

Men in black

The Italian sun was hot in a sky without clouds. Mia Alati sat in the shade of a tree with her sketchbook. Her long black hair fell around her face. Her dogs, Bella and Bruno, slept by her side. With a soft black pencil, Mia was drawing a picture of the old woman digging in the field in front of her. Sometimes the woman stopped her work and sat in the shade with Mia. She gave Mia some bread and cheese for lunch and talked to the girl about many things – about the roses she grew for her own pleasure, about the wild animal that had dug up her potatoes in the night, and about her son who went dancing in Spoleto on Saturday nights and lay in bed until lunchtime on Sundays. Mia nodded and smiled. It didn't matter that she didn't understand all the words. The old woman liked her and accepted her.

All the people who lived in the tiny villages and farms near the Villa Alati knew Mia. They liked it when she came to Umbria from Rome. She always visited them on her long walks with the dogs. She drew the people in their gardens, and while they worked in their fields. They talked to her carefully. They didn't get angry or shout at her if she was slow to understand them.

Mia felt the mobile phone in her pocket begin to vibrate. She pulled it out. There was a text message from Nonna, her grandmother, who was back at the villa. *Are you okay? Is your hat on?*

Mia texted her answer quickly. *Yes. Yes.* She sent the message and put on her hat. Nonna always checked that Mia was wearing her hat if the sun shone, or her coat if it was cool. The phone in her hand vibrated again, and again it was Nonna. *Good girl.*



I'm lucky to have her, Mia thought. At least she shows that she loves me.

She picked up her pencil but she didn't start to draw. She'd reminded herself of her mother – again. Thinking about Rosa Alati always made Mia unhappy.

Don't think about her, she told herself. She's in Rome or Milan or London and I don't have to see her for a long time.

Rosa Alati, Mia's mother, was a famous opera singer. She sang in opera houses all over Europe and in North America. Her voice was so beautiful that people cried when she sang. So it had been very painful for Rosa when her small daughter had first tried to talk. Mia had made noises that her mother found very ugly. In the end, Mia had stopped trying to talk. It was easier that way.

Mia made herself complete the drawing then showed the old woman what she'd done.

'Ah, Mia, you are so clever!' She called her husband and son, who were working on their olive trees, to come and have a look.

They were very excited about the old woman's portrait. 'My beautiful wife,' said the old man. 'And my beautiful olive trees are in the picture too!'

'You've drawn Mama just as she is. It's better than a photograph,' said the son.

Mia took the portrait from the sketchbook and made signs with her hands to tell the old woman to keep it.

Then she woke the sleeping dogs, picked up her bag and smiled at the family. It was time to go. With her hands, she signed: 'Goodbye. It was good to see you again.'

The old woman copied her hand signals in reply. Mia kissed her on both cheeks then began the long walk home.

In Rome, the Collector sat comfortably with friends at an outside table of a restaurant in the Via San Basilio. He had eaten well and

was finishing his meal with another glass of red wine. He raised his glass to his friend Carlo Alati as Carlo walked by. The rings on the Collector's fat little hand shone in the bright sunshine.

'Hello, Carlo,' he said as they shook hands. 'How are you? Would you like a glass of wine?'

'No, thank you,' said Signor Alati. 'I can't stay.'

'How is the lovely Signora Alati? Is she singing in an opera house somewhere?'

Carlo smiled. 'She's away in Milan. But she's shopping this time, not singing.'

The Collector laughed and rubbed his hands together. 'My wife loves to shop too. It keeps me poor. And how is your little girl?'

'Not so little now. She's sixteen. She's well too.'

'Good, good,' said the Collector. 'I hope your collection of treasures is safe now,' he said and picked up his glass again. 'I heard that some thieves entered your apartment last week. So terrible that someone should try to steal those beautiful things.'

'I think the thieves thought we were out of town,' Signor Alati replied. 'We usually go to the villa in Umbria at this time of year. I've moved my collection out of the apartment to a safe place now. Perhaps one man shouldn't own such treasures, my friend. I may sell them.'

The Collector put his glass down carefully and said, 'If you decide to sell, please come to me first.'

'Of course. I've bought many of my treasures from your art gallery in the past. But I'm also thinking of giving the collection to the government. Then all Italy can enjoy my collection and I can sleep at night.'

The Collector threw up his hands. 'My dear Alati, don't be so foolish! What would your father say if he was alive? And your father's father? They built up the Alati collection over many years.'