

Chapter One

*'TIS the last rose of summer
Left blooming alone;
All her lovely companions
Are faded and gone;*

-- Thomas Moore, 1805

Midmorning on February 21, 1935, two gas fitters connecting a gas line to a new bungalow at the Springfield Estate off Corbets Tey Road in Upminster, England, a suburban East London village, spotted an unusual sight for that day and year. A small airplane was flying over their heads. This was noteworthy because airplanes seldom flew over this specific location, and it was especially unusual to the two men as they typically were occupied with their work underground and happened to be taking a short break when the event occurred. Pertinent or not, this was the explanation given as to why both men happened to look up into the sky at the same exact moment on that particular day.

Police reports would suggest that the aircraft, later identified as a six-seat de Havilland DH84 Dragon airliner, was flying at an altitude of approximately three thousand feet and a speed of about eighty-five miles per hour. During the inquiry that followed, neither of these facts was deemed relevant or significant to the event that was to occur only moments later. As the airplane passed through the dark clouds overhead, the two workmen reported seeing something quite out of the ordinary. According to the men's statements taken early that afternoon: "suddenly, what looked like two packages fell away from the plane" and fluttered to the ground "like sheets of paper."

They reported hearing a noise, best described as a curious thud. As this sound appeared to have taken place only a short distance from where they were standing, the two gas fitters ran quickly to the nearby cabbage field to search for what had fallen. Upon investigation, they were astonished to find the broken bodies of two well-dressed young women lying face down on the ground. According to one of the men, "their hands were clasped, and one had a tight grip on the other's coat."

You can well imagine that an incident such as this would be reported across the globe and followed intensely by thousands and, perhaps, millions of readers. And it was, as this was not an ordinary story. Within days, newspapers throughout the world carried the startling and grim details on their front pages. An investigation into these deaths began immediately.

The women were identified as sisters, Americans, in their early twenties, well traveled, and reportedly “familiar with the civilities of European social life.” One was characterized as more of a leader; the other as more apt to follow. They were reportedly the daughters of a high-ranking and well-regarded American government foreign service official whose name was withheld out of respect for the family’s privacy.

As you might conclude, there were many questions. And early on, there was much speculation as to whether this was a double suicide, a tragedy of love or youthful disillusionment, perhaps even a homicide resulting from an argument, or simply a malfunction of the external door from the main cabin. Several newspapers suggested that the women may have been despondent over illness; one of the women had been known to suffer from severe bouts of asthma. Even as the bodies lay in the Hornchurch police mortuary, some reports even hypothesized that this terrible event was in some way tied to a shipment of gold bullion that had been reportedly lost while being transported by the very same airline the preceding week. This theory was quickly dispelled when it became known that three members of the Sabini gang were responsible for that theft.

Every story has a beginning, and this seems to be as good a place to begin as any other. Now the question for you to consider is: *What could this tragic event have to do with a guesthouse, the Pensione Alexandra, located fourteen hundred miles away in Naples, Italy?*

Chapter Two

Me? Own a pensione? I was convinced my daughter, Mela, was crazy in the head when she came home that otherwise unremarkable late-October day in 1934 and announced the news that Bertie Allen, the odd Englishwoman who owned the Pensione Alexandra overlooking the Bay of Naples at Caracciolo 13, was thinking of selling. I had no idea why Mela was so excited. For heaven’s sake, why should Paul and I be interested in hearing about a pensione that was for sale?

But that was how Mela was, a girl of seventeen years, forever dreaming, with a mind that could never sit still. Mela was very smart when it came to so many things, but she was constantly puzzled by the oddest assortment of distractions. She spent far too many of her waking hours each day wondering about what might be. Some days, that head of hers was completely in the clouds. What did she know of life? What did she know of fate? What did she know of disappointment? I couldn't help but smile when Paul told me Mela reminded him of how naïve I had been about these things when I'd first stepped off the train in Naples at the age of twenty-one in those months before we married.

I suppose that operating a small guesthouse like the Pensione Alexandra would not be as ridiculous as trying to manage a huge hotel like the Palazzio, with the bellmen, waiters, chambermaids, and cooks always holding out their hands and asking for tips. No one cared that the Palazzio was careful to warn guests about this practice and that the help was not supposed to act that way. Gratuities for these kinds of services were included as a service charge on the hotel bill specifically to prevent this bothersome behavior.

Most of us understood. These were difficult times in Naples. People needed money. What was the harm in asking? Unsuspecting tourists were fair game. They couldn't tell one coin from another and always fell prey to the sad looks of children. Look at all the *lazzaroni* on the streets, always begging for money. It seemed everyone was trying to make ends meet, even the authorities. The authorities? Ha! They just turned a blind eye. And what about the inspectors from the city hall? They had their hands out asking for money too. Most Neapolitans were simply trying to put food on their tables and keep roofs over their heads. Naples was a city of survivors, where people, from the youngest of age, learned how to get by from one day to the next using their cunning and wit.

A pensione? Crazy in the head! Paul and I did not have the money. We had no experience. Who would stay there? Who would cook? Who would mop? Who would make the beds? Who would launder the sheets? What about Mussolini's Fascists and all their silly regulations? What did we know about operating a pensione?

Now I can only laugh and smile when I think about that time. I remember how I caught Mela's dream. It was an idea that refused to leave, an irritating mosquito bite I continued to scratch. And day after day, that little bite began to itch more and more until, just like Mela, I started to imagine what might be. That was when that crazy little bite grew so large that it did not matter how much I scratched. It became my dream too.

And today? Today, I sit quietly for hours and hours and ponder those moments. I relive those memories. I picture the Pensione Alexandra in the early evening with its beautiful sunsets. I dream of the magnificent view of the Bay of Naples and feel the caress of the gentle breeze on those nights we sat on the balcony after everything in the kitchen was put up and our work was done for the day. I imagine the moon when everyone slept, and how I always knew that I could speak and it would listen. I remember the people of Naples, how they always overflowed with both the joy and the misery of life, and how crazy and alive Naples always felt, like a heart that never stops pounding. How could I forget that old man Vesuvius, his pipe spewing smoke and his mouth spouting fiery red lava, watched over us at night?

The Pensione Alexandra never made us wealthy, but it did enrich our lives. It changed us and made us become so different from the way we were. It brought the world to our windows. I was given a perch to observe the people of Europe struggle and suffer through unimagined and horrible times. I watched impassioned joy and tearful loss. When I think of those moments and the many people who passed through our doors, the memories make me smile and laugh and cry and catch my breath all at once. They bring me delight. They make me sad. They remind me of happiness, uncertainty, anguish, fear, desperation, and longing. They make me grateful for the life I have lived. These memories will never fade. They will always fill my heart.

Me? A pensione? Crazy in the head! That's what I told Mela that otherwise unremarkable October day when she came home and told us that Bertie Allen was selling the Pensione Alexandra. What on earth did we know about running a pensione?

Chapter Three

Meshugenah! I know that is what Mother would have said had she still been alive. I can imagine the concern in the sound of her voice. I can hear her very words: "Elsa, why on earth would you buy a pensione? You are much too old to carry on like that. You are a fifty-one-year-old woman with an aching back and bad feet. Your husband is lazy. He sits all day long waiting to win the lotto and smokes too many cigars. He is an old man. Your children are fully grown. You will soon be a grandmother. What do you know about managing a pensione? What do you know about cooking and cleaning or mopping a floor? It is time for your children to make their own

lives. You know Mela will meet a nice young man, marry, and have babies to care for. You will be left all alone. What are you thinking? You are *meshugenah!*”

Father’s eyes would have twinkled, and in his gentle, calm manner, he would have said, “Elsa, ever since you were a young girl, you have always been a little bullheaded and much too stubborn for your own good. If I gave you my advice, maybe you would listen, maybe you would not. It is your mother’s fault. She spoiled you when you were a child.”

So, perhaps they were right. Perhaps, just like Mela, I was a little crazy in the head. Mother and Father were no longer there to help guide me and give me advice, but I could still hear their voices telling me to be cautious, to be careful, to go slowly, to take one step at a time, just like when I was a child growing up in Germany.

Life was different now. I was older. This wasn’t Koenigsberg. This was Naples. I was married and had raised four fully grown children of my own. With the growing madness sweeping Germany and our little Fascist egomaniac with his bold ideas for Italy, we were living in a time when it seemed that the whole world was destined to become a little crazy in the head. None of us needed to be reminded.

The Pensione Alexandra had been a guest house in Naples for more than forty years. Bertie Allen had always been the innkeeper. It had been her dream when she’d moved from a central London neighborhood to Naples as an attractive and entrepreneurial thirty-five-year-old widow. Her much older husband had succumbed to one illness or another. When he had died, she had been left with a meager savings, far less than she had expected and far too little to continue the lifestyle she’d anticipated in London.

On a rainy-day whim, she’d closed her London home, kept only her prized possessions, and moved to Southern Italy, to sunny and carefree Napoli, to venture out on her own with the hope that she would not outlive her money. That was when she’d opened the Pensione Alexandra. I think most of us would agree: when Bertie Allen embarked on her Italian adventure, she might have been a little crazy in the head too.

The Pensione Alexandra was named after Queen Alexandra of Denmark, wife of King-Emperor Edward VII, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and Empress of India. At first, the pensione had possessed a different name, one that has been long forgotten. Bertie renamed it the Pensione Alexandra in 1902 after the king and queen’s

coronation. To be perfectly honest, when Paul and I first became the owners of the pensione, I found it hard to imagine any reason why Bertie Allen had chosen such a respectable name, other than that she was an Englishwoman giving tribute to her queen.

I must quickly dispel you of any wrong impressions. It is true that, in its day, the pensione had developed quite an international following, particularly since English was its resident language, an appealing attribute and somewhat unusual in Naples at that time. The Pensione Alexandra was the largest of four pensiones overlooking the Bay of Naples on Via Caracciolo and the only one the 1930 *Baedeker Guide* saw fit to describe as “English and good.” Many fine guests from throughout the world had spent their nights at the Pensione Alexandra. Some had even lived there. And frequently, multiple languages had filled its parlor and breakfast room, at times too loud and, upon occasion, in disharmony.

Unfortunately, despite the pensione’s past success, the years had not been kind. They had extracted their toll. The beds were in varying stages of disrepair, and the appearance of the public areas had suffered from overuse. Even the furniture had become a little tired and worn around the edges. I suppose what I am trying to diplomatically say is that, even then and certainly now, being named for a queen did not mean that the Pensione Alexandra was fit for a queen.

When the Pensione Alexandra first opened, Bertie Allen made quite a name for herself in Naples. She developed a reputation as a rather odd bird, particularly in the more cultivated, more polite northern European circles of Neapolitan society. Her behavior certainly attracted attention. She was a woman about town. I am sure she faced an uphill battle and ridiculous obstacles. Can you imagine? An Englishwoman operating a guesthouse in the machismo world of Naples in 1894.

Moreover, I understand that, in her attempt to generate additional income, there were many evenings when Bertie opened a second set of doors and offered her services as somewhat of a self-acclaimed clairvoyant. Thus, not only was the pensione a guesthouse for weary visitors, it served as a gathering place for seances and other mysterious forms of communication with the world that existed beyond the reaches of man’s natural vision.

The specifics will forever remain unknown. Perhaps these activities had something to do with the escapades of her dear departed husband, a well-known eccentric who shared a penchant for stuffed animals, particularly large, feathery birds of all varieties, as these were the prized possessions that accompanied Bertie Allen when she moved from London to Naples. The result was that the Pensione Alexandra housed an extremely odd collection of furnishings and

taxidermical delights, furnishings that made it highly unlikely that Queen Alexandra, or any other queen for that matter, would ever see fit to visit, let alone spend a single night there.

Chapter Four

There is an expression I learned when we moved to America, *skating on thin ice*, which might best characterize our family's financial situation on that day Mela came home and told us about her dream. When I learned that Bertie Allen wanted to sell the Pensione Alexandra, it was our pressing money problems that actually caused my ears to perk up and my mind to start considering this farfetched idea. I can't imagine there was any other possible reason.

The issues with money were a relatively recent phenomenon. Paul and I had been fortunate. For well more than a decade, our family had enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle, certainly when measured by the standard of living in Naples. Over the years, like nearly everyone else, we had experienced our share of upturns and downturns when it came to finances. Italy's economy remained somewhat of an unexplainable mystery, always unpredictable and chaotic. But we'd had more than our share of good luck. For us, the downturns had usually been short in duration and always followed by periods of moderate prosperity.

However, this time was different, and our fortunes had taken an unforeseen turn. For several years, they had been descending deeper and deeper in a seemingly never-ending downward spiral. On that particular day in October of 1934, I could see little light at the end of a very dark tunnel. Paul continued playing the lotto each week, picking his numbers based on one silly superstition or another and praying each Saturday evening for lightning to strike. But winning the grand prize in the lotto seemed a rather unlikely solution. The most he had ever won was hardly enough to take the family out for a Sunday afternoon dinner at one of the eating houses in Posillipo.

It would be misleading for me to say that we were broke. We certainly were not penniless, but it would be correct to say that more pennies were going out than coming in, and we were heading in a direction that could not continue for any extended period of time. Some days, we robbed Peter to pay Paul. Unless something changed, a crisis was certain to be not far off in our future. I didn't need Bertie Allen and her seances to make that prediction. From where I was standing, there could not have been a better time for Mela to dream this dream. The Pensione

Alexandra offered an opportunity that deserved our attention. If we were successful, it could become a much-needed answer to our prayers.

Forty years earlier, in 1894, at the invitation of his uncle and with the encouragement of his mother, twenty-one-year-old Paul had moved from Germany to Naples. He was to be groomed to someday take over his uncle's export business. Aunt Betty and Uncle Arthur had no children of their own and needed someone to be trained in the business. Aunt Betty, in particular, was worried that if something happened to her twenty-year-old husband, Uncle Arthur, she would be incapable of providing for herself. Paul's mother, Uncle Arthur's widowed sister living in Stuttgart, provided a timely answer to this perplexing problem. She had three sons – one studying medicine, one dabbling in antiques – leaving the third son, Paul, who was more than a little uncertain about his life and in need of a future.

Paul's brothers would move to America to pursue their careers, but Paul had shown little interest. He had no aptitude for the language and not much enthusiasm for the adventure. Paul's mother's plan was to join her two sons in America. However, she refused to move until an answer could be found to the pressing question of what to do with Paul. The opportunity for her uncertain son Paul to move to Naples, where he could become an apprentice to Uncle Arthur, became the ideal solution for all parties involved.

Paul clearly had a head for the business and a particular flair for salesmanship, and with time, he showed great promise. His responsibilities grew. We married and had four children. He was capable and conscientious, perhaps, at times, a bit lacking in self-confidence, but his hard work paid off. Twenty years after arriving in Naples, following the death of his uncle, Paul took over the operation of the export business just as planned. He gained the means to support his aging Aunt Betty and to provide for our growing young family.

Flourishing and successful, in its better days, Paul's business was the largest *tartarari* wholesale house in Naples, exporting tartar deposits collected from wine barrels, a key ingredient in the making of cream of tartar baking powder. He could proudly report that, under his direction, the business had grown to include a number of large customers, several in America.

War came in 1915 when Italy joined Britain, France, and Russia in the fight against Germany and Austria-Hungary. Paul's family responsibilities and age kept him from the army, but World War I extracted a terrible toll from Italy. While Naples and Southern Italy escaped

much of the bloodshed, the cost in life and treasure for the nation of Italy was devastating. Everyone was affected in one way or another.

When the war ended, Italy, like much of Europe, suffered high unemployment and hyperinflation. This was a difficult time, yet the *tartarari* business survived, and our family continued to enjoy a certain amount of prosperity throughout the next decade. We were never wealthy, far from it, but we were well positioned in the middle class. We could afford to provide for our children and live a comfortable life.

Our luck ran out when the Great Depression expanded beyond America's shores. It was not to be avoided, and we felt it all the way across the Atlantic in Italy. That was in the early 1930s. The Great Depression marked the moment when our financial situation began to deteriorate. Decreased demand from America meant Paul's warehouses in Italy overflowed with tartar. It could only be sold at a greatly reduced market price, much lower than what Paul had paid his suppliers when he'd first purchased the tartar. The difficulty was that Paul was dealing with borrowed money. Whenever the tartar in the warehouses was sold, Paul received less than what he owed the banks. The bankers did not care. That was Paul's problem. They expected to be repaid.

Matters became much worse when Paul's business encountered a devastating fraud committed by a longtime trusted supplier. Shipments were lost. Paperwork disappeared. Bank transfers failed to take place. The result was a lengthy procession of lawsuits and legal proceedings. The fact that this fraud was perpetrated by someone Paul had done business with for so many years and considered a friend made it all the more difficult to accept or understand. Clearly, this was an indication of how desperate the times were.

Fortunately, a small inheritance upon Aunt Betty's passing helped a little, but unfortunately, it was not enough. The banks kept asking for their money, and the debts continued to mount. We were forced to face reality and tighten our belts.

First, we gave up our extravagances, like the membership dues for the German club. Then we could no longer afford to keep our maid, Elise, who had been part of our family for eighteen years. When the children had been young, we had hired her to be their governess. When they'd grown older, I'd felt sorry for her and kept her on. Instead of sending her back to Switzerland, I asked her to become our maid. I honestly have to say that letting her go was a bit of a blessing. She had been with us too long, and she wasn't the best maid. But I never had the heart to send her away until we had no choice. We cut back on many household expenses: the seamstress who did the mending, the old woman who washed and ironed the clothes, even crazy Consolato, who

drank too much wine and who had no teeth. He came each week to beat our rugs and wash the windows.

I suppose everything is relative. We knew these were luxuries. If we had not had them, they might not have been missed. But we had become accustomed, and the adjustment was difficult. It really wasn't that we couldn't do these things for ourselves. We certainly were able. What made it hard was that our children had grown up with these wonderful people. They were like family. The children thought of them as their friends, companions, and playmates. Even as difficult as Elise had become, she was my friend too.

Finally, there came a time when we could no longer afford private school for the twins. In Naples, private school was a necessity. Paul and I never considered a good education for the children to be a luxury, and the public schools were not very good. But we did not have enough money. By then, the two older boys were already grown and had left home, but the twins, Mela and Arthur, were not even fifteen years of age. They were both promising students, but they wanted to contribute. The two decided to quit school so they could go to work and help with the family finances.

I know there were countless others in Naples whose situations were far worse. We knew we had been fortunate and rarely felt sorry for ourselves, although Mela may have felt differently at times. Our relatives in America generously sent their hand-me-down clothes to their poor relations in Italy. As a teenage girl, Mela found herself the recipient of clothes that did little to improve her appearance, despite her frequent efforts to rip out seams and sew alterations. No matter what, we always had enough to eat. As a family, we remained close and caring. However, this change in circumstances should not be understated. There had been some rather depressing moments.

When times were more affluent, our family developed an affinity for tea, considered by many to be somewhat of a local luxury. A first cousin living in London was married to a man who imported tea from China. Tea was very expensive in Naples. Like salt and tobacco, a special tax was imposed, making it overpriced, in limited supply, and an extravagance most could not afford for everyday use. During our better days, we would order tea from our London cousins. It was an indulgence we were able to enjoy.

As our finances became less and less secure, Mela recognized that many of our friends liked tea too. She decided to order a supply from London to sell for a small profit, another way to contribute to the household finances. Mela was out and about delivering tea the day she learned Bertie Allen was interested in selling the Pensione Alexandra. When Mela rode the trolley down the Via Roma to bring tea to my good friend Lonnie Fabricatore, Lonnie told her this news.

Like much of life, often there are things that are not always exactly as they seem. When we decided to purchase the Pensione Alexandra, I assumed Bertie Allen wanted to sell because she was getting old, was ready to retire, and wanted to return to England. Sometimes, only experience teaches us the questions to ask before one acts. It was only later, months after we took over its operation, that I learned Bertie Allen had never disclosed her real reason for selling. She had been convinced that Mussolini would invade Ethiopia and the League of Nations would impose sanctions against Italy, which would hurt tourism and destroy her business.

Bertie Allen was right about Il Duce's Ethiopia adventure. What a bungled mess that became. Mussolini and his followers were convinced they could rebuild the Roman Empire. At least Mussolini thumbed his nose at the League of Nations, which was quickly becoming a rather toothless tiger, and the sanctions had little effect. If the sanctions had been effective, I am not sure what we would have done. Of course, we could not imagine then that, within a few short years, a much larger and perilous storm cloud would appear on Italy's horizon. At least there would be some sunny days before that cloud arrived at our doorstep.

Chapter Five

Money and risks aside, agreeing to buy the Pensione Alexandra was not an easy decision for Paul and me to make. We had to compromise, and I must tell you, I was raised to become the supportive wife of a merchant, not the proprietress of a pensione. At my age, there were expectations and duties to fulfill. Operating a guest house was not one of them.

It hasn't mattered where I have lived; there has always been a way of life and a way one is expected to act. Naples was no exception. In Italy, at the time we acquired the pensione, the social class structure was very strong. Once pigeonholed, whether wealthy or poor, noble or common, young or old, man or woman, there were certain norms to be followed. The rules may have been unwritten, but we all knew what they were. We kept to our own, knew where we

belonged, stayed within our circle, and conducted our lives well within the lines. What I am trying to say is that a woman in my position was not supposed to have to concern herself with the rather ordinary and mundane task of managing a pensione, a role Mother would have found to be beneath my station.

I remain convinced that children have a better sense of these matters than adults, particularly better than we did at those times. Adults can make life messy and complicated. Children don't care to understand or observe the little differences. They just want to have fun and play with other kids. But even back then, when our children went to the park, we insisted that certain rules of society be followed. Our governess was under strict instructions to keep them apart from many other children and to be certain they played with only those within our social circle. Can you imagine? Before we owned the pensione, the concierge in the apartment building addressed Paul as *l'Eccellenza* and referred to the children as *i signorini*, the little lords. This may all sound ridiculous today, but that was the tradition in Naples, almost caste-like. We all knew our place in society and the roles we were to perform. One thing life has taught me is, whatever the issue, somehow children know how to simplify what adults know how to complicate.

It would have been as unthinkable for one of my children to work as a chambermaid in someone's home or a manual laborer in a factory as it would have been for me to have a career, consider any type of employment, or, for that matter, concern myself with money. Me? Earn a living? My time was to be spent on more appropriate activities. Someone in my position was expected to live a life of leisure and responsibility, and not to have to deal with the chores of daily life. Others more suited to those tasks could handle them.

I tell you all of this so you will understand how significantly our lives changed when we began operating the Pensione Alexandra. And as I say these words, I realize how much they make me sound like a prima donna, even a snob. But I don't believe I was. Snob or not, I was a realist. I knew how I was expected to act, but more importantly, I knew what I needed to do.

Of course, the world has changed a great deal from the way it was back then. The role of women was different. Respect for women was different, and in Italy, when it came to women, everything was different. In Naples, it was a man's world. There was no doubt about that. I suppose the role for women was not dissimilar to many places. We all had our roles, and nearly all the rules were made by men. Then, while nothing was cast in stone, Paul was the family breadwinner, and when it came to family decisions, there was no question that his word was final. It had always been that way. We had never known differently. We all deferred to Paul.

What made Italy particularly unique during this time was our dictator, Benito Mussolini, Il Duce. Life under Mussolini and the Fascists meant that people had less control of their personal lives and the government controlled as much as they could. In 1934, when we acquired the pensione, I lived in that Fascist world. This was a society where boys were expected to grow into soldiers and fight for Italy's glory and girls were encouraged to increase the production of babies. This was a society where bachelors paid extra taxes for not being married and where girls were rewarded for having the most babies. Mussolini had an empire to build. Empires required armies of men to conquer additional lands. Additional lands were needed to support a population expected to grow because the women were pregnant and new babies were about to be born. That was Mussolini's plan.

Fortunately, by then, I was much beyond my baby-producing years and thus excluded from having to concern myself with the daily rigor of Mussolini's plan for women. If I had a concern, it was what this might mean for Mela. But that really isn't what this story is about, and Mela was not all that interested. I just want to give you a broader sense of the role women were expected to play when I was about to become the proprietress of the Pensione Alexandra. The expectations for women were well defined. Women were expected to maintain the household, raise the children, and support the men. I know there are those who question whether it was Mussolini who actually made the trains run on time in Italy but, there should be no doubt that his well-functioning empire relied upon everyone making their contribution and doing their part.

That is how our life was the day when Mela arrived home with her dream of owning the Pensione Alexandra. Paul's first reaction was to show little interest and express even less enthusiasm. He had other things on his mind. Poor Paul. I felt so bad for him. He was always busy with the stagnating and deteriorating tartar business. Most of his time was spent attending legal proceedings. His hands were tied, and he had become terribly depressed. The pressure of our precarious financial situation was an enormous worry. Almost overnight, we watched Paul's personality change from optimistic to pessimistic. He seemed to have aged. He lost weight. His self-esteem and self-confidence suddenly disappeared. Paul and I were managing as best we could. Our marriage remained strong, but I would be less than honest if I did not say that this was a stressful and difficult time.

Paul and I both were keenly aware that something had to be done to turn things around, but keep in mind, he had his role, and I had mine. It was acceptable for Mela and me to make small contributions to our finances. Mela could babysit, do some tutoring, and sell a little tea. Perhaps she could find work as a clerk in a store. With the boys' rooms vacant, we could take in

an occasional border, but there was little more that I could do to contribute without overstepping my place. The difficulty was we all realized that those few minor money-raising enterprises Mela or I might attempt would not be enough to solve our financial problems. Unless Paul successfully picked all the numbers in the lotto, a better solution would be required. Changing who did what would require one of us having to give what the other would take. Acquiring the Pensione Alexandra was not my decision to make. It was an endeavor I could pursue only with Paul's blessing.

With Mela's and my encouragement, Paul had little choice other than to reluctantly approve of the idea of considering the pensione. It was tough for him to accept the fact that he might share his role as the breadwinner in the family. And he made it clear that, if we were to make this purchase, it would become my responsibility. It would be up to me to figure out how to make it work. He would give his support when he could, but apart from that, I would be left on my own. The best he could do was to become my reluctant partner.

With all that in mind, I took a deep breath and hesitated for a moment to reconsider what this might mean. Then the opportunity to solve a big problem prevailed, and I jumped in with both feet. The moment I landed, I received an immediate education. Within days, I learned that dreaming of owning a pensione was not the same as actually buying a pensione. Later, I would learn that buying a pensione is not the same as operating a pensione. Often, there are times when the best way to learn is through experience. In my case, it was by the seat of my pants. I was determined to succeed. Once I jumped in, I found myself far too deep to be able to jump out.