Mom when she had cancer. Dropped out of nursing school when she needed full time care." She blinked hard. "I was glad I could be there with her, at the end." Her eyes held Mia's a minute, then dropped to her capable hands, stretching her fingers out, as if they ached.

Mia said with sympathy, "I was so sorry about Sadie passing." She smiled at Diane, "I know it meant a lot to her that you were with her."

Diane nodded and shrugged minutely, brushing off sentiment. "I felt pretty lost afterwards. It took everything we had, just to keep her at home like she wanted it, not in one of those hospices." She sniffed, her eyes filling with unshed tears. "After I sold the house and paid off the medical bills, there wasn't anything left for nursing school afterwards." She shrugged again, resettling her fussy blouse around her middle and looked at Judith, "Judith kindly offered me a job helping her. I've been there ever since."

"It's not so long as all that," Mia said gently. "It's been what, two years?"

"Four, in August," Diane said, pushing her thick hair back.

"My, how time flies," Mia said, with surprise. "Have you ever thought about going back to school?"

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Diane looked down at her hands, stretching the fingers out again. "I plan to eventually, but things keep coming up. I'll get around to it, maybe next year." She glanced quickly at Judith, then looked up, and smiled hopefully at Mia. "I'm looking forward to seeing Italy for the first time. I've always wanted to travel there."

"It will be a nice vacation for everyone," Mia said kindly.



Kathleen greeted them with a wave as they walked down the stairs leading off the big Gulfstream IV at Aeroporto Internazionale di Padova Gino Allegri. Bright sunlight radiated off the concrete, and the Italian sky was blue and clear.

"Mia!" Kathleen called from across the tarmac. "It's been ages!" Kathleen caught Mia on the last step, giving her an enthusiastic hug, then held the smaller woman out at arm's length, grinning. "It's good to see you, Mia."

"It's good to see you too, Kathleen. You haven't changed a bit."

"Like fun I haven't." Kathleen patted her rounded belly, sticking out like a pea in a pod on her tall, athletic frame. It was the only sign of fat on her otherwise lean figure. "Italian food is just too good not to eat."

"Why ever would you deprive yourself?" Mia smiled at her. "You look good, Kathleen." She did, too.

Her luxuriant gray hair was neatly clipped in place at the back of her neck. She wore well cut gray trousers and a fitted turquoise blue polo shirt with a coordinating teal blue leather belt, stalwart staples of her quintessential preppy wardrobe, unaltered in decades.

The two women had been the best of friends since kindergarten, when Mia had politely shared her crayons with her new classmate. Kathleen carefully colored in the assignment's lines with a precisely even stroke, while Mia had treated the printed lines as mere suggestions to her artistic ability. By the end of the day, the two girls were inseparable.

They spent nights at each other's houses, vacationed with each others' families, their lives intertwined with laughter, clothes swapping, teenage tears and boyfriend angsts. At college, Mia had majored in hospitality management, and Kathleen had piled advanced science degrees on top of each other with the ease of children's blocks. They had danced at each other's weddings. Mia marrying her husband, Leo Spinel, and raising her two stepsons and their daughter together. Kathleen had only two blissful years of marriage with the love of her life, abruptly ended by an icy road and a drunk driver. After the hurricane of grief had passed, Kathleen had thrown herself into her work, publishing scientific papers as if they were her children. Now, they were both widows.

They had lost touch, then reconnected more times than Mia could count. Every time they met, it was as if

they had never been apart, after the rapid chatter of catching up.

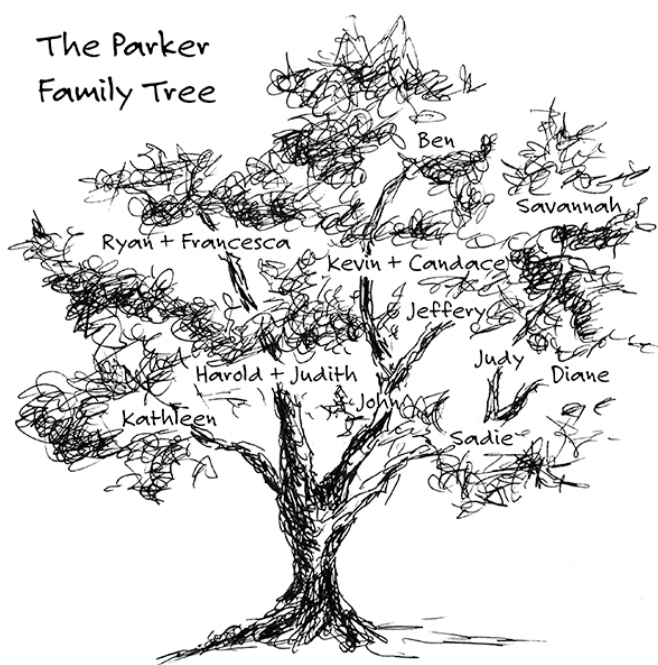
When Kathleen had asked Mia to join the Parker family in their rented Italian villa for two weeks, Mia hadn't been able to resist. Staying connected with Kathleen was much easier now with texting and phones always in reach, but Mia had gradually lost touch with the rest of the Parker family, who'd been so much a part of her childhood, just exchanging Christmas cards or attending weddings now.

She'd adored Harold, Kathleen's older brother, with the fervor of the young child who'd been swung in the air and played ball with. Harold had always been patient with his much younger sister and her friend, throwing himself into the fun of sand castles and bike rides with visible enthusiasm. He'd been the big brother she'd never had, and always wanted.

Harold's enthusiasm had carried the rest of his siblings with him when he founded Parker Perches, going from a small local business building benches for local high schools to an international company producing stadium seating for massive arenas. His brother, John, had joined in the hands-on building, then supervised construction, while his sister, Sadie, had manned the company offices. Even Kathleen had contributed, using her chemical expertise to devise new coatings that made the seating last decades without visible wear.

The business had thrived, and the Parker family had too, for a while. John and his wife had been the first

to fall, leaving their sons, Jeffery and Kevin, in Harold and Judith's care. Childless, they had raised them as their own, taking Jeffrey into the family business, and supporting Kevin when he started his business. Sadie's daughters, Diane and Judy, had expanded the pool of cousins, until family vacations took place in sprawling rentals.



When, after many years of raising her nephews, Judith had Francesca, the couple had been over the moon with joy. Nothing was too good for their adorable baby daughter, and the built-in older brothers and cousins had thought the same.

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Judy, Diane's sister, had had her daughter, Savannah, very young, then left the girl orphaned in her teens. Harold had stepped up again, sending Savannah to the best boarding school and college money could buy, eventually welcoming her under the protective wing of the family business.

After Harold had died several months ago, Judith had taken over the reins with firm, capable hands. She and Jeffery, as the senior family members, had guided the business, into a continuation of their solid success. There might be gaps in the family business tree, like Kevin's plumbing business, but each generation of Parkers planned to participate in Parker Perches, keeping the family company strong, generation by generation.

Mia had joined this family trip, not just because she loved Italy, and looked forward to seeing her dear friend Kathleen—both true—but not the real reason. She'd come because Kathleen had an unusual note of worry in her voice when she'd asked Mia to come. Kathleen was not a worrier by nature, taking each crisis with scientific detachment. Mia had only seen her collapse once, on the death of her husband. She'd recovered, as much as anyone ever does from a great tragedy, and deliberately moved on, creating an ideal life for her altered circumstances.

It had not been merely her imagination that Kathleen was worried. As she greeted her family with hugs and cheek kisses, Mia noticed tension in her jaw, a crease between her eyes. A new restraint was in her hugs,

her back pats more deliberate, not as casually eager as she'd been in the past. Mia wondered what was going on.

Francesca had wakened on the approach, yawning like a sleepy cat, unfurling her blanket cocoon. She looked like she'd needed a good long sleep, to eat well, then perhaps another sleep or two. She stood blinking, her striking, long lashed gray eyes hidden behind oversized dark sunglasses, her airy sundress dancing brightly in the hot tarmac wind.

Mia wondered if Francesca's abrupt divorce was the reason for Kathleen's invitation. If so, she didn't know what she could do to help. Perhaps Kathleen just wanted her to help smooth over an awkward family vacation? She would know soon enough.

Mia nodded to the captain as he descended the stairs, a straight backed young man with flyaway brown hair. "Thanks for the smooth flight, Nate."

"No problem, Ms. Mia. I'll see you back here in two weeks, God and weather willing."

"Are you sure you don't want to spend the night at our villa before you leave?"

He grinned, "No, thank you. We're going to treat ourselves to a nice Italian dinner, and turn in early at a nearby hotel. The crew needs to get going early tomorrow to get to the conference pickups. Tomorrow will be a tour of Europe, pretty much, while we pick everyone up."

"Ciao, then," Mia said.

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He tipped his captain's hat to her with a grin. "Arrivederci, Ms. Mia." He and his crew strode off with the haste of the young, eager to explore a new city.

She smiled at his cheerful enthusiasm, and turned back to the Parkers.

Kathleen had rented a large Mercedes van—the only vehicle that could hold the entire family. Kevin and Ben loaded the considerable weight of luggage into the back. Kathleen took the wheel, driving the unwieldy vehicle around the curving Italian roads with precision and verve. She was clearly used to the fast pace of the twisting Italian roads. Judith, as the matriarch, perched in the prime viewing seat up front, with Francesca ensconced directly behind her.

The landscape changed from swathes of flat fields with crops growing to the green covered mountains of the Parco Regionale dei Colli Euganei. Massive villas popped up in every terracotta roofed village, like so many roosters guarding their flocks, intricate ironwork gates leading to elaborate palaces. Most of the warm array of stucco houses fronted directly on the street, ancient wooden doors painted and peeling in layers, revealing colorful centuries.

They skirted the mountainous park through terraced vineyards unfolding on every hillside. Kathleen waved her hand and shouted back something unintelligible over the engine. Mia guessed they were nearing their destination as the roads narrowed, and towns became smaller. She looked with interest as they passed through a charming town piazza. A massive

fountain splashed in the center, and a motley crew of kids intent on a ball game took up half the piazza. Cars slowed to drive around the game, seemingly used to the detour.

At the outskirts of the small town, a solid stucco wall went on for miles, before it was broken by ponderous wrought iron gates, open graciously wide for their visit. Smoothly raked gravel crunched under the van tires. They climbed the gently sloping hill, the drive bracketed by manicured lime trees, and hazed by golden streaks of sunlight filtering through their bright green leaves. The drive ended in a sweeping courtyard, surrounded by a sprawling villa of a warm ochre stucco. A venerable well, massive stonework girded by ancient ironwork, dominated the courtyard. Terracotta pots of red geraniums made bright splashes of color against the age softened walls.

"What a lovely place!" Mia told Kathleen, as she cut the engine. "I feel like we stepped back in time a few centuries."

"It has a wonderful atmosphere, doesn't it? One of my colleagues had his family reunion here last year. He couldn't stop talking about this villa. I thought it'd be perfect for our family gathering."

"It looks very nice, Kathleen," Judith approved. "Very well kept."

"He said the meals were fabulous." Kathleen winked at Kevin. "That growing boy of yours will be well fed."

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Kevin grinned back at his aunt. "You would not believe how much Ben can eat at a sitting—then be back for snacks in an hour."

They piled out of the van, all laughing with excitement. They'd traveled around the world for this family adventure. After the sterile sameness of the airport and car ride, the warm sun and the ancient building felt like they were finally arriving somewhere very different from back home, truly starting their adventure.

The large courtyard, big enough for a dozen cars or more, was ringed by low outbuildings and another wall. In ancient history, it must have been defensible once the substantial gates were closed, with the smooth stucco walls against the perimeter, and windows facing the safety of the courtyard. Only easily shuttered windows had been presented to threats from the outside, though Mia could tell there had been new vista windows added to make the villa more pleasant for modern life. One side of the square had clearly been the stables in a past generation, the stall doors replaced by neat garage doors in the same green as the shutters on the main house, and the upper haylofts converted into apartments. Two more buildings looked like additional guest cottages carved from older uses. Mia noticed, to her delight, one round stone tower had dovecote holes at the very top.

The main villa building was fronted in an arched columned veranda, with a balcony above. The stone tiles of the veranda met the gravel of the courtyard seamlessly. Round humps of terracotta tiles quilted the roof in a

range of colors and ages, from faded and pale, alive with moss, to crisp and new, in the colors of the setting sun.

A single Alfa Romeo 4C was parked like a shiny red toy in front of the garage, looking terribly anachronistic, as if it'd traveled there through a time machine. "Nice car," Ben commented with glimmers of passion appearing in his eyes, as he walked over to the little two seater for a closer look. It was the first thing he'd said the entire trip.

A tall, lean man with close cropped gray hair, striking silver eyes, and a commanding posture strode out of the villa, closing the heavy, carved wooden door with a thunk. "Hi, Ben, like my rental? Have to drive an Italian car when you're in Italy, you know."

"Hi, Uncle Randall. Can I drive it?" Ben asked eagerly.

"Not unless you have a valid license here," Randall Green easily rejoined. "How're you doing, Mia, Kathleen? Judith, good to see you. And Francesca," he paused a beat, then quickly asked, "How was your flight, honey? Smooth?"

"The flight was fine, Uncle Randall. Slept like a rock the whole way." She put both arms around the big man, and hugged him like she was drowning, and clinging to a rock in the ocean for dear life. "Nice to fly private, huh?" She kept one pale, but well muscled arm wrapped around him.

Randall pulled Mia to him with his other arm, for a bear hug. Smiling, she hugged her old friend back. "Little Mia, lovely as always. Glad you came along with

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the rest of our gang." He slapped Kevin on the back. "Good to see you, man. I think Ben's shot up a foot since I saw him last."

Kevin slapped him back. "Uncle Randall, glad you're here."

His wife came up, and pecked Randall on the cheek with a loud smack, leaving a bright lipstick print on his stubbly cheek. "Me too, Randy. Oops, sorry."

Smiling, he wiped the pink splotch off his cheek. "Looking good, Candace. You'll enjoy someone else cooking for once, eh? Get some ideas for back home."

"I'm looking forward to learning new Italian recipes to wow the girls with," she told him, patting her tightly controlled stomach. "I'll have to keep up the exercise though, not let things slide."

"Kathleen, you found us a gorgeous place," Diane said. She twirled around, taking it all in, smiling from ear to ear. "A real Italian villa, all to ourselves. It's like a dream come true."

Francesca, still clutching Randall's arm, looked around at the bright sunlight and warm terracotta and smiled tentatively, as if her cheek muscles weren't used to the movement. "It's beautiful. Really old, like going back in a history book."

"Is anyone going to help us with the bags, or do we have to carry them ourselves? It looks like it's a do it yourself place," Judith commented uneasily.

Randall smoothly reassured her, "Oh, there's plenty of staff, from what I can see, but I'd be happy to carry

your bags in for you. Just put mine in my room. Pretty nice, with a view of the pool."

Judith said, "Kevin can carry mine." He came forward, as ordered. "If you'd just get those bags of mine, and put them wherever they're supposed to go, I'd appreciate it, dear."

"Sure, Aunt Judith. No problem." He hoisted the three bags easily and headed for the main door, calling back, "Candace, Ben, could you grab ours and follow along?"

Without a word, Ben stopped ogling the car and got the bags, thoughtfully leaving his mother with the lightest one. He followed in his father's wake, the sullen look back on his face.

The rest followed behind slowly, enjoying their first impressions of the villa, reluctant to be cooped up inside after the long flight. Randall scooped up an armful of bags, mostly Mia's usual mountain of luggage. "Still don't travel light, do you?" he chuckled. "I remember that camping trip we went on when I had to make a second trip back just for your stuff. Your luggage always stacks taller than you do."

Mia answered pertly, "I hope you remember I was the only one who brought marshmallows to roast, too. And the chocolate and graham crackers."

He laughed heartily. "That I do. Harold and I made ourselves sick eating most of them."

"It's because you burned them to torches, not roasting them evenly like you're supposed to. Who'd want to eat char?"

Chapter One

He kept laughing, as she opened the heavy door for him. His hands were full with her luggage, after all.

"Mia, you haven't changed. You might as well be ten years old, with pigtails."

"I never wore pigtails," she informed him, to more laughter.

They spilled into the grand entrance hall. After the bright sun and heat of the courtyard, the stone and stucco of the thick walls felt cool and dark, a cocoon enveloping them in dim history. Ancient oak beams structured the room, with terracotta tile floors spanning their spreads. Faint ochres and greens from medieval stencils decorated the cornices and highlighted the windows.

"Isn't anyone here?" Judith questioned, a note of annoyance in her voice. The men dropped the luggage, waiting for the next step of their journey without encumbrances.

"Teresa, that's the housekeeper, was here a minute ago," Randall said. He peered around as if she might appear from thin air, then tried calling, "Hello?"

Silence. A few dust motes danced in the rays of sunlight leaking in, giving a slight shimmer to the light.

Savannah walked around the room, her long black hair swinging like a dark sheet. She'd stripped off her sweater in the warm sunlight, and was wearing a black spaghetti strapped top that enhanced her tan skin. She opened one door, then another, looking inside the magnificent rooms curiously, the taller Ben peering over her shoulder. "I don't see anyone here."

"Where'd everyone go?" Randall tried again, louder. "Ciao? The rest of the group's arrived. Anyone?" His voice echoed in the massive hall, floating up the stairs, and dying away to nothing in the still quiet.

He tried again, booming through the tall rooms, "Hello!"

The strident roar of a mower started up outside, far away in a field. Sunlight hazed the dim darkness of the hall and trickled down from windows slit into the upper floor walls. Ben fingered a gong and the mallet beside it suspiciously.

"Don't even think about it," his mother said quickly. "That's probably to call guests to dinner."

They heard footsteps hurrying down the hall, a quick rap tap tap on the hard tiles, and harsh breathing as if someone had run up the stairs in a hurry. Still breathless, a welcoming "Buona sera! Buona sera!" proceeded the bouncing ball of a woman with short, chubby legs and a white apron moving rapidly toward them, hands outstretched in heartfelt welcome. Her thick hair, unfortunately a rather obviously dyed black, was pulled back in a heavy, smooth bun low on her neck. In perfect, but thickly accented English, she rapidly added, still puffing for air between words, "The Parker family, here at last! I am glad you have made it. Those roads," she crossed herself, "you never know when you arrive. The young men, they drive like maniacs." She held out her plump hand to Kevin. "I'm Signora Teresa, la governante of Villa Bella Sorgente." She beamed at them, unreservedly.

Chapter One

Kevin shook her hand briefly, "Kevin Parker, nice to meet you," then gestured to Judith, "This is my aunt, Judith Parker."

Judith nodded to Teresa, saying limply, "It has been a long trip. I'm afraid I'm ready to see my room."

She did look tired, Mia thought. Judith might be any age, from her appearance. She hadn't changed much in the decades Mia had known her, her perfect oval face unmarred by wrinkles, due to expensive treatments and meticulous care. But she must be feeling her actual age after the journey, especially after Kathleen's enthusiastic driving.

"Oh, of course, of course. Our guests often like to wash and lie down for a few minutes when they arrive," Teresa said with an easy smile. "Let me see, your apartment lies on the courtyard, as you requested, the other rooms are upstairs in the main building. Except for," she looked around the group for individuals, "Signora Kathleen Sutton? She is also on the courtyard, with you. You are all a family, yes?"

Kathleen stepped forward, "I'm Kathleen. Yes, it's a family vacation."

"Ah, good. We will make a wonderful celebration, then. To come so far together as a family is quite an occasion!" Her crisp white apron rustled as she drew out enormous antique keys from among its many folds. There was no chance anyone might wander off with one of these weights in their pocket. "Let me show le signoras to your rooms. "Salvatore, my husband, will bring your luggage when he is done mowing. Will the others prefer

to wait in the sitting room or the veranda?" she gestured outside.

"The veranda would be lovely," Mia spoke for the group. She always preferred being outside in the sunlight after being cooped up traveling. Leaving the luggage in a pile in the hall, they tramped back outside.

Chairs scattered with pristine white cushions and nearby tables were carefully placed under the shaded veranda spanning the building. "I thought there was a pool?" Judith questioned as she looked around. The smooth stone floor felt cool in the shade.

"There is, there is, to the side of the villa," Teresa answered quickly. "It is still too cold for me, this early in the season, but your young people will enjoy it."

"It's not heated?"

"It is," Teresa gave a dramatic shudder, "but if the sun is not very bright, it still is not warm to me."

"I see," Judith agreed, with a satisfied nod, as if checking the villa features off a mental list. "Kevin, dear, would you mind bringing my bags to my room now? I can't wait to change out of travel clothes."

"Sure, Aunt Judith," Kevin obediently trailed the little group with Judith's bags as they headed for the small buildings skirting the main courtyard. As they opened Judith's door, Mia relaxed into one of the comfortable cushioned chairs to wait.

Candace collapsed into the chair beside her, commenting, "Wouldn't you know she'd have Kev fetching and carrying for her from the start?" She crossed her long legs with a petulant look.

Chapter One

Mia soothed, "It's been a long trip." She stretched her arms, feeling the tightness ease a little. "Judith is probably feeling her age and doesn't feel up to lifting luggage. I know I don't, and she's older than me." She stretched in another direction, twisting in the chair.

"Yeah, you're right," Candace agreed. She visibly forced a smile back onto her deeply dimpled cheeks. "It's been a long trip. And Judith is getting old." She tried to keep the slight flicker of satisfaction off her face at the thought, but failed. Instead, she added, with her toothy smile, "We'll have to take really good care of her this trip." Her bright blue eyes strayed to her son.

Ben leaned over Savannah in a mock monster pose, photo bombing her. Savannah, oblivious, had pursed her mouth until her lips looked like a blood dark trout gasping for air, and snapped multiple photos of herself, with red geraniums against the warm stucco of the building for a backdrop.

Candace said, forcing a laugh, "Savannah just loves adding to her socials, you know? Kids." She shook her head. "She's a sweet kid, really. Just likes the goth bit, right now."

"My daughter was the same way when she was younger," Mia said. "She's one of the media contributors at Spinel Resorts now, besides her accounting job there."

"Really?" Candace laughed. "I wouldn't have guessed accounting would have pretty things to share."

"Oh, she takes photos of hotels on business trips, not her paperwork," Mia laughed. "We like having several different points of view for our hotels. That way

it's always fresh, not such an over processed feeling. It feels more like a big family, with a lot of our team contributing."

"Makes sense," Candace took out a shiny gold lipstick case. "Of course, Parker Perches doesn't really need to advertise to the masses, like hotels do. You need a good quality bench, you buy a Parker." With no need for a mirror, she carefully touched up her already perfect lipstick, mimicking Savannah's pucker. Mia refrained from her own instinct to touch up her lips too, just a little.

"What's Ben planning on for his career? Is he going in with Kevin or something else?" she asked instead.

Candace snapped her lipstick closed. "Kev wants Ben to join the plumbing business, of course. Start their own family dynasty, not be dependent on Parker Perches forever," she added with a little laugh. She shrugged, her prominent round breasts jiggling with the movement. "Plumbing is hard work, and someone has to show up whenever a client calls, no matter the time of night. When we started, I made all Kev's appointments, and did all the paperwork. Made sure Kev had the supplies he needed. And raised Ben too." She smiled with the memory. "Those were some days, let me tell you. I never stopped to breathe once."

"You must have been busy."

"I know. Now he's successful, he's hired a business manager and a service for appointments." She grinned, showing white square teeth around her perfect pink lips.

"Now, I get to play. And raise the kid, of course. Ben graduates from high school next year."

"It sounds like you've earned a break. That must be a nice change," Mia told her.

"Yeah, it sure is. After working my butt off, it's nice to kick back a little—" she broke off as she saw Kevin's easy stride returning across the courtyard and smiled her toothpaste ad grin. "Oh, good, Judith is settled in." She raised her voice in a slightly nasal whine, "Did the room meet her standards?"

Kevin leaned down and pecked her on the cheek. "Yeah, they put her in the best room in the place, like Kathleen asked. Pretty view of the vineyards on the other side of the building. She's happy with it. Hope our room has a view that good."

Candace leaned back against him and smiled, curving into his body suggestively. "Trust me, you'll like the view."

He smiled down at her, then said, "So, we'll all get together for dinner tonight? Will there be time to explore this place before that?"

Mia smiled and looked at the golden sunlight hazing the distant trees. "I think it will be nearly dark by the time we get to our rooms—we should be able to see the sunset before dinner, at least."

"Yeah, we'll have to check the grounds out tomorrow," Candace agreed. "'I'm not twisting an ankle in the dark, on the first day!'" She swung her pink strappy sandal with its little kitten heel.

"I'm looking forward to walking down to that town we passed through on our way here. I think I'll stroll down in the morning," Mia said.

Candace laughed, a slightly grating tone, "I'm not exactly a bright and early morning bird."

"No, you like your beauty sleep, honey," Kevin agreed, with an affectionate smile. He patted her shoulder. "Plenty of time to see everything. We're here two weeks, after all."



Dinner Party

Before dinner, they met back on the veranda for drinks and appetizers, under the flickering light of gas-lit torches. The heady perfumed white roses draping the porch columns wafted through the air, mixing with the sweet scent of citrus blossoms. The night sky seemed very blue and deep next to the wavering light of the torches.

"Whatever drink you want, we've got it," said a skinny girl with unwashed, but carefully styled hair. An orange miniskirt and a candy apple red strapless top sagging inward at her clavicle did nothing to enhance her figure. She forcefully proffered a startling array of drink options, wheeled out on an antique brass bar cart, as Mia approached the gathering.

Mia smiled at the girl in greeting. "Buona sera. I'm Mia."

"Mia. I'm Anna. What do ya want?" she demanded impatiently, nasal voice slightly muffled as she rolled candy from one side of her mouth to the other. Under a heavy coat of makeup, her face was pockmarked with acne. She was much the same age as Savannah, but seemed older than the American girl, by her manner. To the world, she presented a been there seen that blasé attitude, where nothing novel would be found under the sun. Not a trace of a welcoming smile lurked on her face, just a desired to serve Mia her drink, and move on to the next person, so she could finish her assigned task.

"Hmm, Anna, I think I'd like something local tonight, something a little light. Can you mix me a spritz Veneziano?"

Anna tapped a foot impatiently. "You mean an Aperol Spritz—Prosecco and Aperol?" Her blunt English was American accented, by way of Hollywood.

"With a splash of soda water and slice of orange, please."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. No problem." Anna turned to the polished drinks cart, and Mia heard hard candy crunch in her mouth as she mixed the cocktail with practiced ease. She smoothly sliced a fresh orange, adding the final garnish to the faceted lead crystal glass, and handed it to Mia.

Mia took a sip. Bitter and sweet, with the fizz of refreshing bubbles. "Perfect. Thanks, Anna." She sat down in a chair next to Francesca. "What are these delightful looking little things?" she asked about the colorful spread of creations speared with toothpicks.

"Spunciotti," Anna told her. "The baccalà is good." She shrugged expressively. "Everything, but everything, Signora Teresa makes is good. She is a fabulous chef." Her sudden enthusiasm made obvious her primary reason for working at the villa.

"Teresa is the chef? I thought she was the housekeeper?"

Anna shook her head, correcting her. "I do cleaning and serve the meals. She tells me and the others what to do. And tells Salvatore what to do, as well," she grinned wickedly. "Her husband, Signor Salvatore, is the head gardener. Signora Teresa cooks so beautifully." A smile flashed briefly on her narrow, thin face at the thought of those meals.

"I see." Mia took some of the creamed cod, whipped to a froth with olive oil, and spread on dainty slices of white bread. "Oh, you're right, the baccalà is very good."

"I told you. Everything she makes is good." Anna hurried back to make Randall his drink, a simple soda water topped with one of the fresh orange slices.

Francesca was gazing across the courtyard, obviously lost in her head. "So, Francesca, which appetizer do you like best?"

Francesca looked at Mia, as if she'd forgotten she was there. "Which appetizer?" She looked down at the tray. "Oh, I guess the cheeses. That one's really good," she pointed with a delicate pink polished finger.

"Monte Veronese?" Mia took an exploratory bite of a sliver of the hard white cheese. It was good, slightly

sweet. She tried some lemony Morlacco cheese, next to it. "Very good as well."

Randall came over to join them. "I'm sticking with meatballs. You can't miss with meatballs." Perfectly brown and juicy meatballs were on their own plate, with just a sprinkling of parsley brightening them. He popped one in his mouth, then grabbed another.

"So, what have you been doing, Uncle Randall?" Francesca asked, taking another piece of cheese.

"Still based in Germany," he told her. "Love it, great country. Best bread in the world." He took another bite with gusto. "Italian food is pretty damn good, though. But German bread, can't get enough."

Francesca laughed a little. "We'll eat all we want this trip, and take some long walks to burn it off."

"I run five kilometers every morning," he patted his lean stomach. "Never gain an ounce with that routine. All about routine."

"I don't think I'll start that routine this week," Francesca laughed and took a sip of her white wine. "Too much like work." Her wavy black hair shimmered with orange highlights in the flickering torchlight.

"Want to walk into that charming little town with me tomorrow, Francesca?" Mia asked.

"Love to. We can have breakfast in town, if we leave early," she suggested, swinging her neatly shod foot under her flowery gossamer dress.

Mia wondered why Francesca didn't want to have breakfast at the villa with her family. "Sounds like fun,"

she agreed, a little curious at the suggestion. Perhaps Francesca wanted a break from her family after the long trip together, like any young woman might.

Kathleen joined the group, then Savannah and Ben came around the corner, laughing. "Fantastic pool," Ben told them enthusiastically. "I'm taking a dip first thing in the morning."

Savannah had arrayed herself in a tight fitting black gown, dripping with black lace, and had added another layer to the kohl rimming her eyes. Her white powdered face was all big dark eyes and blood red lipstick, like a young, beautiful vampire in the medieval setting, which was probably the look she was going for.

Savannah told Ben, "I'll be there watching. I bet you jump out again from the cold."

"Not unless you go too."

"Oh, we'll both jump in at once," Savannah told him. "We can always get back out. I don't mind the cold."

"Fine," Ben agreed. He eyed the well stocked bar with an anticipatory gleam.

"No alcohol for you," Randall told him pointedly. "You're underage."

"We're in Italy," Ben whined. "Don't be so lame, Uncle Randall."

"Doesn't matter," he told him. "Up to your parents whether you have a glass of wine with dinner."

"They're not down yet. It's not fair," Ben continued whining until Randall made a firm cut it out motion with his hand.

Savannah, noticing Francesca's wine, told Anna, "A cabernet, per favore," in a very superior tone. She sipped the red wine with her matching blood red lips, smirking at Ben.

Diane entered in a rush, her cheeks scarlet from hurry. "Am I late? I just unpacked. Judith needed a little help."

"Never late for a good thing," Randall told her, with a smile. "Have a seat, honey."

She sat down next to Francesca. Anna hovered, demanding, "What do ya want?"

"Oh, I don't know," Diane looked around for inspiration. "What's everyone else having? White wine?"

Anna took that as her order and poured it out, handing it to her, with a disdainful shrug.

"Thanks." Diane sipped the cold wine with pleasure, and looked around with obvious enjoyment. "Isn't this the most amazing place? I feel like we stepped back in time a hundred years. Dinner by torchlight, even. So romantic..."

Judith called out from across the dim courtyard. "Hello, everyone! Looking forward to our first Italian feast?" She hesitated, then asked, "It's so dark—I can't see a thing out here. Can you turn on the lights?"

Anna looked like she hadn't heard the request for a second, then sauntered over to flip the switch. The

flickering warm glow of torchlight was suddenly overpowered by bright white security lights, illuminating Judith's path across the courtyard.

"It looks like everyone's started without me," she commented. "I'd better catch up. What is the wine?"

"Oh, just have a glass. Have another if you like it," Randall said with a grin, holding his glass up in a toast, "Now you're here, we can start the party."

Anna took that as Judith's order, and handed her a wine glass.

"Oh, really," Judith looked confused, then came over to sit by Francesca. She leaned over, "I've been thinking, dear, that after dinner you should change rooms with Kathleen, stay on the courtyard next to me. I don't like the idea of you all alone over there."

Francesca looked up, startled. "But I just unpacked. And Kathleen's probably unpacked too. I can't do that to her."

Kathleen heard Francesca's exclamation, "And Kathleen what?" she asked in a warm, pleasant voice.

"Kathleen, you wouldn't mind trading your room for Francesca's, would you? She'd rather be next to me, under the circumstances."

"Oh, but," Francesca weakly protested.

Kathleen shrewdly glanced at Francesca's face, and chuckled lightheartedly. "Don't be silly, Judith. We're all settled into our rooms and no one wants to repack all over again." She added, "It's just two weeks, not like we're moving here permanently."

"I really think," Judith began, her brow furrowed.

"Oh, Judith, everything is just fine as it is," Kathleen laughed deliberately. "Don't be such a perfectionist. Everything is great."

"If you're both sure, then I wouldn't dream of changing a thing," Judith smiled at Francesca, warm concern in her eyes. "As long as you're both happy."

Francesca took a sip of wine and another bite of cheese. Her smile didn't quite reach her deep set gray eyes, luminous in the shadows.

"So, what shall we do tomorrow?" Judith asked the little group, a bright smile on her face. "Let's see, we're having dinner again at the villa tomorrow night, but we'll have lots of time for activities all day. Maybe tour Padua? Or Vicenza? So many sights to see in both, and neither is very far away." She looked for a hint from Francesca.

Francesca took another bite, chewing thoughtfully, noncommittal.

Kathleen glanced around at the group, most of whom clearly didn't want to get back into another vehicle anytime soon, then said, "Let's play it by ear. It's nice to just drink in the relaxing atmosphere here." She stretched out her arms.

"It's all very well for you, my dear, you live in Padua," Judith told her. "The rest of the family doesn't have that long in Italy. We have to see everything while we're here."

Kathleen smiled mischievously, "You can always come back to visit me, if there's something you missed. I do have a spare room."

Chapter Two

Francesca chuckled, "Watch out, I might take you up on that. There's so much to see here, isn't there?"

"Any time." Kathleen looked around the group. Judith's finger tapped on her wine glass. She clearly wanted a firm itinerary for tomorrow, so she could check that off her mental hostess list. "Let's plan a few things in the area we can't miss." Judith's mouth relaxed from its thin line, and she leaned back in her chair a little. Kathleen thought aloud, "We're staying at this amazing place, a once in a lifetime experience, really. Let's plan to explore the villa and grounds tomorrow, walk to the village, go swimming, all the unique things we have right here."

Judith nodded pleased agreement.

Kathleen continued, "Then, we can explore farther afield the next day. We definitely want to see the Scrovegni Chapel, Giotto's masterpiece. The ceiling is a deep, deep blue, true lapis ultramarine, with gold stars. Looking up into it, you feel as if it's a million years of history—all the way back to the fourteenth century. And we'll absolutely go on the Palladian villa tour in and around Vicenza. We can walk the Palladian route through Vicenza, and end up at the Basilica di Monte Berico, stopping for gelato on the way." She laughed and shrugged, "And anyone who feels like driving, instead of walking can meet up at the villas in the van. We can do either, depending on the weather forecast."

Judith nodded in agreement, taking Kathleen's plan as her own. "Excellent itinerary, Kathleen. It's not as

if we get to stay in such a unique place often—I want to make sure our young people get to see everything."

"A little immersion in *la dolce vita* is nice too," Randall added. "Good for the soul," he added, smiling at Judith.

With a look at her watch, Anna broke in, "It's time now to go in to dinner. Is everyone here?" She looked around, "I thought there were more in your group?"

Judith answered, "Kevin and Candace aren't here yet." She smiled tightly, "They're usually late."

"The food will get cold. Signora Teresa will not like that," Anna warned, clearly nervous about a delay.

"Oh, but surely she can wait a few minutes, so we're all together," Judith started to object, but Randall stopped her.

"If the chef says it's time for dinner, then we'll go in. I know I'm hungry," he told Judith, "They'll meet us when they get there, and catch up. Let the parents relax a little by themselves." He held out one arm to Judith and the other to Francesca. "May I escort you in to dinner, miladies?" he asked, smiling.

A small smile on her face, Francesca took his proffered arm. "Why, yes, please, Uncle Randall."

"If you're sure they won't mind," Judith began, with concern.

Mia told her, "Just relax, Judith. It really doesn't matter when they get here. If their food is a little cold because they're tardy, that's on them." She followed Anna's skinny figure into the villa.

Chapter Two

"I suppose not," Judith agreed, adding brightly, "It is a vacation, after all." She followed on Randall's other arm.

The dining hall, far too grand to be called simply a room, was paneled in dark wood, pockmarked with ancient worm holes, and gleaming with polish. The fireplace surround met the high ceiling. At the far end, a beautifully veined stone, replete with acanthus leaves and ancient heraldic devices, was worn by time. Diane went over to the massive centerpiece and lightly traced the outline of a leaf with her finger. She said, almost in a whisper, "So old...I wonder how many families have dined here, children grown old with the room?" She looked around her with awe.

Judith scanned the majestic room with a satisfied smile, "Very nice, very nice indeed." She took her place at the head of the table as Randall smoothly pulled out her chair for her. As the oldest man of the family group, Randall sat at the opposite end, next to the fireplace.

Savannah spoke up, "It's a good thing that huge fireplace isn't lit, Uncle Randall. You'd fry." She grinned at him, the smile breaking the rigid perfection of her face into the less angst ridden simplicity of a pretty young woman, her smooth sheet of dark hair looped and braided in an intricate updo that fitted well in the medieval setting.

"I expect they move the table a little during the winter," he replied, looking into the massive stone opening, near enough to engulf him in its maw.

"How?" Diane pulled up on the table, curiously. It didn't budge a millimeter. "This thing is solid oak. It must weigh a ton." She hurriedly sat down with a thump, as Teresa bustled into the room. Diane's face went beet red at being caught trying to move the furniture, even if the housekeeper didn't notice.

With a triumphant flourish, Teresa placed a huge platter of risotto directly in front of Ben. "See, we feed you lots, don't worry, I know how to feed young men. Lots and lots." She laughed heartily. "Risi e bisi, il primo piatto." Tiny little spring peas cascaded down the slowly oozing rice. Ben practically drooled at the sight. She smiled with satisfaction at his expression as Anna brought in a second platter, brimming with pasta. "Bigoli in salsa," she announced proudly as Anna placed the heavy platter at the other end of the table. She watched Ben's expression closely as his eyes followed the plate, and beamed at his blissful look, "They love to eat, the young men, do they not?" Chuckling to herself, she bustled back to the kitchen.

Anna slinked around the room, filling glasses to the brim with a crisp Soave, then paused, hand positioned on her narrow hip. "Everyone good?" daring them to reply. Everyone's mouth was too full to answer, so she followed Teresa back to the kitchen.

Utter silence ruled the room, while the food got its due of appreciation. Platters passed around the table, there were happy murmurs of delight at the superb cooking, and cutlery clinked.

Chapter Two

Ben helped himself to seconds for the bigoli, asking as he heaped pasta onto his plate, "What is this stuff? It's really good."

Mia answered, "Anchovies and onions, a classic Veneto dish."

Ben froze a moment in horror, then continued chewing with a ruminative look on his face. "I thought anchovies were those disgusting things people order on pizza."

Kathleen laughed, "No, bigoli in salsa is much better than that. They're simmered down for the sauce."

Ben screwed up his face, then took another bite. "Well, I like this, anyway. As long as they aren't anywhere near my pizza."

They all laughed at the expression on his face, relaxed with the good food and wine.

For the second course, Teresa served Ben directly again, placing an impressive leg of lamb next to his plate. "Tagliata di lombo d'agnello alle rosmarino," she announced with pride. "Eat!" she ordered, as she left the room. Anna placed a tray of grilled zucchini at the other end of the table, in front of Randall, brushing her scrawny leg suggestively against his thigh.

He leaned away from her, looking across the room, and saying quickly, "Well, here come the honeymooners!"

Anna smirked, then sashayed her thin hips in her orange mini, as she left the room, managing to brush past Kevin on her way out the door. He didn't notice.

The two were glowing like newlyweds, as they entered the dining hall. "What a great place you found us, Kathleen!" Kevin was grinning from ear to ear. He pulled out an ornately carved chairs for his wife, bowing as he said, "Milady."

Candace sat, smoothing her gossamer blonde hair back on her shoulders, and helped herself to a slice of lamb. "Looks delicious."

"You missed the first course," Ben told her. "They had anchovies in pasta."

"Oh no," Candace commiserated with a laugh that deepened her dimpled cheeks. "You hate anchovies."

"This was good," Ben told her appreciatively. "I had seconds."

Candace chuckled, "I never thought I'd hear you say that!"

Judith added, with a smile, "Teresa is quite a good cook, as you can see. It's too bad you missed the first course."

Candace smiled at Kevin, and he smiled back, "Oh, we don't mind."

Dessert was two trays of fritole, small, round fried doughnuts, filled with a rich cream. Teresa clearly intended one tray solely for Ben, placing the golden mound in front of him, her dancing dark eyes watching for his reaction.

He dove in, licking sticky fingers as he inhaled half the little doughnuts in a quick attack. "Wow, Signora Teresa, those are good. Really good. Thanks. Grazie."

Chapter Two

"I knew you would like them." The little round woman looked around at her guests with approval.

"Tomorrow, breakfast is at eight-thirty. Please arrive on time so the food is hot."

"I'll be there," Ben told her fervently. They all laughed.

"We'd all better be there," Savannah eyed Ben's personal platter of doughnuts, already almost gone. "If we want anything to eat."



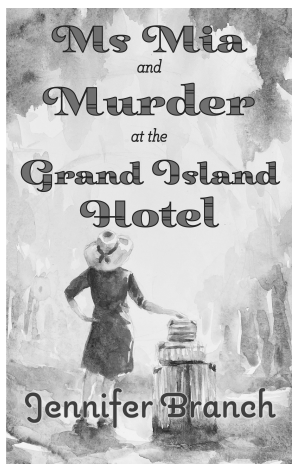
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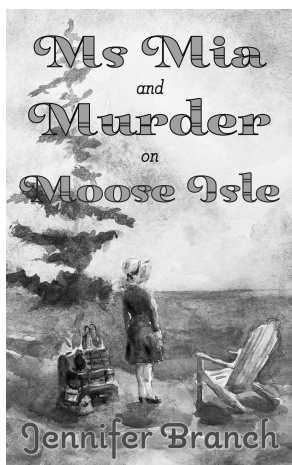
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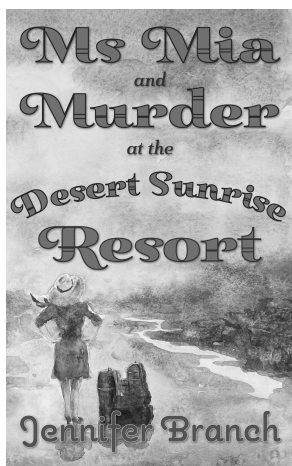
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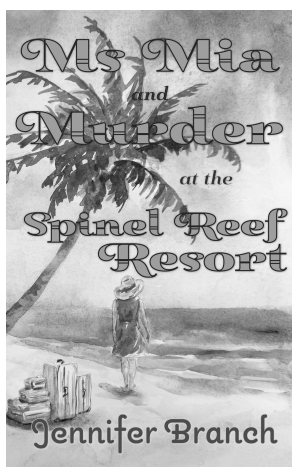
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About the Author



Jennifer Branch weaves cozy mysteries with the vibrant flair of her watercolor paintings, inspired by her renowned ability to capture joyful scenes from the Georgia coast, Maine's rugged shores, Italy's ancient buildings, and exotic destinations worldwide.

Her popular Ms. Mia Murder Mysteries series transports readers to luxurious, intrigue-filled resorts. Beginning with her debut, *Ms. Mia and Murder at the Grand Island Hotel*, set amid Georgia's enchanting Sea Islands, the series continues with *Ms. Mia and Murder on Moose Isle* on a remote Maine retreat, *Ms. Mia and Murder at the Desert Sunrise Resort* in a sun-drenched Southwest oasis, *Ms. Mia and Murder at the Spinel Reef Resort* in a tropical paradise.

As a modern landscape painter, Jennifer infuses her stories with vivid settings, inspired by her artist's eye. When she's not crafting suspenseful tales or painting, she explores coastal Georgia, Maine, and beyond alongside her husband, Roger, sons, Edwin and Owen, and their adventurous dogs, Scout and Sam—gathering fresh inspiration for the next breathtaking painting or story idea.

Discover more Ms. Mia mysteries, exclusive art, and behind-the-scenes insights at www.JenniferBranch.com—join the adventure today!