

CHAPTER 1

Florence 1941

The Day of the Dead

Mussolini did not feel the rain. Straining tall in the open tourer beside his great friend, the Führer, his exaltation would have overcome a blizzard. The Official State Visit. All the pomp of the preceding visits had paved the way for this. It was a long way from Predappio. He would suffer now with his usual cold – could feel it coming on, but just this once he did not care. He clenched his teeth, praying his nose would not drip. He clenched his hands too, arms rigid at his sides, legs wide apart to maintain his balance in the lurching vehicle. Chest puffed to bursting point, he managed to maintain his stony expression, only with great effort. A certain dignity was required, and really, the difference in height between him and Hitler was barely a few centimetres.

‘We passed like two gods over the clouds,’ he boasted to Clara that evening.



The streets glistened. The wheels of the cavalcade sucked and slobbered at the paving stones and tram tracks, spraying grubby water onto the shoes and trousers of the welcoming citizens. *Duce! Duce! Duce! Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!*

Standing beside her father, Annabelle could smell his rage, more pungent than sweat.

‘Pagliaccio! Fantoccio! Vigliacco!’ Quietly. The time for shouting was past. A clown, a puppet, a coward. Achille would rather be dead

than see this day – he said it over and over – but he had Annabelle and her mother to think about. Hysteria, he said. Hysteria. His long, narrow face was more lugubrious than ever. The chanting and salutes soared on the frosty air. A brass band played.

In sunshine, the colours of Florence were golden: ochre, sienna, umber. In today's rain, the colours seeped and ran together into grey and greyer. Achille averted his eyes from the sodden swastikas drooping from the buildings, their scarlet and black piercing the drear of the day – the only colour anywhere. His muttering was in monotone too – he wondered they hadn't put them on the Duomo as well ... his own father saw that icing-sugar facade go up after so many centuries ... thank God he was dead and couldn't see this, not that he, Achille, believed in God ... only an expression. And so on and so on.

November, the worst weather of the year. Annabelle's nose and eyes were streaming, her lacy handkerchief a soggy mess. Her father handed her his own sensible, monogrammed one. She blew and wiped and sniffled, facing the procession. Her eyes flicked back and forth like a small animal in a forest, searching the crowd for Enrico. *Please let him have stayed away, or if he came, please let him not do anything stupid, or if he did, please let him get away.*

'The imbecile,' said Achille. 'The country is broke, the army is a shambles, Italians are dying like flies in Russia, they've already surrendered in Africa and he still thinks he can ingratiate himself with that bastard. March on Rome! He did not march on Rome. He caught an overnight sleeper from Milan!'

Mumbling, grumbling, rumbling to himself – Annabelle had heard it all before. For the first time she thought of her father as old. His words formed bubbles of condensation like word-bubbles in cartoons. She prayed they could not be read here. Even in the house now, they had to whisper. The servants in town could no longer be trusted and neither could the *contadini* on the farm. It was appropriate tomorrow was All Souls Day, her father continued. The Day of the Dead. There were already too many dead in Mussolini's wake.

Now, as the cavalcade swept by, Achille sighed deeply. 'Let us hope it is over quickly.'

Did he mean the visit or the war? Annabelle shivered and pulled her coat tighter. Only last year they had stood here beneath a blue,

blue June sky, listening to Mussolini's voice booming from the loudspeakers: 'An hour marked by Destiny is striking in the sky of our country.' They were officially at war. Today, the sky was pewter, steel, lead.

'Let's go,' said Achille, taking her arm to steer her against the surging tide. His nose was also running, but he did not have another handkerchief. With the back of his glove, he wiped at tiny droplets on the hairs of his nostrils and moustache. His greatcoat was wet through. He was only there because, like her, he was frightened for Enrico. As the motorcade and its roaring motorcycles neared Piazza Signoria, the crowd congealed to a solid mass, a single entity, a heaving and tossing restive animal. The cheering rolled in waves. Annabelle was not cheering. Many around her were not cheering. The tannoys on every corner spewed recorded cheering for them. Over the top of it, the trumpets from the balcony of Palazzo Vecchio heralded Hitler's arrival at the Town Hall. Annabelle plodded beside her father, eyes raking the swirl of people, ears straining for the sound of shots or confusion. Nothing. Deep in the pockets of her coat she curled her fingers tight. Her chest was tight too, but it seemed Enrico and his friends had done nothing stupid, for today.

'Are you going back out or staying in town, Papà?' she asked.

'No, I have an appointment with Aldo,' Achille replied. 'Do you want to go back to the country? It will be hard to get there today with all this confusion.'

'No. I'll stay with you.' That way she could search for Enrico.

Achille nodded. 'Talk some sense into your cousin.'

The saturated wool of her stockings pooled in heavy rings at her ankles. She hated the itch and smell of wet wool. Her plaited hair, normally so fair, was dark with rain and her head itched as much her stockings. Her father's hat was soaked. It would be ruined – the brim dripped like his nose. They turned down via Roma. At least here, he rambled, via Roma really did once lead to Rome ... via Roma ... via Roma ... Annabelle's mind strayed. As they stepped from the kerb, her father put out a restraining arm to stop her walking into the path of a sleek grey and black Lancia. In the rain, the powerful car purred and gleamed like a wet panther. As it slowed to turn, Annabelle saw a driver in peaked cap and uniform, and in the back, a young woman

in a dark fur coat, soft and high about her throat. Long, pearl drop-earrings bobbed against the fur. Glossy dark curls, a pale, oval face. As she leaned forward to speak to the driver, one gloved hand on the back of the seat, she glanced out the window into Annabelle's eyes and away again. Annabelle's gaze followed the car as it glided off in a spray of dirty water. Her father gave a soft *brmmph* and took her firmly by the elbow, turning her towards home. In answer to her unasked question, he muttered to her to get a move on because he did not have all day.



Annabelle squelched from foot to foot on the carpet before the fireplace in her father's study.

Achille put his head around the door. 'I shall be back for dinner. It will be better if you stay in today, *Tésoro*. The streets are no place to be. Take off those wet shoes.'

He said nothing about the soggy patches on his Persian rug.

Annabelle nodded. She was not going anywhere. She waved her father off. The streets were never any place to be. Certainly not in her lifetime. Right from the Renaissance, really, and before. Florence, City of Strife. Her father had taught Classics at the university until he took early retirement rather than wear a Fascist Party badge. He had not worked since Annabelle was seven or eight. She had little memory of him working. Neither had *Zio* Francesco ever held a job that she knew of. He devoted himself to the oversight of the family investments and factories in the north.

Things would not be the same after the war. Enrico said so. Fear of Communism and the Bolsheviks and their land and labour reforms had made the upper classes wilfully blind to the excesses of the Black Shirts these last twenty years. They despised the fascists but were willing to allow them to do the dirty work. Enrico said so. The world has to change, he said, often. And not 'so that all could remain the same'. Nothing would be the same. Enrico said so. Annabelle was permanently afraid. Everyone of her age had grown up afraid. She was tired of being treated as a child, ready to revolt, to take a hand in changing things, like Enrico – whatever he was doing.

Rain tinkled at the mullioned windows. She loved her father's

study with its burnished bronzes and gleaming walnut furniture. The patina of age and permanence mantled everything in a glow of safety, but there was no comfort for her there today. In the mirror above the marble fireplace the air trembled with the rising steam of her damp clothes, but she did not want to go upstairs to change. Enrico really was too difficult! He was thoughtless and completely irresponsible. Her father said so and it was true. She ached to look for him but she did not know where to start. She waited with a clutch in her stomach for what seemed like hours – and then he was there, face flushed, eyes burning. His clothes and hair were soaked.

‘Where were you?’

His breathing galloped wildly. ‘I was there. I saw you and *Zio* but I had to go to a meeting as soon as the cavalcade passed. Did you see those two arrogant crazy bastards!’ It was not a question. ‘Papà says that’s what you get when you put two teetotallers together.’

He did not laugh and neither did Annabelle.

‘The crowd was so thick I could hardly move.’ Her hands balled into fists by her sides. ‘I was afraid for you.’

His hair was wet too. A darker blond than hers, more light brown really, it was fine and very thick, even if the high forehead and sharp widow’s peak did not bode well for his hairline in the future.

Enrico’s breath settled but he was still taut with excitement. ‘Italians! There they are, the heroes, on their way to sign away more lives for Hitler’s war. Italian lives are cheap to Benito anyway.’

They had taken to calling him Benito between themselves but the irreverence failed to lessen the fear.

Now Enrico was safe, however, Annabelle had other things on her mind. ‘Is it true you went with Clarice?’

Her chin jutted and her voice wobbled. The daughter of friends, Clarice was seventeen, the same age as Enrico. Annabelle overheard him getting a dressing-down from his father last night, for an escapade with Clarice.

‘*Ficcanaso*. Stickybeak.’ Enrico smiled. He flicked the tip of her reddened nose with her damp plait. ‘Went with! Mind your own business, *Ciccia*. You have been spying on Papà and *Zio* again. Listening behind doors. My little worry wart.’ His indulgent grin made her want to spit at him.

He too smelled of steaming wool. She could smell his sweat, a sugary-smell. Caramel.



At fifteen, Annabelle was already tall but Enrico towered over her by a full head and he was still growing. It was their Australian blood on the distaff side. Their Australian grandmother, Nonna Annabelle, Annabelle Drummond from Orange, was tall for a woman of those times and she came from a long line of males much taller. All that sunshine and food. Annabelle was named for her but her grandmother died when Annabelle was three. Orange, what a beautiful name for a town.

Australia was a ridiculous shape on the map, a whole country in a single continent. Imagine having a whole continent, all to yourself! A continent at the bottom of the known world. Further than the moon. The Gumnut babies lived there. Her mother read stories of Snugglepot and Cuddlepie from an old book with magical images of cherub babies with fat little bottoms, who lived in exquisite flowers, the *putti* of her Renaissance ceilings transposed to the New World. In another book, exotic creatures ate from a pudding that never got smaller. Antipodean fables were so much lighter and sunnier than the European myths and legends of vengeful Gods and poor children. She listened to all the stories – all of them, the old ones and the new ones, and she melted into them and tried on the lives she found there. What else did she have to do?

Annabelle had never seen Australia but when a distant cousin was executed by the fascists, Papà sent her brothers there, to relatives, to save them from being drafted into Mussolini's army, or shot. It had been more than two years. Enrico was to have gone but now it was too late. He would never have gone anyway. She missed Giacomo and Umberto, and the whispers in the house frightened her. What *was* internment?

In Annabelle's family there were more cousins than she could count. No-one of her age except Enrico, and Lorenzo, a little younger. Annabelle and Enrico had shared every story and every secret since they could talk. Now, most conversations between his father and hers about Enrico – half-heard, overheard and misheard – began with

‘*Quel ragazzo ...*’ Annabelle had grown used to eavesdropping in a society where it was commonplace.

‘That boy ...’ too had lived his whole life under the shadow of Il Duce, in a family that did not belong to the Party. At seventeen, he was in great danger. Soon, they feared, he would be conscripted for Mussolini’s war, or – more frightening and more likely – be arrested for some act of rebellion and disappear into the maw of *Le Murate*.



Seen from above, in the newsreel Annabelle watched at the cinema afterwards, the crowd on the day of Hitler’s state visit was a living organism, a brain-coral: a collective brain given over to a single function. Fascist propaganda newsreels were obligatory in cinemas before the screening of a film. In her short life, Annabelle had known no politics but that of Mussolini.

They had no contact with the main branch of the family and had long since parted ways with many friends and family as fascism drew a dividing line right through the middle of personal relations. Although she officially lived in the Kingdom of Italy, the flag of the National Fascist Party, with its gold Fasces and Axes, swamped the King’s Tricolour. Fascist posters loomed everywhere and on everything. D’Annunzio extolled the Duce in poetry and Marinetti shaped the art world to his visions. Mussolini’s thrusting jaw and bellicose oratory formed the backdrop to the daily events of her life. His bellying voice bombarded every home with a wireless radio. It was only two years before Annabelle’s birth that the first radio broadcast in Italy went to air, but the Regime took to it immediately and radios in bars, schools and fascist headquarters and buildings pumped out propaganda, day and night. Florence was a city of military uniforms, marching feet and blaring loudspeakers ...

When she was small, Annabelle had pined to be allowed to join the Sons of the She Wolf. She watched with envy as girls between eight and eleven participated in the *Piccole Italiane*, with all their sports and games, or the *Balilla Giovani Italiani* physical education programs, with exercises such as ‘farmers hoeing’ and ‘sailors rowing’. She gazed with wonder at their splendid uniforms with the ‘M’ on the buckle. She yearned to grow up to be part of the fascist *dopolavoro* circle, with

all its sporting grounds and clubhouses and cinemas. What fun. But she was never permitted to take part in Mussolini's 'indoctrination program', as her father called it. The cover of her school notebook in fifth grade carried a striking image of a child in uniform at attention, a rifle with bayonet over his right shoulder and the words *Giovinezza in Marcia* – 'Youth on the March' – across the top. Her *pagella*, her school report, was adorned with the word *Vincere*. Win. Conquer. 'War,' said Il Duce, 'is to man what maternity is to women.' It was too much. That was Annabelle's last year of school. From then on, she was tutored at home.



London 2008

Memento mori

Delia checked the flashing screen. Her mother. There goes another half hour, she thought, watching her Blackberry jig across the wooden table beside *The Guardian*. Outside the window, Saturday people in Burberry and cashmere thronged Kensington High Street. She debated letting it go to message bank. Her mother was losing it a bit. Her father was worried too, but Bert was not given to confronting things before he had to. Her brother Tom was as hearty as ever: 'Come on, Dellie, Mum's always been vague.' Alzheimer's. No-one wanted to say the word aloud ... Delia sighed and answered the phone brightly. 'Hi, Mum.'

Today, Maddie's voice was youthful and firm, though it must have been late in Sydney. 'Hello, darling. Your uncle Enrico died last night.'

'Shit!' Delia closed the newspaper and fished out her address book. 'I'll go over straight away. What happened?' ... Whatever that means, she thought. Nothing had to happen. Enrico must be eighty-five, and hadn't been well for a while, but he always behaved as if death did not apply to him.

'Have you spoken to Belle?'

'No. I'm about to telephone her now, but I wanted you to know first.' Maddie had forgotten to reprimand her for swearing.

Delia rang off, found the number for British Airways and booked a flight to Florence for later that day. She ordered another coffee. Not that piss-weak French stuff this time, but a double-shot espresso. *And* an almond croissant. Why not! No matter how many almond croissants she denied herself, she never got any thinner ... Enrico was not her uncle. He was her father's cousin and Annabelle's cousin, her second cousin. She had always called him *Zio* because he seemed too old to be a cousin. She sent a text to Annabelle who *was* her aunt, saying simply, 'I'm on my way. There this afternoon.' Between them, no more was necessary.



Florence

'Eight o'clock is too early to kill yourself.' Delia's tone was light but her heart was not in it. Beside her, Annabelle faced the television, hunched into her high-backed armchair, chin resting on her drawn-up knees.

'And nine o'clock will be too late,' she replied. 'I would like to kill somebody. Anybody will do.' The 8 pm *telegiornale* was only ten minutes in but it was all bad news. The polls had just closed and counting had barely begun, but it was already clear that Silvio Berlusconi would be catapulted back into power. A leap year, 2008. Delia loved that expression. Leap Year. It carried a sense of vitality, hope, joy even. For superstitious Italians though, an *anno bisestile* brought bad luck and it looked like they were right this time. It had turned out to be a leap back into the past, with little joy and no vitality. All day, the terms 'crushing victory' and 'greatest post-war majority' boomed from the media, and not only from Berlusconi's own TV channels.

Annabelle's hands were splayed into her hair on either side of her face, reminding Delia of the way, when she was a small child afraid of monsters, she used to peek at the cinema screen through her fingers. On the low table before them, the pizza from the Neapolitan place in the street below congealed, untouched, into what looked like vomit. No-one was going to eat that tonight. Delia gathered the plates, walked to the kitchen door where she tipped the triangles into the bin from on high, threw the box onto the bench and picked up another

bottle of wine. It was going to be a long night. She should have cooked something. At the best of times neither Delia nor Annabelle was very interested in cooking, and this was not the best of times. It was not yet the worst of times but it was shaping up that way.

Delia followed Italian politics closely but they did not affect her except as an onlooker. She was resolutely Australian. She loved the orderly nature of Australian politics and civic life. She loved the way her Australian history was so close to her: so recent, newly formed, still evolving. White settlement was concurrent with the French Revolution; Achille, her grandfather, was born only fourteen years after Ned Kelly's trial in Beechworth. Although a Republican, she loved the ceremony of the old ways. The Queen and her aunt Annabelle came to Australia for her, the year she was born, she told a school friend in first grade ...

In the bluish flickering from the screen, Delia observed, almost as if she had not noticed before, the knotted joints of Annabelle's slender fingers and the vertical crevices at the sides of her face – suddenly she looked every one of her eighty-three years. It hurt Delia in her heart to see it, made her afraid. In Italy, Delia often found herself feeling like an indulged only child, in that country of only children. Annabelle was her rock, her mentor, her image of everything strong and dependable. She did not want to see fragility and vulnerability in her adored aunt. The ravages of time. Where on earth did that expression come from? Shakespeare? She wasn't strong on Shakespeare.

In the half-light, Delia spread her own hands before her, examining the slender, slightly squared fingers with deep, regular nails. A little on the large side for a woman but nice, capable hands all the same. The scarlet polish was not the only difference between her hands and Annabelle's. No sign of the inflammation and swelling at the joints that plagued Annabelle. Or not yet. Perhaps sixty was the turning point. Oh well, she still had a few years. Had to watch those kilos too. A kilo or two didn't matter now, but ... Delia was a bit apprehensive about sixty – it could hardly still be called middle age. The other milestone birthdays had come and gone without a blip on the graph but sixty ... Shouldn't you have more to show for sixty? A few books about dead Italians suddenly did not seem like all that much.