

A THREAD OF GRACE

A Novel

Mary Doria Russell



R A N D O M H O U S E



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A NOVEL

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RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

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Alla mia famiglia

*with thanks to Susa and Tomek,
who made me reach for more*

Quello che siete, fummo.

What you are, we were.

Quello che siamo, sarete.

What we are, you shall be.

—FROM AN ITALIAN CEMETERY

Characters

ITALIAN JEWS

Renzo Leoni, a.k.a. Ugo Messner, Stefano Savoca, Don Gino Righetti
Lidia Segre Leoni, his widowed mother; *la nonna* (the grandmother)
Tranquillo Loeb, her eldest daughter's husband

Iacopo Soncini, chief rabbi of Sant'Andrea
Mirella Casutto Soncini, his wife
Angelo, their young son
Altira, their first daughter, deceased
Rosina, their second daughter

Giacomo Tura, elderly Hebrew scribe

JEWISH REFUGEES

Claudette Blum, Belgian teenager; Claudia Fiori, *la vedova* (the widow)
Albert Blum, her father

Duno Brössler, Austrian teenager, partisan
Herrmann and Frieda Brössler, his parents
Liesl and Steffi, his younger sisters
Rivka Ivanova Brössler, his paternal grandmother

Jakub Landau, organizer for the Italian CNL (Committee for National Liberation); *il polacco* (the Pole)

ITALIAN CATHOLICS

Suora (Sister) Marta, middle-aged nun
Suora Corniglia, novice, later nun; Suora Fossette (Sister Dimples)
Massimo Malcovato, her father; *il maggiore* (the major)

Don (male honorific) Osvaldo Tomitz, priest, Sant'Andrea
Don Leto Girotti, priest, San Mauro; *il prete rosso* (the red priest)

Santino Cicala, infantryman, Calabrian draftee

Catarina Dolcino, the Leonis' landlady; Rina
Serafino Brizzolari, municipal bureaucrat, Sant'Andrea
Antonia Usodimare, proprietress, Pensione Usodimare

Tercilla Lovera, *contadina* (peasant woman), Santa Chiara
Pierino, Tercilla's son; *il postino* (the postman)

Bettina, his sister

Battista Goletta, Fascist farmer, Valdottavo

Attilio Goletta, his cousin, Communist sharecropper

Tullio Goletta, Attilio's son, partisan

Adele Toselli, elderly housekeeper, San Mauro rectory

Nello Toselli, her nephew, partisan

Maria Avoni, partisan; *la puttana tedesca* (the German whore)

Otello Rollero, partisan, interpreter for Simon Henley

BRITISH

Simon Henley, signalman, Special Operations executive

GERMANS

Werner Schramm, deserter, Oberstabsarzt (medical officer) Waffen-SS

Irmgard, his sister, deceased

Erhardt von Thadden, Gruppenführer (division commander) Waffen-SS; the Schoolmaster

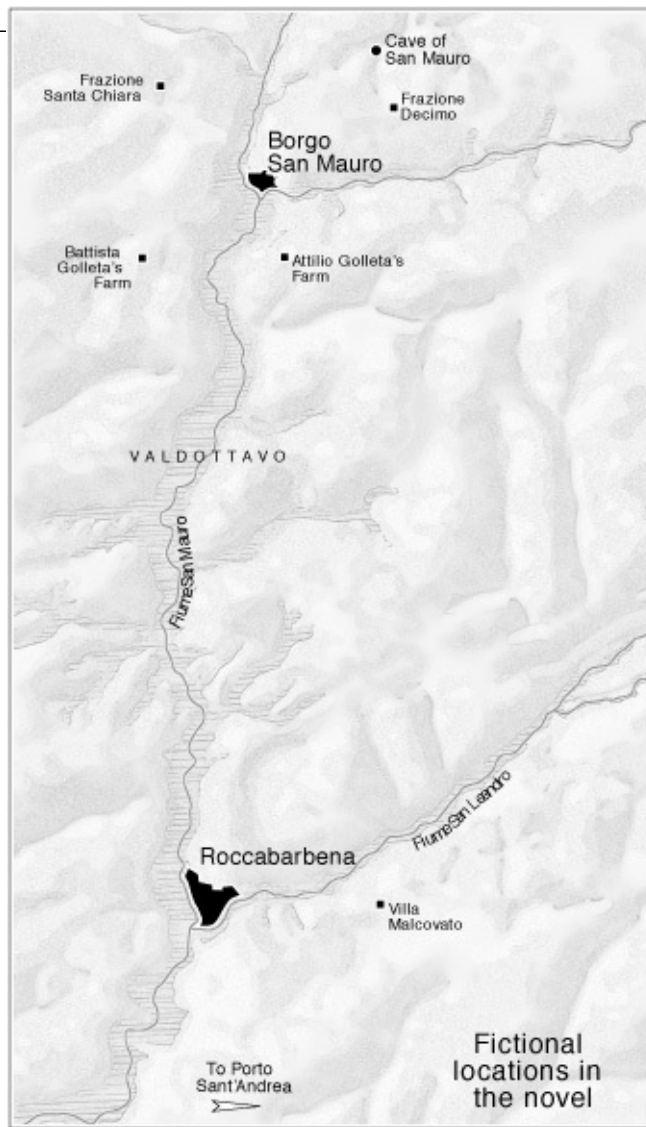
Martina, his wife

Helmut Reinecke, his adjutant, Hauptsturmführer (captain), later Standartenführer (colonel, regimental commander)

Ernst Kunkel, Oberscharführer (staff sergeant), aide to von Thadden

Artur Huppenkothen, Oberstpolizei (police colonel), Gestapo

Erna, his sister



Towns in italics are fictional locations in the novel



Preludio

AUSTRIA
1907

This is what everyone would remember about his mother: her home was immaculate. Even in a place where cleanliness was pursued with religious zeal, her household was renowned for its faultless order. In Klara's mind, there was no gradation between purity and filth.

She had sinned as a girl, made pregnant by her married uncle. Adultery stained her soul black, and God punished her as she deserved. Her sin child died.

So did her aunt, and Klara became her uncle's newest wife, dutifully raising her stepchildren, keeping them very clean and very quiet, so her uncle-husband would not become angry and bring out his leather whip. Her husband was no more merciful than her God.

Her second son died, and then her small daughter. Soon after she buried little Ida, Klara became pregnant again. Her fourth child was a sickly boy whose weakness her uncle-husband despised. Klara was ashamed that her children had died. She hovered over the new baby anxiously, told him constantly that she loved and needed him, hoping that her neighbors would notice how well he was cared for. Hoping that her uncle-husband would come to approve of her son. Hoping that God would hear her pleas, and let this child live.

Her prayers, it seemed, were answered, but the neighbors were bemused by Klara's mothering. She nursed her little boy for two years. He'd squirm away, or turn his face from her, but she pushed her nipple into his mouth regardless of what troubled him. She fed and fed and fed that child. Food was medicine. Food could ward off numberless, nameless, lurking diseases. "Eat," she'd plead. "Eat, you'll get sick and die." It was immoderate, even in a village where mothers expected children to swallow whatever was put before them, and to clean their plates.

In adulthood, Klara's son would have nightmares about suffocation. He would suck on a finger at times of stress, or stuff himself with chocolates. He was obsessed with his body's odors and became a vegetarian, convinced that this diet reduced his propensity to sweat excessively and improved the aroma of his intestinal gas. He discussed nutritional theories at length but had a poor appetite. He could not watch others eat without trying to spoil their enjoyment. He'd call broth "corpse tea," and once pointed out that a roast suckling pig looked "just like a cooked baby."

Whenever he looked in a mirror, he would see his mother's eyes: china-blue and frightened. Frightened of dirt, of her husband, of illness, and of God. Klara's son was frightened, too. Frightened of priests and hunters, of cigarette smokers and skiers, of liberals, journalists, germs and dirt, gypsies, judges, and Americans. He was frightened of being wrong, of being weak, of being effeminate. Frightened of poets and of Poles, of academics and Jehovah's Witnesses. Frightened of moonlight and horses, of snow and water and the dark. Frightened of microbes and spirochetes, feces, and of old men, and of the French.

The very blood in his veins was dangerous. There were birth defects and feeble-mindedness in his incestuous family. His uncle-father was a bastard, and Klara's son worried all his life that unsavory gossip about his ancestry would become public. He was frightened of sexual intercourse and never had children, afraid his tainted blood would be revealed in them. He was terrified of cancer, which took his mother's life, and horrified that he had suckled at diseased breasts.

How could anyone live with so much fear?

His solution was to simplify. He sought and seized one all-encompassing explanation for the existence of sin and disease, for all his failures and disappointments. There was no weakness in his parents, his blood, his mind. He was faultless; others were filth. He could not change his china-blue eyes, but he could change the world they saw. He would identify the secret source of every evil and root it out, annihilating at a stroke all that threatened him. He would free Europe of pollution and defilement—only health and confidence and purity and order would remain!

Are such grim and comic facts significant, or merely interesting? Here's another: the doctor who could not cure Klara Hitler's cancer was Jewish.

Greater Italy

1943

Anno Fascista XXII

8 September 1943

PORTO SANT'ANDREA, LIGURIA
NORTHWESTERN COAST OF ITALY

A simple answer to a simple question. That's all Werner Schramm requires.

"Where's the church?" he yells, belligerent and sick—sicker yet when his shout becomes a swampy cough.

A small crowd gathers to appreciate the spectacle: a Waffen-SS officer, thin, fortyish, and liquored up. He props his hands against his knees, coughing harder. "*La basilica!*" he gasps, remembering the Italian. "*San Giovanni—dove è?*"

A young woman points. He catches the word *campanile*, and straightens, careful of his chest. Spotting the bell tower above a tumble of rooftops that stagger toward the sea, he turns to thank her. Everyone is gone.

No matter. Downhill is the path of least resistance for a man who's drunk himself legless. Near the harbor, the honeyed light of the Italian Riviera gilds wrecked warehouses and burnt piers, but there's not much bomb damage inland. No damned room for an explosion, Schramm thinks.

Jammed between the Mediterranean and the mountains, the oldest part of Porto Sant'Andrea doesn't even have streets—just *carrugi*: passages barely wide enough for medieval carts. Cool and shadowy even at noon, these masonry ravines wind past the cobblers' and barbers' shops, apothecaries, vegetable stands, and cafés wedged at random between blank-walled town houses with shuttered windows.

Glimpses of the bell tower provide a sense of direction, but Schramm gets lost twice before stumbling into a sunny little piazza. He scowls at the light, sneezes, wipes his watering eyes. "Four of you!" he tells the Basilica di San Giovanni Battista. "Tried t'hide, but it didn' work!"

San Giobatta, the locals call this place, as though John the Baptist were a neighborhood boy, poor and charmless but held in great affection. Squatting on a granite platform, the dumpy little church shares its modest courtyard with an equally unimpressive rectory and convent, their builders' architectural ambition visibly tempered by parsimony. Broad stripes of cheap black sandstone alternate with grudgingly thin layers of white Carrara marble. The zebra effect is regrettable.

Ineffective sandbags surround the church, its southeast corner freshly crumpled and blackened by an Allied incendiary bomb. A mob of pigeons waddle through the rubble, crapping and cooing. “The pope speaks lovely German,” Schramm informs them. “Nuncio to Berlin before he got his silly hat. Perhaps I ought to go to Rome and confess to Papa Pacelli!”

He laughs at his own impertinence, and pays for it with another coughing fit. Eyes watering, hands trembling, he drops onto the basilica staircase and pulls out the battered flask he keeps topped up and nestled near his heart. He takes small sips until brandy calms the need to cough, and the urge to flee.

Prepared now, he stands. Squares his shoulders. Advances resolutely on massive doors peopled with bronzed patriarchs and tarnished virgins. Curses with surprise when they won’t yield to his tug. “I want a priest!” he yells, rapping on the door, first with his knuckles and then more insistently with the butt of his Luger.

Creaking hinges reveal the existence of a little wooden side door. A middle-aged nun appears, her sleeves shoved into rubber gauntlets, her habit topped by a grimy apron. Frowning at the noise, she is short and shaped like a beer keg. Her starched white wimple presses pudgy cheeks toward a nose that belongs on a propaganda Jew.

Christ, you’re homely.

Schramm wipes his mouth on his sleeve, wondering if he has spoken aloud. For years, words have threatened to pour out, like blood from his throat. He fears hemorrhage.

Shivering in the heat, he makes a move toward the door. The nun bars his way. “*La chiesa è chiusa!*” she says, but Schramm pushes past her.

The baptistry reeks of carbolic, incense, explosives, and charred stone. Three novices scour the limestone floor. The prettiest sits on her heels, her face smudged with soot from the firebomb damage. Calmly, she studies the Luger dangling in this German’s right hand. Behind him, Sister Beer Keg snaps her fingers. Eyes drop. Work resumes.

Schramm shoves the pistol into its holster, pulls off his campaign cap, and rubs a sweaty palm over his cropped brown hair. The nave is empty apart from a single man who ambles down the center aisle, neck cranked back like a cormorant’s, hands clasped loosely behind his back. This personage studies the swirling seraphim and whey-faced saints above, himself an allegorical portrait come to life. Unconcerned in a Silver-Gray Suit.

Distracted by the tourist, Schramm takes a step toward the confessionals and trips over a bucket of water. “*Scheisse,*” he swears, hopping away from the spill.

“*Basta!*” the fat nun declares, pulling him toward the door.

“*Io need ein padre!*” he insists, but his Italian is two decades old—the fading souvenir of a year in Florence. The Beer Keg shakes her head. Standing his ground, Schramm points at a confessional. “*Un padre, understand?*”

“*La chiesa è chiusa!*”

“I know the church is closed! But I need—”

“A strong black coffee?” the tourist suggests pleasantly. His German is Tyrolean, but there’s no mistaking the graceful confidence of an Italian male who employs a superb tailor. “A medic officer!” he says, noting the insignia on Schramm’s collar. “You speak the language of Dante most vigorously, Herr Doktor, but the people of this region generally use a Ligurian dialect, not the classical Italian you are—”

“Butchering,” Schramm supplies, with flat accuracy.

“Striving for, one might have said. With your permission, I can explain to Suora Marta that you’re seeking a priest who speaks German.”

Schramm listens hard, but their dialect is as thick as an Austrian’s head, and he gives up until the tourist translates. “Suora tells me Archbishop Tirassa’s assistant speaks excellent German. Confessions, however, will not be heard again until Saturday.” When Schramm begins to protest, the Italian holds up a conciliatory hand. “I shall point out that in time of war, the angel of death is most capricious than usual. Preparation for his arrival should not be delayed.”

The man’s voice becomes a soothing melody of persuasion and practicality. Schramm watches Suora Marta’s face. She reminds him of his mother’s sister, a Vincentian nun equally short and dumpy and ugly. “Like Papa used t’say, ‘Christ’ll take what nobody else wants.’ ”

“And so there is hope, even for pigs like you,” the nun replies.

Schramm’s jaw drops. A stunned laugh escapes his interpreter. Eyes fearlessly on Schramm’s own Suora Marta removes her rubber gloves and apron. Without hurry, she untucks her habit, straightens her gown, folds her outer sleeves back to the proper cuff length. Hands sliding beneath her scapular she gives Schramm one last dirty look before gliding away with chubby dignity.

Schramm tips a mouthful of brandy down his throat. “*Verdamnte Scheisse!* Why didn’ you tell me she speaks German?”

“I didn’t know! As a general rule, however, courtesy has much to recommend it in any language. This is a small port, but many of us have a working knowledge of German,” the man continues, deflecting the conversation ever so slightly. “We’ve done a fair amount of business with Venezia Giulia since 1918— Pardon! No doubt you would call the region *Adriatisches Küstenland*.”

“Mus’ cost a fortune for new stationery every time the border moves,” Schramm remarks, offering the brandy.

“Printers always prosper.” The Italian raises the flask in salute and takes a healthy swallow. “If you won’t be needing me anymore . . . ?”

Schramm nods, and the man strolls off toward an alcove, pausing to admire a fresco of the Last Judgment that Schramm himself finds unnecessarily vivid. Searching for a place to sit, Schramm gets a fix on some pews near the confessionals, takes another sip from the flask. “No retreat!” he declares. Probably aloud.

The tourist's slow circuit of the church is punctuated by murmurs of dismay. A fifteenth-century baptismal font is damaged. A colorful jumble of shattered glass lies beneath a blown-out window. "Verdamme Tommies," Schramm mutters. "British claim're only bombing military sites, but Hamburg is rubble! Dehousing the workers, that's what they call it. *Terrorflieger*, we call it. Leverkusen. München. Köln, Düsseldorf. Rubble, all of them! Did you know that?"

"We hear only rumor these days, even with the change in government," the Italian replies, declining comment on Mussolini's recent fall from power.

Schramm waves his flask at the damage before taking another pull. "RAF pilots're so fuggin' inaccurate—" Schramm tries again. "They are so . . . fucking . . . inaccurate." Satisfied with his diction, he swivels his head in the direction of his new friend. "They call it a hit if they aim at a door and smash a church!"

"Very sloppy," the Italian agrees. "A shocking lack of professional pride!"

Slack-jawed, Schramm's skull tips back of its own accord. He stares at the painted angels wheeling above him until his hands lose track of what they're supposed to be doing and the flask slips from his fingers. He aims his eyes at the floor, where the last of the liquor is pooling. "Tha's a pity," he mourns. Laboriously, he lifts first one foot and then the other onto the pew, sliding down until he is prone. "Fat ol' nun," he mutters. Pro'ly never committed a sin in her whole life . . .

A sharp noise awakens him. Coughing and crapulous, Schramm struggles to sit up. His confession hasn't arrived, but chunks of stone have been neatly stacked by the door. Sweeping shards of colored glass into a pile, the Italian flirts gallantly with the novices. The pretty one flirts back, dimpling when she smiles.

Schramm slumps over the back of the pew in front of him, cushioning his brow on folded arms. "I'm going to be sick," he warns a little too loudly.

The Italian snaps his fingers. "Suora Fossette! The bucket!" The newly christened Sister Dimple scrambles to deliver it, and only just in time. "Allow me," the gentleman says, courteous as a headwaiter while Schramm pukes into the dirty water.

Swiping at his watering eyes with trembling hands, Schramm accepts the proffered handkerchief. "Touris', translator . . . now you're a nurse!"

"A man of endless possibilities!" the Italian declares, setting the bucket aside.

He has a face off a fresco: bent-nosed and bony, but with a benign expression. Old enough to be tolerantly amused by another's disgrace. Someone who might understand . . . Schramm wants to tell this kindly stranger everything, but all that comes out is "I was tryin' t'make things better."

"Always a mistake," the Italian remarks. "Where are you staying, Oberstabsarzt? Would you like to come back another day?"

Schramm shakes his head stubbornly. "'Damme Schpageddi-Fresser. Italians're always late. Where is that shit of a priest?"

“Lie down, Herr Doktor.” Schramm feels his legs lifted onto the pew. “Rest your eyes. The priest will come, and then we’ll get you back where you belong.”

“No, thank you,” Schramm says firmly. “Hell exists, you know. Any combat soldier can tell you that.” The other man stops moving. “I knew you’d un’erstan’! So heaven’s real, too! Logic, *ja*?”

Their moment of communion is over. “I myself am not a devout Catholic,” the Samaritan informs him regretfully. “My opinions about heaven and hell needn’t trouble you.”

“Righ’ . . . righ’.” Almost asleep, Schramm mumbles, “You’re not a bad fellow . . .”

Moments later, he is snoring like a tank engine, and does not hear the hoot of delighted laughter that echoes through the basilica. “Did you hear that, Sisters?” his interpreter asks. “The Nazi says I’m not a bad fellow!”

“For a spaghetti chomper,” Suora Fossette amends solemnly.

Musical giggles are quickly stifled when swift footsteps and whispering fabric announce a priest’s approach. “*Grüss Gott, mein Herr*,” he says, shooting a stern look at the novices. “I am Osvaldo Tomitz, secretary to His Excellency Archbishop Tirassa.”

“Don Osvaldo! *Piacere*: a pleasure to meet you!” says a well-dressed civilian. “I’m Renzo Leoni.”

Tomitz’s confusion is plain. Suora Marta undoubtedly told him that the man wishing to confess was an obnoxious German drunk. “How may I be of service to you, signore?”

“Ah, but I am not the one who sought your services, Don Osvaldo.” Leading the way toward the confessionals, Leoni presents a Waffen-SS officer passed out cold on a pew.

Nose wrinkling at the sour smell of vomit and brandy, Tomitz snorts. “So that’s the Arya superman we’ve heard so much about.”

“Yes. Disappointing, really,” Leoni concurs, but his eyes are on the priest. “Tomitz, Tomitz . . . You’re from Trieste, aren’t you? Your family’s in shipping!”

Don Osvaldo draws himself up, surprised by recognition. In his early forties, of medium height and medium weight, with medium-brown hair framing regular features, not one of which is memorable, Osvaldo Tomitz must introduce himself repeatedly to people who have already met him. “My father was with Lloyds Adriatico. We moved here when the Genoa office opened a branch in Sant’Andrea. How did you know?”

“The name is Austrian. The German is Habsburg. The Italian is Veneto. Ergo: Trieste! As for the rest? I cheated: my father was a commercial photographer. Lloyds was a good customer. I met your father when I was a boy. You must have been in seminary by then. How is Signor Tomitz?”

“He passed away last year. I was teaching at Tortona. I asked for a position here so I could be near my mother.”

“My sympathies, Don Osvaldo. My mother, too, is a widow.”

Satisfied to have established a connection, Leoni returns his attention to the drunk. With an almost professional efficiency, he pats the Nazi down and removes the man's wallet. "Herr Doktor Oberstabsarzt Werner Schramm is with the Waffen-SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, Hausser's Second Armored Corps, late of the Russian front . . . Currently staying at the Bellavista. He's in Sant'Andrea on two weeks' leave." Leoni looks up, puzzled.

"Odd," Osvaldo agrees. "To come from such a hell, and spend his leave in Sant'Andrea?"

"Why not Venice, I wonder? Or Florence, or Rome?" Leoni glances apologetically at the fresco. "No offense, Padre, but San Giobatta is not exactly a top draw." Leoni replaces the wallet and resumes his frisk. Withdrawing a silver cigarette case, he offers its contents to the priest with exploratory hospitality. "*Prego!* Take half," he urges. "Please—I'm sure the doctor would insist."

"He's not a bad fellow," one of the novices comments, "for a Nazi."

"Suora!" Don Osvaldo cries.

Dimples disappearing, the white-veiled sister scrubs virtuously at the mosaics, but Leoni's laughter fills the basilica. Disarmed, Don Osvaldo scoops his half of the cigarettes out of the case. Leoni offers a light.

"American," Osvaldo notes with some surprise, examining the fine white tissue paper. "I wonder where he—"

"Smoking in a church!" Suora Marta grumbles, trundling down the aisle. Already annoyed, she smells vomit, and her mouth twists. "Swine!" she snaps at the insensible German.

"Judge not, Suora!" Leoni reminds her piously. "I'm inclined to respect a soldier who has to get the drunk before confession. He must have an admirable conscience to be so ashamed."

She holds out a hand. "Give me the rest."

Leoni's brows shoot upward. "*Santo cielo!* Do you smoke, Suora?"

"Don't waste my time, Leoni. Tobacco's better than gold on the black market. We've got orphans to feed."

With a sigh and a shrug, and not so much as a glance at Tomitz, Leoni surrenders the cigarette. Tucking them into a deep recess hidden in her dark blue gown, Suora Marta lifts the washbucket arm's length and waddles off to dump its contents. "If I find ashes on that floor," she calls over her shoulder, "you'll eat them!"

"Sì, Suora," Don Osvaldo says dutifully. He waits until the nun is out of earshot. "Priest. Monsignor. Bishop. Archbishop. Cardinal. The pope," he chants softly. "And at the pinnacle of the hierarchy? Suora Marta."

There's a muffled schoolboy snicker from his companion. "She hasn't changed a bit. Taught me algebra in 1927. I've got ruler scars to prove it." Leoni taps ashes into a cupped palm crossed with finger lines and gives Osvaldo a sidelong glance. "You looked convincingly innocent for someone"

concealing stolen goods.”

“A sin of omission.” Osvaldo takes his half of the loot out of a pocket and divides it with Leoni. “Are you also a soldier? Home on leave, perhaps?” Leoni stiffens, though Osvaldo cannot imagine why. “Forgive me if—”

“I am,” Leoni says coolly, “retired from military service.”

Schramm’s snoring sputters and halts. “I suppose I should call someone about him,” Don Osvaldo says, glad to change the subject.

“Don’t bother. I’ll get him back to his hotel.” Affable once more, Leoni makes a quick trip to the side door and brushes the ashes from his hands before returning to Schramm’s side. “On your feet, *mein Schatzi*,” he murmurs, cigarette bobbing between his lips. “Your *Mutti*’s going to be very unhappy with her *Söhnchen*, little man.”

“Sen’ ’em t’ heaven,” Schramm mumbles. “Wha’s wrong wi’ that?”

“Not a thing,” Leoni soothes. Maneuvering the German down the aisle, he retrieves a wide-brimmed Borsalino from a pew, settles the hat at a careless angle, and glances back at Don Osvaldo. “Tell my brother-in-law I couldn’t wait for him, would you, Padre?”

“Your brother-in-law?”

“Tranquillo Loeb. The lawyer?” Leoni prompts, glancing in the direction of the basilica office. “There’s a meeting with the archbishop, something about a clothing drive. I don’t need to be here for that.”

Coming near, Don Osvaldo drops his voice. “But . . . Signor Loeb is with the Delegation for the Assistance of Hebrew Emigrants.”

“So am I, as of this morning.” Leoni hefts Schramm higher and confides, “I just got out of jail, and Tranquillo decided my varied talents would be best applied to the Jewish problem. Something constructive, you understand.” Leoni reaches around the German to shake the priest’s hand. “My pleasure, Don Osvaldo, and if you would be so kind as to give my regrets to Rabbino Soncini as well—”

“Rabbi—? *Dio santo!*” Darting a look at the SS officer draped half-senseless over Leoni’s shoulders, Don Osvaldo mouths, “You’re Jewish?”

“A congenital condition,” Leoni says, conducting his stuporous ward across the still wet floor.

“*Pazzo!*” Osvaldo blurts. “You’re crazy!”

“That runs in the family, as well, I’m afraid. Ladies,” Leoni murmurs, managing to tip his hat to the novices on his way out.

Sunlight outlines the two men when the side door opens. Osvaldo throws down his cigarette, crushing it decisively under his shoe. “Leoni, wait! Let me—”

“Don Osvaldo!”

The priest turns to Suora Marta, expecting to be yelled at for the cigarette butt, but the portly nun running, bucketless, down the center of the nave. “Don Osvaldo! Sisters!” she calls, her donkey-horn homeliness transformed by joy. “It’s on the loudspeakers—!”

The basilica air first trembles, then quakes with the peal of great bronze bells, drowning everything she says, until at last, substantial bosom heaving, she reaches the baptistry and leans on the arm Don Osvaldo offers and dissolves into sudden tears. “The war,” she cries. “The war— Thanks be to God. The war is over!”

SAINTE-GISÈLE ON THE VESUBIE RIVER
SOUTHEASTERN FRANCE

West of the Maritime Alps, beyond what used to be the French border, soldiers of the Italian Fourth Army loiter on a street corner, pausing in their discussion of the armistice to watch a girl dash past. Sharing a match, they bend their heads over army-issue *Milites* and raise eyes narrowed by smoke. “Another year, and *Diobòn!*” a Veronese private remarks. “That one’s going to be trouble.”

The others grunt agreement. The Italian Fourth has occupied this territory only since the end of ’41, but that’s been time enough to see her flower. “The features are still a bit too large for the face,” a Florentine sergeant says appraisingly, “but the eyes are quite good, and she’ll grow into those ears.”

“*Minchia!*” a Sicilian swears. “If she was my sister, Papa would marry her off today.”

“To keep you from getting your hands on her?” a Roman corporal asks, smoothly ducking the Sicilian’s punch.

Flushed with late-summer heat and the importance of her news, Claudette Blum is fourteen, and splendidly unaware of her effect on others. Boys and girls her own age cringe at her infantile exuberance as she pushes and skips and dodges through the crowds that jam the streets of the mountain resort. Old men grumble darkly in German, French, Polish, Yiddish. Their elderly wives shake fingers. Those who could be her parents shake their heads, wondering when that gawky, thoughtless child will settle down. Only the kindest bless her heedless elation. They felt it themselves briefly, when they heard the news. The Axis has begun to crumble.

They are all Jews—in the cafés and shops, the parks and pissoirs and bus stops of Sainte-Gisèle on the Vesubie. The whole of Italian-occupied southern France is awash with Jews: the latest in the flood of refugees who’ve poured into Mussolini’s fragile empire since the early thirties. Word’s gone out, in whispers, and in letters passed from hand to Jewish hand. Italians don’t hate us. The soldiers are decent men. You can walk openly in the streets, live like a human being! You’re safe, if you can get behind Italian lines.

A few months ago, those lines were still expanding. When the Fourth rushed across the border, Police Commissioner Guido Lospinoso arrived from Rome with orders to take care of the Jews in Italy’s French territory. Lospinoso did precisely that, commandeering hotels, filling tourist châteaux and villas with refugees from across the continent. He encouraged the Hebrews to organize refectories

and synagogues, schools for their children, nursing homes for their elderly and disabled. And then Commissioner Lospinoso left France. He is, to this day, “on holiday,” and therefore unavailable to countermand his orders placing all Jews under the protection of Italy’s elite military police. Special selected for imposing size and commanding presence, the carabinieri are, to a man, disinclined to be intimidated by their French or German counterparts.

When Vichy authorities wave Gestapo orders for the removal of undesirables, the carabinieri shrug diplomatically, all ersatz sympathy and counterfeit regret. Artistically inefficient, they shuffle papers and announce that another permit, or a letter from Rome, or some new stamp is required before they can process such a request, and no one has been deported. But now—

Claudette Blum gathers one last burst of energy and sprints down a hotel hallway, schoolgirl socks bunched under her heels. “Papa!” she cries, flinging open the door. “General Eisenhower was on Radio London! Italy has surrendered!”

She waits, breathless, for a whoop of joy, for her father to embrace her—perhaps even to weep with happiness. “Thank God you’re back” is all he says. The room is dotted by small piles of clothing. Two valises lay open on two narrow beds. He lifts a pair of his own shoes. “See if these fit.”

Deflated, she takes the worn black oxfords. “Papa, you never listen to me! Italy surrendered!”

“I heard.” He picks up a shirt, puts it down again. “One to wear, one to wash. If those shoes are too big, put on extra socks— Wait! Go downstairs first. Borrow trousers from Duno.”

“Trousers from Duno? I wouldn’t ask him for the time of day! Why are you packing?”

“I blame myself! Your mother wouldn’t tolerate this arguing!” her father mutters, reducing socks and underwear to tiny bundles. “Do as you’re told, Claudette! We have three, maybe four hours!”

She flounces from the room with a sigh of pained tolerance for a parent’s unreasonable whims, but on her way back through the corridor Claudette grows uneasy. Family disputes in half a dozen languages filter through closed doors. Everyone seems angry or scared, and she cannot understand why, today of all days, when the news is so good.

“Believe nothing until it’s been officially denied,” her mother always said. “The only thing not censored is propaganda, and the British lie as much as the Germans.” All right, Claudette concedes, clumping down the stairwell. Maybe the BBC exaggerates Axis losses, but even Radio Berlin admitted that the Wehrmacht gave up ground in Africa and Russia. Mussolini really was deposed in July! The king of Italy replaced *il Duce* with Field Marshal Badoglio, the Fascist regime was abolished, and Badoglio let all political prisoners out of jail. The Italian soldiers said that was true! The Allies conquered Sicily last month and landed on mainland Italy just last week. Could that be propaganda?

Veering between confidence and fear, she settles for adolescent pique, which splits the difference and knocks on the Brösslers’ door. No one answers, but she can hear Duno’s father yelling. “Herrman Brössler’s lost everything but his voice,” her own father said the first time they listened to an argument in the room below. “He was a big *macher* in Austria. An impresario! Now he’s got nobody to boss but his family.”

Claudette knocks again, jumping back when Duno suddenly appears. "What do you want?"

Rising onto her toes, she peeks over his shoulder. Frau Brössler's packing, and little Steffi stamping her feet. "You can't make me!" she weeps, while her nine-year-old sister, Liesl, insists. "Mutti, we can't leave Tzipi!"

Duno grabs Claudette's arm and shoves her back into the hotel hallway. "Ow! Let go of me!" she cries. "Has everyone gone crazy? The war is over! Why is Steffi crying?"

Duno stares with the arid contempt only a fifteen-year-old can produce on such short notice. "Stupid girl. Don't you understand anything?"

She hates Duno, hates his condescension, hates his horrible red pimples and his big ugly nose. "I don't know what you're talking about," she says, rubbing her arm.

"When the Italians pull out of southern France, who do you think is going to march in?"

Her heart stops. She can feel it actually stop. "The Germans?"

"Yes, moron. The Germans."

"We've got to get out of here," she says, dazed. Duno rolls his eyes. "Where can we go now? There's no place left!"

"We're going east. We'll follow the army into Italy."

"Over the *Alps*?"

"It's the mountains, the sea, or the Germans," Duno says, relishing her fear because it makes him feel commanding and superior. "It's Italy or—" He makes a noise and draws a finger over his throat.

"Duno!" His mother pulls the door closed behind her. "What is it, Claudette?"

Claudette has seen a photo of Duno's mother from before the war. Frau Brössler's prosperous plumpness has gone to bone, but if she had any decent clothes now, she'd look like Wallis Simpson: willowy, well groomed. Claudette tucks her wayward blouse back into a skirt she outgrew last spring and decides to cut her bangs. "If you please, Frau Brössler, my father said to ask if I may borrow your trousers from Duno."

"Your father is a sensible man, *Liebes*. Come in. We'll see what we can find."

Head high, Claudette flounces through the door, shooting a look of triumph at Duno, who is forced by hard-taught courtesy to stand aside and let her pass, but she stops dead when she catches sight of his father's face. "Liesl, we cannot carry a birdcage over the mountains," Herr Brössler shouts. "No more than we can take your grandmother on such a climb!"

Duno picks up a china-faced doll and hands it to little Steffi. "We have to leave Tzipi behind," he says, kneeling in front of her. "There's plenty of food for canaries here. He'll be very happy. Oma will be all right, too," Duno says, eyes on his father. "The doctors and nurses are staying."

“Thank you, Duno,” Frieda Brössler says quietly. “Stop arguing, girls. Bring only what you can carry with one hand!” She holds a pair of Duno’s trousers. “Take the woolen ones, Claudette. It will be chilly at high altitude.”

Albert Blum pushes tall shutters aside and leans from the window. In the street below, people are hurrying east on foot, but he himself closes his mind to fear and haste. Taking a seat at the little wooden desk, he smooths a single sheet of carefully hoarded stationery. Iron habit demands that his pencil stub be perfectly sharpened. He brushes wood shavings into the wastebasket, wipes the blade of his penknife with a handkerchief, replaces both in his pocket. When he begins at last to write, each letter is precise and regular.

“My beloved Paula, my brave David and darling Jacques,” he begins. “Claudette and I are leaving Sainte-Gisèle. I cannot know if this or any of my letters will reach you. I’ve spent days at bus stops and markets, asking everyone for word of you. I’ve contacted the Red Cross and the Jewish Council in every town, but nobody’s taken notice of a woman traveling with two small boys. In July, I enlisted the aid of a compassionate and resourceful carabinieri,” Albert writes, silently blessing Umberto Giovanetti. “He found your names on the manifest of an eastbound train last September, but could learn nothing of your present whereabouts. The Italians have done little to ingratiate themselves with the Vichy government, but this policy makes it difficult to obtain information from French authorities.”

Claudette bursts in, trousers slung over one arm, pale but calm. “I’ll change,” she says. “Give me five minutes.”

“Claudette is nearly grown,” her father writes, and turns the paper over. “She’s like a dolphin. Paula. The woman she will be surfaces now and then, before submerging again into childhood’s sea. We are moving on to Italy, where the war is over. Our carabinieri told us of DELASEM, an Italian Jewish organization that operates with government approval. They will find us a place to live, and I will register again with the Red Cross. There’s no more time, my dear ones. May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord shine His countenance upon you. May the Lord give us all peace, and bring us together again! Your devoted husband and loving father, Albert.”

He folds the letter, seals it into an envelope, addresses it simply *Paula Bomberghen Blum*. Shrugging into a baggy suit coat, he turns toward his daughter. His jaw drops. “What on earth have you done to your hair?”

She lifts her chin, but tears brim. “My bangs were too long. I cut them.” Shamefaced, she picks up her bag. “They didn’t come out the way I wanted.”

He shakes his head and drapes a topcoat over one arm. “Never mind. Hair grows.”

She holds the door open while he takes a final look around the room. They join others in the hallway and descend the stairs in a murmuring flow, but when they reach the hotel lobby, Albert steps aside. Claudette looks back at him uncertainly. “A moment,” he says. “Wait at the corner, please.”

When she’s left the hotel, Albert approaches the front desk, where a bored clerk pares his nails. “My wife may come here, looking for us, monsieur,” Albert says. “Would you be so very kind as to

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