

Chapter One

Rosa just happened to glance out the kitchen window when she saw them running across the field toward her house. One stumbled on a fallen branch and she could hear the other two yelling at him. As the shouts came nearer she saw Gatto arch his back and flee behind the shed.

“*Santa Maria!*” she said to herself. “Why are they coming here now?”

She quickly grabbed the broom in the corner and pounded the kitchen ceiling with all her might. Four times.

Just in time. She heard a heavy lid slam shut upstairs just as the soldiers pushed open the door and filled her tiny kitchen. They were sweating, and their shirts clung to their chests.

“*Buongiorno, Signora,*” the chubby one said. “We want to...”

“Please close the door,” Rosa commanded. “I’m trying to keep the house cool. We’ve never had such a hot July, just terrible.” The shortest soldier dutifully obeyed.

The summer had been horrid. All of her neighbors kept their doors and windows closed. They said they wanted to be protected from the boiling Tuscan sun, but they wanted to keep other dangers out, too.

“Now, what can I do for you?” Rosa said, wiping her sweaty hands on her apron. Flustered, the three soldiers looked at one another, and when Rosa picked up her rolling pin they instinctively reached for the pistols in their holsters. Ignoring them, Rosa calmly began to roll out the dough on the kitchen table. Finally, the tall one spoke. His Italian was at best imperfect.

“We are looking for an army deserter. We know he’s in Sant’Antonio and we are searching every house.”

Rosa didn’t look up. “Why in the world would you want to look for a deserter from the Italian army? Don’t you have enough soldiers in your army?”

“Well, of course we have. But we can’t let you Italians run away from your army now, can we?”

“As you can see,” Rosa said, intent on rolling out the dough, “I’m quite alone here, and I’m trying to make these ravioli. Can’t you men see this is a lot of work? I don’t imagine you’ve made ravioli, have you? You’ve probably never cooked anything in your lives. Now if you would just leave, we can all go about our business.”

As much as she tried to speak calmly, Rosa knew that her voice, always high, had climbed higher, and she prayed that the soldiers could not see her heart beating so fast under the top of her apron.

For the last three years, the Wehrmacht soldiers had occupied all of northern Italy. At first, they were simply a presence, and most people tried to ignore them. But in the last months, there had been a growing number of incidents. The soldiers roughed up men who wouldn’t answer their questions. They raided houses without warning. They took food and wine from homes. They enforced a 10 o’clock curfew every night. And there were even more convoys of tanks rumbling through the little village, sometimes skidding off the road and barely missing houses and trees.

The Italians had tried to endure all this without complaint but they were getting more impatient as the Allies slowly worked their way north from the heel of the country. Now, the British were bombing cities and villages in the north to flush out the Germans, and more and more Italian partisans, especially here in Tuscany, were sabotaging the Nazis in the hills.

“Well, then,” the tall soldier said, “you won’t mind if we just take a look around, all right?”

Rosa knew she didn’t have a choice. The soldiers went into the living room, looking under the couch and behind the chair.

“*Raus!*” one shouted.

“*Santa Maria!*” Rosa said. “Do you think someone is hiding behind that little chair?”

The tall soldier glared at her. Then they went into the dining room, where they opened the cupboards.

“He would have to be awfully small to fit in there,” Rosa said as she watched one of the soldiers pull tablecloths and linens from a shelf in a cupboard.

“Come on. Let’s look upstairs.” The tall soldier pulled out his pistol.

Rosa froze as the men’s heels clattered on the stone stairs. She hadn’t wanted to take the young man in when he arrived at their door two days ago, starving and looking desperately for food. He said he was from Montepulciano and he and a friend had jumped from the troop train in the Serchio Valley north of Lucca last month. So she and Marco agreed that he could stay a few days and hide in the sewing room upstairs. He knew that if Germans arrived he would have to crawl into the chest inside the closet and cover himself with blankets.

“Anyone here? *Raus! Raus!*”

Her knuckles white as she gripped the rolling pin, Rosa stood at the bottom of the stairs. She heard the soldiers going into the bedroom and rifling through her and Marco’s clothes in the *armadio*. She held her breath when she heard the door to the sewing room open.

“It’s dark in here. Open the curtains,” one soldier said.

“It’s still pretty dark,” another one said.

“Look in that closet,” the third one said. “Anything there?”

A long silence. Rosa closed her eyes and wiped her brow.

“There’s no light in here. Can’t see anything.”

“All right then. Let’s go. It’s too hot up here. No one could stay here for long.”

Rosa was back at the table rolling out dough when the soldiers came down. Sweat glistened on her forehead and matted her thick hair.

“You see?” she said. “I told you no one was here.”

“I bet you know a lot about what’s happening in this village, don’t you?” the tall soldier said, standing close behind her and breathing on her neck. “Tell us what you know, little *Signora*.”

“I don’t know anything,” Rosa said, squirming away. “I just keep to myself.”

The soldier put his pistol on the table, right next to the dough. He leaned back in the chair opposite her, watching as she sprinkled more flour on the dough and rolled it out.

“Are you trying to frighten me?” Rosa asked. “I don’t frighten easily.” But her heart was still racing. The soldier smirked.

The chubby soldier sat in the chair next to the stove and the short one stood at the door. They pulled out cigarettes from their pockets and didn’t look like they were going to leave.

For the next forty-five minutes, the soldiers tried to get information. Rosa ignored their questions or changed the subject.

“Who are the people here supporting the partisans?”

“Do you like ravioli? I don’t suppose they have it in Germany. I’m using my mother’s recipe. She got it from her mother who probably got it from her mother before that.”

“What do you know about the priest?”

“I have a secret ingredient,” Rosa said. “I bet you can’t guess. I use nutmeg. All the other women here use cinnamon.”

“Where are the older men? Where have they gone?”

“The other women use fancy ravioli cutters. I just use a fruit juice glass, see? My mother used a glass. Her ravioli were fat and round, not square and flat like you see in restaurants.”

The chubby soldier perked up. “That’s how they were in the restaurant in Reboli,” he said.

“You mean at Nero’s? My husband took me there on our tenth wedding anniversary a year ago. It’s a nice restaurant, but I could tell their ravioli weren’t as good as mine just by looking at them. So small. I didn’t have them. Did you like them?”

Rosa was getting tired of this conversation. Finally, the soldiers stood up, the tall one replaced his pistol, and they all left. Rosa watched as they ran across the back to her neighbor Maria, next door.

“Good. Maria will tell them a thing or two,” she said aloud. “*Santa Maria!* I thought they would never leave.”

Grabbing a glass of water, she ran upstairs where Dino, the army deserter, was still in the chest in the closet. Rosa pulled up the heavy cover. “Are you all right?”

Dino climbed out. He was drenched with sweat. “A few more minutes in there and I think I would have suffocated.”

“Those soldiers just would not leave,” Rosa said. “*Bastardi!*”

“Thank you for warning me, Signora. That was close.”

“Here, drink this. Are you sure you’re all right?”

Dino gulped down the water. “I’m fine. Just hot. Don’t worry about me.”

“You rest now. That was terrible. Nazi bastards!”