

THE
SILENT
VILLAGE





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Merryn Corcoran



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*This book is dedicated to the memory of the following families
from Castel Vittorio in Nervia Valley, Liguria, Italy.
30 innocent civilians ranging in age from 2 to 72 years old
were needlessly massacred by German soldiers in 1944
in their garden allotment at Gordale:*

ALLAUMA

BALBIS

FAISSOLA

MILLO

MORO

ORENGO

PASTORE

PEVERELLO

PICCONE

REBARDO

TORRE

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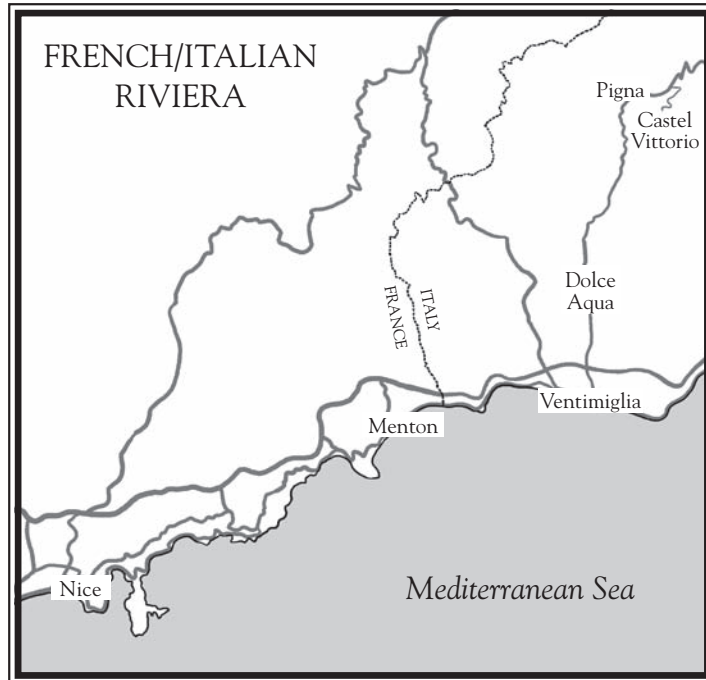
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Prologue



“I don’t believe it! Mum you were adopted! How could you have kept this from us?” Sarah sat rigid, focussing on the familiarity of the elegant silver candelabra as she grappled to respond to her daughter. Dam Hugh! Opening his big mouth – it was typical of her overbearing brother.

“I’m, I’m sorry.” she stammered.

“It’s okay Mum, don’t cry, just, tell us about it?”

Sarah’s son, Nicholas had leant over and laid his arm protectively around his mother’s trembling shoulders. Hugh and his wife sat riveted to their seats as the drama Hugh had provoked, unfolded. Then Sarah finally found her voice.

“Okay, I’m going to tell you, but Flo be quiet, just this once and listen! First, your Uncle Hugh had no right to announce this, as it’s none of his business. Secondly adoption is a complex matter and it was MY adoption not my children’s, nor my brother’s. So how I’ve dealt with it is my business”.

“But Mum...”

“No Florence but nothing. It may take me a minute to compose myself but please shut up and let me get on with it.”

Sarah turned to face both her children who sat to one side of her at the table. “From as young as I can remember, I always knew I was adopted. Mum and Dad regularly referred to me as their ‘special adopted daughter’. In retrospect I can see my parents handled it all very well. But in reality, I didn’t fully comprehend what the word ‘adopted’ meant ’till I was

about ten years old. We had a new girl join our class half way through term, and the class busybody informed us all the next day that this girl was 'adopted'. She spat the words out as if it was a contagious disease and I felt so humiliated. When I arrived home that day I demanded that Mum tell me what it meant. She gently explained I was really hers and Dads but that another lady had given birth to me. The tainted words of the stupid girl at school were all consuming; I demanded Mum and Dad never mention the word 'adopted' again and I guess from that point on I wrongly embraced the shame."

Sarah paused, anxiously rubbed her hands together, and then nervously pressed them up to her mouth.

"Did Dad know?" Florence gingerly queried.

"Yes, and he encouraged me to tell you both, but I wouldn't ever consider it. However, once he knew his cancer was terminal he pushed the matter."

"Rightfully so," Hugh arrogantly interjected, assuming he'd gained the sympathy of the room. They all ignored him.

"Dad's been dead for eighteen months! What's held you back, Mother?"

"There no need for sarcasm Flo, if you must know I agreed to Uncle Hugh's invitation tonight, as after dinner I intended to discuss it with you; just the three of us that is." She shot a look at her brother. Nicholas took the floor. He was the opposite to his fiery artistic sister. Like his late father, he tended to be methodical, pragmatic and quietly spoken.

"Mum, I think once we all calm down, I'm sure we can live with this, even if it is a little late in the piece. Uncle Hugh is correct. I've been diagnosed with diabetes, and have been asked if it's hereditary, so it's a very good reason for me

to have known that you were adopted."

He spoke without malice. "I'm truly sorry Nick." Sarah cleared her throat, raised her voice a notch and straightened in her seat.

"But may I finish please? The grief counsellor I've been seeing has suggested I make a few life changes and the reason I've been with Uncle Hugh today was to go through our parent's old documents, as I've decided to try and find out who my birth parents were."

"Go on Mum, don't stop now! Did you find anything?" Flo was captivated.

"Hugh, do you mind bringing the file in please?" Sarah's tone had softened as she spoke to her brother. As Sarah handed her son the file, he warmly recognised his grandfather's neat hand writing. On the cover, it read 'Sarah's Adoption'.

"Turn to the last page." Sarah's voice had tempered. Flo stood behind Nick, both children fervently reading through the old document. The last page was obviously a copied birth certificate.

Sarah Maria Orengo

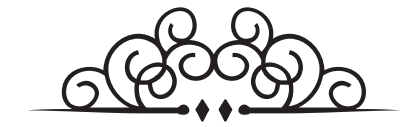
Date of Birth: 31/05/1955

Place of birth: (blacked out)

Birth registered: Golders Green, North London

Mother: (blacked out and DISCEASED hand written in capitals)

Father: Mario Orengo.



PART ONE
ALLESSIA

Menton, French Riviera, 1944-1945



One

“What were those girls up to now?” Their giggles sounded as noisy as a flock of seagulls. Hopscotch was meant to tire them, not stretch their vocal cords. Allesia rested back on the park bench. She closed her eyes to avoid squinting into the low Mediterranean sun and seized the moment to indulge selfishly in her own thoughts.

Old Jean Claude was perched on the adjoining bench watching the pétanque game that his friends were playing close to the young girls hop scotch. He'd mumbled something.

“What are you saying Jean Claude? I can't quite hear you!”

Edging across so he was directly next to Allesia, he pushed his white garlic-scented, moustache close to her ear.

“If I were you I'd be very wary of that Marseilles farmer who's taken over the property in front of yours. They say he bribed officials to get it at that price, so he'll be looking at yours next.”

“Thanks Jean Claude, don't worry, my Joseph has been keeping an eye on him.”

Attempting to mask her anxiety, she gave the old man a goodbye peck on his ruddy, wrinkled cheek then quickly moved over to wind up the hopscotch game.

“Mama, Mama please can I have a gelato? Please, please.”

Allesia's daughter Sylvie jumped up and down like an excited kitten as they left the pétanque terrain. Sylvie was eight years old, an only child with dark curly hair and large brown eyes; happiness and curiosity radiated from her

perfectly oval face. She clutched her mother's hand tightly, but quickly dropped it once they were in sight of Giovanni's Gelato Parlour.

Giovanni's had been selling ice cream in Menton since Alessia first used to visit, nearly twenty years previously. Like Giovanni, Alessia was born and brought up in Italy, just across the border from Menton. She met her French husband Joseph Reiss at the border market when she was just 15 years old and for her it was love at first sight. Joseph and his family were Jewish and it had taken two years of family arguments before both sets of parents had eventually conceded to the couples mixed religious marriage.

It used to be so simple. The border was just a formality. While the French believed their wine was the best, there was no doubt that the Italians always made the best gelato. Why should it all have to be different because those fascists in Berlin and Rome said so?

"Bongiorno Giovanni. The usual for my little one, please."

"Ah! Alessia you look as beautiful as always."

"And Giovanni you're as charming as always, and, before you ask, just one scoop!" As Alessia followed Sylvie out of the parlour Giovanni lifted the counter lid, and sidled up beside her, his kind, wrinkled eyes full of concern.

"My dearest friend, things are not looking good, many of our Jewish friends have left town, you should all be on your way."

Alessia pricked defensively. "My Joseph has the view that most of what they are saying is just hearsay or rumour."

"I pray to the Blessed Virgin that is true." Alessia gave a forced smile at Giovanni's parting comment and then took her daughter's free hand as they walked briskly up the street.

Alessia's looks were those of a typical northern Italian woman. She stood a mere five feet two inches tall, her long black hair was loosely braided and her deep brown eyes complemented her sun-tinted glossy olive complexion. She'd spent the first seventeen years of her life cocooned with her close knit family in the Italian hill top medieval village of Castel Vittorio. Since then Joseph had influenced every part of her life. To please him, the only make-up she wore was Rubinstein red lipstick which accentuated her full, sensual lips. The last nine years under his influence had added the extra polished veneer of French chic to her naturally striking appearance.

The family villa was only a ten-minute walk from Giovanni's. It nestled in the midst of a large garden, up a gentle slope, with colourful views across Menton to the sea. Sylvie had finished her ice cream and skipped ahead arriving first at the ornate wrought-iron gate. It creaked loudly, as with the full force of her small frame she struggled to push it open.

The fragrant path that led from the gate to the family villa and their small hotel was Alessia's pride. Her contribution to her husband's family home and business had been lovingly to design and plant a welcoming perfumed approach. The small eight-room hotel shared the pathway and sat just behind their villa. The grounds had been neat and tidy when she first arrived, but the gardens had lacked structure. Placing tubs of lavender and citronella, interspersed with exotic flowering succulents bordering the path, Alessia had managed to create a grand impression – more than the property actually delivered. Climbing jasmine clung to the fence beside the path, emitting its delicious fragrance, whilst neatly clipped boxed hedging gave a feeling of structure to the borders of the property.

“Happy Birthday Alessia” her mother-in-law, Ruth, greeted her with a big hug.

“Thank you. I didn’t expect anyone to remember considering what we’re all going through.”

“On that subject, where’s the Little One?”

“In the back garden, in her secret hiding place, with her baby.” They both smiled.

“I think it best to wait ’till after dinner to give her the bad news. Let her enjoy the cake first.”

“Oh Ruth, you shouldn’t have gone to any trouble, but, as you have, did you use the last of the sacred chocolate?” Ruth was reassured to see a brief return of her daughter-in-law’s dry sense of humour. Alessia adored Ruth, who was a woman who inspired confidence. She always stood tall and, although matronly she was self-assured. Her pure white hair never publicly left the constraints of the severe bun, tied at the nape of her neck. In contrast her faded eyes still radiated happiness from behind her wire-rimmed spectacles, and her soft mouth was rarely without the warmth of her generous smile.

The door flew open and Sylvie held up her bedraggled looking doll.

“I kept the secret Grandmama! I never told Mama and look, my baby is all dressed for the birthday party. I can’t wait for the cake; please say it’s chocolate. Are Gramps and Gran Orenge going to bring Mario with them? I can’t wait to play with him again.” Her words spilled over themselves.

“I’m sorry Little One; Mario won’t be coming this time. Gramps is coming alone and will be leaving early in the morning. Please go up, have your bath then you can put your special party dress on.”

“It’s not fair!” She stamped her small foot and stormed off.

The Reiss villa wasn’t as grand as some of its neighbours, but the rooms were large enough, stylishly decorated, predominantly in the favoured colours of neighbouring Provence, pastel blue and soft shades of lemon. Downstairs was a salon, a large kitchen and a washing room. Upstairs there was a bathroom and four large bedrooms, three of which enjoyed sea views.

The villa had always basked in loving family warmth, but the divided opinions had soured the once, comfortably, bountiful atmosphere and Alessia’s dread of the following day dampened the joy she normally would have felt on her birthday.

“Happy Birthday beautiful girl.” Alessia’s father-in-law Daniel joined them. He handed her a bunch of tiny white and lemon daisies tied with some old string.

His six foot two inches towered over Alessia in giant fashion. He was extremely tall for a French man, and totally bald with a perfectly shaped, bronzed head that shone above a deeply furrowed brow. His eyebrows were grey and bushy like two fat furry caterpillars; the butt of many family jokes.

“Oh Daniel thank you, I’m going to miss you both so much.”

He took the posy from her hands, laid it on the table and pulled her to him in a tight hug. The three of them sat together as Ruth poured out hot chicory essence which was what passed for coffee. As he unconsciously stroked his eyebrows Daniel asked Alessia about her day and how she thought Sylvie would react to the news.

“Come on Daniel, what else are you really trying to ask me? I know you well enough to recognise the signs of your daughter-in-law diplomacy. Ask what you like.”

“Well my dear, I don’t want to ask you anything, rather say something. There may not be another chance after tonight.

When Joseph first wanted to marry you it wasn't that we didn't like you, or that we're particularly religious, but our hesitation was that mixed marriages can be so difficult, not so much you being Italian, more us being Jewish. We both want you to know you are the best addition to this family that we could have ever wished for. Whatever happens, please know how much we love you."

Allessia, humbled by his words took both her in-laws' hands, giving them an affectionate squeeze. "You didn't need to say that. I know you love me, but thank you – it means a lot to hear it. Let's just get through our last night together as happily as we can."

Allessia had excused herself to tidy up before dinner. She sat in front of the dressing table brushing her hair, attempting some enthusiasm into dressing up a little. As she scrutinised her face in the mirror she felt a sense of loss for her youth. She could see that more laughter lines had made an appearance around her eyes and the dimples on either side of her smile had deepened, well on their way to becoming wrinkles and regularly she found herself plucking out the odd grey hair. At least she hadn't put on any weight. Once she'd applied her signature red lipstick she felt a little more confident. She offered herself a brief smile in the mirror before heading back downstairs.

"Sylvie, you may get the special cutlery set out tonight and give each piece a shine before you place them." Allessia had tried to keep things as normal as possible. They'd all gathered in the kitchen, the true heart of their home, the mouth-watering smell of fresh baking pervaded the room.

"Yes Mama, but what icing is Gran going to put on

the cake?" Sylvie was washed and dressed in a pretty pink pinafore dress only worn on special occasions.

"The birthday cake only comes out when all the main meal is eaten. You'll see the icing then. So you had better be hungry tonight."

"Where's the birthday girl?" Joseph called out as he walked in with a huge bunch of lilies. "Happy birthday my Darling" he laid the flowers on the sideboard then kissed his wife passionately.

"That's yukky Papa. You're being so sloppy" Sylvie shouted as she squeezed between her parents' embrace.

"Okay a big kiss for you too my angel in pink." Joseph swung her up and gently planted a kiss on her nose. Allessia's husband was tall, handsome and rugged. His rapidly receding hairline resembled his father. But the similarity ended there – unlike his father, Joseph's was a little like an ostrich. He didn't want to believe the German propaganda and was reluctant to leave his family home and business.

At around six p. m. the old Orenco truck pulled up outside. Allessia quickly slipped out of the kitchen so she could have a few words in private with her father.

"Papa, is everything organised for the morning?" Her father lovingly embraced her with both arms and whispered his reply to her in Italian.

"You don't have to do everything your husband says, you and the little one can come tomorrow as well. Your Mama and I only want to know you're safe."

As Allessia inhaled the familiar tobacco fragrance that clung to her father's clothes and heard the soothing lilt of her native tongue, she experienced a brief reprieve.

"Papa I've been over it all a hundred times in my mind

and I've decided we must stay together; I think Joseph will be safer if he's with a Catholic wife."

Her father Luigi Orengo was only forty-eight years old, but hours spent working outdoors coupled with the stress of the war had emphasised his bad posture and aged him prematurely. He stood only two inches taller than Alessia but despite everything he still had a full head of rich brown hair. The rest of the extended Reiss family greeted Luigi at the door. He wearily took a seat at the table, then took a large envelope out of his tatty satchel and kissed his granddaughter as he handed it to her.

"Look Mama look! Mario has drawn me a picture, and written me my very own letter." Sylvie's smile was infectious enough to lift the sombre mood, at least momentarily.

"Don't you read it Mama, I can do it by myself, I know my Italian very well."

She proudly read out the few simple words from her ten-year-old cousin and then basked in the applause that followed the demonstration of her linguistic skills. When the first course was finished Daniel stood up and tapped his glass to gain everyone's attention.

"Oh no Grandpapa, not one of your too long speeches, we need to eat up so we can have the birthday cake!"

"Sylvie I want you to sit quietly and listen very carefully."

At the sound of Grandpapa's serious voice Sylvie was wide eyed and sat perfectly still.

"Terrible things are happening to Jewish people because of this war. We don't know if everything we hear is true but I believe we must protect ourselves so Grandmama and I will be leaving Menton in the morning and we must all keep it a secret, especially you Sylvie, as we don't want to get anyone

else into trouble for helping us. You mustn't even tell your very best friends. Okay?"

Alessia pulled her chair up closer to her daughter, for she could feel the child's fear as the adult's sombre mood enveloped the room.

"Where are you going? How long will you be away?" Sylvie's baffled questions sounded small and fragile.

"Gramps Orengo will take us with him early in the morning. We'll stay up in Castel Vittorio with him and Gran." Daniel maintained his authoritative stance.

"But Grandpapa, that's all the way to Italy." Sylvie was on the verge of tears.

"Nonsense, it's just across the border. You can come and visit us dear child when we all agree it's safe." He shot a questioning glance at his son.

The two women retreated out to the cooking area.

"Alessia, please reconsider; please keep the pressure on Joseph to see sense." The tears glistened in Ruth eyes as she whispered to her daughter in law.

"I've tried, but he just won't believe the Germans will oust the Italians and occupy this part of France. You know how passionate he is about this hotel, what more can I do?"

They'd wrestled to contain their emotions as they finished icing the birthday cake. It created a distraction and it put a smile back on Sylvie's little face. The family sung a subdued Happy Birthday before mother and daughter blew out the candles.

"Grand papa, I have an idea. As I am not allowed to go to proper school now, why don't I come with you and Grandmama – just for a holiday?" Sylvie added to the conversation as she started on her second piece of chocolate cake.

Allessia immediately interjected. "Sylvie, you're only half Jewish on your father's side. I'm Roman Catholic which is what you are as well, so you'll be safe here with us and besides you're our little girl and we want you with us."

Joseph anxiously continued, "Sylvie, it is very important you say you are a Catholic to anyone who may ask you questions. You remember taking your First Holy Communion with the other children? Well, that makes you Catholic."

The five grownups hadn't touched their cake. Each sat quietly, their strained faces betraying their inner turmoil. Once Allessia had finally tucked her daughter into bed, the adults huddled closer around the table and spoke in hushed voices.

"Joseph, please reconsider coming with us tomorrow. Allessia and Sylvie may be Catholics but with a name like Reiss you're so obviously Jewish." Daniel was desperate.

"Papa I just don't believe it will be as bad here in Menton as perhaps in other parts of the country. I'm sure a lot of it is exaggerated. Besides you built this business up and I'm damn sure I'm not leaving it for the Germans or any of the Mussolini henchmen to take. The minute we show weakness, we'll lose it all."

Allessia had listened to this same conversation in many different forms over the past few weeks. The question was continually gnawing away at her like a nagging pain: were her in-laws right? She now believed her husband was allowing his wishful thinking and pride to cloud his judgement. Despite the tension and the strong differences of opinion, they all shared a tender kiss as they finally said goodnight.

Ruth placed her arm around her husband as they sat together on the large bed they'd shared for over thirty years;

their careworn faces softened by the glow of the single burning candle.

"Daniel we just have to accept this situation. We don't want to part with bad feeling tomorrow. Joseph hasn't experienced the same anti-Semitic sentiments that you did before you moved here. I guess it's because we've been more or less accepted by the extended family and community He just can't believe the worst of them. She rested her head despairingly on his shoulder.

"This may be our last night in this bed, in this house. Oh Ruth! I'm so frightened for our son, but he's his own man and you're right. Tomorrow our goodbyes must all be without judgement, regret or blame."

Two

Allessia had been up since before dawn. She had made some hot tea with mint from the garden, packed a lunch for the three of them and had just taken the croissants out of the oven when Daniel and Ruth arrived downstairs with their two small suitcases. Every possible precaution had been planned and discussed so as not to draw any attention as they left the house to make their getaway across the border.

“Good bye just for now.” Sylvie still wore her pyjamas as she held her Grandpapa tight.

“Now, my little Angel. We’re all saying our goodbyes indoors, no shouting or waving once we go out to the truck. We don’t want the neighbours to notice anything.” Daniel gently kissed her, then Allessia. He no longer contained his emotions as he hugged his son.

“We must go now. The border guard I bribed finishes his shift at 8am and we must be through the tunnel by then.” Luigi Orengo interrupted the poignant little scene.

He went out first with the bags – one covered by his coat. Then the other two quickly joined him in the cab of the truck. Daniel, Allessia and Sylvie watched from the window fraught with misery. In a bid to stay as silent as possible, Luigi let the old truck just roll down the hill, only starting the noisy old engine when they’d reached the bottom.

“Madame Gueone will be here at ten with a new set of school lessons for the week Sylvie, so hurry up and get dressed please.” Allessia attempted to stick to normal routine as far as possible.

“Mama I still don’t understand if I’m Catholic, why I had to be excluded from school. I don’t even know what excluded really means! I was the only one it happened to, I’m sure Madame Gueone hates me. It’s not fair!” She jammed her hands onto her hips.

“Sylvie! Don’t speak to me that way. Madame Gueone does not hate you or why would she put herself at risk to bring your lessons here each week. I’ve told you it was the new Italian government that has taken over Menton. It made the rule about half-Jewish children. It won’t be forever little one.” Allessia’s voice softened as she reminded herself that it was essential to keep things as calm as possible. “Just get through one day at a time” was the last thing Ruth had said to her that morning.

“All the guests have finished breakfast. There are just the two checking out. I’ll be in the garden so let me know once Madame Gueone has gone. Then I’ll watch over Sylvie doing her lesson, if you are okay to do the rooms?” Joseph too, was determined to keep busy.

“It won’t take me long, thank goodness as those Italian soldiers are so fastidious in their rooms, it makes the job easy.” Allessia poured them both a strong tea from the old pot.

“Don’t be over familiar with those soldiers Allessia. We can’t trust them. They are occupying our countries as an act of war.”

As Joseph walked out to the garden Allessia watched him through the window, while two of the soldiers passed him on the path. They deliberately ignored him. A few months before he would have reacted to such ignorance and bad manners, but now he said nothing.

The soldiers passed the house in silence as Madam

Gueone arrived at the door. Alessia acknowledged them with a lukewarm smile.

“Bonjour, Madam Gueone. Please come in and join me for some tea. There’s still plenty in the pot.” Alessia found it heartening to spend time with Sylvie’s intuitive teacher.

“Madam Reiss, I can’t express just how continually embarrassed we are at the school at the Council’s reluctance to take any kind of stand with these occupiers, especially over a little girl attending school.”

As Madam Gueone spoke, her plump chin wobbled in a jolly way. The children called her ‘Madam wobbly’ behind her back. However she was a precise, strong woman and fiercely protective of the children she taught.

“We really appreciate your support, but it’s important we don’t draw any attention to ourselves under the circumstances, especially with our family name being so obviously Jewish.” They cut the conversation short as Sylvie appeared at the door.

“Madame Gueone, how are my friends? I miss them. It’s lonely here and now I haven’t got Grandpapa to take me to play at the pétanque terrain.”

Alessia quickly interjected. “Sylvie, Madam’s not here to discuss your friends and your play time. She’s here to look at your exercises from last week. So quickly now, fetch your book from the salon.” As she refreshed Madam’s tea she prayed the teacher wouldn’t enquire about her in-laws. For half an hour Sylvie diligently listened and responded to her teacher. Alessia breathed a sigh of relief once she’d left, then called out to Joseph “Your turn Professor Reiss, my turn as the maid.”

A week had passed since Daniel and Ruth had left. Alessia took time out to accompany Sylvie for some

playtime with her two special friends near their usual spot at the end of the pétanque court. Sylvie’s usual happy-go-lucky personality had taken a battering but Alessia tried her best to maintain the status quo.

“Bonjour Alessia. Jean Claude tells me your father-in-law has rushed off to visit his sick brother in Lyon. Is he on the mend?” One of Daniel’s friends called out to her.

“Well we haven’t heard. I think it’s quite serious so he’ll most likely be away a while.” Alessia blushed as she replied with her lie. Their conversation was interrupted by an increasingly loud roar, coupled with vibrations that caused tremors through the loose pebbles under their feet.

As they looked along the promenade a fleet of large heavy trucks was in clear view. They were being driven towards town. Each truck was open-backed, menacingly filled with soldiers sitting jammed stiffly side by side, their upright guns with attached bayonets.

“Mama, Mama! Who are they? There are hundreds of them. We counted ten trucks already!” Sylvie and her friends had rushed to Alessia’s side.

“Now girls, it’s time to finish playing. These are new soldiers from the German army. You must go directly home, now!” Fearfully, Alessia grabbed her daughter’s hand and moved swiftly.

“Mama, you’re hurting me. Let go.” Alessia suddenly realised she had her daughter’s small hand in a desperate, steely grip.

“So sorry Little One. Mama got a fright that’s all. We must hurry home.”

The noise generated by so many large motor vehicles reverberated across Menton. Joseph had run down from the hotel to the villa just as his wife and daughter arrived home.

“Don’t panic Alessia. We must keep calm for all our sakes.” His father’s words rang in his ears.

Having eaten most of the evening meal in silence, they were disturbed by a loud knock at the door. It was an Italian soldier.

“Signore, we must inform you that our entire unit will be leaving tomorrow, except for two of us, so we no longer require your accommodation. The German army are replacing us as occupiers.”

He turned to leave and although Joseph didn’t really want to rock the boat he couldn’t help himself. “Excuse me but can you give us any more information about the German intention for Menton? We have all felt the Italian Army has done a balanced job in difficult circumstances.”

The officer yielded to this patriotic flattery “Well Signor Reiss, that’s not what Hitler thinks. He believes our leader Mussolini has let the Italian and French partisans get away with too much and that we’ve not achieved the desired results with our occupation of this part of the French Riviera. So, apparently they are now dealing with it, and all but the liaison officers must be gone in twenty-four hours.” He turned and hurriedly stomped off.

Alessia couldn’t speak. Real fear had arrived and clung like a mould in her mouth. Once she had settled Sylvie and ensured she was asleep, she led Joseph into the salon and closed the door.

“Joseph we can’t stay now. What are we going to do, I’m extremely frightened?” Her voice faltered, and she struggled to suppress the taint of blame.

“I agree, I have been desperate for a peaceful solution but now I think we should leave as well. We must try and keep as much of all of this as we can from Sylvie and we must protect

her. I’ll sort things out in the hotel and ask Donata and Renee if they’ll watch over the property until we come back, so we can be gone by the end of the week.” Joseph’s tall body stooped in defeat as his eyes filled with tears of impotent humiliation.

Sylvie had sensed the danger and she stayed close to her mother. Four days had passed since the Italian soldiers departed. The only place Alessia could be totally open with Joseph was in their bed whispering, out of earshot of their daughter. Their bedroom was pitch black except for the light of the half-moon glistening palely onto the bed through the half closed shutters. Alessia’s suppressed anger had made it difficult for her to respond to Joseph’s advances, but she listened attentively as he spoke about the Germans.

“I guess it’s not possible to understand Hitler unless you can understand his hatred of everything we hold sacred.”

Subtly, she attempted to create a verbal barrier to avoid lovemaking, but as Joseph continued to talk he began to stroke his wife’s long dark hair. “My Darling you’ve given me such happiness. I’m sorry if I’ve made the wrong decisions, but what I believe is just and moral is clearly not what will keep us safe. I’ve lost control of even our personal circumstances. We’ll be all sorted to leave the day after tomorrow. Let’s try and keep the packing to just three suitcases so we can carry them ourselves if needed. If in the meantime if anything should happen to me, be strong. Be very stoic for Sylvie’s sake.”

Alessia’s reserve had all but gone, and her heart was breaking. Too many words had already squandered precious time. Joseph kissed her gently at first, but as his kisses become more passionate she disguised her reluctance, slipped off her nightdress and feigned her response. Sex was the only comfort she had to give.