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YOUR FLESH AND BLOOD

Anna kicked off the annual Pace family vacation with a lie. It was the only smart move, and she didn't feel the least bit guilty about it.

Benny had wanted to maintain their usual twin-dependent status by meeting up on Friday and flying together to Florence from Newark, a compromise between New York and Philadelphia, but doing so would have involved her sharing a row with his newish boyfriend for the better part of nine hours, and besides the natural human inclination to avoid torture, Anna had better plans.

So she made her excuses—last-minute client meeting Friday afternoon, stupidly important one, ugh, her agency was such a pain, she really needed this vacation—and Benny rolled his eyes *with* her, not *at* her, a crucial difference.

Anna arrived in Florence early Thursday morning and stayed alone in a shoebox Airbnb apartment near Piazza Santa Croce.

In the afternoon and into the evening, she sat on a precariously thin half-moon balcony with her sketch pad stretched across her bare legs, trying to capture the soul of the skyline, until the wine she'd been drinking blurred the lines, and she set it all aside and went out to simply stroll.

La passeggiata, they called it. She liked it—the flow, the freedom, the cacophony of the people around her, and beauty absolutely everywhere she looked.

Friday was travel day for the rest of the Pace family, and although the Florence airport was miles away, she woke up feeling their arrival like a to-do-list item she'd been trying to ignore, a psychic tap-tap-tap on the shoulder. *Hey! Remember us? Your flesh and blood? Don't you care at all?*

Mom and Dad's flight from Ohio, via a changeover in Gatwick, landed at 7:28 A.M. Central European Summer Time—they'd forwarded her the itinerary—then they'd wait for Benny and the New Boyfriend, whom they'd not yet had the pleasure of meeting, and shuttle them in their rental car south into the Chianti region to the medieval hilltop village of Monteperso. Nicole and her circus would roll into town around the same time and make their own way over to the villa. A joyful, almost complete, Pace family reunion would be underway by lunchtime.

Anna doubted her absence would be felt all that acutely, despite what they were sure to say to her later.

She hit the galleries on Friday. L'Accademia. The Uffizi. *Molto bene*. Overwhelming in the best way.

She'd been careful not to tell the family when her fictional Saturday flight was arriving, which gave her time for a brioche and an espresso and one more stroll Saturday morning before she grabbed her shoulder bag and hauled herself out of Florence. She hopped a southern train into the town nearest Monteperso, then sat on a curb in the station's parking lot and booked an Uber.

The driver, a young guy with mussed, curly hair and a sparse mustache, spoke a little English.

"You sure you want to go to Villa Taccola?" he said as he cut off another car on a sharp right turn out of town. "I could take you . . . anywhere else."

"Should I be worried?" Anna asked, watching the landscape scroll past her window, one lovely postcard after another. Skinny cypress and squat olive trees, tidy lines of vineyard hills, beautifully crumbling walls, villages that had been clinging to their rocky brown hillsides for a thousand years or more. The occasional jarring modern sight: a massive satellite dish on a house, a fence plastered with ads for a summer funfair.

Her brain would filter those images out later, she knew. People tended to remember only the pretty parts of their vacations, and Anna was no different.

"No, no, I'm joking," the driver said, but he watched her through the rearview mirror, eyes tracking downward, and she wondered idly whether it was him she should be worried about. She envisioned the possibility. Uber driver with a few of his local buddies, a different car parked down a dirt track, waiting to find her alone.

"Where do you live?" she asked him in Italian. *Dove abita?*

In the mirror, his eyes slid back to the road, just in time for him to avoid oncoming traffic driving too centrally on a switchback.

Her heart thudded with the near miss. She bit her lip, adrenaline pulsing upward.

He replied in Italian. "Not far from where you're staying."

Anna stretched. "What's fun to do around here?"

"Everything is fun if you are fun," he answered. At least, she thought he did. Her actual facility with Italian wasn't nearly as good as her accent.

"Good point," she said. In English.

Up ahead, she saw a small wooden sign too overgrown with ryegrass to read. A narrow country track stretched along it to the right. The driver turned so abruptly she nearly fell over, and she heard him chuckling from the front seat as she rearranged herself.

They passed a field where a gangly goat stood tied to a post, next to a sagging soccer ball. From the long grass beside him, an orange cat emerged, stretched its back, and lazily trailed the

car. Anna craned her neck to peer through the back windshield, tracking its path along the road.

By the time she'd straightened again, they were there.

Villa Taccola.

"I can come back, take you out, have some fun," the driver started to say as he stopped the car, but she hurried out, mumbling, "*Grazie mille, arrivederci.*" She slung her bag onto her shoulder and stepped through the iron gates of the villa.

Anna heard the car idle on the drive for a full minute before it crunched a turn and left her behind. *I'll keep a rock in my pocket when I go for walks here alone*, she thought, even while knowing she'd never bother.

There were two excessively large SUV rentals parked just to the right of the iron gates, signaling that the gang was all here, but as Anna approached the villa, she felt entirely alone. Unnaturally so. There was something careful about the energy here. Not calm, exactly. More . . . preserved in amber. Crickets twitched their relentless song around her, unseen. A brown lizard on the sunny courtyard tiles lay so still that Anna assumed it was dead until it twitched at her approach. There was a perfect circle of dirt surrounding the house and drive, inside of which even weeds didn't grow. Not well-tended gravel. Dirt. Remnants of dead plants poking up in places. The sky was solid cerulean blue and the day was *hot*. Hotter by the minute. Breezeless.

Anna slowed her step, allowing the sense of this place to wind tight around her. The sunlight and shadow, the isolation. Something else she couldn't yet name. She'd have taken out her sketch pad and plunked down right there, cross-legged in the front courtyard, capturing her first impression of this six-hundred-year-old villa—the afternoon light stretching across the pale brown stones of the flat façade, casting shadows that looked like teeth—if she didn't think she'd be caught. Somebody would spot her, take offense, mention it

to the others, setting the combative script for the rest of the week.

Not this time. Anna wanted this vacation. She'd actually looked forward to it.

She set down her shoulder bag and looked around, making a mental sketch instead, marking the gently worn tile roofline, the square tower that rose elegantly from the western wall. There was a single tall window set high in the tower, thick curtains drawn, obscuring the view inside, but as Anna peered up, hand shading her eyes, she saw the fabric move like someone had been spying but had darted away to hide.

Hi, girls.

Anna wasn't surprised her nieces were up there. If she'd been the youngest of the group and gotten here first, she'd have bagged the tower bedroom too.

In any case, she'd been spotted. Time to join the party.

She rapped on the front door. Listened for footsteps.

A movement at her feet startled her into stumbling. The orange cat. She'd nearly trampled the poor thing. A tom, she saw now, not even remotely neutered. He'd walked all this way from that field to greet her with a dance around her ankles, but apparently these ubiquitous, feral Italian cats were the same as American cats—as soon as she bent down, he slinked out of reach, no longer interested.

Anna opened the front door.

Her eyes picked out the old before the new, everything quotidian blurring past notice. She saw smoke-blackened wood beams, stone walls, a frayed wall hanging with a pastoral image woven into it—dancing nymphs dangling clumps of grapes from their joined fingers.

Anna walked through the large, recessed entry hall now doubling as a living room, and mapped a kitchen off to the right through a wide archway, as well as a dim corridor to the left, leading to bedrooms, presumably. There was an extension out

beyond the living room, with steps descending into a brighter space—a contemporary build-out?

“Heya,” she called to the house, mostly out of a sense of obligation. She was constantly being accused of sneaking up on people. Her voice echoed faintly against the stone walls. Nobody answered. The villa sat silent, apart from a dull hum she couldn’t quite identify as insect or electric.

Someone’s in here, Anna thought. Listening.

She turned slowly, taking in the weathered wooden floorboards in the entryway, the stones lining the kitchen arch, the terra-cotta tile on the walls and kitchen floor. One of the ceiling’s long wooden beams had a large divot, as if something had bitten a chunk out of it at some point in the past five hundred years. A few items of furniture looked nearly as old as the beams. The rest, Anna suspected, was bought in one big trip to a home goods outlet: the living room’s beige sectional furniture and large, bland coffee table, a flat-screen television fixed over the great, gaping mouth of a fireplace. The kitchen had herbs and baskets of fruit and root vegetables hanging from the ceiling, pots dangling over the dining table that extended through the archway, but it looked to her like it was arranged for effect. More Epcot Italy than the real thing.

And yet there was something idiosyncratic about Villa Taccola. The whole house suggested pentimenti, original brushstrokes covered over by something else. The same subject in a different style. Past mistakes hidden by fresh paint. What mistakes had been made here? she wondered.

Anna peeked into the nearest of the bedrooms—bare, pristine, minuscule, a single bed crammed against a sloping wall. Obviously hers, so she dropped her bag down to claim it.

She flicked the bathroom light on and off, pointlessly curious—it was, you know, a bathroom—then tiptoed through the living room, wary of disturbing the quiet, and peered down

at what indeed looked to be a modern addition in the back.

Well-designed, she had to admit, if jarringly contemporary, two stories of glass wall looking out on a stunning vista: those neatly lined vineyard hills, a church tower above a cluster of buildings in the distance, and much nearer, a pale blue square swimming pool, bright little figures dotting the water and the deck.

There they were.

Anna trotted down the stairs into the extension, taking in another line of open bedroom doors to the right, and set into that big glass wall, the door to a back patio where clothes had been hung out to dry. As she passed through a sitting area cluttered with her nieces’ books and toys and electronics, a movement caught her eye. She turned in time to see one of the bedroom doors click shut.

After Anna caught a startled breath, she snorted. What a warm welcome. And she was supposed to be the antisocial one? Maybe someone was changing clothes, didn’t want to be caught bare-assed. Oh lord, if Anna saw her brother-in-law naked, she’d never hear the end of it.

Stepping around the edge of the coffee table, Anna spotted a long tail, gray and ragged, and jumped back quickly so whatever it was wouldn’t scurry across her feet. A closer examination, breath held, proved somehow more disturbing—not a live creature, nor a dead one. A possum. Toy. Thing? Anna shook her head and left it where it lay, under the coffee table.

Outside the villa, that buzzing sound trebled, joining the rhythmic song of the crickets. Cicadas? Frogs? What did she know. She’d lived in the city too long.

Down past the patio, a path of sparse stepping stones led to a long wooden table for alfresco dining on which a skinny black-and-white cat had draped itself like a pelt rug, paying her no mind.

Farther down the path, Anna found a flagstone patio with a clay oven and loungers arrayed to take in the view. Waves of heat

rose off the patio. Anna wondered whether they could just plop a pizza down on the flagstone floor and cook it that way.

She shaded her eyes to get the panorama effect of the grounds. This place was huge, by far the biggest vacation rental they'd ever stayed in. Must have been expensive.

I could get lost here, Anna thought.

She heard Waverly's and Mia's high-pitched shouts and splashes, their dad growling monosyllables like an ogre as she made her way down the path to the pool. At the pool gate, shaded by olive trees, she heard Nicole snap, "Do not splash in this direction, *thank you.*"

Anna's hand froze against the latch.

Last chance. She could turn back, issue one more lie, say her flight got canceled, hang out in Florence, head elsewhere. Anywhere.

But somebody up at the house—not, apparently, the girls?—already knew she was here. She'd checked in to Villa Taccola, like it or not.

Anna clanged the gate shut behind her to announce her presence. Nobody glanced up. The girls were facing the other way in the pool, riding on Justin's arms like a fairground ride. Dad was squinting over his glasses at a paperback called *Strike Force Two* with a big red 10% OFF sticker on the cover, and Mom and Nicole were discussing something requiring their full attention, judging by the lines in Nicole's forehead. Or maybe her sister always looked that way these days. It had been a good seven months since Anna last saw her.

"I made it," Anna announced, and when nobody turned, she bent down to wrap an arm around her mother's shoulders.

Mom shrieked. Anna kissed her cheek anyway. Nicole reeled back, hand to her chest like she'd been shoved.

"Anna, you lunatic!" Mom laughed, fanning herself. "Why do you sneak up on us like that?"

Anna did the cheeks-lightly-grazing-air-kiss thing Nicole

always went for, then turned to Dad, who propped his paperback carefully open on his lap before craning his neck to say hello.

"Did you have a good flight?" He sounded like a customs officer.

"Yeah, fine," Anna answered.

And that was the end of that conversation.

"Girls, say hi to Auntie Anna," Nicole ordered.

"Hi, Auntie Anna," Waverly recited, swimming in the opposite direction.

Jaded by age seven, apparently. Anna was impressed.

"Get in the pool, Anna!" little Mia shouted, at five as yet unjaded.

"Let her get settled in first," Justin said, hoisting Mia on his hip.

"You kidding? I'm boiling." Anna kicked off her sandals, hiked up the hem of her dress and waded straight into the shallow end.

Waverly swiveled around, eyebrows raised. "Did you bring a swimsuit?"

"Of course." Anna waded in a circle, feeling the water grip her thighs, ice cold.

"Why don't you go put it on, sweetie, so you don't get your nice dress wet?" Mom suggested. It wasn't a bad idea, but she could see a different kind of judgment in her mother's eyes when she turned to her, and a pinch to the corners of her sister's smile that hadn't been there a minute ago.

Anna remembered last Christmas acutely now. Nicole had gotten drunk, cornered her in the bathroom and told her to stop flirting with her husband, which was—sorry—ludicrous. Justin was nice enough and had been borderline attractive nine years ago at the wedding, but he'd dissolved into a dad bod before they'd even had kids, and whatever charisma he'd used to win Nicole over was either gone now or reserved for the nine-to-five of his sales exec job. Some people were into that middle-of-the-road Ohio guy thing, no judgment, but not Anna, and she'd told her sister as much, which had not gone over as well as she'd hoped it might.

Anna waded out of the pool without greeting Justin. He didn't seem to care.

She spotted yet another cat, solid gray, as it slid under the bottom of the gate and straight to Anna, rubbing itself against her wet legs.

"Don't splash," Waverly shouted to Mia. Her little sister went slack, suspended by her *Encanto* floaties. "You'll scare the kitty."

This one really seemed to want Anna's attention, so she bent down and gave it a pet. It felt dirty, bug ridden. She scratched it gently with her fingernails and it purred, arching.

"There are so many kitties here," Mia cooed. "I love it."

"I do too," Anna said, as the cat slunk away again, disappearing in a blink.

"You like cats?" Waverly asked her from the side of the pool, her head resting on her skinny tan arms. She sounded surprised.

"Course I do," Anna said.

"Why don't you have one, then?"

"Leave your aunt alone," Justin groaned, but Anna wasn't bothered. It was a fair question, not a critique.

She sat down on the deck with her legs swirling in the water, considering. "I think you can like something without wanting to own it."

Nicole muttered, "I'm not sure pets and Anna are a great combination," not quite under her breath.

Anna's eyes cut to her sister's.

Nicole held her gaze. *Am I wrong?*

"You look rested, Anna," Mom said, oblivious as ever to the tension. "Did you get some sleep on the plane?"

"Of course she did." Nicole kicked her feet up on her lounge. "No kids. Heaven."

Anna noticed a scowl pass over Waverly's face before the wiry girl shoved herself away from the side of the pool and dove into the depths again.

Nicole wasn't done. "What, did you drink wine, watch a movie, put your chair back and sleep?"

"I read a book, no movie, but yeah." Anna felt like she was admitting to a crime.

The book was another lie, to be fair. She'd watched trashy reality shows for a solid six hours.

"I hate you," Nicole said, closing her eyes. "I still haven't recovered from our flight. Red-eye, and these two didn't sleep a wink."

"Did you not sleep?" Anna grinned, kicking a splash at Mia and Waverly that made them squeal with giggles. "You little devils."

"Daddy slept!" Mia said, paddling back to him.

"Yeah, let's not bring that up again," he murmured to her with a wink.

"So are Benny and the boyfriend hiding from me or what?" Anna asked, peering back at the house. The villa looked much less elegant from this angle. The great glass extension blocked the original architecture, creating the effect of something amputated and replaced with the wrong prosthesis. The modern bit was far too squat for the rest of the villa, and the midday sun reflected uncomfortably against all that glass. In contrast to the blinding new-build, the stone tower loomed unnervingly dark, like a great shadow cast by nothing.

How did you even get to that tower? She hadn't seen a stairway to it from the inside.

"They've gone to Pisa," Mom said. "Christopher wanted to see it. He was adamant."

"Have you met him?" Dad grunted to Anna from behind his paperback. "It's Christopher. Not Chris. Full name. *Christopher*."

"Who's up in the house, then?" Anna asked.

"Nobody right now." Mom smiled. "They'll be back around six. Benny's *very* excited to see you. Didn't really want to drive that far, but Christopher was not taking no for an answer!"

So nobody was in the villa, rustling curtains, shutting doors.

Anna thought about making a haunted-house joke, it was there for the taking, but she didn't want to freak out her nieces, so she said to Dad, "Yeah, I met Christopher. Benny brought him up to the city and we had dinner."

"When?" Mom asked.

Anna shrugged. "A month or so ago."

"You never told me."

Anna didn't argue the point. A lull hit the conversation, filled by that swelling ambient drone.

"Benny seems happy," Nicole said.

Anna could sense her sister's eyes boring into her through the dark panes of her glasses. A glare with a message: *Don't fuck this up for him.* As if Anna were that powerful. And that malicious.

Anna bit back half a dozen caustic responses, then settled for, "He does, doesn't he?"

Nicole flopped back against her deck chair, annoyed into submission by Anna's calmness, and that was reward enough.

Mia swam to Anna's dangling legs and raised her arms.

"You wanna come out, Meems?" Anna asked.

Mia nodded, her teeth chattering.

Anna hoisted her up, let her sit on her lap, soaking her dress. She didn't mind. It cooled her off, but Mom tutted "Go and put your swimsuit on!" while Nicole groaned "Just watch, she'll jump in fully dressed," and Anna felt life force siphoning out of her like a caffeine crash.

"Good idea," she said, setting Mia gently to the side with a wink. "Be right back."

"Right back" was another lie, meant to pacify, to just get through the next hour and the one after that. Pretty much the name of the game for the next nine days.

Tread lightly. Survive.

She slipped on her sandals and slid away up the path.

"This is so nice," Anna heard her mother say behind her.
"Everybody together."