

## The Cantina

Their palazzo was perched on a hill high above Poggio Imperiale. It was not the largest palazzo, nor was it the smallest, filtered from the worst of the scorching sun by a spreading pine grove whose dead needles carpeted the ground year-round, giving a simple, clean scent to the dirt path that followed the road. Heaven went up the hill in the early morning, and came down again at lunch. Everything seemed so much simpler here than it had been at home.

And yet. Her bicycle had been stolen again. The city provided housing, but didn't think to kick in any security to go along with it, so bike theft in the neighborhood was rampant. Old sheets taped to the insides of the apartment windows offered residents only scant protection from the afternoon and evening hours of full western sun. Heaven didn't mind walking up and out of town to work, but it took longer that way, without the bike. On the plus side, it gave her time to collect her thoughts about what to do next. Buy a new bike. Pay the next installment. Get what updates she could, by word of mouth or from the headline placards that stood out in front of the newsstands on Piazza della Repubblica. She longed for news of her daughter. A strange hum of worry filled her stomach, day and night. Blessing was meant to arrive two months ago. But the only thing that arrived, day after day, was silence.

Heaven found the work with the English family, in the basement of the English church in the Oltrarno. She nannied there on Sundays for a flat fee, children or no. The British congregation was older, wealthy, with a few children. The people at the church were helpful. Her face must have betrayed her need for more work, because over coffee one morning, a woman told her about a family that needed help. They were English. "Well, the wife is," she added, thoughtfully stroking the tips of her blonde bob.

Heaven nodded.

She continued, stirring a second sugar into her coffee. The fresh scent made Heaven's stomach grumble but she continued to listen attentively. "Two children, almost grown, a girl about sixteen, and an older boy." The level detail offered surprised Heaven. Apparently, the Tuscan husband came into the property after a great-aunt's expected end, but not before the requisite years of arguing in Italian probate court eventually met with success. The family had just come

in from London. It was quite an ordeal. They were installed in the palazzo, but it was not yet comfortable. "Are you interested in this kind of work?" the woman asked, looking at Heaven.

Heaven nodded briskly. "Yes, yes. Give me the number; I will call her."

She messaged the wife the very next day, and was invited up on a Thursday morning to have a look around.

"Where is it?" Heaven asked.

"Not far," the wife said. "By Poggio Imperiale. The Royal Repose." She laughed.

The walk was long, hot, the air thick with dust, and stale with sun. After the path closed over with trees, the air became fresher, the needles fragrant. *My daughter*, Heaven thought. *My daughter*. Heaven had to get more stable, gather up some funds. *Who knew where she was, if she was alright, what it would cost me to get her back.*

Heaven rang the bell at the gate. It swung open noiselessly on an electric motor. She walked up the gravel path to the corner entrance, where the hidden house number was curiously placed. A huge chestnut tree shaded half the front garden.

A pretty woman opened the door. Her hair was clean and well-cut. She was thin, in cotton pants and a buttoned shirt.

"Heaven - is it Heaven? Such an unusual name! Hello - so nice to meet you." She extended a hand. "Well," she inhaled and smiled brightly. "I'm Evelyn. Thank you so much for coming. I'm quite at loose ends, at the moment. What luck that Sophie spoke with you on Sunday! Come in, come in. Would you like some water? Or juice?"

Heaven shook her head, not knowing what to say. She couldn't afford to waste this opportunity. "I am here to work," she said.

"Of course," Evelyn responded, closing her mouth a second later. She expected further pleasantries.

She opened the door at the far side of the kitchen. "This was the *cantina*," she said, gingerly picking her way down the dirty steps, pulling quickly on a string overhead to illuminate the room with a dim bulb. The now-dead *zia* lived in the palazzo for years, dividing her living quarters into ever-smaller spaces until she finally finished in a corner upstairs. She was not a hoarder, beyond what one might normally expect of a ninety-year-old Tuscan, but the palazzo accumulated the belongings of family members for decades, centuries even, and now almost every room was packed floor to ceiling with furniture and pieces of furniture, enormous chipped shutters, dirty demijohns and fraying baskets.

She looked around. "Do you think you can manage? It truly is a fright. I am so sorry!"

Heaven nodded. It was a relief to be in the cool air below, even if it was not fresh. *It could be made fresh*. Heaven held up her utility bucket, tucked tight with bottles of citrus-scented cleaning products and clean rags, a hand broom and dustpan, a putty knife.

"Excellent," Evelyn said. "Start now, if you like." She smiled encouragingly.

Each item Heaven picked up released a new puff of dust. This was going to take some time. *Well, that's good, need the work*, she thought. *Can't be living hand to mouth forever. No way to live*.

She sneezed twice, and reached around for her bandanna, tying it tightly around her nose and mouth. The damp mildew seeping from the corners whispered of a different dark season not far off, but difficult to imagine. She thought of Blessing. *Where was she now? Where*. She turned over a collection of crib sides and bed rails. *Keep your mind on the task*, she repeated silently. *Mind on the task*.

Heaven had been cleaning for a few hours when the door at the top of the stairs opened with a whine.

“Mum! Who’s in the cellar?” A young girl squinted down the stairs. She was still dressed for her tennis lesson, her hair pulled back, carrying a haphazardly-packed tennis bag. Even from a distance, and backlit, she was pretty. She was a bit older than Blessing, but not much.

“Mum!” the girl shrieked again, turning away from the door at the top of the stairs. “Who did you let in?” A loose ball slipped from her bag and bounced down the stairs, landing next to one of the demijohns.