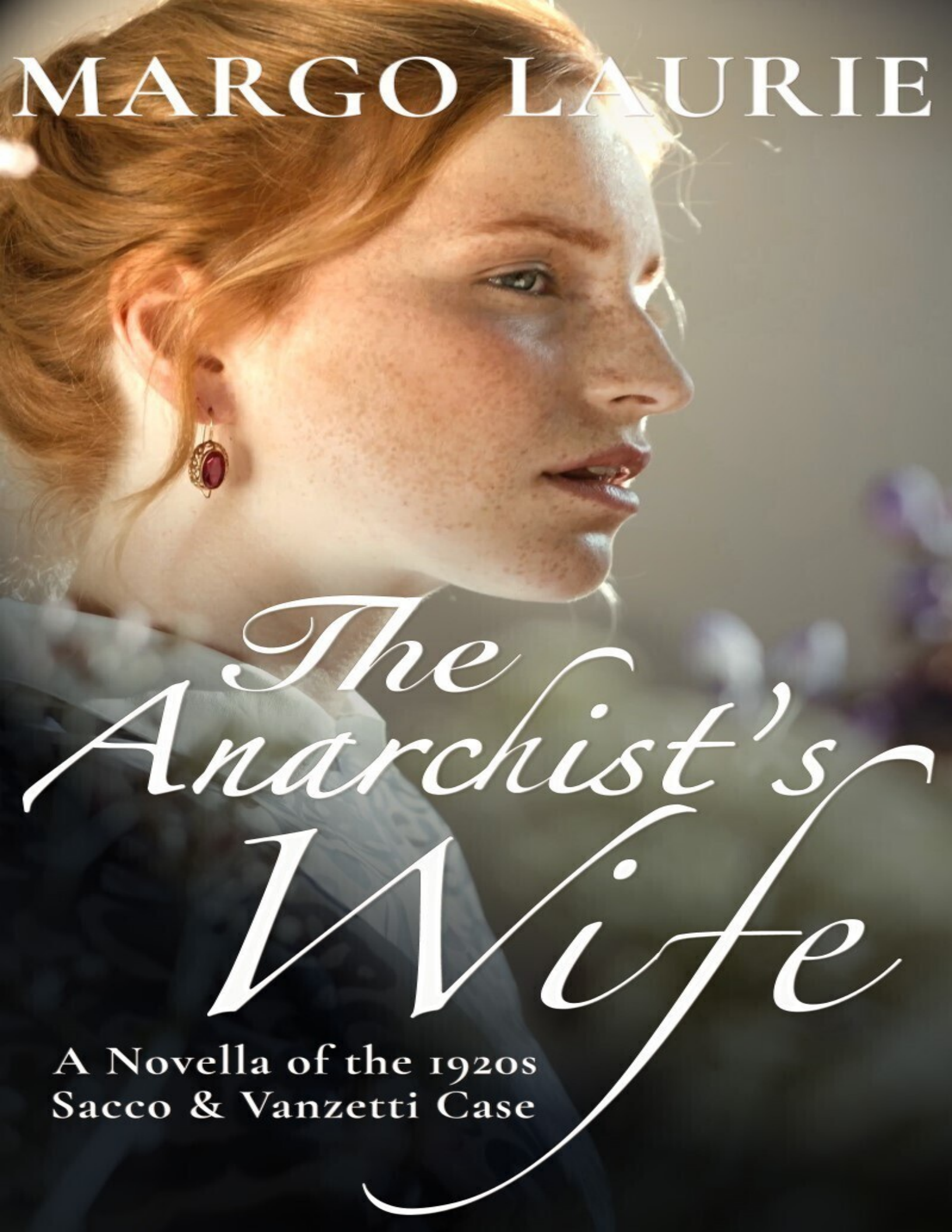
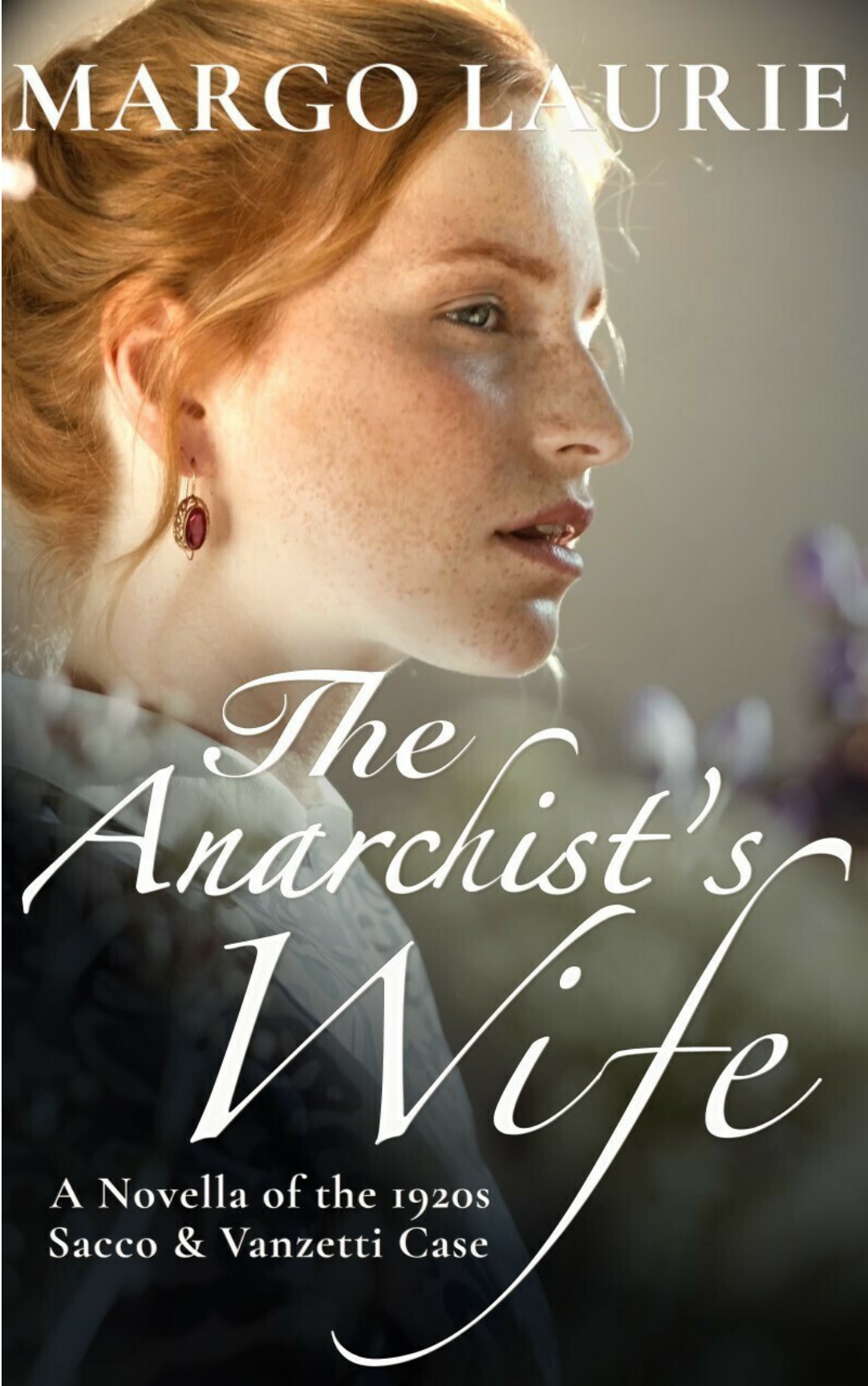




MARGO LAURIE

*The
Anarchist's
Wife*

A Novella of the 1920s
Sacco & Vanzetti Case



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In memory, and awe, of Rosemary Sutcliff

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The Suitcase

When your father died, the jail sent me a letter to say that I had one month to collect his belongings. It said that all prisoners' possessions were liable to be steam-boiled in the autoclave or otherwise disinfected with louse powder, and that Charlestown State Prison could not be held responsible for their state of condition. It was printed, in a cramped typeface, on a scrap of paper like those used for compliments slips.

I ignored the letter for months until Susie found it when she was dusting the bureau. The deadline was long gone, but it turned out your father's belongings hadn't yet been incinerated. They were still there in storage, bundled together in a brown suitcase made of crumbling leather-substitute.

They're here now, in my attic bedroom, stowed under the eaves. There's a scent of rusting metal and rainwater, as if the suitcase had been left outside in the prison yard. It's like having a stranger in the room. This is what your father left behind:

- The coat that the Defense Committee bought him in the winter of 1923. It had a velveteen collar and large buttons. Bart had a matching one. It gave them the look of handsome funeral directors.
- A rosary that Mrs. Kelley gave him, a little hopefully perhaps.
- Tobacco, an inkwell (the sort that can't fall over) and a pen.
- A brass pocket watch. The workers at the shoe factory bought it for him, several years into his imprisonment. It was a leaving present of sorts. His lawyers liked it, said it made him look respectable.
- Letters from Bart, me, his sisters in Italy, and campaigning ladies of Boston. So many women and so respectable: Mrs. Agatha Davies, Mrs. Justine Wheldon, and Miss Livia Parker. The kind of women who were once suffragettes and now at a loose end.

The kitten has slipped in and is acting aloof. She sits upright, flicking her tail, gazing away from me. Last summer, one of the Boston ladies gifted her to you, darling daughter. It was a kind gesture. You

were perplexed though, as if the kitten was intended as a substitute for your father. You got that stubborn look on your face, dark brows knitted together. I had to cajole you into saying thank you.

She's almost full grown now and has the sultry confidence of youth. We still call her *Gattina* – meaning simply “kitten.” Her eyes glitter gold. Wonderfully, I am her favorite person in the household. It's me she stalks towards, always. She can't have mistaken me for the boss – not when Susie exists. It must be that I am a pushover when it comes to dishing out food.

Outside, on Franklin Street, men are shouting drunken farewells to each other. I've heard rumors that a speakeasy has started up in a basement. There were times, during the long years of your father's imprisonment, when I sought sanctuary in the countryside. But I've realized that a suburb like Malden, with plenty of people and petty crime, is better for a quiet life. In a village, the police follow you around like they are lovestruck.

* * *

Your brother asked me to write this for you: a memoir about our family. It's typical of him to give me homework. I was summoned to the schoolhouse today because his teacher wanted to see me. I sat on a low wooden bench in the classroom. There are maps on the wall to show the Civil War, the transcontinental railroad, and various defeats of Mexico.

“It's about Dante's behavior,” the teacher said. “Would you like a strong cup of coffee, Mrs. Sacco? A cigarette? I'm afraid I don't have gin.”

Every time we have a meeting, his teacher makes this joke. I assume it's a joke. She has embraced the Modern Age. Dante calls her “the Ancient Flapper.”

She'd prepared exhibits for me.

First, there was a prayer book in which Charlie Chaplin now wandered the pages along with St. Francis of Assisi. I recognized the style of the cartoons. They crop up on the edges of newspapers left on the kitchen table whenever your brother has been to the cinema. When ‘Son of the Sheikh’ came out, he sold portraits of Valentino for a dime to the girls in his class. I did not explain this to his teacher.

Second, she presented a dead moth in a glass inkwell.

“He's not murderous but morbid. He's got a strange attitude – to life. He collects beetles and insects and calls it a museum. Parents have complained that he charges a one cent admission fee. If I knew where it was, I'd close it down. But the children won't tell me, not even the snitches. Today, he found a dead sparrow in the playground and did burial rites for it – made a pyre and burned bushels

of thyme and rosemary from the wildlife garden. It drew quite a crowd. The younger children look up to him – that’s part of the problem. He was muttering Latin to himself – *amo, amas, amat*. That’s not what Latin’s for. It’s God’s language. But I think that your son, Mrs. Sacco, would invent his own religion if he could.” She scrunched a hand in her blunt fringe.

The final exhibit, the one she’d saved till last, was a slate decorated in chalk. In the center was an empty electric chair, with the punched belts hanging loose at wrist and ankle. Below this, licked flames, and the phrase in copperplate handwriting: “Welcome to Hell.”

Judge Thayer, he who sentenced your father to death, had been given a role as a devil leaping about in hell’s fire. He was signified by a wig, a gown, a white moustache, a pitchfork, and the speech bubble: “I’ll get those anarchist bastards!” Floating above the electric chair were cumulus clouds. And lying on couches in these clouds, like Roman emperors, were your father and Bart.

I liked the idea of them in heaven: a pagan heaven that smells of burnt rosemary. I would have given that picture five merits and a gold star.

“I thought I should show you,” said the teacher, “before I wipe it out.” She got a damp cloth. “Your son is a special case. Most children I teach have nothing more to worry about than lost lunch money.”

“Do you think it might help if he moved schools?” I asked. “A fresh start. You hear of these progressive, liberal schools, where the children spend time outside, learning from nature. That might suit Dante.”

“Playing lutes and wearing Grecian tunics?” His teacher shook her head. “Upstate, expensive, surprisingly strict. As far as I’m aware, Mrs. Sacco, there are no anarchist schools, only anarchist parents.”

There was a pause. She looked about her, brought down a tartan tin labelled ‘stationery’ from the shelf, and offered me a ginger cookie. They were tough, bitter, with scraps of greaseproof paper stuck to them. Army food. I nibbled at the edge. She shattered hers with swift blows on the bench, then collected crumbs on a licked finger.

“You could home tutor for the last two terms,” she said. “I’d still put him in for his certificate. He could borrow books. The point is, Mrs. Sacco, that there’s a highly-functioning brain in that child’s head. He could be a clerk next year, an apprentice. He could work in Boston and be lost in the crowd. He still has a chance to be ordinary.”

* * *

When I got home, the suitcase with your father's belongings was in the hallway. Aldino – that stalwart of the Defense Committee – had collected it for me and dropped it off at the house. It was a kindness. Yet I had not expected it so soon. I was unprepared for this suitcase, with its scent of rust and rainwater, spilling relics in the hall.

Susie was making supper while you, darling daughter, were under the table examining your papa's pocket watch, puzzling over its mechanisms.

I found your brother inside the pantry eating a lump of cheese smeared in honey. No one would believe me that Dante eats like this, like a Biblical glutton. At fourteen years old, he's gangly, with the knobbly-kneed grace of a new-born foal and the face of an angel (though I wouldn't embarrass him by saying so out loud, I'm writing it here as a matter of record). He was wearing your father's coat. It was baggy on him, sweeping the floor like a dressing gown. I neatened up the velveteen collar.

Needless to say, he denied everything.

"No dead moths?"

"Not even a dead woodlouse."

"I think she sees you as a trouble-maker, my lovely son," I said. "Perhaps she's right in one way though. Maybe you should try studying at home – a last push to pass your certificate."

"I'd miss my friends," Dante pointed out.

"You'd still see them," I said. "Imagine it. You get up a little late, it doesn't matter. There's no uniform, no tie. Perhaps, you go out into the park, and sit with your back against a tree. You read at your leisure, until it's time to eat. A cut of ham, bread, lemonade. A siesta to follow lunch, more studying and when the church clock strikes four, it will be time to go and find your friends."

He smiled. It makes his face go a little wonky, impish. I love that smile, but I try not to let on. "If I did do that – worked hard, passed my certificate, all that – will you do something for me too?"

"Maybe, Dante. Name your price."

"Homework of your own. Could you write down about Pa, about our family, for Ines? She's too young to remember much. I don't mean about the trial and the horrible things, but the happier times. The things she couldn't find out from newspaper cuttings and stenographers. You could put it in that suitcase with his clothes and some photographs – store it up in the attic. Then she can read it when she's older."

"My sweet son," I said. "It's a long time since I felt sentimental about your father."

"Try," he said.

(Did we really say that, or just think it? It hung between us in the air anyhow.)

I made an effort to smile – a professional smile, like a nurse’s when there is a lot of blood everywhere. “But look, why don’t you do it?” I said. “That would be better. I don’t write anything but shopping lists...”

“That’s not true. What about those letters to Pa? I’d wake up in the night and you’d still be writing. I remember you, sitting up in bed, with the paper resting on your knees, and that dip pen you stole from the prison. I bet if I went and looked, there would still be ink spots on the eiderdown. Come on, Ma. A diary. A dime novel. A ten-cent romance would do.” He started eating again, as if the whole thing was decided.

“And you’ll pass your certificate?” I said. “You’ll work?”

“I cross my heart.”

I didn’t trust him, but I loved him. We did the secret handshake he made up years ago and it was a deal.

* * *

So here I am, with a Dedham dip pen and a gas lamp, at two in the morning on 14th December 1927, writing. I hope it is you, grown-up Ines, reading this, and not some disgruntled future tenant, laying down rat poison in the attic, or a nosy parker at an auction house in 1993. One never can tell, and for that reason, I won’t include everything.

The question is where to start. I could tell you about Lake Garda and the nuns, but that was long before I met your father. No, the story of this family begins in Milford, Massachusetts, of all the unpoetic places.