

Number One Bestselling Author

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A Dream of Italy

Sometimes a new
place changes
everything ...





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‘Don’t live a little, live a lot.’

Alice Hoffman, *The Rules Of Magic*

Montenello

Every morning Salvio Valentini walked the same way. Zigzagging up steep steps, past shuttered buildings with faded 'For Sale' and 'To Rent' signs, not stopping to rest until he reached the small piazza high in the town. There he said his first '*buongiorno*' of the morning to old Francesco Rossi, who spent his days sitting beside the long-dry fountain, trying to sell his few wrinkled apples.

Salvio always bought one and, biting into its soft, sweet flesh, turned and walked the final few metres across the piazza to the Town Hall where he would sit at his desk and work until it was time to eat lunch.

He loved this dilapidated medieval town with its narrow streets, fresh mountain air and views across the valley below. When he had stood as Montenello's mayor he promised to restore the place to its former glory. He would make sure the abandoned buildings didn't crumble to ruins and do his best to see that this didn't become yet another Italian ghost town. Salvio had meant every word but six months later still had no idea how to make it happen. In the meantime, even more of its residents had died or turned their backs on the town.

Clinging to a mountain, Montenello looked impressive from a distance. People passing by often paused to take pictures. But few bothered to drive the final stretch of road to pay a visit and those who did, never stayed for long.

This town didn't have any of the things tourists look for. It wasn't beside the sea; there were no smart shops, fancy bars or historically significant monuments. It was just another hilltop village. And yet it was beautiful and Salvio couldn't

bear to see it fade away. Somehow he would save it. He just needed to dream up a clever idea.

At first he thought the wisest plan was to track down those who had left. Hours of sifting through dusty files yielded the names of several owners of abandoned properties and Salvio spent days delving further into the records to find out where some of them had gone. Many had headed for the cities, mostly Rome or Milan. Others had travelled further to places overseas. All were lured away when times were hard, dreaming of a better life. Now Salvio sent out letters and emails trying to tempt them to return.

He crafted those notes with so much hope and care. You still have a home in Montenello and will be welcomed with open arms whenever you return, he wrote, reminding them of the slow pace of life, the fresh breezes and bright sunshine, the food, the wine, the traditions, all the things that made this part of Italy worth coming back to. 'Our quality of life is second to none,' he promised.

Some didn't bother to reply. If they did write it was to say they weren't interested, they had finished with Montenello and weren't going to pay any property taxes they might owe either. A few were brusque, others composed lengthy emails, but the message was the same. We don't want the house any more. It is nothing but a burden. As far as we're concerned the *comune* can keep it.

'This is crazy. Imagine giving up a house,' Salvio said to his assistant Augusto who had shuffled across and was peering over his shoulder at the latest email.

Augusto was so ancient that if ever he didn't appear at work in the morning everyone feared the worst. He was a frail, bony man but his mind was sharp and he remembered so much about Montenello's past.

'These people feel as if they escaped, they don't want to be reminded of what they used to be when they were poor,' he told Salvio. 'What we need here now is new blood, foreigners

who think a crumbling Italian building is romantic. Find them and Montenello's problems are solved.'

'You are suggesting we should rent out the empty houses to tourists?'

'Absolutely no.' Augusto looked horrified. 'Then they would be the *comune*'s responsibility and there aren't the funds to restore them properly. If the owners don't want these places then we must sell them to people who do.'

Salvio considered the idea. More than anything he wanted to be the one to halt this town's decline. If he could help it flourish again, fill it with people and life, he would feel as if he had achieved something truly worthwhile. Glancing out of the window down at the wind-swept piazza empty aside from the old apple seller, he thought anything was worth a try.

'OK,' he agreed. 'If we get these some of these families to legally sign their houses over to us then I suppose we have every right to sell them on to whoever we like.'

'Of course,' said Augusto, dusting his hands together as if all was decided. 'Foreigners with money will come, they will renovate Montenello for us, and our problems will be solved, just like I said.'

'How much will people pay for these properties?' Salvio was dubious. 'Some are close to being ruins. They are worth almost nothing.'

'Almost nothing is what we should ask for them,' said Augusto, crisply.

'And where will we find potential buyers?' Salvio ran a restless hand through his thick, dark hair; he could see so many problems. 'How will we reach them?'

Augusto shuffled back across the room and sat down at the desk that housed the shiny new computer he had taught himself to use with only a minimum of frustrated muttering beneath his breath.

'That is very easy, we will use my Internet.' He threw his

arms wide and beamed as if he had invented the whole thing himself. 'We will make an advertisement.'

Live your dream of Italy.

Here is your chance to buy your own home in southern Italy for less than the price of a cup of coffee. The picturesque mountain town of Montenello is selling off some of its historic buildings for just ONE EURO each. The only conditions are that purchasers must renovate their new home within the next three years and that they plan to contribute in a meaningful way to this small and friendly community.

To be considered as a future resident of Montenello contact the town's mayor, Salvio Valentini. Live your dream of Italy for just one euro.

Mimi

The Silver Divorcees met on the second Wednesday of every month. There were times Mimi felt as if the only thing keeping her going was the prospect of gathering in some cheap and cheerful restaurant and drinking too much wine as all of them talked at once. The few occasions over the past couple of years that she could recall laughing properly were her Silver Divorcee evenings.

Despite the name not one of them had silver hair. All were tended to regularly by skilful colourists, a couple were Botoxed, and at least one was keeping a cosmetic surgeon busy. Still they were a social phenomenon, apparently, part of a rising tide of middle-aged couples deciding to divorce after decades of putting up with one another.

‘These are the new freedom years,’ Mimi’s closest friend Sinead declared. ‘The kids have left home, we’re financially secure and we don’t have to deal with anyone’s dropped socks. This is our time and we’re not going to spend it cleaning up after other people.’

Mimi wasn’t especially buoyed by those remarks. Her friend’s situation was entirely different to hers. Sinead was the one who had walked away from her marriage, striking out for freedom and independence, determined she wasn’t going to spend another minute with the nice but dull man who had been by her side for the past thirty years.

‘Fuck that,’ Sinead said (she swore more now she was divorced). ‘Perhaps the two of us had something in common once but we don’t any more. I want my life back.’

Mimi, on the other hand, had been happily married; at

least, she had thought so. With their two sons gone to university, she and Glenn had been making plans to move out of London and build their dream house somewhere leafy and green. Glenn had seemed as enthusiastic about the idea as she was. They used to sit together watching *Grand Designs* and talk about how they might manage something similar. So when Glenn told her he had rented an apartment because their relationship had run its course and it was time for a fresh start, Mimi had been rocked.

He refused couple's counselling and only offered her clichés. He still loved Mimi but he wasn't in love with her. He needed some space. He wanted a new life.

And so her husband moved out, and Mimi was left behind in their old life, alone in the family house surrounded by all their shared stuff. She spent a lot of time rearranging things, trying to make the place seem more her own. Buying a new bed, shifting the sofas, painting a feature wall and filling the living room with plants – none of it helped much.

'Just sell the house, settle up with him and move on,' Sinead urged her.

Mimi could see the sense in this advice but not how to follow it. 'Move on where?'

'Your work isn't keeping you in London, is it? You could go absolutely anywhere.'

'That's the problem,' Mimi said.

Sinead was an incurable solver of other people's problems. 'Go and live in a little village somewhere just like you were planning to before the break-up,' she advised.

'Which village, though? I can't just stick a pin into a map.'

'I don't see why not. It doesn't really matter which place you choose. You need to make a move. You're stuck.'

'I am aware of that.' Mimi squinted in the bright light of the ladies' toilets as she reapplied her perfect pinky-brown lipstick. She was sure Sinead had followed her in on purpose, determined to have this conversation. She was standing right

beside Mimi now, talking at her reflection in the mirror.

‘Un-stick yourself,’ she counselled, ‘and do it sooner rather later. You’ve never been this indecisive before, have you?’

‘No, but I always had a vision of what I wanted in life.’ Mimi slipped the lipstick back in her bag and gave her short, fair hair a quick fluff with her fingers. ‘I saw myself being married, having a family, working as an illustrator. I saw Glenn and me going on long walks and eating Sunday lunch in country pubs. All of a sudden the vision has disappeared completely, it’s like the screen’s gone blank. I can’t see a way forward any more.’

Sinead stared at her, bereft of advice, temporarily at least.

‘Another glass of wine and some food, that’s as far ahead as I want to look right now,’ said Mimi, quickly. ‘Come on, or the others will think we’ve abandoned them.’

They were at an Italian restaurant favoured by the Silver Divorcees mainly for its bring-your-own-booze Tuesdays. Mimi enjoyed the food, always ordering the pizza with burrata because she loved to slice into the soft cheese and watch its creamy centre oozing over the crisp, charred dough. She was the only one among the Silver Divorcees still eating carbs and saturated fat, but then all the others were dating; they were on Tinder or signed up with elite matchmaking agencies.

That was what they were discussing when Mimi and Sinead made it back to the table, shrieking with laughter at stories of Tinder encounters gone wrong.

‘So when I woke in the night, I thought he was stroking my shoulder,’ Jayne was saying now. ‘Then I turned over and it was actually this huge, hairy dog which had wriggled into bed between us and was drooling on my pillow. I could not make the thing move. In the end I got up, left a note to say I was a cat person, and went home.’

Sinead jumped into the conversation. ‘The dog wasn’t actually in the room when you were ...’

‘Yes! It was lying on the rug, staring at us and panting. I kept catching its eye. It was really off-putting.’

‘Oh my God, that reminds me of the time I was dating the guy who had these Burmese cats ...’

Mimi listened to their voices growing louder. She never had similar stories to share. She had been with Glenn for thirty years. It was impossible to imagine herself with anyone else.

‘Men ... I really don’t know why we bother.’ Someone trotted out that line almost every time the Silver Divorcees met up; tonight it was Jayne, shaking her head in dismay. ‘All of us should buy a big house, move in together, and give up on them altogether.’

‘You’re right, we probably should,’ agreed Sinead.

‘Count me in,’ said Mimi. ‘It sounds like a great idea.’

‘Me too,’ added Dottie.

‘Why don’t we stop talking about this and actually do it?’ said Sinead, leaning forward, arms crossed. The Silver Divorcees had been her idea in the first place and she thought of herself as the group’s leader. ‘Let’s pitch in and buy a holiday villa, the four of us. Seriously, I mean it.’

‘Nice idea but I can’t afford it,’ said Jayne.

‘What if it hardly costs us anything? Hang on a minute, I saw this ad on Facebook.’ Sinead rummaged for her phone and started jabbing at the screen. ‘Here we go, this is it: Live Your Dream of Italy.’

She read the advertisement aloud with extra emphasis on the words, ‘just one euro’.

‘Sounds too good to be true; there must be a catch,’ said Jayne.

‘Not necessarily,’ Dottie countered. ‘I’m pretty sure I read an article about that in the *Telegraph*. The ad’s gone viral and they interviewed the mayor of the town..’

‘Salvio Valentini,’ said Sinead, reading from the screen again.

‘Could have been.’

‘If it’s gone viral then we’ve no chance of getting a house.’ Jayne sounded almost regretful.

‘Why don’t we try, though?’ Sinead urged. ‘It’s worth putting in an application. Imagine the Silver Divorcees with their own place in southern Italy.’

‘Do you really mean it?’ asked Mimi.

‘Yes, of course I do. We can all afford one euro. Tell you what, it’s on me.’

‘We’d have to spend some money on renovations,’ pointed out Dottie.

‘Not that much, surely, at least to begin with, so long as it’s structurally sound and has a serviceable kitchen and bathroom,’ said Sinead. ‘Imagine the sunshine and the fabulous food, just lazing round with books and opening the first bottle of wine at lunchtime.’

‘Living the dream,’ agreed Jayne, wistful.

‘Why not do it then?’ suggested Mimi, who suddenly had this new feeling, a kind of happy excitement that filled her with the sense anything was possible. She pulled her phone out of her bag. ‘Let’s send an email now.’

Edward

Sometimes Edward felt as if he was going mad. He needed to talk to someone about it but who? Not Gino, that was for sure. He had made it very clear he didn't understand what the problem was. And their friends, all the guys from the gym, the ones they had brunch with at cafes or invited over for dinner. Would they even want to listen?

On the face of it everything was perfect. He and Gino had worked hard for the life they enjoyed. The apartment in Bondi a few streets back from the beach, all renovated and filled with the furniture Gino designed and made. They had a convertible Mini Cooper, ate dinner out once or twice a week, drank good wine, wore nice clothes.

Edward ought to have been happy, or at least satisfied. He couldn't explain the feeling he got every time he unlocked the front door and saw the vase of fresh flowers Gino had arranged, and the hook where he was meant to put his key, and the cupboard for his shoes and the shining surfaces of the kitchen and living room. He wanted to scream.

He had done such a bad job of explaining it. 'Everything is so predictable,' he had said to Gino. 'It feels like Groundhog Day. It's boring.'

'If you're bored with our life, Ed, then you must be bored with me.' Gino had sounded hurt.

'That's not what I'm saying.'

'It seems like it.'

That had turned into one of their worst fights. There were no raised voices but then there hardly ever had been, not in all their many years together, just simmering resentments

and things left unsaid. This time Gino was hurt and Edward sorry, but it didn't change the way he felt, like he was buried alive in his own existence.

For a while they carried on as if nothing had been said. Edward spent his days in the spare room they had turned into his office, writing articles for newspapers and magazines, and dull content for company websites. Gino went to his studio where he worked long hours custom-making furniture from recycled timber. On Saturdays they walked the coastal trail from Bondi to Coogee or had friends over for a barbecue. On Sundays they swam lengths in the ocean pool. They visited the same places, and saw the same people. Edward tried, he really did, until he couldn't try any longer.

They were having Sunday lunch with Gino's family. Edward always enjoyed these occasions. They were chaotic and noisy, with too much food and too many children. This time they were gathered for a picnic in the Botanic Gardens and Gino's father was being querulous. It was too cold in the shade and too hot in the sunshine. The peperonata was overcooked, the pasta al forno too dry, the meatballs needed oregano. It had been over fifty years since he had immigrated to Australia but his accent was so thickly Italian and his chatter so rapid that often Edward struggled to understand him.

'He does that on purpose. The old man hates you,' Gino said, darkly.

'No, he doesn't.'

'Yeah, really he does.'

It was true it had been tricky for a while when they first got together. Gino hadn't even come out to his family at that point, although Edward thought his older sisters must have guessed. So there was this big drama, with his father declaring his only son dead to him, and his mother crying a lot. Edward had known they would come round eventually. They were old-fashioned people and very devout Catholics,

so of course they needed time to adjust to the idea. He was OK with that.

It was fine now, although they were still careful when Gino's parents were around. They kept their distance from each other, no kissing, no touching at all, nothing that gave them away as a couple. Edward had never really resented that. It was only for Sunday lunches and the odd dinner, so it wasn't going to kill them.

Gino struggled though. Even on this sunny day, with the harbour glittering and the Prosecco chilling, Edward could sense he was slightly on edge.

They had spread picnic rugs on the grass and the kids played a rowdy game of football before being defeated by the heat and flopping down beside them demanding lemonade. Edward was sitting surrounded by Gino's sisters. There were four of them, all dark-eyed, dark-haired and so meticulously groomed that hanging out with them felt like being in a Dolce & Gabbana advert.

Tia was the youngest, the only sister not to have married or had children yet, and Edward's best friend. At least once a week they met for a cocktail or a walk on the beach without Gino, who had always been slightly mystified by the close relationship between them.

Often strangers thought they were a couple, which Edward found amusing and liked to play up to. He would rest an arm round across her shoulders or brush her dark curls from her face. 'We'd have beautiful babies,' he would tease as Tia shook her head and laughed.

She was the person he had come closest to confiding in, but he held back, out of loyalty to Gino, perhaps, or because he was still struggling to put his feelings into words. Edward had so much – great friends, a beautiful home, enough money – everything he needed. He was ashamed of wanting more.

Still, Tia must have noticed there was something off kilter.

‘You’re very quiet today,’ she remarked, as he was finishing his pasta. ‘Is everything OK?’

He looked up from his plate. ‘Yeah, of course.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Oh, I’m feeling a bit over everything right now,’ he admitted. ‘Probably could do with a holiday.’

‘You guys haven’t been on one of your,’ she lowered her voice, ‘gay cruises for ages, have you?’

For a while they had taken lots of those cruises and it seemed the perfect holiday: Gino loved making their state-room a home away from home; Edward liked waking up somewhere new each day; both of them enjoyed the non-stop partying.

‘You can only do so many of them and I’ve reached my limit,’ he told Tia.

‘Time for something different then?’

‘I think so, but ...’ He looked towards Gino and widened his eyes.

‘No so keen?’

Edward shook his head. ‘Sydney’s a beautiful city so why do we have to keep leaving it?’ he said, flatly.

‘Ah right, I see.’

He stared at the iconic view: the Opera House, the arch of the bridge beyond it and the ferries ploughing through the wide harbour. Dropping his voice to an almost-whisper, Edward let the words come out.

‘I don’t know if he and I have got anything in common any more.’

The expression on Tia’s face flickered from dismay to something else – determination? As her mother murmured about dishing out the tiramisu, she patted her taut stomach and complained about being much too full to manage another thing.

‘I need a walk to digest all that pasta,’ Tia declared. ‘Edward, stop eating and come with me.’

They headed towards Mrs Macquarie's Chair at a stroll because the afternoon heat was building and there was a lot they needed to say.

'What's wrong with me?' Edward asked her. 'I have a good life so why am I feeling like this?'

She took his hand and squeezed it. 'You still care for Gino, though?'

'Yes, of course, he's my family ... you're my family. I can't imagine life without either of you. But then I think about the future – the same routines, the same life, nothing changing except us all getting older – and I start to panic.'

'Have you said all that to Gino? How does he feel?'

'It's not a conversation we can have. He gets upset; he thinks I'm criticising him. And perhaps I am, indirectly at least. Should it be such a huge surprise if we're growing apart? We were so young when we got together, almost kids, really. I still had all my hair, for God's sake. That's how long ago it was.'

Tia smiled. 'I remember – such a pretty blond boy and the two of you ridiculously in love while my parents were freaking out.'

'You were a child back then. I'm surprised it made such an impression on you.'

'I could tell what you had together was special. It still is; I'm sure of that.'

'I love him, but ...' Edward shrugged, miserably. 'I'm not so certain that's enough any more.'

Tia pulled him to a stop beside the sandstone rocks. 'Don't give up what you've got. I'd give anything to have that kind of love, really I would. It's not easy to find.'

Edward was surprised. She had never said anything like that to him before. He knew there were guys in Tia's life; she often went out on dates, but no one seemed to hold her interest for long and Edward always assumed she wasn't in any hurry to settle down.

‘Tia, do you want—?’

She tugged at his arm again, sharply this time. ‘Listen to me. You can shake Gino out of his rut. Do something crazy and impulsive. Book a trip, make him go skydiving, sell your apartment: I don’t know exactly, just make sure you give yourselves the best chance you can. Promise me that.’

Tia was so beautiful, with her dark hair drifting over her shoulders and her skin gilded by sunshine. Surely she could have any guy she wanted?

‘There aren’t many men like Gino around, I can promise you that,’ she said, softly.

‘OK then,’ Edward agreed. ‘There’s no way I’ll get him to jump out of a plane but maybe we can take a trip somewhere. I’ll think about it.’

‘Thank you.’ Linking her arm through his, Tia leaned against him. ‘For a moment there I thought you were going to break all our hearts.’

They turned and started walking back. The tiramisu would be waiting and Gino’s father growing fractious again. As they drew closer, Edward saw the old man, sitting on a fold-out chair, holding forth about something. Some day Gino would look exactly like that. His jaw would soften and his hair grow snowy, and his manner become more imperious. Edward couldn’t help wondering if he would still be around to see it.

Do something crazy; shake him out of his rut. It was easy to say but harder to make happen. Edward would have to think about it.

Weekday life went on as usual, Edward at his desk trying not to distract himself by checking into social media or reading long articles in the *New York Times*. From time to time he thought of Tia’s advice but didn’t make a move to do anything about it.

He began seeing the advertisement everywhere he looked.

Three friends shared it on Facebook, it cropped up on Twitter, there was even an article about it in a newspaper he glanced at in a cafe where he was grabbing a coffee.

‘Live your dream of Italy,’ it kept nagging him. Apparently, in some town called Montenello they were giving away houses. The name seemed very familiar and Edward tried to recall if this was the place that Gino’s parents had come from originally. Yes, he thought it might be.

Edward found himself entertaining wild ideas. Spend one euro on a house and go to Montenello to visit it, maybe even do the place up. He gave the fantasy free rein. Then he started considering the idea seriously. Perhaps this was the ‘something crazy’ he was looking for. After all, they enjoyed renovating and Gino had grown up speaking Italian at home, so it wasn’t beyond the bounds of possibility. And what if this actually was his parents’ home town? If it didn’t work out what had they lost? Nothing at all, really.

He sent off the email without mentioning it to Gino. Almost certainly there would be thousands of applications and his wasn’t in with a chance. But Edward thought it was worth a go. Besides, he had to try something.

Elise

It had got to the point where Elise almost ran past estate agents' windows. She skipped over property pages in newspapers and never picked up interiors magazines because she couldn't handle how envious she felt of all those people who had their own homes and filled them with beautiful things.

It didn't matter how hard she and Richard saved, she was sure they would never have enough money for a deposit on a place. Prices in Bristol kept climbing and just day-to-day life was so expensive. All that money Richard had needed to spend on his car recently, and Elise still paying off her student loan. No wonder they couldn't get ahead.

The flat they lived in was tiny and always smelled of curry. There were two Indian restaurants below and Elise often noticed people standing outside, peering at the menus and trying to decide between them. She knew it didn't matter which choice they made. Looking down from the window of their flat, she could see how the two places shared one huge kitchen. All those vats of butter chicken and dhal, bubbling away, filling their rooms with the scent of spices, which had seemed exotic when they first moved in and everything was new and exciting but now, almost three years later, just made Elise feel faintly nauseous all the time.

'We've got to get out of here,' said Richard, who hadn't liked curry much in the first place. 'What if we get evening jobs in a bar or something?'

'How much do you think that would pay?' asked Elise, willing to crunch more numbers even though she was sure they would never add up to what was needed.

They had stopped buying takeaway coffees, shopped for groceries at Aldi and almost never went to the pub any more. Richard was already working weekends, helping his dad who was a builder. During the week he taught at a primary school in Hotwells. He had been lucky to get that position. Elise was doing maternity cover at a private girls' school and wasn't sure where she would go once it was over.

'Maybe we should give up and spend what we've managed to save on an amazing holiday,' she suggested.

'It's not a completely stupid idea,' Richard conceded. 'So where would we go?'

This was a favourite fantasy. They would huddle round Elise's laptop looking at tropical islands in the Pacific, walking trails in South America and adventures on the Mongolian steppe.

'What's the food like there?' Richard would ask. 'Do they have much of a problem with mosquitoes?'

Elise always got tired of the game before he did. She would start to wonder where the people who took all these holidays got their money from and how she had gone so wrong. She had worked hard, got good A levels and outstanding grades at college, done charity work, played sport and developed creative hobbies (because everyone said to succeed you had to be a well-rounded person). And where was the reward? There was no sign their life would ever stop being such a struggle.

'Let's go out for a few drinks tonight,' she said to Richard as they were rushing to get ready for work one Wednesday morning.

'To the local for happy hour?' he asked.

'I'd rather go to that pub down by the river, the one that does the expensive gin and tonics and the Maris Piper chunky fries with mayonnaise.'

'The Pump House.' He raised his eyebrows. 'Really?'

'Yes, let's splash out for once.' Without some sort of treat

to look forward to, she might not get through the day. 'I like that place. We can walk there and save on the taxi fare.'

It was an especially challenging day at school with the unruly girls louder than usual and even the quieter ones not paying attention. By the time she got home, worn out and discouraged, all Elise wanted was to pull on her baggiest, fleeciast track pants, lie on the sofa and dial in a pizza. But she was twenty-five, for God's sake, and these were the years she was meant to be having fun. So she changed into her jeans and her newest top from Zara, tonged a few curls into her long blond hair, and put on some eyeliner.

'We're still going out then,' said Richard when he saw her. He looked tired and didn't sound enthusiastic.

'Yes, come on. We'll perk up when we've had gin.'

The walk to the Pump House was enough to revive them, a brisk half hour with a chill wind biting through their Puffa jackets. Richard ordered the drinks and Elise found a table beside the window with a view over the river.

'Don't even ask what this lot cost,' he said, appearing with two tall tumblers. 'There's foraged nasturtium pods in here, a twist of Sicilian orange peel and something else too ... it's not just a gin, it's an experience.'

Elise screwed up her face. 'Perhaps we should have gone to the local for a half-price sauvignon blanc.'

'Nah, a couple of fancy cocktails isn't going to make any difference to things in the long run. We may as well enjoy them.'

They took slow, small sips, making the drinks last and Elise looked out the window at the river where on summer mornings she and Richard used to go rowing. That was how they had met, when they were members of a boat club, and they loved being on the Avon. But then Richard started working most weekends and it didn't seem worth paying the membership fees, so they had let the hobby slide away.

'I miss it too,' said Richard, managing to read her thoughts.

‘This summer we should try to get out there again.’

‘Yeah, that would be nice,’ agreed Elise. ‘We should plan some day trips in the holidays too. Let’s go to the beach at Weston-super-Mare and the Portishead Lido. Or we could borrow a tent and go camping.’

‘Maybe ... depends if Dad’s got much work for me. Last summer things were pretty busy, remember.’

Elise shrugged and looked away. The tables near them were crowded with people laughing, drinking and eating. Everyone seemed to be having a better time than they were.

‘This isn’t working out for us, is it?’ she said suddenly.

‘What isn’t?’ Richard’s face registered alarm.

‘Plodding along, being sensible, working hard and saving up. It isn’t getting us anywhere. It’s pointless.’

‘Do you have a better idea?’

‘Not really.’

‘Because I’m doing the best I can, you know. I’m not sure what else you expect.’

‘I’m not getting at you, Richard,’ she said, knowing how much he hated criticism. ‘All I’m saying is maybe we need to change things.’

‘How?’ He still sounded defensive.

‘Shake things up, be daring, take risks.’

‘You mean put everything on a horse in the Grand National?’

‘Of course not.’ Elise stared down at her half-empty gin glass. ‘I think we need to be more dynamic, look for opportunities ... oh, I don’t know. Ignore me, I had a crappy day.’

‘It’s true that we’re plodding along,’ Richard acknowledged. ‘But I don’t see what other option we have.’

She shrugged. ‘Me neither. I’m just feeling as if we have to do something.’

‘I’ll take some time off this summer, OK? We’ll go on that camping trip. And what if we rejoin the rowing club? Would you feel better about things then?’

Richard was such a good guy. With his broad, freckled face and stocky build, at first glance Elise hadn't thought he was her type at all. But then she got to know him and it was so easy to be charmed. She discovered he had a quirky sense of humour and a tendency for small kindnesses. No one made her laugh like Richard did, no one made her feel so cared for. In her better moods Elise thought meeting him had been like winning the lottery.

'Let's definitely get back into our rowing,' she agreed, because Richard sounded so hopeful, and she didn't have the heart to tell him she was pretty sure it was going to take much more than that to keep her happy in the long run.

She was in the staffroom drinking tea and trying to get some marking done when she eavesdropped on the conversation. The head of languages had been reading the *Guardian* and the physics teacher stopped to look at an article with him.

'They're selling houses in Italy for one euro each? Seriously? That has to be some made-up rubbish doesn't it?'

'It might well be for real. Some of those small towns are struggling to keep their populations up and falling into disrepair.'

'Why don't you buy one? Could be an interesting little project.'

'Nice idea ... if I was twenty years younger and had some DIY skills I might consider it. But I don't think I'm the right guy to restore an ancient ruin.' The head of languages put aside the newspaper. 'It's an opportunity for someone, but on balance I reckon I'm better off trying to teach French to the fifth form.'

Elise waited till they had gone before she got up to fetch the newspaper. It was lying open at the article they had been discussing.

'*Live your dream of Italy ...*' it began. She scanned it fast, then went back and read more carefully, noting down the

email address, before putting the newspaper back where she had found it and heading off to her next class.

In her head the words kept playing like a song: '*Live your dream of Italy*'.

Montenello

Salvio was beginning to wonder if it had all been a mistake. At first when the emails started trickling in he had been caught up in the excitement. He and Augusto began in an organised manner, creating files headed 'yes', 'no' and 'maybe'. But very quickly they were overwhelmed and when their advertisement went viral and was picked up by the media they lost control entirely. Phone lines were jammed, computers crashed, people became hysterical. Only Augusto seemed serene. He bought himself a smartphone so he could access emails at home in the evenings, and continued to work his way through them slowly, not seeming to care that hundreds more were flooding in as he did so.

The atmosphere in the Town Hall remained fraught and Salvio could sense the blame falling on him. He kept reminding everyone to keep calm, to let the phones ring, ignore the emails and get on with their usual work.

'When all this fuss dies down we will make a decision. But we can't hope to consider every single application,' he told Augusto.

'Of course not,' his assistant agreed. 'I will keep reading until I have found exactly the right people then I will stop.'

'How will you know they're the right people?'

Augusto looked puzzled. 'Because it will be obvious.'

'Do you really think so?'

'Of course,' he said, with certainty.

To Salvio all those emails were starting to seem the same. Everyone loved Italy, adored the food, the climate, the people, was looking for a project or a challenge, needed an

escape from a tough job or a stressful situation or couldn't afford the price of a house back home. He didn't think he could stand to read another; at least not today.

Shutting down his computer, he slipped on his coat 'I'm heading out. I have some appointments this afternoon,' he told Augusto.

'You will be coming back later?'

'Probably not. I'll see you in the morning.'

Augusto gave a small salute. 'Very good. I will stay here and keep reading through these applications.'

'You should head home early,' suggested Salvio, concerned the old man was overdoing it.

'No, no, I have a feeling this could be the day we find our first future citizen of Montenello. If so I will be in touch.'

It felt so good to escape his desk. With a wave at Francesco Rossi, stationed beside the mossy old fountain selling his apples as usual, Salvio hurried down the steep streets to the garage where he kept his car, a classic Alfa Romeo Spider, left to him by his father. Its white paint was polished to a high shine and on weekends he liked to drive it too fast with no real destination in mind. Today, though, he knew exactly where he was going. There were no appointments, as he had claimed. What Salvio needed was to see his mamma, to taste her cooking and listen to her talk, the way he always did when he had a problem.

His mother was the reason he had returned home to the south in the first place. When his father died he was certain she would struggle living alone in the *trullo* house the pair of them had spent so long trying to restore together. Salvio was living in Milan at the time and working in sales. He gave up his job, ended things with his girlfriend (in truth he had been looking for an excuse to do that for quite some time), and moved back to care for his mamma.

While happy enough to have him there, she had made it

very clear that she could look after herself. Within a few months the restoration of the *trullo* was complete and she was putting in a swimming pool. Salvio still had no idea what she had said to the workmen to hurry them along but by the time she registered the place as a holiday rental he thought he was beyond being surprised by her.

‘If there are tourists staying in the *trullo*, then where will you and I live?’ he had asked.

‘You have a life in Milan, *caro*, and I have a future with Giovanni. I will live with him,’ his mother said, crisply.

‘Giovanni?’ Surely he must have misunderstood. ‘You mean the farmer who lives next door?’

‘Yes.’

Salvio was astounded. He pictured the small, sun-browned man who nodded at him every time he drove past on his rusty tractor, heading off to tend the olive groves and cherry orchards.

‘Have you been ...’ he began hesitantly.

‘When your papa was sick, Giovanni helped us in so many ways. We grew close.’

‘But when did you—’ Salvio was still in shock.

‘Papa was aware he was dying, Salvio. Knowing I wouldn’t be alone was a comfort to him in those final months. None of us expected you to move home for good. You had a career and we thought you would be settling down in Milan, marrying your girlfriend, having children. And it is time for that, Salvio. You are a thirty-year-old man, what are you waiting for? Am I never to be a nonna, never to know the joy of holding your son or daughter in my arms ...?’

‘Mamma, stop,’ Salvio interrupted. ‘We were talking about you and Giovanni, not me.’

‘We had finished talking about that.’

‘No, we hadn’t.’

‘What more is there to say?’

‘Are you going to marry him?’

His mother considered the question. 'Eventually, perhaps, but we are in no hurry.'

'So you'll live together? No other plans I haven't heard about yet?'

'Well, perhaps just one plan.'

'Mamma?'

'We are going to convert Giovanni's barn into a restaurant. I have always wanted to have more people to cook for and this will be my chance.'

'At your age, really?'

She winced at that. 'I am in my fifties, *caro*, and it is not so old. Besides, Giovanni's niece Martina will help me and we will make simple, local dishes our customers will enjoy out on the terrace surrounded by olive trees and ... you know, Martina is a lovely young woman. You must meet her very soon. The two of you would be perfect together. Why didn't I think of that sooner? Perhaps a little lunch or dinner at the weekend, very casual, I'm not matchmaking, *caro*, just seeing if you get on. Because you aren't so young yourself my darling and it is time to grow up and take on some responsibilities ...'

Salvio leaned back in his chair, stared up at the conical roof of the *trullo*, and tried not to sigh. His mother meant well. She didn't realise thirty wasn't considered old any more, that most people were leaving it until much later to settle down and start their families. He had a plenty of living left to do before he wanted any of that.

All the same he wasn't going back to Milan and leaving his mother behind with some man he hardly knew. He needed to stay close by. So he began looking for a job and, with a lack of sales positions to apply for, ended up standing as Montenello's mayor. It had been an impulsive move and in the small town there was a great deal of mumbling that he was far too young for the job but at least he was keen and energetic and, in truth, no one else was interested. So

now here he was, living only a forty-minute drive away from his mother, a drive with an interesting mix of winding hill roads and straight highways, a drive he made very regularly in his beautiful car, although she claimed she would entirely understand if he was too busy to visit quite so often.

His mamma was such a beautiful woman with soft curves and long glossy hair like silk shot through with silver. No wonder that nuggetty little Giovanni had made a move the moment he sensed Salvio's father was failing. Time had passed and the pair of them were married now but there was still some awkwardness there. Whenever he paid a visit, Giovanni would shake his hand, exchange a few polite words then make himself scarce, rattling away in his old tractor. That suited Salvio, who preferred having his mother to himself; he was an only child, after all, and they had always been close.

As he sped away from Montenello, over-taking other cars, one hand on his horn, Salvio hoped she would have some time to stop and chat. Over summer the restaurant was so busy that a conversation with her was always a brief or disjointed thing. But it was chilly today with the sky threatening drizzle so surely there would be no people wanting to eat surrounded by the olive trees and for once they might talk without her being distracted.

Salvio turned off the main roads and headed down dusty lanes that crosshatched past fields of red earth and old trees, farmlets guarded by barking dogs and *trullo* houses with their distinctive conical roofs. At intervals there were signs pointing the way to the Ristorante di Donna Carmela. It always amazed Salvio that so many tourists persisted in following them and somehow managed to find the place.

He eased the car through a narrow gateway, parking next to a small farmhouse cheered with a fresh coat of white paint. The old stone barn beside it had been made more picturesque when it was converted into a restaurant. Bougainvillea

climbed its walls now and a garden was planted with prickly pears.

He found his mother in the kitchen, leafing through a folder of recipes. Looking up at the sound of his footsteps, she smiled. 'Salvio, what a surprise! But shouldn't you be at work? Is anything wrong?'

He kissed her on both cheeks, catching her clean soapy scent, and for a moment longed to lean in and hold on to her like he had as a boy. 'Everything is fine. I just decided to leave work early and come to see you.'

'Are you hungry?'

'For your cooking, Mamma? Always.'

He loved to watch her in the kitchen. She cooked like she did most things, with an easy confidence. There was no show or fuss, in fact, she appeared to be making very little effort at all, but somehow artichokes were trimmed, steamed and drenched in garlicky olive oil, fava beans became an earthy purée, tender slices of eggplant were wrapped around an oozing centre of mozzarella cheese, sweet red peppers were gently roasted, a table was filled with dishes and Salvio was being urged to eat, eat, eat.

She laid out a linen napkin, filled a glass with wine poured from a dusty unlabelled bottle then took a seat beside him and, as Salvio picked up his fork, began telling him her news. He heard how he had missed his chance with Giovanni's niece who had fallen for a local boy and was surely going to marry him. How there were plans this summer to put extra tables in the dining area, hire more wait staff and find another couple of kitchen hands. She shared gossip about people he didn't know and described in detail the plot of a movie she and Giovanni had recently watched. For Salvio, it didn't matter what his mother talked about, just the sound of her voice soothed him.

'And what about you?' she asked, finally. 'Are things good?'

‘Not so great,’ he admitted. ‘I think I’ve screwed up.’

Salvio knew his mother wouldn’t have heard about the advertisement. She refused to waste time reading newspapers or looking at the Internet, insisting there was no space in her brain for all that information, and if there was anything she needed to know then someone would tell her. So she was intrigued now to learn about the plan to save Montenello and bombarded him with questions. Was it going to be a lottery and would they pick names out of a hat? Would he interview the successful applicants? Were there any special requirements – age limits, language skills, financial situation? What would happen if these people didn’t renovate the houses as they had agreed to? And what if they decided to sell?

‘Those are all points we ought to have considered but instead we rushed in and now we have chaos,’ Salvio told her, using a crust of bread to scoop up the remains of the fava bean purée.

‘You aren’t enjoying this job?’

‘Some days I do, but this wasn’t one of them.’

‘Maybe it’s not for you? All those years working in sales and making good contacts ... it seems a shame to waste them.’

‘But there are no jobs here.’

‘Then you must go back to the city. I will miss you, but I will understand.’

‘That is exactly the problem in the south, Mamma. So many ambitious young people have left to look for better jobs. Some of us need to come back and have our families here, or what will happen?’

His mother’s eyes widened.

‘Not that I’m ready for a family yet,’ Salvio hastened to add. ‘But some day I want my children to grow up here, surrounded by countryside and forests, just like I did, not in some grim little apartment.’

‘How many children do you think you will want, *caro mio*?’

‘I haven’t thought that far ahead.’

She sighed. ‘I always planned to have a large family but it was impossible for me.’

Salvio knew about the miscarriages and stillbirths his mother had suffered. She had told him many times. Still he listened again as she repeated her sad story.

‘My poor Salvio, you should have had lots of brothers and sisters; instead only ghosts,’ she finished as always.

‘You would have been such a wonderful mamma to all of them.’

‘Some day soon I hope to be a wonderful nonna.’ She managed a smile. ‘You must have at least two children, preferably more. Find a girl who is younger than you, a strong and healthy one. She should be clever and attractive, of course, but don’t forget the importance of temperament.’

Salvio felt his phone vibrating in his pocket and pulled it out to check who was calling. ‘Mamma, I have to take this. It is Augusto, he is Facetiming me.’

‘Facetiming? What? I don’t know about this.’

‘I didn’t realise Augusto knew either. But look,’ Salvio held up his phone and his mother peered at it, moving her face closer to the screen.

‘Augusto? It is Donna Carmela. Can you see me?’

‘I think so.’ The old man’s face brightened with a smile. ‘Ah yes, there you are, signora. Are you looking at me?’

‘Yes, yes, I am.’

‘Then I have made a success.’ He sounded thrilled. ‘Do you have a smartphone yet, Donna Carmela? No? Then you must get one. It is incredible. Truly it does almost everything. My life is changed.’

Either Augusto had the phone at an unfortunate angle or the lighting was bad because his face seemed to be made up entirely of dark shadows and pouchy folds of skin.

'I am calling with important, confidential news,' he announced.

'How exciting!' Salvio's mother replied.

'Confidential news,' Augusto repeated.

'Yes,' she said, expectantly.

Salvio intervened. 'Mamma, aren't you busy? Surely there is something you should be getting on with in the kitchen?'

'No, nothing at all, not right now.'

'Augusto and I need to talk privately,' Salvio said, firmly.

She gave him a disappointed look. '*Va bene*, I will go, if you insist. But Augusto, if this is about the applications to buy a house in Montenello then what you want is younger women, not old ones. Single women who are strong and healthy, attractive and clever.'

'Mamma, please.'

As she stood and began to move away, she continued talking, her voice growing louder. 'A good nature is essential, generosity, calmness, oh and honesty. But most important of all is that she is *young*!'

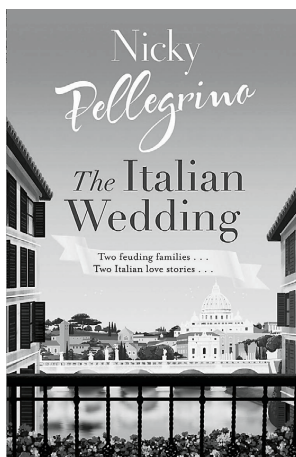
Once his mother was too far away to eavesdrop, Salvio turned back to Augusto. 'Yes, what is it?'

'I have found her,' he announced. 'A woman that I know is completely right for us. I have put her in the "Yes" pile and I absolutely refuse to remove her.'

'OK, tell me all about her.'

'Well, she ... she ...' Augusto paused for a moment then lowered his voice. 'I am afraid Donna Carmela isn't going to approve.'

ALSO BY NICKY PELLEGRINO



*Two feuding families, two love stories
and a lot of delicious Italian food . . .*

Although settled in London, the Martinellis are a typical Italian family: fighting, eating and loving in equal measure. Now Pieta's sister is getting married and she will make the wedding gown. But she is distracted by a series of mysteries. Why is her father feuding with another Italian family? Why is her mother so troubled? And could the man she's always secretly cared for really be getting married to someone else?

As the wedding draws nearer, Pieta uncovers the secrets that have made her family what it is – and may stand between her and happiness . . .

'The Italian Wedding, a feast of food and love, a terrific read.'

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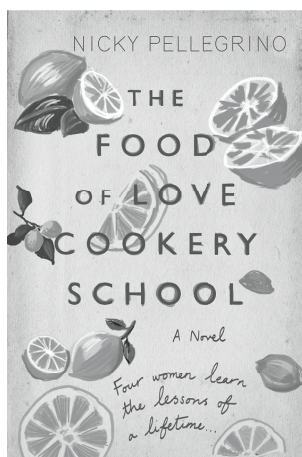
MINDFOOD Magazine

**'Nicky Pellegrino has crafted a feast not
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boomerangbooks.com

**'The elements of drama, history, romance and passion are layered,
flavoured, tasted and left to simmer, not unlike the Italian recipes
which are scattered throughout the book . . . I absolutely loved it!'**

Stephanie Zajkowski, tvnz.co.nz



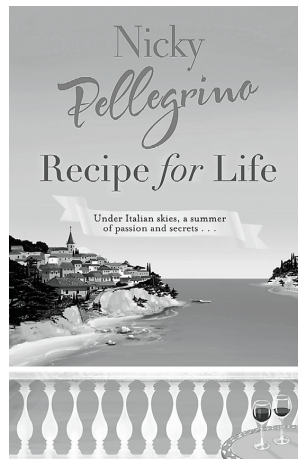
Luca Amore runs a cooking school in the Sicilian mountain town of Favio. He's taught many people how to cook the dishes passed down to him by generations of Amore women. As he readies himself for yet another course he expects it to be much like all the others. He will cook, he will take his clients to visit vineyards and olive groves, they will eat together, become friends, and then, after a fortnight, they will pack up and head home to whatever corner of the globe they came from.

But there is a surprise in store for Luca.

This time there are four women booked in to The Food of Love Cookery School. Each one is at a turning point in her life. Each one is looking for something more than new cooking skills from her time in Sicily. Luca doesn't realise it yet but this group of women is going to change his life. And for Moll, Tricia, Valerie and Poppy, after this journey, nothing will ever be the same.

'Nicky Pellegrino not only knows her Sicilian recipes and cooking traditions, she also keeps an immaculate beat throughout her tale.'

Sainsbury's Magazine



Two women, one house – one at the beginning of her life, one nearing the end. Alice is in London, working in the kitchen of a top restaurant and determined to live life fast and to the full. Babetta is living in a lonely house in southern Italy and trying to hang on to the quiet life she has made for herself.

When the two women meet one summer life changes for both of them. This is a novel about what we run from, and the places that make us stop and consider. Drenched in sunshine, it's about friendship and growing up, food and love.

'A slice of pure sunshine'

Good Housekeeping

'An amazing book . . . it's a wonderful and enchanting read . . . one of those books you want to read and reread. It's endearing, entertaining and inspiring.'

Novelicious.com

'The author delivers not only on every sensory front – combining her love and knowledge of food with her passion for the Italian coast – but also with her energetic writing, layering every character with shades of darkness and believable charisma.'

The Australian Women's Weekly



In the maze of Venice's canals, one woman sets herself a goal to find the ten things that could be the key to her happiness

'This isn't a mid-life crisis OK? For a start I'm not old enough yet to have one of those. I'm calling it a happiness project. I've stolen an entire summer from my life and by the time it's over I plan to leave this place with a list in my hand. The ten things that make me happy, that's all I want to know.'

Addolorata Martinelli knows she should be happy. She has everything she thought she wanted – her own business, a husband, a child. So why does she feel as if something is missing? Then when her restaurant, Little Italy, is slated by a reviewer, she realises that she's lost the one thing she thought she could always count on – her love of food.

So Addolorata heads to Venice for a summer alone, aiming to find the ten things that make her happy. Once she's found them, she'll construct a new life around her ten things, but will they include her life in London?

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