

# La Mia Famiglia

*12th Grade  
Fiction*

My grandfather only talked about three things when he was alive: religion, traveling, and family. *Grandpa is dead.* The thought causes agony to slip past my numbness. *I'll never get to hug him again or-*. The painful truths associated with death threaten to overwhelm me. I shake my head causing my curly brown locks to fall over my eyes. *You can't think of that right now,* I tell myself. I take a deep breath and look around. The plane is dark and eerie, all the other passengers are sleeping. I envy them, for my thoughts chase away my ability to rest.

My hand holding the letter is trembling. I begin to second guess my impulsivity. I hadn't seen my grandfather in six years yet, at his request, I am traveling transatlantic three days after his funeral. Giving into the temptation that's been eating at me, I reopen the letter. My hands are careful as if I am handling a precious jewel instead of just a letter. My vision blurred as my grandpa's warm voice fills my head as I reread his letter.

**My dearest Olivia,**

**I love you, you could never comprehend how much. I am sorry that I couldn't be with you on this joyous day. The 18th birthday is quite a milestone in the marathon of life. This is your chance at freedom and to discover yourself. That's why I have arranged this trip for you. I am sure Mark, the lawyer that gave you this letter, has informed you about this trip. I made so many promises to you the last time I saw you, I don't intend to let death keep me from being a man of my word. While I will not be able to be with you in body, I will be with you in spirit. I love you Olivia and may God use this trip to answer all the questions you had for me six years ago.**

**Love,**

**Your adoring grandfather.**

I would deny knowing what he meant regarding my questions but it's futile. For he was referring to the very questions that have been plaguing me since my early childhood. Who am I? Where did my family come from? How come I don't have the normal amount of extended family? Where do I get my green eyes from? My parents and both sets of grandparents have various shades of blue. These are just a few of my inquiries. My ancestry has always been unknown to me. My mother refused to discuss her family that disowned her after marrying my father. My father only had my grandpa and grandma. While I never met my grandma, I've seen the pictures and heard of her and grandpa's epic love affair. Beyond that, nothing. My grandparents' names were Bastien and Maribel. That's it, no middle or last name. Both of them were raised in an orphanage in Créteil, France. Neither knew anything about their families. Bisset was their chosen last name upon leaving the orphanage. Grandpa passed his surname, lean build, and bronzed complexion first to my father, then to me.

My grandparents' love story is definitely one for the books. Two orphans who grew up together and fell madly in love. There was no shortage of obstacles that they had to overcome but they persevered. I remember the time he showed me their wedding picture, his face glowed as

per usual when discussing his “beloved sweets.” I inherited my grandma's soft features and 5 '7" frame. The kinkiness of my hair is attributed to my mother. They were the typical immigrants, moving to America for opportunities. That's just what they found: the perfect job for grandpa and endless possibilities for their little one, my dad, who was on the way. He worked as a consultant for the oil industry, my dad followed in his footsteps. This allowed him to pursue his greatest passion, traveling.

I was infected with wonderlust after being raised on stories of his adventures. We had plans to explore the world together. He promised he would show me his favorite places. That together, we would discover where our family originates. He should be here with me right now, on this flight to France. The weight of regret on my heart is substantial.

Emotions swirl inside me as I remember the events that separated me from my grandpa. It was the worst day of my life. I lost my dad and my grandpa on the same day, in different ways. It was six years ago. I wasted one of my summer days waiting for my father and grandfather to arrive home from their work trip. I was miffed that I wasn't allowed to tag along, but exhilarated to hear every detail. The sun came and went with no sign of them. Mom tried to hide it but I could see her worry. My heart lifted when I heard the doorbell ring. My life came crashing down because two officers were on the other side.

My mom's fair skin turned almost translucent. Her blue eyes leaked tears as she was informed of the car accident that killed my father and left my grandpa in critical condition. Death stole more than just two people I love, it stole my home. My mom whisked me to New York City from my quiet life in Missoula, Montana. She blamed grandpa for my father's death, so she kept me from him. Soon she met Dave, a fancy and rich lawyer. Dave is nice enough but it is obvious he only puts up with me to have Mom. Shortly after their wedding, I was sent to boarding school.

*Because of her, Grandpa died alone. Because I couldn't stand up to her.* I breathe through the vexation, loneliness, and self-loathing that floods me. When it dissipates, exhaustion sets in. As my eyes slam shut, the memories of my dad holding me and my grandpa telling me stories loop in my head.

“Bonjour passengers and welcome to Paris!” The mechanical voice startles me awake but proceeds to continue. “We will be landing in the City of Love in 20 minutes. Please take your seats and prepare for landing.” The voice was true to its word, we touched down in precisely 20 minutes. I smiled at the butterflies that filled me as we descended. The movement seems foreign to my facial muscles. I haven't smiled since I received a letter about my grandpa's death and the information about his funeral. I focus on the task of disembarking before my thoughts lead me to tears again.

The first stop I made was to the restrooms. The sleep did not remedy the dark circles that hung below my eyes. My emerald eyes were red-rimmed and were missing their usual spark. My mop of brown locks implies that I'm homeless as opposed to the reality that I'm an heiress of a small fortune. Olivia and heiress in the same sentence seem like an oxymoron. However, Heiress is the title my grandfather's lawyer gave to me. The very thought of my grandpa leaving his

wealth to me still seems fictitious. My family has always been well off. That is how my mom and Dave, my stepfather, have been able to afford to send me to boarding school for all these years since my father's death. However, that was always Dave's money and he would never hesitate to make you beg for it. The money is mine and while it has been tainted by death, it gives me my freedom.

There is a man with a sign awaiting me, my last name in bold upon the thin sheet of marble colored paper. Mark, my grandfather's lawyer, informed me of this. He said that my grandfather had my trip planned down to the second. They arranged for drivers, guides, and itineraries to read upon my arrival. My surroundings leave me in awe. The tip of the Eiffel Tower is teasing me from my view in the back seat. As the sun begins to dip below the horizon, the city comes alive with activity. I pass thousands of restaurants and shops before the chauffeur delivers me to the front of a luxurious hotel. The building screams elegance and expense.

"Ah, Miss Bisset!" A man with kind eyes and a pristine suit says as he approaches. His French accent is obvious but his English is clear.

"Hello," I responded shyly.

"Sorry, I forget we have not met before. Your grandfather has told me so much about you, I feel as if I know you." He pauses with a smile splitting his face. "My name is Louise. Your grandfather was a great friend to me, I am sorry for your loss." I flinch at the reminder of death's most recent theft.

"Thank you," I said through a forced smile. Not knowing what more to say I remain mute. Taking my silence as a hint, Louise continued.

"Of course. Everything has already been arranged. I will go get your room key and show you to your room" He then turned to a young man behind the desk. "Jules, fetch her luggage."

After a short elevator ride, Louise departs from me after ensuring that I will be comfortable. The room is peach color and is very spacious. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted something lying on the nightstand. I stumble over to the bed and pick up two white envelopes. One with '#1' written on it, the other '#2.' My quite rebellious side urges me to open letter '#2' first. I give in. I open the envelope gently and slide out the letter.

**My Dear Rebellious Olivia,**

**I shouldn't be proud of the side of you that likes to change things up and disobey what they are told, but I am, nonetheless. I am proud of all of you, but especially the things you get from me. I think it was my wild side that made me so irresistible to your grandma. While you did not get her light blue eyes, you inherited her loving and optimistic disposition just like your father. How I wish I could hold all of you once more. When your father died in that car accident, I felt like I was suffocating in agony. I was only glad that brain aneurysm, kept your grandma from experiencing that pain. Rest assured we are keeping each other company in heaven. It's ok to cry a bit but don't wallow. We love you very much, I can't simply say it enough.**

**Though I know that voice inside will tell you to read the other letter because I told you not to, you must resist. It will ruin the surprise. Take it with you on your adventure tomorrow, then open it when you reach the last place you visit in France. I love you, have fun!**

**Love,**

**Your Doting Grandfather**

I fall asleep clutching his letter to my chest. A hesitant knock wakes me from my slumber. "Yes?" I said, evidence of sleep obvious in my voice.

"Good morning, sorry to wake you, miss. The itinerary calls for you to be departing from here in an hour." Louise's contrite voice slips past the door. "Once you are dressed call down to the lobby and I will have your breakfast delivered."

"Ok, thank you, Louise," I respond. I reluctantly rise from the cloud-like bed. I opened my luggage and change out of my crumpled travel clothes. I tug on a plain green T-shirt and a pair of comfy jeans. I call down for breakfast. While I wait for it to arrive, I look over the provided itinerary. My heart begins to beat with excitement. I pack a bag for the day and place letter "#1" in it.

I scarf down my breakfast and then make my way down to the lobby. After sharing some parting words with Louise I meet David, my guide, at the car. David seems like a kind man; however, I don't know if it is just a byproduct of his occupation. He looks about ten years older than me, setting him at about 28. His hair is a dark brown, almost black. His features are angular and he possesses the cliché French mustache.

"First, it is scheduled for you to spend the day at the Louvre Museum," David informs me. "It is one of Paris's best attractions. Did you know that it is the world's largest art museum?" He paused until I answer with a nod. "Wonderful! It contains some of the most famous artworks. They are spectacular. You will surely love it." David proceeds to inform me about Paris and the museum. I am so excited that I feel I finally understand the phrase "I have ants in my pants."

The museum was not as crowded, which David says is a lucky occurrence. The unpopularity could be attributed to the fact that it is Monday, a weekday, in the middle of April. Just from the outside, the museum is magnificent. The building's architecture was beautiful and the dazzling pyramid beside it gave the site an exotic touch. I took out my phone to take a picture.

"Would you like me to take a picture of you in front of it?" David offered. I nodded my head shyly. We snapped a quick picture before heading inside. The intricate detail inside the building would lead people to believe the building is a work of art, just like the pieces it contains. David informed me that he would be leading me on a private tour. I could see the passion in his pale blue eyes, as he recounted the history behind each piece we saw. It's clear that he loves Paris. *Can you blame him?* I made sure to take a moment to gaze at each piece, analyzing it and taking it all in. I was not a brooding artist or an art collector. However, I couldn't help but admire

the passion and history embedded in each paintbrush stroke. We made it through about half of the museum before breaking for lunch. I was reluctant to leave but David assured me we would be right back. We went to a little cafe, where I had a very tasty sandwich and tried my hand at small talk with David. I was terrible at it, David wound up carrying the entire conversation.

“Did you know my grandfather?” I question out of the blue.

“Yes, he was a very good man. I even considered him a friend. Every time he was in town, he made it a point to schedule for me to take him to the Louvre Museum.” He paused, there was sadness in his eyes. “You remind me of him. Your curiosity, quiet appreciation, and kindness are just like him.” He smiled at me and I answered with my own.

True to his word, we resumed our exploration of the museum after lunch. I saw impressive statues and the famous *Mona Lisa*. It’s more impressive in person than on the internet, if I say so myself. We finished the day at a five-star restaurant that earned every star. As soon as my head hits the pillow that night I was out like a light.

The next day, my last day in Paris, passed in a blur. I visited the Eiffel Tower and indulged in a bit of Paris shopping. The tower was magnificent and the shopping was pretentious. While I was filled with fascination, all day sorrow kept close. I knew something was missing, that something was Grandpa. I was overcome with anxiousness as I headed to the last destination in France. It’s where I get to open my grandpa’s other letter. I am kept in the dark about the specific location in the name of it being a surprise.

“We are here,” David said and he took my hand to aid me in exiting the vehicle. The site before me filled me with confusion. It was an old run-down building. I looked at David the question clear in my gaze. “We are in Créteil,” he paused as understanding light my face. “and this is the orphanage where your grandparents were raised.” I peered at the building that was crumbling before my eyes. I opened my bag to retrieve my letter and proceed to open it. David’s hands stop my movements. “Not here. Come, this way.” he took me around the back of the building. There was a small garden that seemed to hold secrets of magic. A lovely wishing fountain was in the center of it. “Sit,” David gestured toward the fountain, “and read. Return to the car when you’re finished.” David left and I obeyed his words.

**My Dear Adventurous Olivia,**

**Here in this very garden is where the greatest adventure of my life began. It is the place that I asked your grandmother to marry me. Luckily she said yes as your existence entails. Our love blossomed in this garden. It was our escape. It is the place where we shared our deepest desires and secrets with each other. Upon marrying we took the name of Bisset for our last name. It is the last name of the pastor who married us and helped us form a relationship with Jesus Christ, so it seemed only fitting. I pray that you enjoyed seeing the City of Love and all its wonders, though for me Créteil will always be my City of Love. I love you, my granddaughter.**

**Love,**

## Your Loving Grandfather

For a moment I just sat in the garden meditating on my grandfather's words. I feel like I can soak up their love from the environment. I can picture my grandfather as a boy picking a rose for my grandma. Or spouting lines of poetry to her under the moonlight. I let my imagination run a bit longer before heading back to the car. After returning to the hotel I eat dinner, pack, then go to sleep. My dreams are blissful and full of love.

The plane ride to Italy seems to pass in a flash. During the flight, I contemplated why Grandpa chose for me to visit Italy, of all places. I also recollect my time in France. The fact that soon I will be returning to New York is bitter tasting. I'll be returning to my mundane life and going to college. The whole adventure will become a distant memory.

I begrudgingly acknowledge that I'll have to deal with my mom. I haven't talked to her or listened to one of her 50 voicemails since we argued and I stormed out of the house to go to the airport. It wasn't enough for her to keep me from my grandpa when he was alive, she wanted to keep me from him in death too which just hurt me. So I told her just that. I also aired out all of our dirty laundry. How she has abandoned me for Dave and made me feel isolated all these years. From the way she flinched and paled at my words, I guess that my misery went undetected by her. That made it hurt a little more. *Did she ever just look at me?*

I distract myself with the task of disembarking. I stop just outside of the baggage claim area, as David instructed, and pull out the letter David gave me. It was another letter from my grandpa.

**My Beloved Olivia,**

**Just outside of here, lies the answers to all of your questions. May God grant you strength, my granddaughter. *Ti amo tanto.***

**Love,**

**Your Nonno.**

I frown at his short letter. *What does "Ti amo tanto" or "Nonno" mean*, I thought. My curiosity overpowered my confusion, so I put the letter back in my bag and entered the baggage claim. I found my suitcase without trouble then went on the search for a driver holding a sign with the name "Bisset," on it. I was bewildered to find the sign surrounded by a crowd. I came to an abrupt halt when I saw an elderly woman holding the sign. She was round and her hair was colorless but what caught my attention was her familiar eyes. They were the same emerald eyes that have been staring back at me in the mirror all my life. Soon, the crowd was upon me.

"You're Olivia Bisset," The old woman's words weren't a question but I proceeded to nod the affirmative. A smile crinkled the skin around her eyes. "It's nice to meet you. My name is Angela Romano. I am your great aunt, so you are to call me Zia." she gestured to the people that accompanied her. "This is your family." she introduced me to everyone before we loaded

into a big van and headed for “home.” My thoughts are scattered and I have a million questions but I remain silent.

“Home,” turns out to be a large stone villa that is breathtaking. Zia and I stray from the others as she shows me to my room. “There is a letter in there for you. Read it then come down for dinner.” Zia says before leaving me. The room is not as luxurious as my one in France. But it is cozy in an attractive way. It feels safe, like a home. I grab the letter off the bed and read it.

### **My Beautiful Olivia,**

**They are the most precious gift I could give you, which seems only fitting because you gave them to me first. I never wanted to find my family but when I discovered I had cancer, I frantically searched for them for you. I couldn't leave you all alone with so many unanswered questions. I always thought I was unwanted and unloved, but that wasn't the case. Your *zia* ( Italian for auntie) and her family welcomed me when I met them. They are going to take care of me until I die. So don't feel any guilt concerning me Olivia. Forgive your mother, she was hurting. Angela brought me into her family and made me feel loved, she will do the same for you. Angela has the answers to your questions. *Ti amo tanto* (I love you so much).**

***Tuo Nonno* (your grandpa)**

With hot tears streaming down my face, I bolted from my room. I didn't stop till I launched myself into Zia's arms. I clung to her as I sobbed, she cooed to me and lovingly rubbed my back. I felt all my self-contempt and anger about Grandpa's passing seep out of me.

“Thank you for loving him,” I whisper through my tears.

“Thank you for bringing him to us. It was an honor to get to know him and love him. It will be the same with you.” I could hear the tears in my zia's voice.

The next three days were full of healing and enlightenment. As I bonded with *la mia famiglia* (my family), I learned that grandpa's mother was my zia's sister, Maria. She ran off to Paris with a French soldier against her parent's wishes. The soldier, Enzo, was killed in battle. Maria got sepsis and died when Grandpa was one. Zia never heard from her sister after she ran off, so she didn't know she had a little boy out there. Also, I learned that my emerald eyes were a recessive trait in Zia's family.

The parting was painful, but I had to get home and fix things with Mom. However, Zia informed me that I would be back. It turns out, I will still be receiving letters from Grandpa. Zia has one for each of my future birthdays with a destination in it. The plan is to travel to Italy every year on my birthday to spend time with my new family and pick up the correlating letter. Then I will travel to the destination written on the letter and read the letter upon my arrival. Leave it to my amazing *Nonno* to travel with me from heaven. *I love you, Grandpa!*





