Place: Opening of a Murder Mystery

There was nothing much to notice about the field, a hundred-metre square of dry grass below a small village in the foothills of the Dolomites. It lay at the bottom of a slope covered with hardwood trees which could easily be culled for firewood, and that was used as an argument to increase the price when the land and the two-hundred-year-old house upon it came to be sold. Off to the north a slant-faced mountain looked over the small town of Ponte nelle Alpi; a hundred kilometres to the south lay Venice, too far away to influence the politics or customs of the area. People in the villages spoke Italian with some reluctance, felt more at home in the Bellunese dialect.

The field had lain untilled for almost half a century, and the stone house had sat empty. The immense slates that made up the roof had shifted with age and sudden changes in temperature, perhaps even with the occasional earthquake that had struck the area during the centuries the roof had protected the house from rain and snow, and so it no longer did that, for many of the slates had crashed to earth, leaving the upper rooms exposed to the elements. Because the house and property lay at the heart of a contested will, none of the eight heirs had bothered to repair the leaks, fearful that they would never get back the few hundred thousand lire the repairs would cost. So the rain and snow dripped, then flowed in, nibbling away at plaster and floorboards, and each year the roof tilted more drunkenly towards the earth.

The field, too, had been abandoned for the same reasons. None of the presumptive heirs wanted to expend either time or money working the land, nor did they want to weaken their legal position by being seen to make unpaid use of the property. Weeds flourished, made all the more vital by the fact that t he last people to cultivate the land had for decades manured it with the droppings of their rabbits....[1]

[1]Donna Leon, *A Noble Radiance*, (New York: Penguin, 1998) pp 1-2.