



# PART I

– *Late May 1944* –

## CHAPTER 1

Captain Frank Hill wakes abruptly.

Last night, as he fell asleep, he had prayed that his luck would hold. But could it last till the end of the war?

A siren wails. He hears the bass growl of bombers overhead. Is that his answer?

Frank raises his head from the pillow and listens to the familiar din, but tonight something is missing. He sits up, stretching for his torch as his mind starts to clear. Where is the shudder of high explosives?

Damn them! The buggers must be dropping firebombs.

His watch shows 0235. He clammers out of bed and begins to throw on his uniform. The curfew applies to everyone, including officers, but that won't stop him. If he wavers, the theatre – *his theatre*, where for seven months he has entertained Allied troops – could burn down.

The theatre is close to Frank's heart. It has been his passion since October '43, when he reached Naples. Finding the abandoned building and getting the Colonel's permission to reopen it, had saved his sanity after the Battalion's drubbing on the beaches at Salerno.

Out in the street he flicks on his torch until he hears another wing of enemy planes. Anti-aircraft guns boom out



a distant response. Searchlights sweep the sky, illuminating the planes and a thousand incendiaries. Frank raises his fists, aware that each stick of magnesium carries a detonator to ignite it on impact.

The bombers are heading for the docks where their targets will be the Allied supply ships and the warehouses near the quays. For the Fascists, Naples had been the port of empire; but now it's the main port of entry for the men and supplies the Allies need on the road to Rome.

Naples has seen many raids: the Allies bombed the port when the Germans were supplying Rommel in North Africa; before the Germans abandoned the city, they sabotaged the sewers and utilities; and since Naples was liberated, it has been a frequent target for German bombers. Mercifully, as the front has inched northwards, there have been fewer raids. Until now.

Frank keeps in the shadows as a fire appliance clangs by, its crew unconcerned about his theatre. *They* don't lie awake at night, worrying about its vulnerability so close to the docks.

Before landing in Italy, Frank had fought in North Africa where he often organised entertainments for the Battalion, but nothing on the scale of this theatre. Yet, as he recovered from Salerno, something drove him to stage a revue. It proved so successful that he was ordered to stay in Naples to provide daily entertainment for the troops passing through the city on their way to the front. And by keeping Frank away from the fighting, it had probably saved his life.

He hurries on. There's a blackout of course, intended to reduce the danger from air raids, but in Naples poverty ensures greater control: few inhabitants can afford electricity.

In the darkness Frank's boot strikes something solid. He tenses as a bottle shatters. That's the sound of his father all those years ago, stumbling over the empties – milk bottles on the front step awaiting collection.

He freezes as glass crunches beneath his boots. He must avoid both the Military Police and the looters who come out after every raid. Briefly he flicks on his torch; the red unblinking eyes of two rats stare back.

He sets off again, walking as fast as he dares. He would like to run but can't afford to fall. Another fire appliance speeds past. He covers his ears as its bell resounds in the narrow street.

Frank was slow to join up when the war began. It had been different in '37 when he volunteered for Spain, but he had soon grown disillusioned with the horrors and treachery of that war. It was only when his wife, Maggie, was killed in the London blitz that he felt compelled to enlist again.

Somehow he had survived the brutal fighting in North Africa where he was part of the Eighth Army's retreats from Benghazi and Gazala before Monty got a grip in the summer of '42. But the landing at Salerno – south of Naples – was different. Days and nights of unending bombardment on the beachhead had killed a third of his Platoon, and by the time the Germans withdrew Frank feared he was becoming unhinged.

Reopening the theatre had changed his life; even after months at the helm he finds it hard to believe. He never dreamt that one day he would run one of Italy's great opera houses, the Real Teatro di San Carlo. In the midst of this interminable war, it feels like a miracle.

Frank knows, however, that his run at the theatre could end suddenly, if just one incendiary were left ablaze on the roof. Of course, opera houses often burn down – the San Carlo theatre itself was destroyed by fire in 1816 – but he couldn't bear that to happen again, especially not on his watch.

Frank had fallen on his feet when he was ordered to run the theatre. He had been fortunate to miss so much of the fighting, but he doubts this good fortune can last. Tonight he senses that the war has tracked him down. Is the moment finally coming when the army will change its mind and pack him off to the front?

From the next corner, he looks down towards the docks. A blazing building stands out against the moonless sky and the pitch-black sea. Its windows glow with an inner light, like a crowded church at Christmas. Then a windowpane explodes

and tongues of fire start licking at the lintels, preparing to devour the roof.

Frank watches, mesmerised, as he had watched from Ealing while the heart of London blazed. The hot air is heavy with the reek of burning and the sight of buildings transmuted into pyres raises hairs on the back of his neck. He coughs as he presses on. With the road now illuminated by the conflagration he lengthens his stride. Through the smoke rolling up from the port he finally glimpses the theatre; and with a hundred yards to go he starts to run.

He hammers on the stage door. 'COME ON, GIOVANNI!' he shouts in Italian. 'HURRY UP!'

Silence. He considers drawing his pistol. When he first entered the derelict theatre, Giovanni, the night watchman, was waiting in the shadows with his rifle and forced Frank to raise his hands. Luckily, he relented when Frank offered him sufficient cigarettes.

Frank kicks at the solid wooden door. 'GIOVANNI! PLEASE! THIS IS URGENT!'

At last he hears slow footsteps.

'VENGO! PORCA MISERIA! VENGO!'

A bleary-eyed face appears. 'Ah, Franco!'

Giovanni sways as his words stumble out. 'You must be my guest. Have some wine.'

Frank glares at Giovanni, struggling to follow his Neapolitan dialect, which is hard enough when Giovanni is sober.

'NO, GIOVANNI! THE THEATRE COULD BE ON FIRE! I MUST CHECK THE ROOF!'

Frank brushes past and hastens towards the stone staircase.

'There's no need to hurry, Capitano!' Giovanni chortles as he lurches after Frank. 'The Lieutenant is up there already! She thinks there are bombs on the roof!'

'Good Lord! I hope she's all right!'

Frank accelerates. He had come to protect the theatre never thinking Vermillion would come too. He clenches his fists and presses on.

Vermillion Henthorpe, a Lieutenant in the ATS, has been at the theatre from the start, selling thousands of tickets each week to the troops. Without her, the theatre would never have flourished. She is clever, amusing, hard-working and charming. In short, Frank has been lucky to work with her.

He has also grown fond of Vermillion and has struggled to stop himself from falling for her, knowing she would never fall for him. She comes from a different social world: so perhaps it was fortunate that before she reached Naples she was already practically engaged – to Edmund Manley, a Major in Frank's old unit.

But while Frank was ordered to stay in Naples to run the theatre, Edmund led 3rd Battalion's C Company as the Allies pushed north into the mountains in late '43. The fighting, especially around Monte Cassino, was intense with the Germans desperately defending well-prepared positions.

In March Edmund was badly wounded, losing both legs. He almost died but has since made a good recovery and will soon go home. Initially he asked Vermillion to go too and she agreed. Frank likes to think she did this reluctantly, but when they said goodbye two days ago he was sure he had lost her. Then yesterday evening – just a few hours ago – the Brigadier had told him that Vermillion intends to stay.

Giovanni clicks a series of switches; but on the first landing Frank is greeted by a single bare bulb.

'Thank you, Giovanni,' he calls back, his voice echoing off the stone walls.

The steps are steep, and Frank isn't used to such exertion. At least here the air is clear, without the burning stench that fills the streets. But that doesn't matter: it's the prospect of seeing Vermillion that threatens to overwhelm him.

On the next landing he stops to catch his breath. His heart is pounding. He pictures her lovely face as he had held it between his hands when they last parted. He'd felt drained by the fear that he might not see her again. He longed to kiss her, but only brushed his lips against her cheek. Even that was too much: she spun round and fled up the steps to her flat.

Arriving at the top landing, Frank again encounters the stink of burning. He tries to hold his breath as he hurries towards the wooden stairs that lead straight to the roof. He looks up. The door at the top is open: Vermillion must be up there already.

The wail of the all-clear sounds from outside. Frank inhales the scorched air, and coughs. His mind is churning. He takes another breath and puts his foot on the first stair, which creaks in warning. He climbs slowly, stopping as he reaches the top. He wants to call Vermillion's name but holds back, afraid he might alarm her. He looks out across the city, lit by a thousand fires. Oily clouds stream heavenwards, pushing the barrage balloons aside.

Seeing no sign of Vermillion, Frank steps onto the roof. Something solid sweeps past his face and thuds against his shoulder. Pain shoots down his arm.

'BUGGER! What was that?'

A dark shape moves in the shadows. 'Vermillion, is that you?'

'Frank!' She drops the metal bucket and grasps his arm. 'Are you all right, Frank? I'm so sorry. I thought you were Giovanni. How's your poor head?'

Clumsily he feels for her hands. 'Don't worry, Vermillion. It was only my shoulder.'

'Thank God it's you, Frank. I was so afraid when Giovanni grabbed at me and gave chase. But I had to come to the theatre; I feared it might burn down. I've already put out one fire.'

'You're wonderful, Milione!'

'Frank, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you!'

'It was a funny way to show you were pleased! In fact, when you swung that bucket, I had a feeling you might be cross.'

'Why should I be cross with *you*?'

'I wasn't sure.' He pulls her gently towards him. 'Perhaps because I'd told the Brigadier I would go to Rome.'

'I'm sad you're going to Rome, not cross.' She holds him tightly. 'I thought you'd lost interest in the theatre.'

'I've changed my mind, Milione, but I haven't had a chance to tell you. The Brigadier says I'm staying here.' Frank points behind her. 'There's another incendiary!'

‘There’s no water up here! But there’s plenty of sand.’

Frank grabs two sandbags and struggles through the smoke towards the blaze, which leaps up in greeting.

‘Damn the bloody Germans!’ He empties the load onto the flames, which vanish with a splutter. ‘We mustn’t let them destroy our theatre. Not after all we’ve done.’

Frank turns towards Vermillion. Dirt is streaked across her face and her hair is lank, but her eyes are shining. He hasn’t seen her look more appealing.

‘How wonderful Frank that you’re staying in Naples,’ she beams, ‘I’m staying here too. Edmund’s going home without me.’

Frank puts his arms around her. ‘I know.’

‘Frank!’ She leans back and frowns. ‘How could you possibly know?’

‘The Brigadier came to see me at the flat. He wants me to stay at the theatre. He thought I wouldn’t mind, as Edmund had said you intended to stay.’

‘Edmund is incorrigible!’ Vermillion glances at the Castel dell’Ovo, its walls glowing in the light of many fires. ‘Even now it’s over, he still wants to run my life.’

‘Perhaps we should be grateful, Milione. It was knowing you planned to stay that made me check the theatre.’

‘Frank, I’ve missed you so much in the last few months.’ She looks up; the light from the burning buildings flickers across her face. ‘Please don’t go away. Tell the Brigadier you’ll stay here till the war ends.’

Frank can’t speak. He knows that any day he may be moved to Rome or returned to the front; but he can’t think about that now. He clears his throat. The thick air makes it hard to breathe but he has to sing.

“Quanto è bella, quanto è cara!  
Più la vedo, e più mi piace ...”

*How beautiful she is, and how precious.  
The more I see her the more she attracts me ...*

He watches Vermillion who seems stirred by the song until she slides her hand behind his head and draws him down towards her. He has wanted to kiss her so often and has fought to hold himself back. Now he feels engulfed by the softness of her lips.

He holds her tightly, closing his eyes. Although he had longed to kiss her, he had never thought of anything more. Now he feels a strong desire to sleep with her; he wishes she would come to his flat.

Looking down at Vermillion's lovely face framed by her chestnut hair, he sees tears well in her eyes.

'You said you were pleased to see me,' he whispers.

'I am pleased, Frank ... and I'm very happy,' she forces out the words. 'And I'm so glad ... you're staying in Naples ... I thought I was going to lose you ... that would have been too much.'

She kisses him again. 'Thank you for making this time in Naples the happiest of my life. You've been very good to me.'

He pulls her gently towards him. 'You'll make me cry too, even though I'm very happy.'

'Frank ... I'm crying for Edmund although I don't love him anymore. And because of all the suffering in this dreadful war. And because I still hope we can make the world a better place.'

Frank looks out across the familiar bay, lit by pyres all around the harbour. In the east, the paler sky heralds the dawn and he can see the grey finger of the Sorrento peninsula. He lifts her onto the balustrade, gently wipes away her tears and kisses her again.

'Milione ...' he whispers. 'We will make the world better, but we've done what we can for tonight. Now we need some rest. We've still got a theatre to run.'

'You're right, Frank. We don't have to hurry. At last we have plenty of time.'



## CHAPTER 2

Thick smoke belches from the smouldering buildings as they scurry through the foggy streets. But Vermillion is mainly aware of the grip of Frank's hand as he leads her through the shadows. She almost has to run to keep up with his long stride, but she doesn't care. "Quanto è bella ..." still echoes in her head.

Frank pulls her into an archway as an army truck rattles by.

'I love you, Vermillion ...' he kisses her gently '... and I always shall.'

She wants him to kiss her again and to talk about what has happened but the streets are dangerous during the curfew and Frank pulls her on.

Above them the brooding buildings are outlined in the twilight. It must be almost 0400. As they cross a small piazza, she glimpses the navy hue of the bay, where the silhouette of Vesuvius looks serene. She squeezes Frank's hand; she hasn't forgotten her feelings of dread when the volcano erupted in March.

'Frank, I love you too,' she whispers as they approach her flat. 'I think you're remarkable.'

Her feelings for Frank have grown silently. But she never dreamt he could love *her*: she doesn't feel clever enough. She has always admired him and what he has achieved. He knows so much about so many things; he isn't like the other officers who are mainly interested in the military, and in sport.

As the light increases, colour begins to return. Vermillion can now make out the khaki of Frank's jacket and the grey of his grimy face. Hers must be grubby too. And her fingernails are rough and broken from digging up sand to smother the first incendiary. It doesn't matter of course: no one will see her when she slips back into her flat without waking the other two ATS girls.

Frank slows as they approach the corner of her road. He peers round cautiously.

'Good Lord!' he grips her hand.

The street ahead is filled with a clamour of people milling about in their nightclothes. Someone shouts above a chorus of lamenting. Behind them smoke rises from the roof of a substantial building, the palazzo where Vermillion's flat is.

'Where the hell have you been, Vermillion?' Jackie rushes towards them, her service dress unbuttoned over her nightdress and her fair hair wilder than usual.

'We thought you were still inside, Vermillion. Barbara has gone back to find you. She could burn to death!'

'Oh, heavens! I just went to the theatre, Jackie ... in case it was hit.'

'In the middle of the night?' Jackie glances up at Frank. 'You could have told us, Vermillion.'

'I didn't want to wake you.'

'We must look for Barbara,' Frank says. 'How long has she been gone?'

'At least ten minutes.'

'You stay here while I find her.' Frank marches through the palazzo gates and up to the main door. Vermillion follows. He turns and quickly kisses her.

'No, Frank. You mustn't go ... alone.'

As he opens the door, smoke surges out. He pulls the door behind him but Vermillion slides through, coughing in the thick air.

'Keep down!' Frank kneels on the second stone step and sets off on his hands and knees. His khaki backside is the only thing she can see, until that too is absorbed in the murk. Vermillion follows, although the familiar staircase seems utterly changed.

The flat had originally been Edmund's. He had brought her here soon after she got to Naples. They had a delicious lunch at Settefrati, a black-market restaurant by the harbour, before Edmund brought her up to the flat. She remembers that he smacked her bottom as she walked in front of him and she scampered up four floors to get away.

But she can't run now: the lack of air makes it hard to breathe. Already Frank is well ahead; she can hear him half a floor away as he follows the staircase round.

High above a loud cracking records the progress of the fire which has enveloped part of the roof. A flaming joist tumbles through the central void, thumping against the banisters. She feels the draught as it hurtles past.

Reaching the second landing, she hears Frank on the floor above.

'Are you all right, Frank?'

Her voice doesn't carry in the fog and there's no response. She coughs again. Her throat feels raw and her eyes smart until her tears overflow. She pulls out a handkerchief and wipes her eyes. Then covering her nose and mouth, she presses on.

When asked what she's afraid of, she usually lists dentists and flying; in future she will add burning buildings.

'Dear God, please protect Frank,' she says several times. She cannot lose him now, not when she has admitted that she loves him. Being involved with the theatre and spending time with Frank has meant so much: he is the first man who has really trusted her.

'Vermillion!' she hears Frank's muffled call. 'I've found her. I'm coming down.'

A heavy footstep resounds above her head, and then another. She coughs but cannot clear her throat; she coughs again. She can hardly breathe. She squeezes her eyes shut and sinks down on the stone step.

She hears Frank's footfall above. The banister vibrates as he steadies himself. He is only half a floor away and she can hear his laboured breathing. Oh God, he is such a dear man. Another step. Then another. It must be hard for him, after losing his wife in the blitz. She wonders how he recovered.

A second joist plummets from the roof. It thuds against the wall, releasing a swarm of sparks. Vermillion jumps back.

'I'm here, Frank,' she calls hoarsely, afraid she may pass out. But Frank can't carry them both; she must get out herself.

She discards the handkerchief covering her nose, and hesitates; it will be harder going down. She wishes she were wearing something better than service dress: a pair of slacks would do.

Behind her, she senses Frank's looming shadow with Barbara slung across his shoulders.

'Milione ... you must ... go down.' His voice rattles. 'I'll come ... as fast ... as I can.'

She grasps the banister with both hands and bends almost double as she shuffles down step by step. She opens her mouth to suck oxygen from the soupy air. Another step. Another panting breath. Her head swims. Another step, another gasp. Her eyes are streaming. She can see no further than her hands. She has lost her bearings in the uniform greyness. Is she falling? She clings tightly to the handrail as the world starts to revolve. She closes her eyes but her head continues to spin.

Behind her, Frank follows. But his steps are slower now. Oh God, she mustn't faint. No matter that the staircase is whirling, she must keep going down. Another step. She must go faster than Frank. Another step. Frank's heavy tread echoes down the stairwell as he stumbles, but rights himself. She lurches on. One more step and she will start the final flight.

As she makes it to ground level something clatters down, shedding an intense white light. It must be the remains of the incendiary. She presses herself against the wall and gropes her way past the glowing timbers. She straightens up. There seems to be more air, and light is coming through the glazing above the door.

Should she wait for Frank?

She listens. She can only hear her own breathing. No sound of Frank. Oh God! Should she go back? She listens again. Still no noise from above. On the theatre roof she had panicked when she heard footsteps, fearing they were Giovanni's. Now she longs to hear footsteps again.

She tries to stay calm as she turns back. 'Frank!' Her voice is muffled. 'FRANK!'

Moving towards the stairs she hears a footstep above. Frank gasps for breath before taking another pace. Thank heavens! He's coming.

From outside she hears a clang of bells as a fire appliance arrives. She turns back towards the door. What will happen

when she opens it? Should she wait for Frank? Or perhaps a draught through the door will help to clear the air. She turns the handle. The door flies open in her face, almost knocking her down. Cool air races past.

Thank God! But behind her the timbers burn with new vigour. Help! Frank will never get through. She throws her weight against door. The frame shakes as she slams it shut. Behind her the flames subside.

Across the hall, she discerns a shadow. It must be Frank and Barbara. She runs towards him, grabbing his free hand and together they grope their way to the door.

'She's still alive,' he breathes heavily. 'I felt a faint pulse.'

She watches as Frank lowers Barbara's ragdoll body to the ground. 'Thank God, Frank, you've come back.'

## CHAPTER 3

Paolo Baldini sniffs the dawn air. Naples is a city of smells but even the worst of its drains seem muted since he was held in the rancid Poggio Reale gaol.

Growing up in these ancient streets Paolo learnt to use his nose to navigate the city where each alley has a distinctive scent: one has an aroma of roasted fake coffee, another stinks of cats' piss. But today, even in the cooler morning air, each odour is masked by the tang of burning following the raid.

Paolo, however, can breathe more freely, knowing the charges against him have been dropped. Of course, he should never have been arrested. He had only bought some lengths of copper telephone cable from the man who dug them up.

He extends his arms to touch both sides of the alleyway as he sidles along. He has lived in Naples since he was five and feels at home in the narrow confines of the old Greek heart of the city. His parents had moved here from Rome and he grew up thinking he was a Roman. But service in the

Italian army had shown him that he talked and thought like a Neapolitan.

Paolo is pleased with what he has achieved since the armistice in September '43 when he deserted from his barracks near Bologna in northern Italy and walked all the way to Naples. In a city where many are starving he has learnt to get by.

As usual he spent last night with Emma but he left her before dawn to visit his own flat. She lets him stay on condition that her children never see him. She has lost hope that their father will return from military service in North Africa, but she isn't ready for them to meet a *new father*. So each morning before dawn Paolo takes his leave and doesn't return until the children are asleep. Last night had been awkward because the raid had woken them and for more than an hour he had hidden in a wardrobe.

This morning he didn't want to get up, but Emma was adamant, and now, after changing his shirt, he feels ready to meet old friends to discuss opportunities for new business.

Despite feeling at home in the city, Paolo moves warily. With no sign of the bloody war ending, Naples – *his* city – is going to the dogs. Since the Allies arrived everyone must fight to survive. There's no work and no fucking money, and the food handouts are pathetic. The inhabitants have to take their chances, just as Paolo has taken his, by trading on the burgeoning black market. All right, it may mean bending the rules. But who cares? He smiles. Provided they avoid the Military Police, they can make a decent living. However, there are of course limits. He doesn't approve of how some of his compatriots behave: raiding isolated farms and selling the stolen produce not through the proper black market but through organised gangs.

He passes a group of half-dressed children squabbling in the gutter before an elderly couple totters by without looking up. All right, there's misery around. But there are opportunities too, for those with the balls to grasp them. How fortunate that Naples is full of witless young Allied soldiers, afraid of going to the front. They hang around in all parts of the city with too much money and too little to do. And the port is chock-a-block with their stuff. Despite the guards and barbed wire, the

inhabitants – with a modicum of ingenuity – can divert a fair share of these supplies for themselves.

Still, Paolo wants the Allies to leave. The only thing to be said for their troops is they're not as bad as the blasted Germans, who occupied Italy after the armistice and now hold the north of the country in an iron grip. God, if he ever gets the chance, he'd love to kill some Germans.

Something which stands out about the Allied troops is that many of them come from British and French colonies in India and North Africa. Paolo has even seen soldiers with bushy beards wearing turbans. He laughed at first, but now he worries that just the thought of these troops will terrify the peasants in the countryside.

And why should foreigners run his country? Why can't Italians have the latest tanks and planes to defend themselves? Mussolini promised to make Italy modern and strong. But look at the result: the whole bloody place is on its knees. It wasn't this bad when the Visigoths sacked Rome!

At school Paolo had learnt about the benefits of Italian unification. Now the Risorgimento looks like a fucking big mistake: the country will soon break up again.

Paolo turns into another narrow alley, ignoring the stench of urine. Here it's dark and surprisingly cool. He looks up at the sunlight high above. The buildings lean over him. They stand so close together that only one double sheet can be hung between them and with a stretch the occupants can shake hands with their neighbours across the way.

He hears a noise like a boot slithering on broken glass. He spins round but there's no one there. He feels an emptiness in his stomach. Is he being followed? If only he hadn't quarrelled with Sandro.

Most of Paolo's family has left Naples. Only Chiara, his elder sister, remains. All winter she had lived with the giant English Capitano they call Franco or Generalissimo, but now the stupid girl has walked out on him. Bloody Chiara! And because Paolo was in prison, she moved into *his* flat with bloody Sandro, thinking he would never be released.

At first Paolo was appalled about Franco and Chiara. He even drunkenly attacked him with a knife – but it hadn't done much good because Franco had knocked him out cold. Over time, however, he had changed his mind and was grateful when Franco got him out of gaol. Now Paolo is livid that Chiara gave Franco up. *Porca miseria!*

Is it surprising he feels anxious? Chiara is only two years older, yet already she's going mad. Why else did she break off her engagement to Franco? And in favour of an army deserter? *Porca puttana!* Her madness brings shame on the family, although they no longer feel like a family since the fucking war split them up. *Porca Madonna!*

In '42, Paolo's father was sent to Germany – to work in an armaments factory – because he was too old to fight. But since Italy changed sides, he is effectively a prisoner. And after his father left Naples, his mother, who had never really settled in the city, returned to Rome with Francesca, Paolo's younger sister. Sadly his elder brother – poor Stefano – was killed on the island of Pantelleria during the dreadful Allied bombing.

Now only Paolo and Chiara are left in Naples. And Chiara is mad. Of course he hasn't forgotten that she was good to him when he struggled back to Naples in the autumn. And now she swears that once Rome is liberated she will go to live with Mamma. Paolo can't wait for her to leave so he won't have to feel ashamed. But thinking of Mamma pricks his conscience: he knows that soon he too must visit her.

Of course, there's nothing really wrong with Sandro. They had met as conscripts near Bologna where they did their military training. Several times they were moved in preparation for combat but – *grazie al cielo* – they never saw active service. And when the armistice was declared in September '43, they just walked out of their barracks while their comrades, who waited for the Germans to arrive, were disarmed and bundled off to labour camps.

From Bologna, Paolo and Sandro had walked right down the peninsula until they slipped between the opposing armies and crossed the front line. Then they split up. Paolo headed for



Naples to find Chiara while Sandro joined the Italian King's new army. But that didn't last long. Sandro soon acquired the distinction of deserting twice from different armies, although he still contends it was twice from the same army – before and after Italy changed sides.

Soon after his second desertion, Sandro turned up in Naples. Paolo was delighted to see him, until he realised that like a baby Sandro needed constant attention. Coming from Turin – where all his close family had been killed in the bombing – he was lost in Naples. He couldn't understand the Neapolitan dialect and the moment he opened his mouth everyone knew he was a foreigner.

For months Sandro has depended on Paolo to survive. And how does he repay him? By ensnaring the feather-brained Chiara. And when Paolo was released from prison – which Chiara should have predicted once Franco took up his case – they were suddenly three in one bedroom. *Santo cielo!* He can't wait for Chiara to go to Rome!

## CHAPTER 4

Frank cries out as he wakes from a nightmare.

Clissold – Frank's Platoon Sergeant in 3rd Battalion, who had nursed him through at Salerno – had been ordered to lead his men into a burning building. Frank couldn't stop them. And when the building began to collapse, Clissold emerged engulfed in flames.

Frank sits up shivering despite the warm night. Clissold was shot during the attack on Monte Tranquillo, near Cassino. So why had Frank dreamt he was on fire?

Frank swings his legs out of the bed; slowly his brain follows. His heart thumps and his head aches. He rubs his hands across his sweaty face; his throat feels parched. He shakes his head and wrinkles his nose: something is burning.

Frank sniffs at his fingers and grimaces. Then he grabs his handkerchief and blows his nose, leaving two sooty rings. He tries to stand but his brain spins and he falls back onto the bed. He needs some water.

He rubs his face again and smiles. Vermillion is next door. He wonders whether she and Jackie are comfortable, sharing a bed. They had to sleep somewhere: they could hardly return to their flat.

Again Frank tries to stand. His head throbs as he grasps the back of a chair. Steadying himself, he steps towards the door but nearly falls before he grips the handle. He pulls on his dressing gown and rakes his fingers through his hair. With luck the girls are still sleeping.

He takes a deep breath and coughs, but then can't stop. His mouth is full of phlegm and his brain continues to whirl. He steadies himself again. He badly needs a drink. With heavy footsteps he makes it to the kitchen where he fills a glass of water. He takes a gulp and coughs again. He drinks more water and smiles: at least Vermillion knows that he loves her.

He remembers Clissold. Who ordered him into that building? It wasn't Frank but the dream has disturbed him.

He looks at his watch. 0840. It's only three hours since he got to bed but he must go to the theatre, now he's in charge again. But first he needs to wash. He thinks about lighting the wood-burning water heater but decides there isn't time. He will have to make do with cold water, even though he won't get properly clean. After a hasty wash and shave he gets dressed. Then, still moving from one piece of furniture to the next, he hunts for something to eat. He finds some stale bread and a piece of cheese but nearly chokes when he tries to swallow. He coughs violently. His throat feels scorched. Even water leaves it feeling sore.

It's almost 0920 when he's ready to leave. He wants to see Vermillion and check she's safe, but their bedroom door remains firmly shut so he leaves a note on the floor where she will see it.

\* \* \*

‘Good morning, Sir,’ Corporal Huggins greets Frank at the stage door. ‘Did you sleep through the raid, Sir?’

Huggins has been Frank’s batman since they landed in Sicily in July ‘43. Having a personal servant meant little at the front but in Naples he has been invaluable. It was Huggins who had found the flat for Frank and he has proved adept at getting things done in the theatre, although Frank sometimes worries about his methods.

Frank tries to clear his throat. ‘No, Huggins, I didn’t sleep through the raid.’

He coughs. ‘I spent half the night on the theatre roof, putting out incendiaries dropped by the bloody Boche.’ He clears his throat again. ‘You’d better take a look up there to assess the damage.’

‘Crikey, Sir, you have been busy,’ Huggins strokes his right hand which he holds close to his chest. ‘I suppose you’re back in charge, Sir, now the Doctor’s in the clink. That’s what I’m telling everybody.’

Dottor Malaspina had been the theatre administrator for many years and had stayed on when Frank took over. Frank found him hard to deal with and had recently discovered that Malaspina was hiding evidence about staff who were Fascist Party members. And when the Military Police came to arrest Malaspina, he drew a gun.

‘Huggins, you really shouldn’t guess. But this time you happen to be right. The Brigadier paid me a visit. He’s pleased we put Malaspina away and for the moment I’m back in charge.’

‘I haven’t seen Miss Henthorpe this morning. I expect ...’

‘The Lieutenant had a late night too. I found her on the roof searching for incendiaries ...’

‘Blimey, Sir, it *was* crowded up there.’

‘... and then there was a fire in the palazzo where she lives. She and Lieutenant Platt are at my flat getting their beauty sleep. However, Lieutenant Fortune was overcome by smoke and was taken to hospital.’

‘You did have a night, Sir.’ Huggins looks down at his

boots and then at Frank. 'Now you're back in charge, Sir, does that mean we'll be staying in Naples for a while?'

'It's hard to say, Huggins, now Malaspina has gone.'

'It sounds to me like quite a while,' Huggins glances at Frank. 'Don't get me wrong, Sir. I've had a marvellous time in Naples. But I'm ready to return to the front when the order comes.'

Huggins pulls out his cigarettes and strikes a match. 'Now Fifth Army has broken the Gustav Line, they're into the Liri Valley. In no time, they'll be in Rome. I just thought with the Germans on the run we might be needed at the front.'

Frank knows this breakthrough is important, but he can't forget that it has taken four months of bitter fighting at Cassino. For a moment he looks blankly at Huggins as it hits him that the officer in his dream who sent Clissold into that burning building was Roger Bewdley.

'I often think about the Battalion.' Frank says, wondering how Roger is faring at the line; he imagines he's all right, because Roger is adept at avoiding trouble.

'This morning,' Frank continues, 'I've been thinking about Clissold, who helped me though at Salerno. Perhaps I owe it to chaps like him to return to the line. But I have to confess I enjoy running the theatre.'

'What you've done, Sir, is bloody marvellous.' Huggins grins as he turns to Frank. 'You've made all the difference to thousands of lads who arrive in Naples with nothing to do. You've given them something real 'igh class to enjoy.'

'Have I told you why I joined up?' Frank asks.

'You said once you wanted to kill Nazis.'

'But did I tell you why?'

Huggins shakes his head. 'I joined up to save ammunition.'

'How come, Huggins?'

'My old man said he'd shoot me if I dodged conscription.'

Frank smiles. 'I joined up after my wife was killed. I couldn't do anything else. I kept remembering that moment of standing in front of our ruined home, staring at the holes where the windows had been. I was desperate to get into the building but an ARP warden held me back.'

Frank wonders why he is saying this to Huggins: usually he keeps such things to himself. He pulls out his handkerchief and blows his nose: the two sooty rings remind him of his flat's charred window frames.

Frank blinks. 'Sorry, Huggins. It still feels a bit raw, even after three years.'

'I don't know what I'd do if the bastards got my old lady. I think I'd go berserk.'

'I probably did go berserk. I can't remember much. I just knew I had to join up, to take revenge. Yet after a year of training and two months on the boat to Egypt I didn't have the same urge to fight. But the memories don't go away.'

\* \* \*

Frank sets off to see what's happening around the theatre. He finds everyone hard at work and the arrangements for the afternoon performance of *Un Ballo in Maschera* are well in hand.

He is greeted warmly but discreetly. Everyone seems to know about Malaspina, but nobody mentions his name as though he no longer exists. Is this how they feel about the whole entanglement with Fascism, which held the country in thrall? Or do they fear that Malaspina may return? Frank doubts he will ever know the answers to these questions because no one will talk. After seven months in Naples he understands most of what he hears in Italian, but he knows he'll never understand the silences.

At the end of his tour, Frank slips into the auditorium and finds a seat. Even when it's empty, the place excites him. But as the quietness embraces him, he closes his eyes sensing the theatre's ghosts are at peace.

When he first entered the theatre it was dark except for pinpricks of light from the bullet holes in the ceiling where Allied planes had strafed a machine-gun post on the roof. Then Naples had no electricity; while the Allies repaired the power stations the first supply came from the generators of captured submarines tied up in the port.

The theatre had been abandoned but Frank was impressed by its faded grandeur and was determined to bring the place back to life. From the start, he revelled in its circus atmosphere as he mounted a string of revues. But what meant much more to him was staging a season of Italian operas for houses crammed with enthusiastic troops. Frank has loved opera for as long as he can remember but he doesn't know why: his parents had never even seen an opera house.

Frank had waited for several days before seeing the theatre with lights so it came as a revelation when he saw the illuminated auditorium with the great painting on the ceiling. He opens his eyes and looks up at Apollo. It seems right that the god of music and healing should preside over their shows.

The murmuring of voices and the shuffling of feet announce the orchestra's return to the pit. The maestro brings them to attention, and they start to play the frantic overture to *Madame Butterfly*, which will open soon. The rehearsal isn't fully staged but it doesn't need to be. The story is clear from the opening exchanges. Lieutenant Pinkerton knows his *marriage* to the fifteen-year-old Butterfly is temporary; but she believes she has found lasting love.

Frank feels transported by the richness of the sound. As he often tells Maestro Nanta, the orchestra and the chorus have improved immensely in the last seven months. And Frank feels confident that Butterfly's relevance to Naples will ensure its success with the troops.

Satisfied the rehearsal is going well, Frank has no pressing reason to stay but the music has caught him and he can't bring himself to leave. The tenor has a fine, light voice and catches Pinkerton's brash bravado as he sings:

"Dovunque al mondo  
lo Yankee vagabondo  
si gode e traffica  
sprezzando i rischi.  
Affonda l'ancora  
alla ventura ..."

*Wherever in the world  
a Yankee wanderer  
enjoys himself and makes wagers  
blind to risk.  
He drops his anchor  
and tries his luck ...*

Frank gulps. He bows his head, afraid someone may see the tears welling in his eyes. He turns away from the stage, pulls out his handkerchief and blows his nose before stealing back to his office. He closes the door firmly, shocked by this sudden surge of emotion. He sinks onto the solid wooden chair and leans on the desk with his face in his hands.

After several minutes he raises his head and surveys the bare room, furnished only with memories. Here he had battled for permission to stage a first opera when Brigadier Carburton demanded daily revues. Also here he had watched Vermillion with secret delight, long before he dared to hope she might reciprocate his feelings.

He wipes his eyes and stares at the blank expanse of the opposite wall where in the early days he often saw an image of Maggie, his wife, sitting at her piano. Sometimes she seemed to look up and nod approvingly. But over the months her image faded; instead he saw Vermillion's lovely face.

Looking at the wall now, he remembers the charred window frames of his flat. If only he had saved Maggie the way he rescued Barbara. He swallows, prompting another bout of coughing. It feels as though his lungs are still full of smoke. He pulls out a handkerchief, causing an envelope to drop onto the desk.

Frank picks up his father's letter, which had arrived a few days ago when Frank believed he had lost Vermillion. His father had urged him to fight for her although Frank had said little about her. Without even giving her name, he simply said he had met a girl he would like to settle down with. But he added that he knew she wasn't interested because she came from a different class and already had a boyfriend.

Frank's parents had divorced after his father returned from the trenches in a sorry state, made worse by alcohol. He has few memories of his father and what he does remember has been filtered through his mother's bitterness. It was only Frank's belief at Salerno that he might die and his sense that at last he understood what his father had been through, which led Frank to get in touch after more than twenty-five years.

But now he is established in Naples and has fallen for Vermillion, he isn't sure he wants to see his father again. He couldn't introduce him to Vermillion. And knowing his father has remarried, Frank faces the prospect that there might be half-brothers or half-sisters to come to terms with.

Frank sighs as he stuffs the letter away and makes a mental note to think about it another time. At the moment there are more pressing things. In particular, he's desperate for a drink. He looks at his watch. 1140. Ignoring the papers on his desk, he hurries down to the stage door.

'Come on, Huggins, let's find a bar. I'm parched. Last night has completely dried me out. And my head is full of fog.'

Huggins raises his eyebrows as he scans Frank's face.

'All right, Huggins, I know this is irregular, but spending half the night on the roof and rescuing Lieutenant Fortune was also pretty irregular.'

'Yes, Sir. Of course, Sir.'

'But there is one condition, Huggins.' Frank turns and grins. 'You must stop calling me "Sir" once we've left the theatre.'

## CHAPTER 5

Vermillion opens her eyes and looks around. This isn't her usual bed. Where is she? Someone is breathing beside her. In the half-light she recognises Jackie's mane.

Frank's flat, of course. Last night's events come flooding back.