

**Delayed Death**  
by Beate Boeker

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All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. I would particularly like to stress this fact when it comes to the mayor of Florence who is not portrayed in a favorable light in this novel. If you are familiar with Florence, you will recognize some places and names, but everything else is completely invented.

## Chapter 1

"I've never seen such a sexy bride." Carlina stepped back and looked at her cousin Emma with a smile. "The gang will faint."

Emma twirled on her pearly high heels and checked her rear view in the mirror that went from the ceiling to the floor. Seventeen spotlights illuminated the white painted bedroom and showed the bride in full splendor. "That's the least I expect." She wriggled her shapely bottom in the skintight dress. "The sexiest bride of Florence." Her smile was triumph made flesh.

Carlina took the veil and held it up. It felt soft like a cobweb, and a faint trace of Emma's perfume wafted up to her. Probably Emma had already tried it on several times, admiring herself in the mirror. "Your new mother-in-law might have a stroke, though." She smiled at her cousin with affection.

"Why?" Emma slipped underneath the veil and adjusted the position with her fingertips. "Just because it's sexy?"

Carlina glanced at Emma's legs and swallowed her answer. The late September sunlight poured into the bedroom and shimmered on Emma's exquisite nylons. Her legs looked a mile longer today because the wedding dress was short enough to make everybody wonder why it had cost more than a month's salary.

Emma didn't notice her cousin's hesitation. "Can I go like this?"

Carlina nodded. "You're perfect." The family had been blessed with many good-looking women, and Emma had inherited the long legs and peachy skin, but on top of that, she had an energy about her that made her even more attractive. A faint feeling of melancholy grabbed Carlina. Emma was getting married. Things would be different now. *Why should they be different?* A voice inside her mocked her thoughts. *Emma will continue to live two floors below you, Lucio has lived here for months, and she will always remain your little cousin. Don't become maudlin, just because it's a wedding.*

Emma took a deep breath. "I'm glad I sent mother and the rest of the gang away. They would have driven me crazy."

Carlina nodded. "I couldn't agree more with you." She slanted a look at her beautiful cousin. "But they were a bit huffed. I was surprised they obeyed, particularly Benedetta. I expected her to insist. After all, you're her eldest daughter, the first one to get married, and . . ."

"It's because I'm the bride today." Emma opened her arms and threw back her head. "Today, I'm the star."

Carlina suppressed a smile. "You're always the star, and I do hope your big day will be perfect."

"Of course it will!" Emma laughed. "Think of all the hours of preparation! I've thought of every detail. Nothing will go wrong."

A shiver ran through Carlina. *I hope the gods don't listen.* "Don't you think the house feels strange with the whole gang gone? It's never been so quiet."

Before Emma could reply, a ringing tone came from Carlina's black evening handbag lying on top of the white dresser.

"Oh, no, not again!" Emma bent forward with one fluid movement and grabbed Carlina's arm. "Don't answer that. I think your shop assistant should for once manage without you. She has already called twice. Why does all of Florence want to buy underwear on my wedding day?"

Carlina gave her a reassuring smile. "It's the first time I left Elena all alone at the store, and I said she could call whenever she has a question." She shook off her cousin's hand and clicked open the tiny clasp of her handbag. "We have plenty of time, so don't worry." With a flick of her wrist, she pulled out her phone and checked the caller ID. "Oh, no." She closed her eyes as if that would make it go away. "It's Mama."

"Don't answer it!" Emma's voice rose. "I know she will spoil my wedding!"

"Nonsense." Carlina shook her head and laid a calming hand on Emma's arm. *Emma is more nervous than she wants to admit.* "I bet she only forgot something." She clicked onto the green button. "Ciao, Mama."

She listened to the quaking voice on the other end. Her face twisted.

Emma frowned. "What's up? Why do you look so strange?"

Carlina made a soothing motion with her hand. Then she said, "All right. Don't worry. We're almost on our way. Ciao." She pressed the red button, threw back her head, and exploded into laughter.

Emma circled around her, too impatient to stand still. Her high heels left tiny imprints in the creamy carpet. "I didn't understand a word. What does she want? Why are you laughing?"

Carlina gasped for breath. "I was right. She forgot something."

"What?" Emma placed her hands on her hips. Her red mouth pulled down at the corners.

Carlina took a deep breath and said with relish, "She forgot grandpa."

Emma's mouth dropped open. "She forgot grandpa? How can she do that?"

Carlina shook her head. "I have no clue. It seems he didn't want to join her for the hairdresser and the manicure this morning, wasn't even dressed yet, so Mama decided she would leave without him but forgot to tell me." She started to laugh again. "That's so like Mama."

Emma flattened out an imaginary crease on her skirt. "She's not normal, that one."

"No one in our family is normal." Carlina gave her a cheerful smile.

"I don't know why you look so happy about it." Emma twitched her veil to the side and glared at her.

"No?" Carlina's smile deepened. She opened her mouth, but before she could say something, Emma interrupted her.

"No, don't tell me. I don't want to know." She looked at the mirror once again. "When did you say Uncle Ugo would come?"

Carlina checked her wrist watch. "In twenty minutes."

Emma sighed. "I wish he could drive to our door."

Carlina grinned. "If you hadn't insisted on the biggest limo to be rented in the whole of Italy, he could have done just that. As it is, you will have to walk the few steps to Via Ghibellina. He said he would wait in the car."

"I still think he could have tried."

"So do I." Carlina made sure her voice sounded ironic. "It must be great fun to squeeze a limo through a historical street that was created long before cars were invented. But who would have paid for the scratched lacquer on both sides of the limo? You?"

Emma pursed her lips. "You're not supposed to be nasty to me on the day of my wedding. Now let's go." She turned on her high heels and sashayed to the white door. "I just hope grandpa has dressed in the meantime."

"You forgot to pack your makeup into your handbag." Carlina held up the slim rectangular in glittering gold. "Why don't you do that, and I'll go downstairs and get grandpa ready."

Emma pulled her finely plucked eyebrows together. "I hope grandpa will hurry. What if

he takes one of his sudden ideas into his head and--"

"Don't worry; all will be fine. I promise." Carlina pushed Emma in the direction of the bathroom, a modern wonder in black with spotlights hidden in the floor. "Pack your stuff. I'll take care of grandpa." She slung her evening handbag over her shoulder and left Emma's apartment to go downstairs. As always, she put one hand on the polished wooden railing because she loved to feel the smooth surface and enjoyed the way it led her in soft curves from the top of the house to the ground floor, passing all family apartments. Today, she also used her other hand to gather her long evening dress and hold it up. The staircase smelled of beeswax. *Benedetta must have polished it yesterday.* Carlina took a deep breath.

The bells of Santa Croce chimed the full hour. Carlina stopped for an instant on the landing and listened. How often had she heard the bells chime; how much their sound was part of her life. She loved this house, her home. For as long as she could remember, it had been special to her, first as a kid, when she had come with her family during the long summer vacations, and later, when they had moved to Florence after the death of her father. A pang went through her. *I wish he could celebrate with us today.* After all these years, the pain had lessened, but from time to time, the sharp feeling of loss jumped at her without warning.

She pushed the thought away and forced herself to descend the worn wooden stairs a bit slower than usual so she wouldn't trip in her high heels. The rustling of her dark-red dress made her feel festive. *I've never seen Emma so nervous, but maybe that's normal if you're getting married. I hope she'll be happy with Lucio. He's so . . . fierce sometimes.* Carlina frowned. *But then, Emma isn't a mellow dove either. She'll be fine.*

She arrived on the ground floor, turned to the left, and knocked on the green wooden door. When she didn't hear a sound, she knocked again, louder this time. Without waiting for a reply, she took out her key, turned it in the lock, and pushed the door open. The apartment was stifling warm and smelled of grandfather's peppermint drops. As she went through, she called out, "Grandpa! It's me, Carlina. Are you ready for Emma's wedding?"

He wasn't in the sitting room.

Carlina frowned. "Now what?" *I'm not in the mood to play hide and seek with a nervous cousin and a disgruntled grandfather.*

She opened the door to the kitchen and froze.

Emma's heels clicked behind her on the old linoleum floor. "Carlina, is he ready? We have to go."

Carlina stared at her grandfather, slumped in his chair, with his chin sunk against his still chest. His eyes were wide open. "He . . . he's not ready." Her voice spoke all by itself. It sounded devoid of all feeling.

Emma came up. "He has to hurry. I'm not willing to be late for my own wedding, just because--" She stopped mid-sentence, grabbed the door frame, and screamed.

Carlina twisted around and grabbed her arms. "Shh. It's all right. Don't scream." Her whole body quivered from shock.

Emma pointed a pearly painted fingernail at their grandfather. Her hand shook. "He's dead!" Her shriek reverberated through the old kitchen.

Carlina gulped. "Yes. He's dead." Her eyes filled with tears. "I'm so sorry." A feeling of sorrow and helplessness swamped her.

"Sorry?" Emma narrowed her eyes. "He has destroyed my wedding!"

"But Emma," Carlina laid her hand, suddenly cold, on Emma's arm. "It's not his fault."

"Not his fault!" Emma stemmed her hands on her hips and stared at her grandfather with clenched jaws. "I'm not so sure. He always got me into trouble, always."

Carlina stared at her. "That's not fair. Of course he was a bit unusual sometimes, but . . ."

"Unusual?" Emma rounded on Carlina with such a vicious hiss she took a step back.

"Don't you remember the time our dear grandfather was supposed to collect me from hospital and didn't show up? He said he had to worship the sun that day because it had come out for the first time in weeks. That was the sun-worshipping period. I stood in front of the hospital for two endless hours, thinking my family had forgotten me. Don't you remember that?"

Carlina bit her lips. "I do. But please, calm down now. We have to--"

Emma interrupted her, "And the day we were supposed to leave on vacation, all together, and he made us jump out of the train at the last minute because he felt a bad vibe on the train? That was the vibe-feeling period. Don't you remember that?"

Carlina searched her cousin's face with worry. Her cousin's violent reaction perturbed her.

"Do you remember the bad vibe period?" Emma's voice became louder with each word.

A small smile escaped Carlina at the memory. "I do. It was the period I liked most." A tear rolled down her cheek. "I'm going to miss him so much."

Emma threw her a look full of contempt. "And now he dies, minutes before I get married. It's unbelievable! He was fine this morning, fit enough to tell me my wedding dress is way too short."

Carlina caught her breath. "Do you mean . . ." she had to swallow before she could continue, ". . . something's not right with his death?"

Emma made an impatient move with her hand. "No, of course I don't mean that. He's seventy-nine, for heaven's sake. People his age die all the time. I just wish he hadn't chosen this exact moment!" She stamped her foot.

"He couldn't help it." Carlina wiped away the tear. She opened her handbag and pulled out her phone with a shaking hand. "I have to call Mama."

"No!" Emma pounced on her and took the phone away.

"But Emma!" Carlina stared at her, nonplussed.

Her cousin pressed her lips into one determined line. "He won't destroy my wedding." She emphasized each word. "I don't accept it."

"But . . . what do you want to do?" Carlina lifted her hands. "We don't have a choice. I mean, he--"

"We'll leave him as he is."

Carlina's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"It doesn't make a difference if he dies today or tomorrow." Emma lifted her chin underneath the veil.

Carlina blinked. "You make it sound as if it was a matter of choosing."

"But it is." Emma bent forward and took Carlina by the arms. Her dark eyes glittered. "Today, his death is inconvenient. Very inconvenient. Tomorrow, he can die as much as he wants. Tomorrow, I'm on my honeymoon, far away in Africa, where he can't bother me."

Carlina didn't know if she should be scandalized or laugh. "But . . ."

"Please, Carlina." Emma opened her eyes wide. "For him, it doesn't matter one bit. For me, it makes all the difference in the world."

Carlina felt herself soften. In a way, Emma was right.

Emma narrowed her eyes and pressed her point. "Besides, think of Uncle Teo. You know the doctor told him only last week to avoid any stressful situations because of his weak heart. He almost forbade him to join the wedding today, and that's nothing compared to the sudden death of his twin!"

Carlina hesitated. "But surely . . ."

"If we tell him now that grandpa died, Uncle Teo might immediately drop dead, too."

"Oh, God. Do you really think so?"

"Yes." Emma pressed her lips together. "After all, they're identical twins. Better let Uncle Teo enjoy the party and all the excitement of the wedding, then get a good night's rest,

and tomorrow, you can break it to him easily.”

Carlina bit her lip in indecision. “You make it sound so sensible. But everybody expects grandpa.” She shook her head. “They’ll ask us why he didn’t come. They’ll worry!”

“Nobody will worry.” Emma took Carlina’s phone from her cousin’s hand, placed it on the kitchen table, and watched her grandfather out of narrowed eyes. “We’ll say the bad vibe period has come back, and Nico decided it would be unlucky to join the party. Nobody will think twice about it.”

Carlina felt as if she had strayed into an out-of-body-experience, disconnected from reality. She shook her head, but the feeling didn’t go away. “That won’t work. Everybody knows the bad-vibe-period stopped a year ago. Right now, he has the dangerous past period. Had, I mean.” She hugged herself.

Emma shrugged her perfect shoulder beneath the filmy material of her wedding dress. It shimmered in the soft sunlight coming from the window. “So grandpa changed his mind.”

“He never changed his mind. He never went back to old periods. I knew him.” A lump formed in Carlina’s throat.

“Now he did. Never too old for surprises, aren’t you, Grandpa?” She nudged Nico’s shoulder with an impatient expression on her face and recoiled when he toppled to the side.

Carlina jumped forward and steadied him. She had never touched a dead body before. It felt heavy and warm. Warm?

She swallowed. “Emma?” Her voice sounded unsteady. “I . . . I think he must have died a minute ago.”

Emma stared at her. “Why?”

“Because he’s still warm.”

Emma recoiled. “Madonna.”

Something smelled strange. A cloying feeling grabbed Carlina by the throat. “I can’t make him sit up again.”

“Then place his head on the table.” Emma took back one step. “My dress--”

Something inside Carlina cracked. “I don’t give a damn about your dress.” She glared at her cousin. “If you want to continue with your wedding, help me to put him into a decent position. Now.”

Emma came closer with obvious reluctance. Just as she stood in front of the kitchen window, a man walked past on the street. He whistled when he saw her. Emma turned her back on him with a hiss and stared at her cousin out of eyes wide with fear. “I can’t turn around,” she breathed. “Is he still there?”

“Who?”

“The guy on the street!”

Carlina froze. She shifted her grandfather’s weight as best as she could and craned her neck to look around Emma’s slim form. “No.”

Emma swallowed. “We can’t leave grandpa here where everybody can see him.”

Carlina closed her eyes. Her grandfather’s weight hurt her arms, and the sickening smell made her gag. “Whatever you want, but come here and help me!”

Emma turned around and closed the white curtain. “Maybe we should put grandpa to bed,” she said. “Then nobody will find him too early.”

“Fine.” Carlina clenched her teeth. “Now take his feet.”

“But I . . .”

“Emma.” Carlina knew Emma would recognize the underlying threat in her voice and obey her elder cousin, just as she had done all those years ago when they were teenagers. She didn’t use that tone often, but it still worked.

Emma sighed and grabbed Nico’s feet. “My dress will explode. It wasn’t made for workout.”

Carlina didn't reply. Nico had been a small man, and he looked smaller than ever without his personality to fill the space around him, but he was so heavy, she started to pant.

"He weighs a ton." Emma gasped.

"Don't drop him." Carlina tottered forward on her high heels and kicked open the old door to the bedroom.

They both heaved a sigh of relief when they placed him onto his bed. The mattress sagged in the middle.

"We have to take off his shirt and pants." Carlina felt sick.

"What? Why?"

Carlina held onto the brass bed-frame to stop herself from shaking. "How likely is it that he goes to bed, dressed in his best suit for your wedding?"

Emma glanced at her and pulled her slim eyebrows together. "Your face is green."

Carlina pressed her hand to her mouth. "Ugh." She ran to the bathroom.

When she came back several minutes later, she had to place one hand on the wall to assure herself that something firm existed.

"I've done it." Emma tucked a corner of the cotton bedspread behind Nico's shoulder and straightened. "We can go now." She looked cool and composed, as if she undressed the dead every day.

"Where did you put his trousers?"

Emma made a vague move with her hand. "They're over there."

Carlina willed herself to leave the support of the wall and crossed the room. "We have to hang them up. Grandpa was pedantic. He would never have thrown his best trousers across a chair like this."

Emma sighed. "Maybe he felt ill already."

"No way."

"Oh, all right." Emma picked up the trousers and folded them along the crease, then smoothed them over the back of the wooden chair in the corner.

"I've forgotten my shawl." Emma left the room without closing the door. "I'll just run upstairs to get it. And I'll open the curtain in the kitchen so nobody will wonder. Don't forget your phone. It's still on the table. Please hurry." Her last words were drowned out by the clattering of her high heels on the floor.

Carlina folded Nico's white shirt and placed it next to the trousers. She glanced one last time around the room, taking care not to look at the shrunken figure beneath the bedspread, then she closed the bedroom door behind her. For an instant, she leaned against the door, her hot brow pressed against the smooth wood. *This is the biggest mistake of your life.*

"Carlina? Are you coming?"

Carlina straightened. "Sì, sì."

## II

"Where's father?" Carlina's mother sidled along the pew closer to her daughter. Her long blue skirt twisted around her legs, and she pulled it free with an impatient tug.

"Ssshhh." Carlina placed a finger on her lips and pointed at the altar where Emma and Lucio stood in front of the priest.

Fabbiola stood on tiptoe and brought her mouth to her daughter's ear. "Why were you so late?" Her perfume smelled of lily-of-the-valley.

"I'll tell you later." Carlina stared straight ahead, her back stiff. *Stop pestering me. Please.*

"Where's your grandfather?" Fabbiola poked her in the ribs.

Sweat formed on Carlina's brow. She lowered her voice so only Fabbiola could hear her. "He didn't want to come."

"Why not?" Fabbiola's voice rose.

Aunt Maria, seated in the pew in front of them, turned her head and frowned. The three gigantic feathers adorning her hat wiped across Carlina's face and tickled her on the nose.

Carlina sneezed.

"Be quiet," Fabbiola whispered. "You're disturbing the service."

The priest turned to the congregation. "Dear sisters and brothers in the Lord, let us now sing hymn 232, the Golden Gates of Paradise."

Amid the rustling of book pages, Fabbiola poked her daughter again. "You're hiding something, Carlina. Out with it."

Carlina took the folded program and waved it in front of her face. "It's hot in here." Thank God her dress was cut low on the front and back.

"Caroline."

*Oh, God.* Now she was Caroline instead of Carlina. Two more minutes and she would be Caroline Arabella. Desperate, she bent to her mother's ear. "He said he felt bad vibes." The organ started to play the first notes.

"Bad vibes?" Fabbiola's blue hat wobbled. "But he had gotten over the bad vibes!"

"Shh." Carlina placed a finger over her mouth. "You're disturbing the service." She took a deep breath and warbled together with the congregation. "Yes, the golden gates of paradise, of paradise, of . . ."

"Caroline Arabella!"

Carlina broke off in mid-paradise. "It came back."

"What came back?" Fabbiola had painted her fingernails bright red to celebrate the occasion. They looked like fat drops of blood.

Carlina averted her gaze. *I'm not going to be sick again.* "The bad vibe period is back."

"Oh, Madonna."

"Yes, the golden gates of paradise, of paradise, of paradise . . ." Carlina sang as loud as she could. Maybe her mother would get the message and stop talking.

"Did he say this bad-vibe-thing in front of Emma?" Fabbiola's whisper penetrated the music.

Carlina closed her eyes for a brief moment. "Yes."

Fabbiola's brown eyes grew round. "I bet she threw a fit."

*That much at least is true.* Carlina nodded and trilled a last high note. Too bad the song was so short.

They all sat down, and for a minute, only the shuffling of feet, the rustle of clothes, and a cough from Uncle Teo filled the church.

The priest opened his bible.

"Did father feel all right?" Fabbiola directed a look of reproach at the priest who dared to interrupt her with the beginning of his sermon.

"Never better." The words came out of her mouth before she could stop them. Carlina blushed. *This is not the right moment for black humor, Carlina.*

"But--"

Aunt Maria turned around again. Her black eyes swept over them with a mixture of reproach and curiosity. A wave of garlic aroma wafted into Carlina's direction.

Carlina glared at her mother. "Not now, Mama. I'll tell you later."

Fabbiola sighed, then shrugged. She looked at the priest for an instant.

Carlina watched her from the corner of her eye with misgiving. She knew what was going to happen. It never took Fabbiola more than one minute to decide the priest wasn't interesting enough to keep her awake. Today, it took even less.

Fabbiola grabbed her trusted cushion which was already waiting on the pew, slid lower, and placed it behind her head.

Carlina suppressed a sigh. *If she wasn't so short, she couldn't sleep in church. On the other hand, if she was taller, she might decide to stretch out on the pew in the middle of the service. Now that would be a sight.* The thought brought a smile to her lips. *At least she doesn't snore.*

She turned her gaze back to the priest. The huge altar, the life-size golden cross, and the flickering candles in five massive chandeliers made the man of God look small and unimpressive in spite of his white robe. *But he has a soothing voice. A bit like Grandpa's.* Carlina swallowed. *I'm going to miss him. It was never boring with him around.* She bit her lips. She was not going to cry. If she did, several family members would think she was crying because she wasn't married yet. She had better rustle up some clever answers to the inevitable questions that would come later.

The priest droned on and on. He never seemed to change his text. Carlina felt as if she could soon hold the ceremony herself. How many Mantoni marriages had he conducted this year? Carlina counted back in her mind. Five? Six? The last one had been Angela and Marco's, three months ago. They had been the most beautiful couple she had seen so far. Not as sexy as Emma but classy and graceful. *Marco has enough sex appeal for two, no matter if he's in a tux or a pair of jeans.* Carlina could see his dark head two pews further down. *He'll become a successful doctor, even if he's new to Florence. The women will come to him in droves.*

When the service was over, Carlina hid behind a column at the side. She didn't want to talk to anyone.

At long last, the church had emptied, and only the priest remained. His steps echoed on the stone slabs as he went past her. Carlina forced herself to follow him. Her heart felt heavy. The portals of the Catholic church stood wide open, and the September sun danced in dusty beams across the ancient wooden pews. A peal of laughter greeted Carlina as she arrived at the steps. She closed her eyes against the bright light and took a deep breath. The air smelled pure and clean, a welcome change to the heavy scent of incense in the church.

"Please gather on the steps." Uncle Ugo waved his big camera and spread out his arms, shooing stray family members like sheep back into position. "Now smile!"

Carlina stayed where she was, everything but her head hidden behind her fat Aunt Maria. Obedient, she smiled past the waving feathers on Aunt Maria's hat, but her gaze swept beyond the crowd.

To her left, the lilac hills of Tuscany stretched in soft waves. From her position, she had an enticing view over Florence and its ancient center, down in the valley. The Duomo's vast globe gleamed in the sunlight, a rich gold, seconded by the Campanile tower that speared the sky in slim elegance. The reddish color of the terracotta-tiled roofs all around them made the town look warm and inviting. Carlina's heart swelled with happiness. She loved Florence, its beauty, its busyness. She had fallen in love with it during her summer vacations as a kid, but even when she had come to live permanently in Florence, a scared and sad thirteen-year-old, the magic had never abated. *Maybe it's different if you're born here, then you don't see it as a gift.* She looked at the faces next to her. Did anybody spare a glance for the town, sitting like a sleeping beauty at their feet? She caught her brother's eyes. Enzo had been six when they had moved from Seattle. Maybe he was more of an Italian than she was.

Her brother waved. "Carlina!"

She waved back but stayed where she was because their mother stood next to him. She had to keep an eye on her mother to make sure she kept her distance all day long. Fabbiola knew how to drag a secret out of her daughter.

To Carlina's right, beyond the church ground, five cypresses stood in a row like slim

sentinels. A soft haze lingered in the air and softened their dark green. Summer was over, even if it was still warm enough to go in shirtsleeves. Behind them, the cemetery stretched down the sloping hill. It brought her back to ground with a thud. Grandpa was dead. She would return next week for the funeral service. Carlina stifled a sigh.

Aunt Maria's feathers wiped across Carlina's face as she turned. "It'll be your turn soon, Carlina." Her small eyes blinked at her.

Carlina, nodded, clenched her teeth and forced a smile. She backed up one step to avoid the feathers a third time.

Alberta, her mother's eldest sister, appeared out of nowhere and slanted Carlina a glance from beneath her hideous green hat.

*Damn. She must have overheard Aunt Maria's remark.*

Aunt Maria turned away with a quick reflex that made Carlina bite down a smile. Then she steeled herself. Her aunt Alberta was famous for her vicious tongue.

"You should stop to chase them all away, Carlina." Alberta pushed her hat higher so she could see better. "You scare men. Nobody wants an independent woman. I understand why Giulio broke off the engagement."

*I broke off the engagement. He didn't.* Carlina wanted to sweep that stupid hat off Alberta's head. *Besides, that was five years ago, so we can talk of a more recent scandal now.*

Alberta chose not to notice Carlina's stormy silence. "You should try to be a bit more understanding. You're not getting younger, you know. With thirty-five, you're on the verge of being a confirmed spinster." Her false smile stretched the wrinkled skin above her lips.

"Thirty-two," Carlina said through clenched teeth.

Alberta waved. "Whatever. My Angela now, she found a wonderful husband." She gave a sentimental sigh. "But then, she's a beauty."

*And she knows it.* Carlina looked beyond her aunt. *I want to take out my Vespa and go for a ride. The wine leaves will be red by now, and the earth smells so rich this time of the year.*

Her aunt scrutinized her. "You don't look much like the other girls in the family." She sniffed. "Must be the father."

Enough was enough. "I don't have a tongue like a steel knife either, which seems to be another family characteristic." Carlina pretended a smile and hoped it would come out serene.

Carlina could tell by Aunt Maria's heaving shoulders that she chuckled.

Alberta turned red. "I'm going to talk to your mother about your manners." She moved her hat once again. It now looked like a crooked egg. "Where's father?" Her voice carried over the crowd. "I haven't seen him at all. Your mother said I should ask you."

Several people looked around.

Carlina squared her shoulders. "He decided to stay at home."

"What?" Alberta frowned so hard, her face looked like a wrinkled walnut. "He's becoming very odd."

*He always was odd. And a dear.*

"Why on earth didn't he want to come?"

"The bad vibe period has come back. He said it would be safer to stay at home." The more often she said it, the more it sounded like the truth.

"But he had left that period!" Alberta pressed her lips together. "These past months, he only talked about the bad past catching up with us."

"Really?" Carlina pretended she had never heard about Nico's latest tic. "What event from your past did he mention?"

Alberta pulled herself up to her full height. "Nothing that concerns you."

*Bravo, Grandpa. I hope you rattled her, even if you invented it all.*