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A Kiss from Maddalena

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DR. FABIANO PRESSED the buzzer three times, then let himself in. He climbed the stairs slowly. In the front room he found Concetta Leone sitting on the couch, chewing her nails and staring at nothing. By this time the old woman had lost most of her hair and was more than half crazy.

"My son found a shirt," the doctor said. He explained that his boy had been playing on the slope of the gorge, where he shouldn't have, adventuring like boys do. He'd spotted the shirt near the river, wedged between two rocks. The front of it was crusted with blood, which had dried in the shape of a giant tooth. The boy had brought it home, and now his father had brought it to Concetta.

Dr. Fabiano stood beside her, held up the shirt, and turned it twice around. He pointed to the torn sleeve and the blood and the frayed threads of the collar.

"Tell me, Signora," he said, lowering his voice. "Does this belong to your son?"

She took the shirt with both hands and held it to her nose. She smelled the armpits and handed it back. "No," she said. "*Grazie,* but no. This isn't Vito's. Do you want a glass of wine?"

The doctor's face was serious. "Guglielma Lunga told me she saw Vito in a shirt with a torn sleeve this summer," he said. "She felt sorry for him, she said, because his father was the best tailor in three towns but too far away to mend it. Everyone I talk to remembers it the same."

"What does everyone know?" Concetta said. "Is everyone his mother?" She looked toward the kitchen. "I have some chestnuts. Do you want chestnuts?"

He sat on an arm of the couch. He folded the shirt in half and set it on the floor, then took her hand in his. "Do you get enough to eat, here by yourself?" he asked.

"Of course!" she said. "What kind of question is that?" She took her hand away and put it on her lap. "I can get you chestnuts. I can even get you veal. Which do you want? I can send Vito to the woods or to the butcher. It depends how hungry you are." She tried to stand.

"No, no," said Dr. Fabiano. "I'm not here for food. Tell me: Do you know where Vito is? Right now?"

"Right now?" She repeated. "*Scusi* for one second." She called out, "Vito!"

No one moved. Birds flew across the front window and flashed shadows on the wall.

"He's probably at the Piccinelli store," she said. "It's getting close, you know. The wedding. The sooner the better, if you ask me. If you had to pick the most beautiful girl in the village, Dr. Fabiano, wouldn't you say Maddalena Piccinelli?" She fingered the small gold crucifix hanging from her necklace. "You have no daughters, do you? Only sons?"

He nodded. "Do you see Vito anywhere here?" he asked. "Do you talk to him?"

"There's no one else," she said. "Nobody comes. Guglielma's

a *strega,* a witch! And my head, Doctor! The inside, it feels thick. And so dark! Vito makes it light. He sings the old songs and tells me about his life. He loves his mother." She rubbed her head behind her ear. "My daughters don't write anymore. America keeps them too busy to write even once a month?"

"I'm sorry, Signora," said the doctor. "Really, I am. Life hasn't been good to you. Everybody remembers that, too. But I have to tell you: No one in Santa Cecilia has seen your son in more than a week, not since Maddalena—" He stopped. "We thought he might have run away, but now that my boy's found this—"

"It's lamb you want, then?" she said.

He took a deep breath. He leaned over, picked up the shirt, and again held it in front of Concetta's face.

She narrowed her eyes at it, then looked at him. "It's dirty," she said. "You want me to wash it?"

"This is Vito's shirt," Dr. Fabiano said. "There's no doubt, Signora. Don Martino in Broccostella saw him in it, blood and all. He hurt himself. On purpose." He lowered his voice. "He's dead."

Concetta threw her head back, laughing. "Really?" she said. "You should stay for some wine, Doctor. When Vito comes home, you can tell him that yourself."

The Bike

May 1943

I

FROM THE AIR, the village of Santa Cecilia appears in the shape of a woman lying down. If you'd been a pilot flying over it—on your way to Germany or Africa or some other place to drop bombs—you'd have noticed how the main road forms a kind of spine leading to a round piazza, where green trees fan out like hair over the hills, and four narrow roads grow into limbs at both ends. One of the woman's arms cradles a cluster of white stone houses; the other stretches lazily into fields, in a way that suggests she is resting. Her legs straddle farms and orchards and a few scattered vineyards. She bends her knee at a curve just before an olive grove. If you'd been a pilot—young, maybe, one of the thousands of boys soaring over every week—you'd have had a woman's figure on your mind anyway, and you'd have longed to land in this place, to hide with her from Hitler and Russia and the *passo romano,* and to lose yourself in the parts of her body you can only see up close.

If you had come early on this spring afternoon, you'd have found Maddalena Piccinelli, not yet a woman but close enough, standing on the terrace above her family's store. This is as high

above her village as a girl can expect to get, and many years will go by before someone describes its shape to her. Today, though, she watches something much more interesting: Vito Leone, a boy she's grown up with, celebrating the first victory of his life. All winter he'd talked big about building a bicycle from scraps he found lying around three towns, and no one believed he could do it, not even his own crazy mother. But now here he came, pedaling it up the main street of Santa Cecilia for all to admire.

"Free rides!" he shouted. "Come to the olive grove for free rides!"

Maddalena rested her forearms on the iron railing. Vito wobbled toward her on a heap of rattling metal that seemed about to burst. He'd painted every inch of it bright silver, from the handlebars to the rubber tires. The front wheel was nearly twice the size of the back, but the two did turn together, and Vito did flash the proudest of smiles when he noticed her.

"You're coming, right?" he asked without stopping.

"Depends," she said.

"I made this for you," he said. "Believe me or not. It'll go to waste if you don't come." Still he rode past her toward the spring and the upper half of the village, toward the twenty other girls her age. "Free rides!" he started again.

Shutters smacked open against the fronts of houses. Fiorella Puzo, three doors down, sat up from her place on the roof, where she was taking a sunbath. She climbed into her bedroom window and in seconds emerged fully dressed on the street, smoothing her skirt and rushing toward the olive grove.

He must have made it just for her, too, thought Maddalena.

She had turned sixteen that month, almost two full years after Vito, but they were in the same grade. For a boy, he'd never

had much luck. He was short for his age, and skinny in the arms. No hair grew on his face. He had a long and oval head like a peanut, a shape that Maddalena, from her seat behind him in school, found more comical than ugly. He was always spilling ink on his fingers, then forgetting and rubbing it on his temples when he got nervous. He told long, complicated jokes, sometimes funny ones, and once someone laughed no one could stop him from telling another. Other than that he was like most boys, best at standing around for hours in his pressed white shirt, smoking and whistling at girls. At least now he had the bike to show for his time.

Maddalena went inside to grab her shawl. It was too warm for it, but the pinks and blues matched the flower pattern on her dress, and she liked that she had to hold it clasped at her neck to keep it on. It made her look more dignified than if she let her arms swing loose at her sides. She'd learned from her mother, who'd grown up in Rome and seen real operas, that even though Santa Cecilia was a tiny village at the top of a mountain, it was still a stage where the world could see her.

You could never mistake Maddalena, the youngest, for one of her sisters. Yes, she had the same full lips, and the same nose, a bit too long and slightly rounded at the tip. Like the older Piccinelli girls, she was tall, with slim legs and hips just broad enough to catch the fall of her dress. But no Piccinelli, as far back as anyone could remember, had hair like hers—the color of straw, with streaks of white blond. It both thrilled and embarrassed her, and so conflicted was she about it that in public she wore the long curls pulled tightly back, secured with a handful of pins. She arranged it this way now, and washed her face with the kettle water, still warm from the morning coffee.

She found her sister Carolina in the dining room where she'd

left her, sitting on the long table and digging under her toenails with a twig. "Well?" Carolina said. "How's it look?"

"No worse than that," said Maddalena, pointing to the pile of fuzz she'd cleaned from between her toes. "But it works. You have to admire him a little."

"Not too much," said Carolina. "When he builds a car or a tank, then maybe."

"A bike isn't hard?"

"He'll make like it was harder than it was, that's for sure," Carolina said. "I know him. He'll show us his scars." She jumped down from the table and brushed the mess she'd made onto the floor. "I'm riding first," she said, "before the thing cracks in two."

Carolina was Vito's age and slightly taller than Maddalena, with wider shoulders and more womanly breasts. She wore her hair long, styling it only when her mother ordered her. She had dark eyes that dared you to step closer. Vito was a little bit scared of her, and sometimes Maddalena was, too.

"Fiorella's already halfway there," Maddalena said.

"Fiorella's always halfway there."

They ran down the marble steps out of the house. Their two older sisters, Celestina and Teresa, twins, stood huddled with a few of their friends against the front wall of the store. They'd turned twenty this Christmas, and since then had had no time for the teenaged sisters they called "pretty babies." If she had wanted to be laughed at, Maddalena would have asked them to come along.

They ran past Guglielma Lunga, sitting as always on the crumbling steps outside her house, hungry for gossip. They waved without a *buongiorno,* afraid the old lady would make them stop and talk and sit through some horrible prediction about a girl getting killed on a homemade bike. They passed the butcher's house, their dead Zio Anzio's, the barber's, and the empty *tabac-*

cheria. When they turned the corner and saw the crowd at the olive grove, they slowed down.

There must have been fifteen girls in a circle around Vito, pulling at his shirt and begging. Fiorella knelt at his feet. Vito held his arms out in front of him, fanning them slowly up and down like Mussolini.

"Quiet!" he said, with a big grin. "*Pazzi!* You're all nuts." He spun around slowly. "I'm changing my mind as I speak."

"Changing your mind?" said Carolina, pushing through the pack of her groaning friends. "No way in the world!"

"I slave all winter," Vito said, "and everyone makes fun of me, especially you girls. Then I show up and everyone's my best friend? I don't think so. There has to be a price."

Maddalena took her place beside Luciana Campini, just a year older but already promised to Vito's best friend, Buccio. Buccio sat on the grass a few yards from the group, guarding the bike. Paying little attention to Vito, he straightened the spokes and polished the frame with a rag. Maddalena watched him. The muscles in his arms pulsed as he rubbed the metal tire guard until it shone. In two months, he'd turn eighteen and get sent to fight the Russians. He'd end up like her brothers Maurizio and Giacomo, who'd left for the front more than five years ago, and who'd stopped sending letters or telegrams ten months later. There was a time when Maddalena believed they'd make it home with all the other boys the village no longer heard from. Now when she thought of them, their faces glowed in her mind like the pictures of saints on funeral cards. They lived and breathed somewhere, but in another world. Lately she caught herself thinking of Buccio and Vito this way, too, though Buccio still had until June and Vito three months after that.

"You asked us to come here, Vito," Carolina was saying. "We

were at home minding our own business. You can't take back your offer now."

"Did I know what animals you'd be?" he said. "No, I didn't." He folded his arms and thought a moment. Everyone was quiet. "I'll tell you this." He looked to both sides, the way he did in school when he was trying to cheat. "You can each have a free ride, but only"—he checked again—"only if you kiss me first."

"That doesn't sound free to me," Carolina said.

"Take it or leave it," Vito said, shrugging. "To me it's the same. I ask only for a little kiss. A little kiss isn't much for all my hard work."

"I agree," Luciana said. She broke from the circle and bounded toward Vito. She clasped her hands behind her back and leaned in toward his chest. She brushed the underside of his chin with her lips, as if she were sucking up spilled wine.

The girls howled.

Luciana turned around and held out her arms. "It wasn't so bad," she said. She winked at Carolina. Then, to Vito: "I'm first now, right?"

"New rule," said Vito. "The kiss must be on the lips, or a long one on the cheek."

"Do I have to do it again?" Luciana asked.

Buccio, the *fidanzato,* suddenly appeared beside her. Vito looked at him. "Next time," he said.

"I don't mind," said Luciana.

"I think once was enough," Buccio said.

"I'm still first, though?" Luciana asked Vito, not embarrassed at all.

"Yes, yes," he said. "But not until I show you all how to use the bike." He turned to the crowd and spoke louder. "This is a special vehicle, you know, with special brakes and a special seat. I

fashioned it in the cold winter months, sealed it with my own blood."

He pointed to the cuts on his fingers.

"Gesù mio," said Carolina, and smiled at her sister.

"Listen to me," Vito said. "I'll give you all a lesson, a group lesson, one only. You watch me the first time and then Luciana will ride, and while she's on it we can do more kissing. No time to waste. Follow me!"

He broke through the pack and brushed Maddalena's shoulder as he passed. She still held her shawl to her neck, though her armpits were sweating. Leave it to a boy, she thought, to take something fun and make it dirty and complicated. Leave it to Vito Leone to finally do something right, then mess it up with his big silly talk. She wasn't about to throw away her first kiss for this boy, or risk her father's or brother's finding out—not for ten rides down the hill. I only kiss people who deserve it, she told herself and, as she watched the girls fight to form a line behind Vito, decided this was what she would say when he asked her to pay his price. It was a good answer; it would stop him cold; it would get a good laugh.

Vito marched through the olive grove like an invader. He led everyone down the main road, which became a steep and broad hill, perfect for bike rides. The hill split the grove in half, dividing it into two regions the girls named East and West Olive. One of the boys was always arguing that what the girls called West Olive was really East, or, worse, that East was really South or North. But Maddalena thought it sounded right the way it was, and that it was bad luck to change names after all these years.

Boys gathered in the gorge and the woods behind the spring, but the olive grove had been girl country since their *nonni* were

young. Girls made up plays here, practiced dance routines, and performed shows for each other on the stage in West Olive, which was really just a mound of grass. This was where Maddalena did her famous imitations of Guglielma Lunga, Caldostano the drunk, and other misfits of the village. Fiorella sang Christmas songs whatever the season, and Luciana told long, sexy stories about German soldiers without blushing, but Maddalena always got the loudest applause.

In the far corner of West Olive, the trees stood so close together that the leaves made a second sky. Girls sat in circles under it and complained about their mothers. They gossiped about whoever showed up late or left early. When the army trucks swallowed up their brothers and boyfriends and young fathers, they came here to forget or cry or admit *I'm glad he's gone.* After they turned twenty, they found somewhere else to talk—they got married, or they leaned against the front walls of stores and acted smart—but until then, the olive grove was the center of their world.

The road flattened at the bottom of the hill, by the sign that announced the exit from Santa Cecilia on one side and the entrance on the other. If Vito kept walking out of the village, he'd lead them all to Avezzano in an hour, Rome in a day. Instead he propped the bike against the sign and waited for the girls to pay attention.

The Santa Ceciliese took pride in this road Vito now commanded. They celebrated it like a saint, all because one day three years ago a radio announcer told them it was one of the widest in Italy. It was so wide, in fact, this road that seemed so little, that the government made it a main artery for German tanks to drive south through the country. The announcer had listed all

the towns the tanks would pass through, and when the words Santa Cecilia left his lips, Maddalena swore that Hitler himself could hear the cheers. Like everyone else, she'd hoped that soldiers coming through would mean money for the town and the store, but soon she came to fear these men. She avoided listening to the one o'clock news, afraid to hear stories of the approaching war front, of untrained sons and fathers and husbands becoming an Italian army overnight, of Axis planes getting shot down over cities as close as Naples. Twice a day, when the tanks rumbled through the town, she found herself unable to breathe. While the ground shook, the chandeliers swayed, and the slow parade of blond soldiers shouted and lifted their guns in the air, she waited for the world to end. Then the planes would come, screaming overhead by the thousands, and she'd run to find and grab onto her mother until they passed.

"I'm next," Carolina said. She bumped Maddalena with her hip. "You awake? I'm after Luciana. Don't even try to get ahead of me."

"Don't worry," Maddalena said. She folded her arms. "I'm not interested."

"There's nothing to be scared of," Carolina said.

"Who said I was scared?"

"Listen," Carolina whispered. "I talked to Luciana." She cupped one hand behind Maddalena's ear and whispered into it. "She told me that kissing Vito was like rubbing her lips against a peach. She said his skin is softer than a girl's."

Maddalena laughed. "Still."

"What's so funny?" Vito said, smiling at them. "Are you telling jokes, Signorina Piccinelli?"

"Mind your own business," Carolina said. She pinched

Maddalena's arm and turned to the crowd. "Can everyone shut up, please? I want to ride this jalopy before I'm fifty, and Vito still needs to play teacher for us."

"*Grazie,*" said Vito. He gripped the bike and wheeled it to the center of the circle. "First I should tell you how I made this."

"We don't care!" Carolina said. "We only care if it works."

"That's what I'm trying to explain," Vito said. "Listen. One day, Buccio and I skipped school. We found a barn, way in the middle of nowhere, in the fields outside Broccostella. In the barn was this bike, smashed up in three big pieces, like it was hit by a tank or something, and maybe it was. The chain was rusted, and it was missing this half of the frame." He pointed to the bar between the seat and the back wheel. It was thicker than the other pieces. "And the front wheel, and one side of the handlebars, and the seat, all missing." He stopped. "And the brakes didn't work."

"It was a pile of shit," Buccio said.

"It was," said Vito. "I told Buccio, 'Watch me turn this pile of shit into gold,' and I did. I looked everywhere for pieces to fill it in. The frame here and the handlebars are both from an old stove my father kept under the house. The front wheel I found in the graveyard, no air in it at all. I blew into it myself through a little hole, then sealed it with glue. I banged out the rest of the body to straighten it, and fit the new wheel on the front. I filled all the holes in the metal and the rubber with the glue, and soaked the chain in grease. All I had left was the seat, and I have to say that took me a long time. Finally I got a chunk of wood, and carved it until it fit inside the hole in the frame. I wrapped the top part in rags, because of the splinters, and to make it easier on the *culo.*" He slapped his behind. "But still, it's not very comfortable. That much I admit."

"And what happened to the brakes?" Luciana asked.

"That's the important part," Vito said. He held up one finger the way their teacher, Signora Grasso, did. "That's the part I have to show you." He eased himself onto the seat and started pedaling up the hill. He couldn't just walk it like a normal person. He weaved and strained until he reached the top, and when he turned around, his face was flushed. "I recommend you girls walk up when it's your turn," he said.

Carolina rolled her eyes.

"Now watch me, and when it's your turn, do what I do," Vito called down. "When I hit the grass at the bottom of the hill, I'm going to turn the handlebars as hard as I can to the left, to get the speed out. Then, I'll let go and hop off the bike. Just hop off, like a rabbit. Not too high, or you'll kill yourself. Don't try to stop with your feet or you'll trip. And don't worry about the ground; me and Buccio and Marco and everybody spent all yesterday cleaning the stones out of the grass. Understand?"

"It's a death machine," Maddalena said.

"I'm still going," said Carolina.

They watched him. The bike popped and jumped over the rocky hill so roughly that Vito's cheeks jiggled. His eyes got wide and scared, and his shirt flew up, flashing his pale, sunken stomach. When he reached the grass, he turned fast, released his grip from the handlebars, and launched himself into the air. He landed safely on his back, rolled a few times, then came up all smiles. He wiped dirt from his hands with a few hard slaps. The bike, still in one piece, lay upturned a few yards from him, its back wheel spinning.

Luciana ran and flipped it right side up. "I got it," she said. "I watched really close. Here I go." She ran it up the hill and barely turned around before she hopped on the seat, screamed "Ouch!"

and headed down. She flew toward them and, midway, lifted her hands high and waved. Vito crawled out of the way when she turned, expertly, at the last possible second, onto the patch of grass. Then she tumbled off the bike. "No problem!" she said, and exhaled all the air from her lungs. "You're next, Carolina."

Carolina gave Vito a quick peck on the cheek, then rode. After her, Fiorella. Then a girl named Silvia who showed up from Broccostella with her cousin. Then Ada Lupo, the dentist's daughter, and Nunzia Vattilana, Buccio's sloe-eyed sister. No one seemed to mind giving Vito what he wanted. Eventually, after every girl had had a turn, he came for Maddalena.

"Well?" he said. He lowered his voice. "You remember what I told you today? Who I made this for?" He leaned in and tilted his right cheek upward. "Do I have the honor?"

It rolled off her tongue perfectly, like a prayer: "I only kiss people who deserve it," she said, loud enough for everyone to hear. As soon as she said it, she turned and, feeling triumphant, climbed the hill on foot.

The crowd howled again, this time in her honor. She walked slowly so some of the girls—Carolina, at least—could catch up, but halfway up the hill she found she was walking alone. She heard Luciana say, "Me again then! *Me!*" and one of the boys whine, "When's our chance?" but there were no shadows or crunching footsteps behind her. No one called out, "Stop, Maddalena! Come back!" As she walked toward her house, she closed her eyes and wished for the rush of wind against her face, for the sudden plunge, for the shawl she was sweating under to unclasp and float off her shoulders into the air.

One by one that spring, every girl in the village—even Maddalena's older sisters Teresa and Celestina—pressed

her lips to Vito Leone's hairless cheek. Again and again Vito asked Maddalena if she'd changed her mind, and again and again she repeated that same answer.

"Am I that terrible?" Vito would ask.

"Maybe," she'd say.

It wasn't him, though, not after a while. It was a matter of pride, but she couldn't let him know that. Instead she recited for him the story of Saint Cecilia. She was a real person a thousand years ago, she reminded him, who let herself suffocate from smoke and get struck with an ax rather than submit to the soldiers pounding at her front door. They were trying to get her to deny God, but Cecilia wouldn't let anyone force her to do what she didn't want to do. And neither would Maddalena, no matter how small that something was.

"You'd rather get struck with an ax than kiss me," was Vito's response.

"That's not what I said."

"I must be that terrible," he said.

All that spring Maddalena watched Vito get more expensive. He charged two kisses to get from the olive grove to the church, and one on the lips to ride the length of all three village streets. Sometime near the end of May, just as school was ending for the summer, Luciana kept the bike overnight, and everyone wondered what she'd had to pay for that.

"Two on the cheek," she said.

They were huddled in a circle in the cool darkness of the olive grove, all of them who mattered: Maddalena, Carolina, Fiorella, Ada Lupo, Clara Marcelli, and Luciana.

"That's it?"

"Well, then a real one on the lips," Luciana said. "With this!" She stuck out her tongue.

"So elegant," said Carolina.

"Does Buccio know?" Maddalena asked. She sat half in, half out of the circle, stretching her legs and pulling up grass with her toes.

"It was *for* Buccio," Luciana said, waving her away. "No, I didn't tell him. Why should I? I did it for both of us. We snuck out of the house in the middle of the night and rode the bike out to that barn, where they found it. I sat on the handlebars the whole way, with Buccio driving like a maniac. It was freezing."

They looked at her.

"What?" she said, as if she did this every night.

"You slept there?" asked Ada. "Together?"

"If you have to know," Luciana said, "then no. We didn't sleep very much." She rubbed her arms as though she were still cold and blinked. To Maddalena she said, "Don't stare at me like that."

"I'm not staring," said Maddalena, though she was.

"Buccio's already eighteen. By the end of the month, maybe sooner, he'll be in Russia." She kept her head down. "We're engaged, more than engaged, really. I cook for both families every night. We might even get married before he leaves. What are we waiting for? When he comes home in a box?"

Slowly Maddalena rubbed the middle of her forehead, then under her chin, then both shoulders—a long, stealthy sign of the cross.

Luciana noticed. "This one!" she said. "God was the last thing I thought of." She searched the other girls' faces. "What if I get pregnant? What if my clothes get dirty? What if my father finds us? How will I look at myself the next day? That's what I worried about. God will come later, I guess."

"Maddalena would worry about all of it," Fiorella said. "She can't even kiss Vito Leone on the cheek. I think that says it all. Doesn't it, girls?"

"It's fine with me," said Ada. "I mean, one girl less means more rides for us, right? But really, Maddalena, when are you going to grow up?"

"She's right," said Fiorella. "It's over in one second. You just smash your lips really tight together and let them touch his cheek. You don't even feel anything."

"It's not about the kiss," Maddalena started to say, but Luciana interrupted her.

"How are we talking about Maddalena," she asked, "after what I just told you?" She'd pulled her hair back over her ears and kept smoothing it with her palms. "Don't you want to know how I feel? How it felt? How it is with Buccio and me now?"

Carolina shrugged. "I'm not biting my nails waiting for the story," she said.

"I am," said Fiorella.

"Me, too," said Ada.

Though Maddalena was the youngest of them by only a year, today it felt more like ten. For months she'd been making a big deal about one kiss, and here was Luciana, spreading her legs in a dark barn for a boy she hadn't married yet. And why didn't it impress Carolina? What had she done with boys already; what had any of them done? Maddalena hated having brought God into the group, like a child, when Luciana already had so much else to worry about.

"Buccio was nervous, too," she was saying.

Maddalena didn't want to listen, not if Luciana was going to make herself sound like a *puttana*. But if she got up and left, they might never ask her back.

"He kept asking if I was all right, even though all we did for the first few hours was sit next to each other on the hay, not talking." She smiled, and now instead of keeping her head down,

she looked out over the heads of the girls in front of her. "We kept most of our clothes on at first, it was so cold. Then we warmed up. I can't say too much. All of a sudden it was happening, and Buccio moved very fast, and I was holding my breath, and the pain was so bad at first I got tears in my eyes, and I almost told him to stop, but if you could have seen his face, so sweet and still nervous, you wouldn't have wanted him to think he was hurting you, either."

"I don't know about that," said Carolina.

"Well," said Luciana, "I do." She sat back on her hands and let her hair fall in front of her face, all confidence now. "And when it was over—it didn't last very long, maybe five minutes?—we put our clothes back on, and we were both shaking, and he lay down next to me and put his arm over my chest, and I was about to fall asleep, but he started whispering to me this long story about his Zio Salvatore in Pescara, who lived on a boat, who had all these tattoos and scars on his body, whose wife died a year after they got married, and how Zio Salvatore pushed him off the back of his boat once for no reason, then laughed and laughed for the first time in years, even after he found out Buccio had smacked his leg on the motor and could barely swim anyway; I had no idea why he was telling me this, and I don't think he knew either, but I liked hearing his voice. Then he started kissing me again, and we kissed and kissed, and then it started again right before we had to ride back, and this time"—she brushed the hair from her eyes—"it didn't hurt that much at all."

Fiorella had her collar pulled up over her nose and held it there.

"You're probably pregnant right now," Carolina said. "You should get married the minute you wake up tomorrow."

"You don't get pregnant the first time," said Luciana. "That's what Buccio's brother told him. And even the second time there's less of a chance."

"Well, you know more than I do," Carolina said, standing up. "Congratulations to you. Honestly. We'll have to start calling you *signora*."

Luciana didn't answer. Ada whispered something in her ear.

When they broke through the olive trees onto the road, Maddalena asked, "Do you believe her?"

"Half of it, maybe," Carolina said. "The part about Buccio's uncle I believe, and the cut leg. But we'll see. Watch if she starts getting fat. I mean, fatter."

Maddalena laughed. She took Carolina's hand in hers. Music was coming from the Al Di Là Café, and she wondered if there were soldiers inside. The owner, who'd closed up and moved to the coast after the war started, once held dances there, on the flagstone patio under strings of white lights, where bands from as far away as Florence came to play. The men wore suits; the women, pale-colored dresses that fanned out above their knees when they twirled. Kids danced and ran jumping among them for hours, then fell asleep on folding chairs set up around the floor. Now sometimes the German soldiers used the café as a free hotel, sleeping there overnight when they passed through. When the rooms filled up, they knocked on the doors of the houses next door and kicked out whoever lived there. They forced them to the street with guns, and sometimes the families ended up on the floor of the grocery.

"I miss the dances," Maddalena said.

"I miss ricotta," said Carolina.

"I miss the old Luciana." This was one of their games—listing all the things the war had taken away.

"I miss eggplant. How did the Nazis scare off eggplant?"

"I miss having the village to ourselves."

"I don't know," Carolina said. She was always the first to interrupt the game. "I like the soldiers. They stop looking so mean if you smile at them a little. Ask Fiorella."

It was almost dark. They were nearing their house. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," said Carolina.

"No, what?"

"I'm just making things up."

Later that night, they lay alongside each other on the bed. There was a cool breeze, but the air stayed warm enough for them not to need covers. Teresa and Celestina slept beside them, Celestina snoring as always.

Maddalena reached her arm over Carolina's chest and pulled her closer. "Tomorrow," she said, "if the weather's nice, I want to make a deal for the bike."

"Really?" Carolina asked. She flipped around to face her and propped herself up on her elbow. "Why now, all of a sudden?"

Maddalena thought a moment. "I don't know."

"Well, I'm surprised," Carolina said. "Believe me, I don't want Vito to think he beat you—I don't want to see the satisfaction on his face—but there's no reason you should miss the one fun thing in Santa Cecilia just because he made it."

"You have to do the talking," said Maddalena. "I still won't kiss him, but I thought maybe I could cook him some *fritelli*, use that as a trade. That, or something else fair."

"He doesn't want food," Carolina said, laughing. "You don't hear his heart break every time you say he doesn't deserve you." She took a curl of Maddalena's hair between her fingers. "It's hard to believe, but maybe he's smart enough to see how special you are."

That Carolina believed this, that she more than once and without jealousy called Maddalena's hair and eyes a blessing from God, amazed her. If she were Carolina, she would hate this Maddalena and everyone who fussed over her. Instead, Carolina adored her. She treated her like a church statue: too sacred and precious to disturb. She trusted only herself and Maddalena and made everyone else work to get along with her. No one disliked Carolina, as far as Maddalena knew—but no one rushed to throw his arms around her, either. Only Maddalena saw her many sides and, though they sometimes confused her, loved them all.

"I was thinking about when we were kids," Carolina said, "How Vito used to push you off the dance floor at the Al Di Là. Do you remember? You couldn't be there for two seconds before he'd run out and knock you over. He didn't do that to anybody else."

"He did that to everyone," Maddalena said, but, when she thought back, maybe he didn't. He used to make her so angry. Teresa would be trying to teach her the tango, and Vito would come stomping between them, making her lose her place. She'd even tripped over his leg once and torn her dress.

"Crazy must run in his family," Carolina said. "You almost have to feel sorry for him."