

***Across Time and Space* – sample chapter**

Meryl was excited and nervous. She had the sinking feeling she was doing something she would regret somewhere down the track, she quickly dispensed with that thought, regret was better than missing an experience that would cause regret anyway. It was a cool seven degrees, she wished it was summer as Florence was made for summer activities. She spent the last hour on the flight dreaming about the cottage in Viareggio that Andrei owned. He said he would meet her at the airport and both would spend a night at his apartment in Florence before heading off for Viareggio the next morning.

She stepped out the airport expecting to see Andrei eagerly waiting for her. A taxi driver held a misshapen board high above his head which read ‘MERYL MOORECROFT, HERE!’ This caught her by surprise, she was half expecting Andrei to pop up behind the taxi driver. The driver took her bags, guiding her to the car saying ‘Signor Malakov, *beeezy*, he wait at *apartemente* for *youse*.’

‘Brilliant’, thought Meryl, ‘so much for insisting I come to Florence, well perhaps he is busy.’

The drive to the city took 15 minutes, she was promptly dropped off on the sidewalk and told to ‘*preeez* the button’

She wondered why Andrei had not called her about the change in pick-up arrangements when a cheerful voice said, ‘Is that you Ms Meryl? I buzz you up now.’

A matronly figure, a woman in her late fifties, dressed in a pale blue shirt and black skirt welcomed Meryl at the door asking if she had a pleasant flight. The woman showed her to her room and told her that Andrei would be back in three hours as he had some business to attend

to in Pelago. She offered Meryl coffee which she declined saying she needed to freshen up first.

She felt decidedly irritated that she was not forewarned about any of these arrangements.

Andrei arrived at 7:30pm profusely apologetic, saying he had to meet a family member in Pelago at short notice and that he would fill her in on the details on the drive down to Viareggio the next day. They settled down to a chicken pasta meal, cooked by the housekeeper who was leaving for Viareggio that night to set up the cottage for their arrival later the next day.

He poured her a glass of white wine, and turned on the music in the background to allow them to hear each other as they chatted about Meryl's last week in London. Soon she was infused by the warmth of his presence forgetting the irritations of the day. It was 11:30pm when she realised she had not called Ben. She knew his distaste for 'impersonal text messages'; one would suffice for now.

A late leisurely breakfast at a local café, a stroll on Ponte Vecchio with the elusive sun casting a faint glint on the river, Meryl and Andrei chatted about the small shops and galleries which they planned to visit together when they were back in town. Later that day they packed the car and set off for Viareggio. Meryl was filled with excitement and renewed energy, leaving all doubts behind her now. She loved the medieval look of the city and relished the

thought of writing a detailed blog about the bridge and arts and crafts which left her so inspired, yearning to know about the historical sites in the city.

During the hour and half drive, Andrei revealed that the house was a farm house nestled aside an olive grove, it was a little out of Viareggio, quite peaceful, away from the bustle of the city, traffic and people. Ana, the housekeeper would come in three times a week from Florence to cook, shop, wash and basically attend to their needs, she had been working for Andrei for many years.

Sitting around the fire that evening in the large living room, with stone walls and brick floors adorned with richly patterned Persian rugs, the conversation turned to more serious matters. Andrei brought a mink blanket from the linen closet tossing it onto Meryl's lap saying, 'it gets quite fresh here at night so bundle up as much as you can to enjoy a restful sleep.'

It was Meryl who broached the topic which Ben had planted.

'Andrei, have you ever been married? Have children?'

'Ah, *Merryl*, just the subject we both need to address as yes we both only have a skeleton perception of each other, certainly our love for literature is most profound in our friendship, a window into our personal lives is acceptable, I agree.'

What Meryl was about to hear came as a surprise - the man with a million lines that encircled his bright, curious eyes exuded a laid-back lifestyle with complications she could never have imagined!

Andrei explained that he was married to a Russian woman and had two children, two young men, now in their thirties, the older son was living in Russia with his mother, the younger son was drawn to the Big Apple and enjoyed spending more time there with Andrei. He paused

for a moment saying, ‘I hope this is not too much to take in, *Merryl*, I think I shall continue and you can tell me your life story if you are up to it later tonight, I can wait *Merryl*, I have waited my whole life...’

She observed a tenderness in his manner, in the way he looked at her when he said this, she felt so adored in this moment that she sank further into the luxurious folds of the gigantic couch relishing the caresses of his curious eyes across her face.

He continued his tale, saying, the marriage was a mistake when he realised that Mariya, his wife, was not the person she said she was, she told him she was a university lecturer completing her doctorate in literature, being somewhat older than him, he was drawn to the life she had. They married in New York where they met while she was on holiday, he laughed saying the impulsiveness of youth had led to years of trying to untangle himself. The best part of this unfortunate union were his boys, more particularly the son living in New York who shared a very special bond with him. He tried to make a go of it but her overpowering family did not help them to grow as a couple, she spent all her days doing the bidding of her father and brothers, all four of them. They ran a family business which he was never invited to be a part of, their lives were indeed very separate. He explained the reason why he was so distracted the night of the opera, adding that he had filed divorce papers two years ago after her father died and he was still caught up in the justice system wrangle, there were a few hiccups but the process was in motion, his wife did not appear to want to contest it anymore.

Meryl gulped, eyes like saucers, ‘So you are still married to her...’ her voice broke as she said this.

‘In the eyes of the law yes, but we have been apart for over fifteen years, I got really tired of suing for divorce on several occasions with no success. Now, I am paying the price for leaving things to sit and fester with no pursued action. I believe it will be finalised this April.’

Meryl studied Andrei’s face for any clues that he might be lying about his situation, all she could see was a man who looked at her, searching, hoping for understanding. He was so contritely formal in narrating the woes of his life.

‘Won’t my staying here as a platonic friend, jeopardise the legal proceedings to your disfavour, I could leave tomorrow...’

‘Not at all *Merryl*, the process is in motion, I met you after the process had started, and furthermore, nobody knows you are here.’

‘Well, that makes me uncomfortable, what if somebody says you have a woman staying on your property, won’t Ana talk? I’m really worried for you Andrei, I might be the one to thwart your final freedom.’

‘Don’t you worry about a thing, *Merryl*, you cannot jeopardise anything, relax, enjoy the space and solitude needed to write, I will be busy too, so all’s well on that count. Ana is a very loyal person, she will treat you with utmost respect and allow you your privacy, rest assured.’

They parted to their respective rooms with Andrei, giving her a tender pat on the shoulder and a quick peck on the cheek.

‘Sleep well’, Andrei said, ‘you can leave the fire burning in your room, it is quite safe, if you don’t want it, I could put it out and you can turn on the air-conditioner for the rest of the night. You can tell me your life story tomorrow, perhaps, when we take a walk through the olive grove.’

‘Thank you, Andrei, the fire will be good, you rest well too.’

She sent Michael a text message telling him she was fine and would call him in the next day or two. She jumped into bed wondering how she would reveal this to Ben, it would have to wait until morning as Ben would be asleep now.

Meryl tossed and turned, got out of bed, picked up her laptop and wrote the next part of her blog on the sights and sounds on the drive to Viareggio. She was all too aware now that she could not make mention of her host at the farmhouse on the outskirts of Viareggio. She ended the blog with a nod to Picasso that had fuelled this junket.

Without great solitude, no serious work is possible.