

THE CILENTO DOVE



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A Novel by
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CHAPTER ONE

She had once been told that the best way to see Venice for the first time was from the sea – and now, half a lifetime later, she watched again as it rose from the waves like Aphrodite. Slowly it surfaced, each moment another brush stroke on a broad canvas, teasing the imagination before its final revelation as the most legendary prospect in the world. Grace drew a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. Of course the world at large had changed greatly over the years. She had changed also – no longer the giddy girl of before. But this special place had not. It was all breathtakingly familiar - the scene just as cool and calm as then, with outlines softened by pure turquoise light, and the sea reflecting the colours of the city in shifting shades of rose and aquamarine. Not Canaletto's Venice, but Monet's. And beside her, leaning on the rusty rail of the old ferry, was Annie, her eyes bright with anticipation. Grace touched her hand and smiled in response. 'Happy Birthday!'

* * *

So they were there – in Venice at last - beginning the holiday she had thought would never happen. This was to have been a twenty-first birthday present from Grace to

her goddaughter. But as things had turned out, Annie was now twenty-four years old, a university graduate and long-time possessor of the Key of the Door - and Grace, who had been laying her plans for almost as long as she could remember, was hard pressed to feel anything but a wistful sense of anti-climax.

Even now, as she gazed towards the distant shore, the scene rising from the horizon held an indistinct aura of disbelief. She had simply lost count of the number of times the trip had been postponed - of how often she had struggled to contain her disappointment - the sense of playing second fiddle to the social and academic demands of university life. And even when finally it seemed as though plans were safely in place, Annie's mother had fallen ill and once again everything had been put on hold. Grace shuddered, remembering the dreadful days when they had all suspected cancer - the trauma of thinking the unthinkable for someone as beautiful and enchanting as Antonia Bright. But miraculously it had been a false alarm. Antonia had recovered after a small operation, and Ted had whisked her away to her beloved Cannes.

'It seems as though we'll just have to celebrate your graduation instead,' Grace told Annie, philosophically pressing yet another disappointment into the well-stuffed corner of her mind marked Experience. 'But we'll make it in the end. I promise we will.' And now they had. No

longer was this the dream of before, but the actual here and now, and as the boat drew closer to the shore the hazy image became a sharp and shining reality.

She smiled to herself. Perhaps she was just a foolish old lady, cherishing a dream that was very much larger than reality. Possibly the modest sum she had saved over the years would have been better spent on a more tangible gift for her goddaughter. Who could tell? Certainly she chose not to admit, even to herself, the reason why this had been her unequivocal choice, or just how long it had been so. If she had, reflecting on half a lifetime would have brought her very close to the truth. It would have cast her back to Annie's early childhood, when the two families were living next door to each other in Froscombe - possibly to the very moment of Annie's arrival in the world. For truth was that the child had brought such unexpected pleasure into Grace's quiet existence that it had changed everything. It had blown to pieces all that had gone before, including her dogged belief in her own life and destiny. In Annie she had discovered a new sense of purpose.

It was strange to think that until then she had believed that her best times had come and passed. Already she had settled with equanimity into a future of spinsterhood, content to reminisce over one life-changing encounter in Venice, committing it to memory as her

most precious possession. She smiled now to think of it. And as for the party of schoolgirls she had been escorting at the time, whatever would they have thought had they known that dull, staid Miss Brown had had such an ill-starred but glorious romance all but under their noses? But they had not known. And glorious it was, flinging wide shining windows into her consciousness, filling her mind with memories sufficient for a lifetime. It still shone brightly with bitter-sweetness - that halcyon summer shortly before the war, when all such windows were about to be closed and shuttered by necessity for years to come. In some ways it was probably just as well, she thought, for time had softened the sharpest of realities, and what in truth was half a lifetime, now felt like an entire age.

And so the Brights had come to Somerset. On a languid summer day in 1939 they moved into Froscombe, arriving on a tide of anticipation in the closing weeks of peace, as the village stoically tried to come to terms with the imminence of war. Gossip had already proclaimed Ted Bright as the new head of one of the most advanced communications companies in the west of England. The village was full of speculation. They were saying that radio-communication would be vital in the nation's struggle for survival, that there was new technology being developed and hush-hush work going on. Besides,

they were London people – sophisticates – moving into a house that stood at the very heart of the community. They awaited the new arrivals with keen interest - Grace most of all, since they were soon to be her closest neighbours at Forbes Fold.

‘It will be so good to have a family living in the big house again,’ she declared to her aunt on hearing the news. ‘We are really very lonely at times in our little corner. Don’t you agree?’ Grace’s corner of Forbes Fold was certainly both small and unpretentious, and somehow wore an air of desolation beside the echoing emptiness of the main house. But she had never really minded. To own even the smallest part of such a splendid place had always seemed the best stroke of fortune. But of course she acknowledged that Forbes Fold was a house crying out for a family to fill it.

Charity nodded eagerly. ‘Oh yes, I do. I’m sure they will be very welcome.’ Of course she agreed. She always did. Since moving into the cottage with her niece, unexpectedly diminishing her prospects of ending her days in an old people’s home and allowing her to add her own few treasured possessions to the little household, Charity had found herself agreeing with Grace in everything.

The cottage was part of Forbes Fold, a distinguished manor set squarely in the centre of the village. The house

tacitly proclaimed its own importance, nestling smugly beneath an ancient creeper that attempted to cover the sagging stones of its roof and invade the many-paned windows. At some time in its long history it had been divided into two very unequal parts – the smaller possibly to accommodate a dowager or a grandmother, Grace liked to think, even though logic suggested servants to be more likely. Of course she would never be sure. But in any case changing times had finally won Forbes Cottage its independence. It had come up for sale just as she was reaching a turning point in her life following her father's death, his modest legacy enabling her to own a home of her own for the first time. The main house had lain empty for over six months.

On this particular afternoon, though, anticipation of the Brights' arrival – of war even – was very far from Grace's thoughts. She was indulging herself in the garden of the cottage, reclining in a hammock slung between two of the gnarled apple trees in the little orchard at the bottom of her plot, entertaining herself with a particularly riveting novel and a glass of Aunt Charity's home made lemonade. Soft sunlight dappled her retreat, and she fancied she could smell the faintest cider-scented aroma of last year's fallen fruit in the orchard. It was strangely evocative, intoxicating and, despite the novel, curiously soporific. Not a breath of breeze stirred the

leaves around her. The only sound was of Henry's rooting in the long grass, a tail wagging, inquisitive snuffling as he searched for excitement. Then he too gave up and collapsed in the shadow of the hammock.

The peaceful afternoon droned on. Grace was fast asleep and dreaming pleasantly when the disturbance occurred. In one split second Henry returned to full alertness, and began to bark hysterically. It was followed moments later by Aunt Charity's voice from the kitchen door, croaking with urgency. 'Grace, come quickly. There are furniture vans arriving – and a huge limousine. They must be moving in.'

Grace heaved herself from the hammock and straightened her skirt, a little annoyed to be disturbed from her pleasant dream, even though she no longer quite remembered what it was. Quickly gathering herself, she hastened across the lawn with Henry at her heels, anxious to steal a first glimpse of these new neighbours who had engendered such gossip.

Inside it was dark and cool. She made her way to the window where Charity waited. The cottage was tiny and fronted directly onto the road, separated from it by only a narrow verge. Charity, who seldom went out, spent a great deal of time by the window with her crochet, watching the narrow world of Froscombe passing by. It was from here that she claimed she could spot Grace

returning from school on her stately bicycle from half a mile away – the cue to prise herself from her chair and shuffle to the kitchen to see to tea. For that was the bargain. Charity kept house while Grace provided for them both. Today the crochet lay abandoned on the floor at her feet and she was craning her neck to get a clearer view of the happenings next door. A very large pantech-nicon had pulled up beside the door, its tailgate open to reveal the tightly packed contents inside. Two men in overalls were beginning to unload it. Behind it a small van in the same livery was parked, and in front, the limousine which Charity had seen.

‘Not *exactly* a limousine, Auntie,’ Grace remarked, ‘but a very smart car all the same.’

‘All big black cars are limousines to me. In my mind it means expensive – opulent. And *so* much furniture. Where will they put it all?’

Grace smiled at her old aunt. ‘Forbes Fold is a large house – not like our little bit you know.’ Ruefully she glanced about her. Their small living room was not only tiny, but also sparsely furnished. It had taken a very small van to settle them here.

But they were comfortable enough. It was all perfectly homely, with well-worn furniture, and colourful rag rugs made long ago by Charity - at present lying in scrambled heaps on the polished linoleum, where Henry

had scattered them. The shabby chintz covered sofa had been her father's, one of the few pieces of furniture she had brought from the family home. It was a pity really. Everything of his had been large and cumbersome and quite unsuitable for Forbes Cottage and it saddened her. Together with his heavy dining room furniture, the bedsteads, and the great wardrobes, that would never have made it up these narrow stairs, had gone a cherished slice of her childhood. She supposed the piano should have gone too. But she had brought it nevertheless in memory of the old gentleman who had once played Chopin on it for Grace when she was young, telling her that his music made the birds in the garden sing. She believed him still! But now it stood in silence. For a moment Grace felt a little pang of remorse to remember his gentle kindness, and how close at times she had come to resenting the long years she had given to caring for him. They were lost years in a way, she supposed, for when his death offered her freedom and the chance to make a new life for herself in the country, she had already settled into the role of the classic spinster schoolmistress, gathering the dust of time, with a future that held little promise of the dreams she had once had, only of making the best of life's realities.

This was perhaps why she had invited Charity, now her only living relative, to share the cottage with her.

Whatever the reason, the offer had been rapturously received. 'Your dear mother would be so joyful to see us here together,' the old lady told her niece over and over again. 'She always yearned to be in the country, you know. Ever since our family spent a holiday with cousins in Sussex. That must have been the summer of '64 I think – just before my father died. Or perhaps it was '63. I do remember it was wonderful weather.'

Grace listened patiently, having heard it all before. Charity's faded memories stretched far back into Victorian history, when a trip to Sussex was the equivalent of global travel in her young life. The fact that Grace had actually been as far as Venice still filled Charity with breathless awe. 'Well nothing could be more rural than Froscombe,' Grace agreed.

It was almost a year since they had moved there, together with Henry, a dachshund, chosen by Grace in the mistaken belief that he was small and manageable. 'Everyone has a dog in the country,' she had informed Charity. In hindsight it had possibly been a flawed choice, for Henry's size proved to be no obstacle when it came to asserting his will and cheerfully ignoring all attempts of discipline. In truth he was a serious handful. Charity was secretly rather afraid of him. At this moment he was flinging himself against the windowsill in a frenzy of teeth and hair.

Grace closed her thoughts and returned to the window. Of course things had to change. It was the way of the world. And all that remained of the old life was the sofa, the piano and her father's two nice old Windsor chairs – one with rockers, which Charity liked to occupy - where now they sat watching the unfolding scene beyond.

The activity next door was intense. A great deal of furniture was being carried from the van, followed by packing cases, masses of them. Their new neighbour made a brief appearance, striding out to his gleaming car, unlocking it and retrieving a bulky briefcase before returning to supervise operations within the house. He looked brisk and business-like.

'If we see them taking a break, I think we should go round and offer tea or something,' Grace suggested.

'Oh yes, I'm sure you're right. That would be the neighbourly thing to do, wouldn't it?' Charity scrambled to her feet at once and began to fuss about the glass-fronted cupboard beside the hearth. 'I ought to get out the china, don't you think? We don't want to give a bad impression of ourselves, do we?'

'I'm sure they won't be concerned about that in the middle of all this, Auntie. But just as you like.' Grace watched tolerantly as Charity delved amongst their few treasures, unable to suppress her own mounting excitement. Then she gave a little exclamation, causing

Henry to leap against the sill once more, barking wildly. 'There's another car, Auntie. It looks like Mrs Bright this time – and some children.'

They sat staring from their window in fascination. Antonia Bright stepped from an immaculate little motorcar – a sporty saloon with wire wheels and gleaming headlamps – and ushered three small boys ahead of her into the house. She was tall and attractive. Amber coloured hair framed fine features, and even from this distance she gave the impression of being groomed and confident. She wore a slim-fitting skirt and a sky-blue blouse, quite simple and elegant. For some reason this reminded Grace of just how dowdy she had allowed herself to become. Almost involuntarily she ran her hand through her hair, aware that its bobbed style was really very unfashionable and, worse, turning noticeably grey. She exchanged an incredulous glance with Charity, who simply muttered, 'My, my!'

It was some time before Grace gathered enough courage to present herself at the new neighbours' front door. Already she could hear the children rampaging about the house, exploring their new surroundings, shouting and arguing over bedrooms. One thing was certain. The unnatural quiet of Forbes Fold was well and truly over. Grace did not mind unduly. Children were her stock in trade, and although, to be scrupulously honest,

she preferred small girls to small boys, she welcomed the thought of young people about her.

Antonia Bright opened the front door. The two women studied each other in mutual curiosity. Close to, Antonia was more elegant than ever, the kind of woman who would look good caught unawares on a wet Monday morning. Even under the duress of moving house she possessed that natural poise that sets some women apart. A pair of wide, very clear grey eyes surveyed her curiously. Hesitantly Grace introduced herself, now thoroughly conscious of how drab she must appear. 'We wondered, my aunt and I, whether we could be of any assistance – or at the very least whether we could carry in a tray of tea.'

'Oh no, really, that's kind of you, but we can manage, thank you.' Antonia's face registered immediate wariness. Fear of over enthusiastic neighbours was written all over it. She had probably been warned about village life and most likely knew next to nothing about it.

Her husband came to the rescue. 'I think we should accept such a kind offer,' he said smiling kindly. 'I'm dying for a cup of tea myself.' He held out his hand. 'Ted Bright.'

'Miss Brown. Grace Brown. How do you do?'

After the briefest of pleasantries Grace returned home, and in palpitating excitement she and Charity assembled their best china. Silver teaspoons were lifted

from their leatherette box, and an embroidered tray-cloth retrieved from a deep drawer. It was all placed on their nicest tray - the one with the wicker edge embellished with little orange wooden beads that Charity had once bought at a church bazaar. Of course it was all a little overdone. Grace knew that. But then maybe Charity had a point, and first impressions were important.

She carried the tray next door, with Charity shuffling along behind, bearing the teapot in its knitted cosy. It was all placed ceremoniously on a wooden packing case in the drawing room. 'You can return the tray whenever you find a moment,' Grace said. 'There's no hurry at all.'

'That's very kind - and we're very grateful.' Antonia was smiling now as she recognised the trouble the two ladies had taken. 'I'm sure we'll all feel much better for a cup of tea. And look, boys, chocolate biscuits.'

The three boys, who silently observed from the threshold, now crowded round the tray. Their father solemnly introduced them - Alistair, who was nine, and eight-year-old twin brothers, Tim and Simon.

Grace smiled at them all. 'I hope you will be coming to join us at school in Froscombe.'

Their response was a wide-eyed silence.

'You are a teacher then, Miss Brown?' Ted asked.

'For my sins, yes. I'm in charge of the infants at the village school.'

‘In that case I’m very sorry they’re not. But it’s boarding school in September. They’re off to Thornford. Isn’t that so boys?’

They nodded glumly.

‘How splendid,’ Grace said. ‘Aren’t you in luck? Boarding school can be excellent fun you know.’

Ted Bright beamed his approval and ruffled his son’s hair so that it stood in peaks. ‘There you are then. I’m sure Miss Brown is perfectly right about that.’

The boys exchanged sceptical looks. ‘Of course it’s mostly because of the baby,’ Alistair said, ducking away and scowling. ‘That’s really why we’re going.’

‘Of course it isn’t,’ his mother protested. ‘Nothing of the sort. You’re going because we want what’s very best for you all.’ And clasping her hands over a still deceptively smooth stomach she turned to Grace and Charity and added quietly, ‘It’s very hard, isn’t it, to think of somewhere really safe in these terrifying times? Sometimes I wonder how we dare to bring a new life into such an uncertain world.’

‘I know. It’s all so dreadfully worrying,’ Grace agreed. ‘But I suppose we must just keep hoping for the best. There’s still time for things to change.’ And turning to the children, who were silently taking it all in, she added, ‘I’m quite sure you’ll love boarding school. I’ve heard such

good things about Thornford.' They returned her gaze in plain disbelief.

Nevertheless, within five minutes they were racketing about the house again, as Grace and Charity took their leave. All in all, it was a satisfactory start to neighbourly relations, Grace thought.

From that moment the arrival of the family next door provided a source of endless interest. Charity's place by the window now opened onto a world where there was always something to watch, where the comings and goings supplied an insight into modern family life, previously unimagined. Ted departed each morning for the office with watch-setting precision. After that Antonia and the children could be seen about the place; she always neat, beautifully groomed, despite an expanding waistline; the boys doing their utmost to run rings round her, boisterous and, Charity secretly thought, a bit unruly. 'They are quite a handful,' she confided to Grace after a particularly boisterous day. 'And when Mrs Token came in to clean this morning Mrs Bright jumped straight into that little car of hers and left them all to it. Can you imagine?'

'With three small boys, I easily can,' Grace assured her, feeling that a lifetime working with children stood her in good stead to pass judgement. 'I've always found boys quite difficult.'

Yet true though this was, when it came to the small boys next-door even Grace's professional observations seemed somehow more personal. And this surprised her. Of course the situation itself was different. At home children simply did not fit into patterns and form into rows, and they certainly did not toe lines, which she accepted she might easily have guessed. But she had not bargained for the emotional tug on the heartstrings this evoked.

For the first time in her life she found herself conscious of what she had missed, partly from being an only child herself, but mostly from being denied the opportunity to form a family of her own. This surprised her also. She had long since put aside the disappointment of being left on the shelf and faced it philosophically. At least she had had her moment – that brief moment in Venice when she had believed she was loved and in love – and not everyone could claim even that. And although her one great love affair had ended in bitter disappointment, leaving her bruised and disillusioned at the time, it had provided a priceless memory that was almost certainly more fulfilling than the reality would have been. It was this that had always sustained her, the knowledge that nothing could taint a perfect memory. She had returned to her spinsterhood in a spirit of resignation. Nowadays she even wondered whether living with a man and all

that it entailed might have been a little unpalatable. Besides, the hundreds of children who had passed through her hands over the years - most of them a little wiser from the experience she fancied - had always provided her with satisfaction enough. So why it was that watching the microcosm of family life being enacted in the house next door was suddenly so poignantly different, Grace could not tell.

But by the end of August the idle days of such contemplation were drawing to a close. The boys were dispatched to school in Devon, and silence filled the house next door. Now there were different sounds to be heard. Fears were becoming facts - and it was no longer possible to deny that the rumblings of impending doom echoing across Europe were beginning to sound more and more like the apocalyptic drums of war. When at the beginning of September the inevitable came, the Prime Minister's famous declaration echoed round the little cottage to stunned silence. The future appeared bleak - as though the failure of faith and belief in prayer had somehow robbed Grace and Charity of all their trust in the future. They little imagined that this seeming end would turn out to mark a different kind of turning point. But it did. The family circle so envied suddenly opened up to them. Ted ordered an air raid shelter to be built in the garden. 'It's for all of us,' he told the two ladies from next

door. 'We are going to face this crisis together.' And curious though it was, Grace was to look back on those dark days as the beginning of some of the best of times.

As the nation braced itself, they found themselves swept up in a clamour that filled the echoing silence. Especially Grace. Even as their own young neighbours departed for Devon, children were arriving daily from London to be taken into the farms and cottages of Somerset, swelling the school in Froscombe almost to breaking point. Grace accepted the task before her with an equanimity borne of compassion. So many of the young evacuees appeared to be undernourished and poorly educated; some bearing few more possessions than the clothes they stood up in. Many were ragged and infested with lice. All were homesick and afraid. As the teacher in charge of them the task was so monumental that she simply had to brace herself and draw deep on her inner reserves in a patriotic spirit of doing her bit for the country. Meanwhile Charity tussled with the vagaries of black-outs and the beginnings of making do, declaring that as soon as she had finished the matinee coat she was making for the baby she would knit unceasingly for the troops in the trenches.

'They won't be fighting in trenches this time, Auntie,' Grace told her kindly.

‘They’ll still need warm things and home comforts.’ Charity insisted, firm in the dogged belief that this was her own patriotic duty. In her long life she had knitted for more conflicts than she cared to count. And it really was something of a wonder that the arthritic old hands that trembled like aspen leaves and fumbled to fasten buttons, could still produce scarves and woollen socks. But they did.

‘And I’m sure they’ll be very welcome,’ Grace conceded. ‘But I’m afraid miracles are what they’ll really need.’

Charity sighed stoically and put on her bravest face.

They saw less of the Brights as the weeks passed. Ted was now working long hours, and as Antonia reached the end of her pregnancy, she was seen out and about less than before. But the tacit understanding of mutual support was there and always reassuring.

‘If there’s anything you need, please ask,’ Grace would say whenever they met, and Antonia would respond in kind.

‘I will be so relieved and glad when the baby arrives,’ she once confessed. ‘These final weeks are quite the most trying, you know. This is the really hard bit.’ She was looking tired and cumbersome.

‘I can well imagine,’ Grace sympathised. In truth she could imagine nothing of the sort. Children in her

experience came complete and fully formed, ready to be filled with facts and figures. The mystery surrounding their arrival in the world was something she had neither need nor wish to understand. But she added the usual, 'But we'll help out in any way we can.'

Slowly summer began to fade and the shadows across Europe grew longer. The so-called phoney war continued to draw a flimsy veil over the reality of the Nazi's advance. But phoney it was and it fooled no-one. Eventually the last superficial gilding of peace was swept away by events. Summer itself surrendered just as Europe was collapsing into its own abyss – and the nation knew that this was the beginning of the end of the calm before the storm.

Hardships now became real and biting. Grace buttoned up her mackintosh, lowered her head, and struggled to and from school in a succession of equinoctial gales, turning day-to-day life into battle of wet clothes, draughty windows and muddy paws. Charity watched warily from her window. The first time a column of soldiers marched down the street she mistook them for Nazis and hid in the broom cupboard. 'I'm too old to be brave,' she told Grace. 'Much too old.'

Then at the end of the month came a night that the people of Somerset would refer to for generations as 'the night of the hurricane'. The most ferocious storm in living

memory swept through the county, as though to echo the violence erupting in Europe. It left a trail of devastation in its wake.

Grace could neither settle nor sleep for the noise of the gale. She could hear breaking branches and flying debris even above the deafening roar of the wind. Rain slashed at the windows with ballistic force. Somewhere a door banged relentlessly. Then no sooner was sleep about to claim her than Henry, uneasy and restless, began to bark yet again. Eventually she dragged herself out of bed, went downstairs to make a cup of tea. It was almost half past two.

She sipped the tea, ashamed of feeling nervous. This house had been standing for almost four hundred years and had surely survived countless storms as fierce as this. But she could not allay the sense of unease. Then she heard another sound, a persistent hammering that set Henry barking afresh. There was someone at the front door. She held her breath. Could it be the ARP? Was something astir at last? Surely no German attack could be possible on a night like this.

Grace drew her woollen dressing gown tightly round her and paused, trembling, behind the door. 'Who is it? Who's there?'

'Miss Brown, it's Ted – Ted Bright from next door. Can you open up please?'

With a flood of relief, quickly followed by renewed alarm, she drew back the bolts and admitted him. He was driven into the cottage on a great gust of wind, soaked through and dishevelled. She faced him in astonishment. 'Whatever's the matter?'

He looked manic. 'The baby started about an hour ago, and we set off for the nursing home at Woolmington - but couldn't get through anywhere for fallen timber. It's quite dreadful out there. Trees down everywhere.'

'Oh, my goodness, how awful.'

'We came back to ring for help, but the 'phone lines are down too. I honestly can't believe this is happening.'

'How can *I* help?' Grace asked, a dreadful panic seizing her as she stood looking at the usually cool, sophisticated Ted Bright in such a fever of despair. 'What can I do?'

'I wondered if I might borrow your bicycle. I simply can't think of any other way to get through. If I could just get to Dr Webster...'

'Of course.... right away. It's in the shed round at the side. Please take it at once.'

'And also - if you wouldn't mind - could you possibly stay with Antonia while I'm gone?'

Grace felt her heart miss a beat. But she smiled stoically. 'Of course I can. I'll just lock Henry in the

kitchen so that he doesn't disturb my aunt, and I'll come at once.'

She was ashamed to find herself trembling as she tried to concentrate on the simple tasks of alerting Charity, and securing Henry, who did not wish to be secured, her fingers fumbling with the key as she locked the door behind her. Then still shaking she followed Ted Bright into the house next door.

Antonia was wearing her coat and sitting on the sofa in the sitting room with her suitcase beside her. She greeted Grace with a wan little smile and unconvincingly assured her that there was plenty of time in hand and that probably the baby wouldn't arrive before morning anyway. Then she closed her eyes and clenched her fists as a great wave of pain contorted her face. Grace looked on helplessly. 'Perhaps a cup of tea...'

'Oh yes, that would be nice.'

'I'll do it straight away.' Grateful for any diversion, Grace flew to the kitchen, while Antonia went upstairs to have a bath.

In any other circumstances she would have welcomed the opportunity to explore the Brights' splendid and enormous kitchen, but now it was with trembling anxiety that she searched for the cups and the teapot, tussled with the unknown technicalities of the electric kettle, while the storm raged outside. She

imagined that Henry would be whining, imprisoned in her own kitchen, disturbing her aunt. Not that Charity would be sleeping amidst such commotion.

As Grace mounted the stairs bearing the tea tray, the lights flickered again. It was only a matter of time, she was sure, until they failed altogether. She swallowed hard as she went into the bedroom.

Antonia was sitting, motionless, on the edge of her bed, swathed in an enormous towel. Her eyes were wide and afraid as she said, 'The waters have broken.'

Grace set down the tray and faced her solemnly. 'I'm afraid I don't understand these things very well.'

'It means it's all starting to happen,' Antonia said bleakly. 'Oh Grace – how long are they going to be?'

The Brights had never used her Christian name before and it struck Grace to the heart. In a strange way it boosted her courage, reminding her that she was now in charge and responsible in much the same way as she would be if a pupil were hurt or in distress. She took Antonia's hand and held it lightly. 'Try to hold on a little longer. They'll be here soon – I know they will.'

'I can't,' Antonia gasped. Her whole body heaved as fiercely she clung to Grace's hand.

'You must try. Please try.'

Antonia's face creased in pain. She bit her lip in silence and closed her eyes as another huge contraction gripped her.

Outside the storm continued to batter the house, tearing at the windows and doors until the hinges creaked, tossing rain against the panes in great angry fistfuls. The lights dimmed for two or three seconds, then recovered. Grace found herself praying as she had never prayed before. Ted had left candles 'just in case'. Now she prayed that she wouldn't need them.

The baby was born at twenty to four, delivered by Grace who had never before in her life even witnessed a birth, and who was suddenly guided by instincts she didn't know she possessed. As the little head appeared she was still grasping Antonia's hand. 'You're almost there. Just one more little push.' And the tiny body slid free, a slippery, blood-stained little creature accompanied by an immense length of umbilical cord. As she lifted it aloft a wheezing intake of breath was swiftly exhaled in a loud new-born cry. She gasped. 'Antonia - it's a girl! A girl!' And Grace began to cry also - great tears rolling down her face.

She wrapped the baby in a towel, and for a few precious moments clasped her to her breast. It was the most emotional moment of her entire life, a miracle that in those fleeting moments was hers alone. Somehow the

little child became hers also, and she was consumed with the most powerful feeling of love and fulfilment. For a few tender moments she cradled the tiny new life in her arms, her heart rattling against her chest, scarcely able to breathe, her emotions in utter turmoil. Then gently she laid the baby in Antonia's arms and listened with a great surge of relief to the sound of Ted's return with the doctor.

When all was safely accomplished and Grace had made tea yet again, the power finally failed. But it no longer mattered. They sat drinking tea at the candlelit bedside in a spirit of intimacy and excitement. The gale continued to roar outside, but less fiercely than before. They all knew that the drama was safely over.

It was, in retrospect, Grace came to acknowledge, one of the best moments of her whole life. It was a high spot that told her more about herself than anything else before or since. It somehow explained those strange pangs of longing she had felt listening to the sounds of family life in the house next door - of why being single and alone in the world had felt more than lonely but deeply unfulfilling. It was the answer to so many unspoken questions. The knowledge of it now gave her a new sense of self-belief and self-respect. It was truly wonderful. Suddenly she no longer hovered on the outside of the things most people saw as normal, an oddity of sorts, just

looking in. But she was there at the very heart of it all – listening to her own praises being sung by Antonia and Ted while the doctor himself, his kindly face glowing with relief at the satisfactory outcome of such an unsatisfactory situation, was claiming that the success of it was largely due to her.

‘We will never forget what you have done tonight,’ Ted told her, his eyes full of warmth and admiration.

‘It was nothing. I did very little really.’

‘You were quite simply a tower of strength,’ Antonia said, reaching out for her hand and touching it lightly. ‘You were so wonderfully calm and reassuring that I just knew it would turn out alright.’ She and Ted exchanged glances. Then she said, ‘We are both so grateful that we have already decided if you agree that we would like to name our little girl after you.’

Grace could have wept for joy, even as she protested, ‘Oh no! Surely not - not Grace. It’s such an austere name for such a tiny person!’

‘It’s what we’d both like – if you’ll let us. Unless of course you have other ideas – or perhaps even a second name you prefer.’

Grace smiled a little doubtfully. ‘I have a second name. But it’s only a little better. It’s Annie.’

‘Annie. But that’s perfect!’

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'Oh yes, it's exactly right. It's just lovely. Annie. Yes, Annie it will be.'

And so Annie it was.

And now here she was, twenty-four years later – her wonderful, beloved goddaughter – standing beside her at the rusty rail of the old ferry, as together they watched Venice rising from the sea.

END OF CHAPTER ONE

THE CILENTO DOVE

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