ESCAPE TO TUSCANY

Kat Devereaux

An Aria Book

First published in the UK in 2023 by Head of Zeus,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events
portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's
imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

ISBN (PB): 9781804549858
ISBN (E): 9781804549834

Cover design: Leah Jacobs-Gordon

Typeset by Siliconchips Services Ltd UK

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

Your Magnificence:
I don't have any horses, cloth of gold, splendid jewels, armaments, etc.
This book will have to do.

1

Tori

St Gytha's Church, Canonford, UK

February 2019

'For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor might, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.' The vicar's voice rings out in the near-empty church. She's a pleasant middle-aged woman with candyfloss-pink hair and a West Country accent, and she told us straight away to call her Angie. I like her immensely.

'Margaret came to our village twenty-five years ago, after the death of her beloved husband Hugo,' Angie continues. 'Her dignity, her grace, her Christian faith and her strong sense of fairness endeared her to all who knew her. Today, in a private service with Margaret's closest family, we gather to celebrate her life and commend her soul to God. Let us pray.'

Next to me, my mother folds her black-gloved hands in her black-clad lap. She's perfectly rigid, radiating disapproval of everything around her: the squat stone

church, the colourful Victorian stained glass, the appliquéd banners with their fat white doves and wonky crosses. I can only imagine what she thinks of Angie's hair. Not for the first time, I wonder how Granny and Grandad – whom I remember as a vague, gentle presence, all frayed wool and pipe tobacco – managed to produce such an appalling social conformist.

There's a muffled sound somewhere behind me, and I look round to see a little group of women lurking at the back of the church by the noticeboards. I recognise some of them as Granny's friends from the local Women's Institute. I smile and nod, motioning them to sit down, and Mummy kicks me in the ankle. I've broken the rules, you see. This is strictly family only, even though Daddy died when I was little, and my sister Charlie's kids are sick with something violently contagious, and my husband Duncan was simply too busy to come, so that only left Mummy and me. We're supposed to bury my brilliant, generous, loving grandmother quietly and without making a fuss. It isn't right. It isn't fair.

Angie's reading a psalm now, the one about the Lord being our shepherd. I glance over my shoulder and see the WI ladies massed in the back pews, silk-scarved heads bowed in prayer. A sob rises in my throat and I press my hand to my mouth to stifle it, but it bursts out as an ugly, strangled hiccup.

My mother stiffens. She puts her gloved hand on my arm and lets it rest there for a second. Then she returns it to her lap and goes on looking ahead, back straight, perfectly rigid.

*

As Mummy stalks off across the church car park towards her elderly Jag, Angie approaches me. 'Tori, are you rushing off? Or have you got time for a quick word?'

'Yes, of course,' I say. 'My train doesn't go for ages.'

She beams at me. 'Great. Then we could have a cup of tea and a proper chat, if you like. And I can tell you all about the vigil. It really was a lovely event – I was so sorry you couldn't be there, but I know you were with us in spirit.'

I blink at her. I didn't hear anything about a vigil, and I can't imagine Mummy condoning such a thing. It sounds distinctly like making a fuss. 'Sorry?'

'The vigil, last night, at the Chapel of Rest. We had ever such a good turnout. Mostly locals, obviously, but word must have spread because a few of your grandmother's friends came from London and beyond. We even had one or two Italians – because your granny had friends over there, didn't she? She told me all about how you two used to go there together.'

'She did,' I say. 'We did.'

'That must have been wonderful,' Angie says. 'Anyway, I know it was too much for you, the vigil, but I thought you'd like to hear about it.' She's starting to look puzzled herself now. 'You don't know what I'm talking about, do you?'

'I don't,' I say.

'Right,' Angie says. 'Right. Yes, we'd better have a cup of tea. The vicarage is just over the road. Come on.' She takes my arm and guides me through the lychgate and across the narrow lane to a pretty, low-slung cottage in Cotswold

stone. I'm starting to feel a bit odd, if I'm honest: shaky and unreal. I feel like I might break down and cry properly for the first time since Charlie called me to tell me that Granny had been taken to hospital and then again, just a short while later, to say that she was gone.

'In here.' Angie opens a side door and ushers me into a homely kitchen painted in gentle blues and greens, with cacti ranged along the windowsill and an elderly cat dozing in front of a big cast-iron stove. Once I'm seated at the scrubbed-pine table with a plate of biscuits and a clay mug of tea with a peace sign painted on the side, Angie sits down opposite with her own tea.

'The first thing to say,' she begins, 'is that anything we discuss here is completely confidential. The second is that if you need a bit of a weep, go ahead and have one. I won't judge you.' She nods towards the box of tissues by my elbow. 'And you can swear all you want – it doesn't shock me, nothing does. Understood?'

She looks so serious. She looks, in fact, really concerned and I have a feeling, a nasty, creeping feeling deep down in my gut, about what she's going to say. 'Understood.'

'Good,' Angie says. 'Now, the vigil. You really didn't know about it?'

'I didn't. If I'm honest, I'm not totally sure what one of those is.'

'I see. Well, it's not necessarily common practice in the Church of England, but our parish has a tradition of holding a vigil the night before a funeral – a bit like a wake, you know, in the Catholic tradition. It's something we do for people who were really important to our church community. And since the funeral was going to be family

only… well, it was a chance for all of us to say goodbye, especially as she died so suddenly. So we asked your mother if we could hold one for Margaret, and she gave us her permission.'

'What, really?' Mummy finds the C of E a bit infra dig. I can't see her giving the go-ahead to anything that smells even slightly of Rome.

'Well, not right away,' Angie admits. 'I think she was concerned it would create more work and stress at a difficult time. Which is totally understandable, of course, but in this case we'd planned to organise everything ourselves and she wasn't expected to do anything or even to attend. So once I'd made that clear, she agreed. And obviously our first thought was to invite you. I know you're not a churchgoer…'

'Sorry,' I say.

'No, no, it's fine. But I know you and Margaret had a special bond. She talked about you all the time. And my own mum died of a stroke – I know what a horrible shock it is, and how painful when you don't get to say goodbye. So I phoned you up.'

I put my mug down. 'You phoned me?'

'Yes. I couldn't get through to your mobile – it wouldn't even connect. I suppose the signal isn't great up there in the Highlands.'

'No,' I say. 'The house is in a bit of a dead spot.'

Angie nods. 'I can imagine. Anyway, I phoned your landline and your husband answered. Duncan, is it? I told him all about the vigil, and he said that he was sure you'd love to be there, and that he'd ask you about it and get back to me. Then he phoned about half an hour later and said that you'd talked about it and you weren't feeling up

to coming. Losing your granny had been a terrible shock and you wouldn't be able to cope. He sounded completely convincing.' She grimaces. 'From the way he talked, I didn't expect to see you at the funeral, either.'

For a moment I don't know how to respond. All I can think about is how I had to argue with Duncan to be allowed to come here at all. He said that funerals were for the living, and attending wouldn't bring Granny back. He said the train tickets would be extortionate, the plane too much of a fiddle, a hotel room an indulgence we couldn't afford. He said the estate couldn't spare me and I'd be selfish to go. He said I'd only get angry with my mother and come back and take it out on him. He said I'd only get upset. He said I wouldn't cope. He said I wouldn't cope.

'Tori?' Angie prompts me.

I stare at her. 'That bastard,' I say. 'That absolute fucking *bastard*.'

Angie doesn't tell me what to do. She doesn't tell me what Jesus would do, either. She just listens as I rant and cry and try to piece things together, supplying more tea and biscuits and, finally, a large whisky from the bottle she keeps in her study. Only when she's giving me a lift to the station in her ancient Range Rover does she finally say: 'Tori, if you're ever in a situation where you need somewhere to stay, there's a room at the vicarage for however long you need it. Okay?'

'Okay,' I say. 'That's really kind, thank you.'

'It's no problem. And here we are.' She pulls to a stop in front of the station building. It's picturesque like the rest of the village, with immaculate whitewash and pots of

purple cyclamen. 'Now, before you go – I meant to give you this earlier, but we had more urgent things to discuss.' She rummages in her bag and passes me an envelope in thick, heavy cream paper, with *To Victoria* written on it in Granny's perfect copperplate.

For a moment I just look at it, there in my hands. This last thing from Granny. 'Is this…' I have to clear my throat. 'Did she write it in hospital?'

'No. She gave it to me last year, when she was updating her will. She said…' Angie gives a sort of choked half-laugh. 'You know, I didn't really understand at the time. She was worried that if she took ill, she wouldn't get to say goodbye to you before she died. Not your sister or your mother, specifically you. I remember thinking that she was probably just having a fuss, like people do when they think about mortality. Fixating on something to take away the really big fear.' She shakes her head. 'But now… look, she never talked about your husband, or not badly. But I've got to wonder if she had him figured out.'

Now I laugh – hiccupy, tearful laughter. 'Maybe,' I say, wiping my eyes. 'It wouldn't surprise me. Granny's bullshit-o-meter was always better than mine. I mean, she only met him, what, a handful of times? But maybe…' I trail off as it dawns on me just how rarely Granny and Duncan had actually met – how often I'd had to choose between him and her. How many trips south got cancelled because of some last-minute problem on the farm? How many times did I cut short one of our phone calls because Duncan needed something?

'I think you've got a lot of processing ahead,' Angie says gently. 'If there's anything you need to talk over…'

There's the distant, tinny sound of a voiceover announcement and I look up to see a train – my train – already approaching the station. 'Oh God,' I say. 'I've got to go. Thanks so much again.' I'm half-panicked, half relieved. I lean over and give Angie a quick hug before getting out of the car and grabbing my overnight bag from the back seat.

'No problem,' she calls after me as I bolt for the entrance. 'Here any time!'

I make it onto the train just in time. I flop into my seat, put my bag at my feet and look at the envelope, wondering what to do. Of course, I'm desperately curious to know what's inside. But once I open the envelope, once I read whatever Granny has to say to me, I'll never have that moment of discovery again. All the words will be finished.

Curiosity wins out as the train approaches Bristol Temple Meads. I rip open the envelope and find a single sheet of paper.

Dearest Tori,

In case I don't see you, I want to tell you that I have left you and your sister a gift of £30,000 each. You may use it for whatever purpose you think best. My only condition is that you do not spend any part of it on anyone else. This money is for you and you alone. What you do with it isn't up to me.

But if it were up to me, my darling, I should tell you to go back to Florence. I have such wonderful memories of my time there. With you, of course – but also as a young woman, quite free, with the means to do as I

pleased. I can't give you that freedom, though I've often wished you'd take it for yourself. Perhaps I can give you the means.

I love you.

Nonna

2

Stella

Romituzzo, Tuscany, Italy

February 1944

My friend Berta Gallurì was a hero of the Resistance. If she had lived, I think she would have been one of those great twentieth-century women, an intellectual and a fighter – like Lidia Menapace, Ada Gobetti, Tina Anselmi, Carla Capponi, Rossana Rossanda. If she had lived.

Berta was nineteen when the Nazi occupation began in September 1943. She was a bright young woman from a family of anti-Fascists, the daughter of our local pharmacist, and she was studying literature at the University of Florence. The day she opened her shutters and saw a column of German soldiers marching up the via Romana, her first thought was to find a way home, to Romituzzo, because she knew that we would need her. Not as a courier like me, or a combatant like her brother Davide – although there were women combatants, more than you think – but as an organiser.

Organisation was Berta's great gift. Within weeks of her arrival, our little town had a growing network of girls and women who carried messages, smuggled illegal publications

and false papers, and took essential supplies to the various partisan groups that were forming in the hills south of Florence. Our partisans were young and old, communist and socialist, monarchist and liberal, Catholic and Trotskyist and anarchist. Many were completely new to combat, while some had served in the military or the police. If all these different people were going to work together, and do so effectively, then they needed all the help they could get.

Berta understood this perfectly. The women in her network belonged to no party, espoused no faction. We went where we were asked, when we were asked; we worked for anyone who needed us, and we never quibbled. This was my Resistance: the everyday routine of messages on cigarette paper and guns in shopping bags, of delivery runs fitted in around school and church and home. If I have no spectacular stories to tell you, it's because my Resistance was unspectacular, necessary, quiet. But it was dangerous, too.

On the evening of 15 February 1944, Berta was returning from Florence, where she had collected copies of the clandestine newsletter *The Workers' Struggle* to distribute in Romituzzo. As she often did, she'd sewn the newsletters into the lining of her handbag. When she got off the train, she was stopped by a German soldier who checked her papers and looked in her bag. A routine check and one she'd passed so many times, but this soldier had a sharp eye. Perhaps the worn old lining, unpicked and restitched so many times, had begun to give way; perhaps the stark black newsprint peeked through a rent in the silk. He took the bag from her, tore open the lining and found the newsletters hidden there.

Berta didn't go easily. That's what people tell me, people

who were there. She fought like a cat, screaming and clawing as the Germans bundled her into their truck. The next day, her broken and violated body was left at dawn outside her father's shop on piazza Garibaldi, in the very centre of town, as a warning to those who dared resist.

My friend Berta Gallurì was a strong woman, stronger than you can imagine. She died without giving up a single name. I know that because our little network went on existing. I know because the Germans didn't come for me.

I didn't see poor Berta that morning, thank God. I didn't even know that she had been caught. But when I came downstairs to make myself breakfast before school, I found my father sitting at the kitchen table with his face in his hands and I knew that something was wrong.

'Papà,' I said, 'what's happened? Why aren't you at work?'

My father raised his head. He was a big man, an impressive man – rather like Peppone in the *Don Camillo* stories – but that day he looked tired and old. 'Achille has gone to open up the garage,' he said, in a voice quite unlike his usual one. 'Your mother is having a lie-in.'

If my mother was still in bed, something must have been *very* wrong. I sat down next to him and watched as he rubbed a hand over his face. I didn't know what to do, and I'm not sure he did either. Eventually I put my hand on his arm, and he briefly held it in his own rough hand before letting go again. He took a clean rag from his pocket and pressed it to his eyes.

'Stella,' he said, 'promise me you won't get involved with

the partisans. It's enough that we have to worry about your brother. Promise me.'

'I promise I won't get involved,' I said. And it wasn't a lie, technically, because I was already involved. I'd been part of Berta's network for months by that stage.

'Good,' my father said. For a moment he looked as if he were going to say something else – as if he were looking for the words – but then he cleared his throat and repeated: 'Good.' He got to his feet and went to the stove, moving a little painfully as he always did in the mornings. Back in the 1920s, my mother once told me, he had refused to fix the car of a local Fascist leader. The Fascist and his henchmen had shattered both his kneecaps. My father never told that story, or not in my hearing.

'I'll make the coffee,' I said. 'I have time before school.'

He was already spooning the chicory powder – nasty stuff – into the coffee pot. 'I'm making it. And you're not going to school.'

Now I was really alarmed. My father never made anything for me, and he never let me have a day off unless I was very sick. And I had to go to school, because I was supposed to drop something off on my way there. I often managed my work that way. Since I was clever and wanted to be a teacher, my parents allowed me to keep studying even though the nearest high school was at Castelmedici, twenty minutes or so along the train line towards Florence. And since I was small and plain and looked young for fourteen, and I took the same train at the same time six days a week, I could smuggle all kinds of useful stuff without attracting the attention of either the Fascists or the Germans. Or my parents, for that matter.

'Papà, what's wrong?' I asked. 'Please tell me. Is Mamma sick? Is that it?'

My father shook his head. He was staring at the coffee pot, watching it as it started to hiss and bubble. I know now that he was fighting with himself, caught between telling me what he had heard – and perhaps even seen – and keeping it from me, keeping me innocent for as long as he could. 'There are Germans at the station,' he said at last. 'More than usual, and they're checking everyone.'

'But that's all right,' I said, though my heart was beating fast. 'I don't have anything to hide.'

'I still don't like it.' His voice was grim. 'I don't like to send you there alone.'

'Then get Achille to walk with me, or Enzo. Please, Papà. I have to hand in a Latin composition, a really important one. I've been working on it for days. Please.'

My father grunted to himself. He poured out a cup of chicory and put it in front of me with a piece of bread. 'I suppose Enzo could take you along, if you absolutely must go,' he said. 'He's working today.'

I was relieved, though I didn't dare show it. Enzo was a friend of my brother Achille, and he helped out at the garage whenever there was spare work to be done. Both boys were ardent communists, although – unlike my brother – Enzo had the good sense to keep his clandestine work a secret from my father. Papà thought he was a good influence. I thought he was wonderful; but, more to the point, I knew he had my orders for that day's run. How simple it would be, how much easier if we could do the handover somewhere quiet, well away from the garage and my father's tiresome vigilance.

'And if he sees me on to the train and meets me when I come back, then there's really nothing to worry about,' I went on. 'Honestly, Papà, I'll be quite all right. You'll see.' I knew that I was on the point of being insolent, that I had already pushed my father much harder than he would usually permit, but he didn't seem to notice. 'Please,' I said again.

For a long moment he seemed sunk in thought, and then he nodded, just once. 'Very well. Finish your breakfast, and I'll go across the road and tell Enzo to get ready.' He went out before I could thank him, his hands in his pockets, defeated.

When I went out into the cold hazy morning, Enzo was waiting for me at the gate. He looked serious, but I didn't think anything of it because Enzo was always serious. His father had died in an accident before the war and he'd lost his mother recently, too, when a stray bomb destroyed the factory where she worked just outside Castelmedici. Enzo's parents had moved to Romituzzo when they were newly married, and they had no family in the area. So he had been taken in by the Frati family, who lived in the next street to us on the very outskirts of town. It made perfect sense for him to live there because he was practically part of their household already. Sandro Frati, Achille and Enzo had ganged up together on their first ever day at the local school and now, at fifteen, they were still the best of mates.

'*Ciao*, Stellina,' Enzo said, and kissed me on each cheek. It was the most innocent thing in the world, but I still remember how it thrilled me. 'Come on – let's get you to the station.'

'And make sure she gets on the train,' Achille's voice rang

out. He was standing in the garage forecourt in his greasy overalls, his cap pulled down over his curly black hair and a thick woollen scarf around his neck. 'Don't just leave her there and piss off.'

Enzo rolled his eyes. '*Ma dai!*'

We set off together along the road towards the station. As soon as we were out of sight of the garage, Enzo pulled me into a narrow side alley. He took hold of my shoulders and looked at me with that serious expression of his. For just a second, I thought he was going to kiss me for real.

'Are you all right, Stellina?' he asked in a low voice. 'If you don't think you can face it today, I'll make some excuse to your father and go instead of you.'

'Of course I can face it,' I said. I was insulted, and more than a little disappointed. 'Do you think I'm going to back out just because of a few Germans?'

'No, no. It's just that, well, after what happened…' He was frowning now. 'Don't you know?'

'What? What should I know? Everyone's acting so strangely this morning. I don't understand what the problem is.'

Enzo took my hands in his and he told me, in simple and terrible words, what had happened to Berta. And then he held me as I cried.

The square outside the station – back then, it was called piazza Burresi – was even busier than usual. I don't know if Papà actually knew about the Germans but, whether he meant to or not, he'd told the truth. The square was lined with armoured cars and there were soldiers stopping people

on the way into the station and checking their papers. I realised then that I had put Enzo in danger by wanting him to come with me; a young man, a worker, was always going to be more suspicious in the eyes of the Germans than a schoolgirl in uniform. They might think he was a partisan, which he was, or a draft dodger, which he wasn't – but only because he wasn't old enough to be drafted.

'You don't have to come in with me,' I said in my brightest voice. With the Germans around, it was best not to sound fearful. 'I can manage by myself.'

'Don't be silly,' Enzo said. 'I want to see you off.' He spoke lightly, too, but his arm was tight around my shoulders.

In the event, the soldiers didn't bother with us. They took a cursory look at Enzo's identity card and waved mine away. Enzo waited with me until the train arrived and then he did kiss me, just softly, on the lips.

'Have a good day, Stellina. I'll be here when you get back.'

I got into the train carriage with my cheeks burning and fought my way through the crowd to find somewhere to stand, finally contriving to wedge myself into a corner with my satchel between my hip and the wall. In the satchel were my schoolbooks, my jotter and a little paperback copy of Machiavelli's comedy *The Mandrake*, which Enzo had given me to carry. It might have contained some kind of message in code, likely written in vinegar or some other form of invisible ink, or perhaps it had a compartment cut into the leaves. I didn't open it and I certainly didn't ask for details. The more I knew, the more danger I would bring upon others if I was caught. It was my responsibility to know as little as possible.

When I got to Castelmedici, I was to walk to school as I

always did, except that this time I should pause at the gates of the municipal park to shift my satchel from my right shoulder to my left. My contact would find me then. I was used to this kind of arrangement by now, but I still preferred the mornings when I simply went to school and didn't have to rehearse that day's signal in my head and hope, the whole time, that the right person would approach me.

The train was running slower even than usual, stopping and starting. I was hot and uncomfortable, both from the stifling air of the packed carriage and from fear that I would miss my connection and fail to hand over the book.

'No doubt the communists have blown up the line again,' a woman in a fur coat said rather loudly, looking around the carriage as if to rally us to her aid. 'As if it does anything but make life harder for the rest of us.' But she was met with satisfying silence, and one or two people shook their heads.

Eventually the train juddered to yet another stop, and we were in Castelmedici. Now I had to fight to get out of the doors, because hardly anyone else was getting off; but I managed it, and I was outside in the cold air and already ten minutes late for school. I wanted to run, but I forced myself to walk slowly and look confidently ahead, just as if it were any other day. There were fewer Germans at Castelmedici than there had been at Romituzzo – I never could figure out their patterns – and I was able to walk right past a little group of soldiers who were poring over an elderly man's papers, and out into the square. I picked up my pace as I walked, so absorbed in my task that I almost missed the gates of the park altogether. But I caught myself in time and, feigning discomfort, I stopped just long enough to take my heavy satchel off one shoulder and move it to

the other. Then I kept walking, because the whole point of these 'flying rendezvous', as we called them, was not to look as if you were waiting for someone.

'Mimma!' someone called behind me: a female voice, cheerful and light. Mimma was the code name I used for my work. 'Mimma, wait for me!'

I slowed down a little and a woman appeared alongside me, pushing a bicycle with a little boy riding happily in the basket. She was wearing a rather shabby overcoat and her hair was covered with a scarf. She looked just like any young mother out running errands.

'How lovely to see you,' she said, smiling at me as if we were old friends. The child, obliging, smiled at me too. 'You're off to school, I suppose. Tonino and I will accompany you some of the way, if that's all right. I should like to catch up.'

Her eyes were fixed on me, her manner determinedly bright. I glanced over her shoulder and saw two black-capped gendarmes on the street corner a little way behind us, apparently deep in conversation. These were Fascists, members of Mussolini's National Republican Guard, and their task was to root out and crush those who helped the partisans.

'Of course,' I said. 'Let's walk together.'

We set off, and she began chattering away about people and places that meant nothing to me in the slightest. For all I know, it was completely made up. We walked together in that way for a couple of blocks – the Fascists, thank God, made no move to follow us – and then she made a regretful face, gave me a quick hug and said that she ought to go.

'I'm glad we could catch up for a few minutes,' I said.

'Oh, and I forgot! Thank you for the loan of the book.' I took *The Mandrake* out of my satchel and handed it to her, and she tucked it into her bicycle basket, next to Tonino.

'*Ciao*, Mimma,' she said, and cycled off with a wave. I waved back and hurried towards school.

When I got back to Romituzzo, Enzo was waiting for me on the platform just as he promised. I had spent the whole school day with the news of Berta's death going round and round in my head, and I wanted to collapse into his arms, but I didn't. We made our way past the Germans, who didn't even look at us this time, and began to walk home.

'Good day at school?' Enzo asked once we were safely away from piazza Burresi.

'What do you think?'

Enzo laughed. He knew, of course – knew how it sickened me to spend my days pretending to be an obedient girl and a good Fascist. 'You could have left last summer,' he reminded me.

I sighed. 'I know. But then I couldn't train to be a teacher and, well…'

He took my hand. 'Just think, Stellina,' he said quietly. 'Just think of the lessons you'll teach one day in the future.'

It's miraculous, really. I was scared and sad; there was danger everywhere and yet I could still marvel at the touch of his skin. I suppose that's youth.

'Achille's out on a job,' Enzo said. 'Been called out to fix a broken bicycle.'

'Where? Santa Marta?' This was our shorthand for the old farmhouse, high up in the hills, that had been taken

over by the independent communist brigade to which Enzo and Achille belonged. They were both couriers, but Achille was also the brigade's unofficial mechanic, fixing bikes and motorcycles and getting hold of valuable fuel and parts.

Enzo shook his head. 'Other way. Sant'Appiano.'

Sant'Appiano was a hill village north of Romituzzo, towards Florence. I knew that there was a little knot of partisans operating near there, not communists but monarchists. 'A new client, then,' I said, trying to keep my voice casual. 'How did they hear about Achille?'

Enzo grimaced. 'I suppose word's got around.'

As we turned into my street, I slipped my hand out of his. My father was waiting, standing in the forecourt with his arms crossed. He nodded as we approached.

'Bye,' Enzo muttered, and hurried across the road towards the garage.

My mother was where I knew she'd be: in the back room that served as a laundry and storage space. It was cold in there, but it was the only place where she could see the little road that led from the back of our row of houses up into the hills. Achille always took that route home if he could, to avoid the checkpoints. She was sitting by the window, swaddled inadequately in an old blanket, working through a basketful of socks for darning. She looked so small, so fragile, that I suddenly felt very sorry for her.

'Mamma, won't you go and do that by the stove? I can keep watch.'

She looked at me with dull, distracted eyes. 'What? No. He shouldn't be long.'

'Can I bring you a coffee, at least?'

My mother shook her head. 'No,' she said, as I knew she would. She never ate or drank anything while Achille was out on a run – it was her bargain with God. 'No, thank you. There's some soup in the pantry,' she added.

My stomach was tight and acidic. The idea of soup, those bland soups we lived off during the war, was revolting. 'Thanks, Mamma,' I said, and went to the kitchen to warm myself up.

I was sitting in the big chair by the stove, trying to read the portion of Manzoni I had been assigned for my literature class – and if you have read *The Betrothed* from beginning to end, then you have done better than I have – when I heard the sound of an engine and then, a moment later, a cry of joy from my mother.

'Achille! Achille, *tesoro*, there you are. How you made me worry!'

The door of the kitchen opened, letting in a whisper of frigid air, and Achille strode in. His overalls were smeared with mud and he was chafing his hands together, but his eyes were bright. He always looked so happy when he came back from a run, as if he'd won a race – which I suppose he had.

My mother bustled in after him. 'Stella, lazy girl, get up and let your brother sit down. Do you want some soup, Achille? Get him some soup,' she instructed me, without waiting for his reply. 'I'll go and let your father know you're back.' And she hurried out again, pulling the door shut behind her.

'For Christ's sake, don't move,' Achille said as I made to get up. 'You need the heat more than I do. You look half-dead.'

'Do you want some soup?' I asked, though I knew what the answer would be.

Achille made a face. 'God, no. I had to force down a bowl of the stuff at lunchtime.' He pulled out one of the kitchen chairs and sat on it backwards, resting his arms on the back and his chin on his arms, and grinned at me.

'Enzo says you went out to help the monarchists,' I said. 'Why on earth did they send for you?'

'Because I'm the best mechanic in the Valdana,' Achille said. 'And theirs was taken out by the Germans.'

I closed my book and held it tight in my lap. 'What happened? Was he arrested?'

'Shot. They were planning to ambush a convoy heading to Florence, carrying prisoners for deportation.' Achille spoke as if this were the most everyday occurrence – which it was, back then. 'They were lying in wait by the roadside when this guy lost his nerve. He broke cover and ran out into the road just as the Germans were approaching.' He mimed firing a rifle.

'So they didn't manage to free the prisoners,' I said.

'No, they did not, thanks to that *coglione*. And now they're down a mechanic, too. Good thing I could assist.'

'You showed up in your red kerchief, of course.'

'Of course.' Achille fished it out of his pocket and waved it at me. 'You think I'd let them forget that a godless communist helped them out?'

The kitchen door opened. Achille stuffed the kerchief back into his pocket.

'Stella!' my mother scolded. 'What are you doing still hogging the stove? Where is your brother's soup?'

'It's all right, Mamma.' Achille got up and went over

to her, put an arm around her shoulders. 'I'm fine. I'm not hungry. And Stella should stay in the warm. Look at her, she's shivering.'

And I was. I was shivering, and not from the cold – although I was cold – but because the events of that day were crowding in on me. I couldn't stop thinking about that convoy rolling on unimpeded, the trucks full of frightened people being carried to their deaths.

My mother looked at me with blank disdain. I could see it in her face, how little she thought of me in that moment – and not in the sense that she despised me, although perhaps she did, but in the sense that I scarcely figured in her world. She turned back to Achille.

'You shall have a bath, then, before your father comes home. I'll heat up the water. Stella, go and fetch the tub, and then you can start on the potatoes for dinner.'

Achille opened his mouth to protest, but there was no pont. I got up and went to do as I was told.