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**Map of the Austro-Italian Mountain Front Mid-October 1917**

## *Prologue*

**Dizziness** overtook him and he paused, leaning on the wall of a dark alley.

His thoughts took him back to Asiago at the height of the war, crouching in an icy trench.

He imagined snow whipping around him. Raised his hands to his ears and tried to shut out the deafening noise of guns, of men shouting, screaming and dying. Yet, the sound still rattled in his head. He felt himself scrambling over the top of the trench into the blizzard, charging forward to stay close to Enricho, his Capitano.

The corner of his left eye began twitching as the agony of seeing a brute of an Austrian rushing at his captain came back to him. He had no rifle with him in the alley, but somehow he seemed to have one gripped tightly in his hands, its razor-sharp bayonet thrust forward.

He thought he heard himself grunting as he ran the bayonet through the Austrian's guts once, twice and several times again. Chest heaving, he wiped sweat from his brow, exhilarated, a true Alpini fighting machine, proud to have saved his captain.

No rifle in his hands in the alley now, but he did have a bayonet in the scabbard at his side, and a score to settle.

Calm and clear at last, he peered out of the alley and up the street. Not many people around tonight in the barracks town of Udine, it was perfect.

While running an errand for the Capitano at army headquarters a couple of days ago, he'd spotted Major Armano Calendri. Then he followed him that evening to the Alpi, a fancy hotel for a military police bastardo, the enemy within the army.

Calendri deserved skewering with this bayonet, but the hotel's housekeeper didn't. Thanks to Maria hating the

Carabinieri because they'd killed her husband, he'd found the major's room. With her help, he had found the liar who testified against his Capitano at the trial and called for a penalty of death.

He took off his feathered hat and shoved it into a pocket in his uniform. Then he pulled a khaki wool cap onto his head. Good, as soon as he took off these puttees, he'd look more like a regular foot soldier than an Alpini fighter.

His eye twitched as a small man, twenty centimeters shorter than him, appeared from around a corner up the street. The man marched along, swinging his arms as if on parade, strutting, trying to make himself look important. Plain clothes, no Carabinieri uniform, but he'd recognize Calendri anytime, anywhere.

Pivoting on a heel, he turned, unlaced and pulled off his hobnailed boots. He ran along the frozen mud of the dark alley between the hotel and the next building, out back to the fire escape. Leaving his boots at the bottom, he climbed the iron steps not making a sound. One floor up and breathing hard from the thrill of being on the attack, two floors, three ... he stopped outside the window of Calendri's room. Then he took a pair of thin leather gloves from his pocket and slipped them on. He tried the window, finding it unlocked as he'd left it yesterday after prying the lock open with a stiletto. He slipped into the room, closed the window, took a few quiet strides and stopped on the hinge side of the door to the corridor. Warning himself to stay quiet, he unwrapped the puttees from his trouser legs, rolled them up and tucked them into a pocket. Then he took out some brass knuckles, favorites he'd often used back home in Milan. He knew just how hard and where to hit with them to stifle a shout or a scream.

Frowning, he pressed his left ear to the wall. He could hear people talking and coming closer. Rage started rising inside him at the thought that Calendri might not come to his room alone, and he felt the frustration build inside his head. He ought to hide but he didn't have time. Hell, he couldn't do this now. The radiator on the other side of the room let out a loud and angry hiss, making him whirl around. Yet it didn't seem to bother the people in the corridor; their voices faded as they moved on.

Heart thumping in his chest, he continued listening and then his frown turned into a grin when he heard someone else approach the door. Poised at the side of the door, he raised a brass-knuckled fist.

The key turned in the lock, the knob rattled, the door swung open, and Calendri swaggered in. Lunging forward, he hit the liar hard on the side of the jaw, knocking his hat off. Calendri fell face-first on the carpet, out cold. He closed the door, took off the brass knuckles, wrenched the key from Calendri's grasp, locked the door and left the key turned, blocking the lock.

He rolled Calendri onto his back, forced open the man's mouth, pushed one of the rolled puttees into it and tied the other around the liar's head. He ripped open Calendri's overcoat, jacket and shirt. Then he yanked the bastardo's belt off, planning to use it to strap his hands behind his back. Yet, when he rolled Calendri onto his face again, he heard the clink of metal on metal and felt a hard lump in the overcoat's pocket. As he fished a pair of handcuffs from the pocket, he chuckled. Snapping the cuffs on this Carabinieri officer's wrists, locking them and throwing the key away was true justice.

After strapping Calendri's ankles together with the leather belt, he waited for a minute, admiring his handiwork. The man didn't stir, so he rolled him onto his back again, knelt astride him then sat on his legs. He started slapping Calendri's face and kept doing it until he heard a muffled groan, and saw the man's eyelids flutter. Hell, Calendri stunk of perfume and smelled like a bordello.

Drawing the bayonet from its scabbard, he flashed it before staring, terrified eyes. Then he grasped the bayonet in both hands and held it still, upright over Calendri's heart, point pricking the skin of the chest. Calendri struggled for life, tried to kick his legs, let out muffled screams and thrashed his head from side to side.

As a hoarse rasping sound came from the man's throat, he rammed the bayonet in until it hit something solid, a bone or the floor. Blood started to pool around the bayonet where it pierced the chest, yet the liar kept struggling when he should be dead.

Twisting the bayonet would take care of that, and he did until the body beneath him went limp. Blood ran out as he drew the bayonet from the dead man's chest. Carefully, he wiped the blade clean on the overcoat before shoving it back into its scabbard, making sure he didn't get blood on his uniform or gloves.

Eye twitching furiously, he quickly retrieved the puttees from Calendri's head and mouth. Then he slipped out of the window onto the fire escape, into the dark.

## *Chapter 1*

**Wounded** Italian soldiers surrounded Carmela DeMitre, some propped up on the beds of Udine's hospital, others sitting on a chair like hers or on the rough wooden floor. Some men had lost arms and legs. Others were heavily bandaged, the lucky ones, the few who'd survived after being seriously wounded in the trenches. They focused on her intently, as if listening to her reading letters could block out the rumbling of Austrian guns, the sound of the terrible slaughter on the Isonzo front.

This makeshift hospital could use a good scrubbing, she thought. Wrinkling her nose, she glanced at the pile of tattered khaki uniforms in a corner of the ward, cast off ripe with body odor. To accomplish what she came to do here, she would have to ignore the desire for order and cleanliness that she'd grown up with in her parents' prim and proper house in New York.

Having just finished reading a letter, Carmela continued sorting through a pile of mail that she'd tipped into her lap from her bag. She hoped that she'd done the right thing going to the Italian army's recruiting center in Florence and signing up for the *Posta Militare*, as her way to help Italy in the Great War. Now, faced with these shattered men in the shadow of the war-torn Alps she couldn't be sure.

She had thought she'd simply be delivering messages of love and offering words of encouragement, not reading letters so all could hear. So far, only a few soldiers had taken their mail to study in privacy. Although why wouldn't most of them want to share messages from home when they'd fought side by side, probably had little left to hide, and thousands of their comrades lost their lives?

So be it, if they wanted entertainment, she didn't mind providing it by reading to soldiers in need. Didn't mind

supplying a family connection for those who hadn't received any mail, or couldn't read, especially when they seemed to find her American accent entrancing. Besides, concentrating on their problems should help her to overcome her own personal tragedy.

A bit shaky inside, Carmela slit open a letter from Rome. "It is for Sergeant Tito, from a beautiful wife. Do you wish me to read?"

A gray-haired man raised the bandaged stump of an arm. "Si, si." How he could smile with such an injury, she'd never know.

Yet not all of them were friendly. One, a fellow on crutches who appeared to be in his early twenties like her, looked as ugly as the cracked window beside his head. He had a sneer on his face that at times seemed to be more like a penetrating leer.

Her English nurse friend, Cecily Jones, had warned her about men like him. Cis had also gone to some lengths to make it clear that with Italy having to conscript millions of men, many deserters now roamed the streets. As the enemy advanced, the northern half of the country had become completely lawless.

"This letter is short and sweet." Carmela cleared her throat then began to read aloud in Italian. "*My dearest husband, so long is your absence that our hearts bleed for you here at home. Gabriella, who now stands as tall as my waist, wishes she could roll back time and that you were here, and she could be small enough that you would carry her around on your shoulders.*" As Carmela continued to read, the elderly physician who'd escorted her into the hospital ward appeared in the doorway, beckoning to her with a finger. "*All my love, Francesca,*" she finished. Standing, Carmela slipped through the crowd of soldiers and handed the letter and envelope to Sergeant Tito.

Dr. Ricci took off his thick glasses, polishing the lenses. "I need you to come with me, Lieutenant DeMitre."

Carmela smiled at the soldiers. "Sorry, but you must excuse me." She gave the rest of the mail to a corporal who had his right leg in a cast, and he started calling out names and passing letters around. As she slid through the crowd to Dr. Ricci, a soldier



started clapping and it spread until the entire ward seemed to applaud. Feeling much appreciated, she followed Ricci into a small private room at the side of the ward, a room lit only by a lantern.

“This is Cato,” the doctor said in English. “I have a letter for him from his mother that came by special courier.” He slipped an open letter into Carmela’s hand.

“Special courier?”

“Cato is very special, and I would like you to do the honor of reading to him. He fought to the last bullet in the mountains, helping to save scores of Italians. The Austrians found him badly wounded. Impressed by his bravery, they returned him to us. As you can see, Cato still survives, but by a thread. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

Spirits wavering, beginning to feel shaky again, Carmela stared at a small figure covered by a blanket. The side of the bed that should show the outline of his right arm looked flat, as did the bottom of the bed that ought to show lumps where his feet would be. Pallid face, smooth, only a trace of hair on the upper lip and chin, a boy who didn’t look old enough to be in high school. He had his eyes open wide, but his expression seemed hollow, vacant. Yet she could see the bedclothes slowly rise and sink as he breathed.

Then the bedclothes seemed to stop moving, and Carmela tried to will them to keep going. Trembling, she clasped the letter in both hands to steady herself enough to read.

Dr. Ricci seized her arm, making her gasp. “He’s gone!” Ricci snatched his hand away from her, knelt by the left side of the bed, tugged a white hand from under the blanket and held the wrist. “My son, my only child,” he murmured, leaning forward, pressing an ear to the boy’s chest.

Shuddering, Carmela dropped the letter and watched it flutter to the floor. Hearing a scraping sound, she glanced up and found herself facing the doctor.

Glasses askew, as pallid as Cato, he muttered. “I’ve lost my son.” Then he stood with his mouth open, staring at her as if unable to say more.

"I'm terribly sorry." Carmela had never seen anybody die before. Sick to her stomach, she slowly left the room. She leaned on the wall outside, took a deep breath and muttered, "How cruel, Cato didn't even live long enough to hear from his mother." The unfairness of everything landed squarely on her shoulders. Not only could she still envisage Cato's frail figure, she became painfully aware of what the war had taken away from her. She had lost more than a close friend. She'd lost Ben, the man she loved. It had only been a few weeks since fate had taken him. Time, she needed plenty of time to get over it.

A soldier coughed, snapping her back to the present, making her realize that she had reentered the ward and they'd heard what she said about Cato.

Cecily hurried up to her. "Come on lovey, it's after six. Let's get you over to the Alpi."

"Cato died before I could read to him," she whispered.

"Yes, but we have to get on with life. Look, stop blaming yourself for everything, you did the best you could for Cato, and there's no way you could have foreseen what would happen to Ben."

"I know, and thanks for being such a good listener at dinner the other night when I kept talking about Ben. I'll find a way to get over losing him, somehow."

As Cis took her hand, Carmela felt the warmth of friendly fingers. "I saw Dr. Ricci take you in to see his son," Cis continued. "I guessed you might need a bit of help."

Carmela hurried through the crowded ward into the hospital's lobby with her friend. None of the soldiers said anything. They simply stared. Sadness had descended on them like a suffocating blanket, as it had on her.

Cecily pushed Carmela's Cossack hat onto her head and handed over her furry muff. "There you are, Czarina."

Czarina. The irritating title that Cecily had coined when she'd watched her select an overcoat, boots and hat at a local outfitter, a gray military style overcoat, knee high black boots and a Russian fur hat. Now, clever Cis used what had started as a joke to perk her up. It worked. "Please don't go calling me that again."

Cecily laughed and gave her a hug, the best kind of friend to have.

Brakes squealed outside. “C’mon, there’s our ride.” Cis grabbed Carmela’s arm and pulled her out into the frigid dark, toward a waiting army truck. “The driver’s a friend that I met in the Café Angelo. He’s a good sort.” As the passenger door swung open, Cecily hopped into the cab, reached out and dragged her up and in as well. Carmela slammed the door, wedging herself up against her friend. She knew they only had a mile to go, ten minutes at most in the truck, but in the dark and freezing wind, it would have been a very long mile afoot.

Not wanting to intrude on Cecily’s conversation with her army friend, Carmela allowed herself to drift into memories of Ben, hoping that it would ease her anguish.

Talent, he’d had more of it in his little finger than most people had in their wildest dreams. With her help at high school in New York, his writing had slowly but surely come alive, more so than even hers. He had the gift of storytelling, whereas she’d worked hard to develop it. At first, not being able to match him word for word disturbed her, but she soon began to enjoy helping a dear friend make progress.

The times they’d had together weren’t all smooth. Education didn’t keep him from saying things like, Yeah, and cursing and drinking with his friends. After they’d both graduated, he’d continued to indulge in what she called subway language. Subway, since he took a job helping to hack tunnels for trains under the streets of New York. Ben Carlotti could be exasperating, yet she never stopped admiring and loving him, and put his bad language down to a strange sense of humor.

Cecily shook her shoulder. “We’re there, let’s hop out.” The truck’s door flew open as Carmela tugged on the handle. A moment later, she found herself stepping across slippery cobblestones with Cis.

“Where did you get that walking stick?”

“It’s Mario’s. The bloke in the lorry, he wants me to keep it.”

“Have you hurt your leg or something?”

“No, but it’ll come in handy if I run into any lechers, or boozed up soldiers.”

“I think I ran into a lecher while reading letters at the hospital.”

“Well, if I run into the rotten bugger, he’ll get a dose of this stick.” Cis sounded as fiery as her red hair; she must have a little Irish in her, like Ben.

Trying to fight off a pang of sadness, Carmela bumped open the hotel door for her friend. “How are you going to get back to the hospital?”

“Mario’s returning with the lorry. He’ll only be a few minutes.”

Carmela gave her a peck on the cheek. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to go up to my room.”

“Good idea, you still look a bit shaky. You did hear about someone robbing and killing that military policeman in his third floor room, didn’t you? A major named Armanno Calendri.”

“No! I didn’t. I did see the Carabinieri searching the hotel, but I didn’t dare to ask why. Now, I’m really scared.”

“Just don’t be in too big a hurry to open the door of your room if anyone knocks, and make sure the windows are locked.”

“Look, I’m leaving early tomorrow morning for my first trip into the mountains for the Posta Militare, so I’ll be out of the way. Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine.” Being alone in her own room would be even harder than it had been every night since she’d been in Udine. But she had to face up to the danger here, and come to terms with losing Ben, keep herself busy and get used to it all.

“Where? What mountains?”

“The Tre Cime. The three peaks.”

“Do you want to take this stick?”

“No, I’ll be escorted, and will have my service pistol with me.”

Cecily shook the stick and grinned. “When I get back to the hospital, maybe I will track down that lecher you told me about and get some practice with it. I’ll see you again soon. Have a good trip.”

Relieved to have somewhere decent to stay, and at the same time worried about a police officer being murdered in the hotel, Carmela climbed the stairs. Before, her only misgivings about the hotel were that she really didn't deserve a good room in it when Cecily didn't have a nice room, and heroes like Cato Ricci only had a rundown hospital or even worse, filthy trenches in which to gasp their last breath.

She could understand why the army promoted her to lieutenant, as she'd attended Columbia University and had become truly bilingual in Italian and English. Other junior officers didn't have fancy quarters, though, and she suspected that being a 'token' American willing to work in Italy's defense had earned her a billet at the Alpi. The hotel didn't sound safe now, though, with a terrible murder in one of the rooms.

With the ominous rumble of artillery loud in her ears, feeling very alone and shaky, Carmela ducked into her room on the fifth floor. She slammed the door, locking it. Then she checked the window, finding it locked. Yet no one could climb this high up the brick front of the hotel and get in this window, and even if they could, she had a gun and could shoot well. She must take hold of herself. Other women had lost husbands and boyfriends like Ben, yet still kept a brave face.

Tears came to her eyes as she continued to think about Ben. She'd asked him to leave New York and join her in Italy, had even given him the name of the ship. Blaming her parents wouldn't work. Yes, her father had done his best to separate them, and had sent her to her grandparents' farm in Tuscany to get her away from him. Although it had been her own clever plan to have Ben join her in Italy that led to his death.

No survivors, her grandfather had said. She and an Austrian U-boat had sent the man she loved to his grave on the seabed. God, she missed talking to Ben, and watching him listening to her.

The radiator in her room hissed, leaking a puff of steam. It sounded as if it had as much pain inside it as she did. Not even taking off her hat, she sank into an easy chair in the corner. The wallpaper showed the spring flowers of the mountains, edelweiss, azaleas and bright orange poppies. They'd provided

a little relief when she first moved into the room, but now they seemed to laugh at her.

She felt much worse than when her boat, the Napoli, had run into choppy weather during the voyage from New York. It had pitched and rolled so violently that even good thoughts of Ben following her to Italy hadn't taken her mind off the nausea, or kept the bile from rising in her throat. If she'd only known what would happen.

If she had known and couldn't warn him, she'd have let the torrents of green water that crashed over the Napoli's bow sweep her off the deck into the sea, and waited for him down in the depths.

Carmela heard a heavy vehicle pull up outside, jumped to her feet, darted to the window and saw Cecily get into an army truck and slam the door. As Carmela sank back into the chair, she heard the truck drive off. Good, Cecily hadn't had to wait long.

The radiator blew off more steam and began to rattle as if about to explode, startling her, somehow jolting her back to thinking about Ben and New York. She should have said goodbye to her parents, left them and their blind prejudice against him being half-Irish, and moved upstate with him as he suggested. Then he'd still be alive, handsome and strong as ever. Now, she'd lost him forever.

Remembering their first kiss, she swallowed hard. Her eyes moistened as she imagined his lifeless body floating among the fish. They would never share another kiss, but she had to stop blaming herself and try to be positive. Ben would have wanted her to work through her grief.

Hearing someone shouting in the street, prompted her to get out of the chair again and peer out the window. Two wobbling men in khaki appeared under a gaslight, staggering, shoving and pushing each other. Carmela winced, remembering Ben struggling with some drunken Irishmen outside Clancy's bar in New York, and despite being hurt, how he rushed to stop her from getting hurt in an ugly conflict.

Calm yourself down, stop shaking, will you! She'd developed the habit of mumbling inner cautions as a little girl,

and to help to control herself, she still used favorites like; Hush your mouth; don't be spiteful; be nice.

Feeling hot and bothered now, Carmela stripped off her overcoat then pulled her Cossack hat from her head and tossed them on a chair with her muff. She kicked her boots off so she could sit cross-legged on the bed. Then peeled off an itchy wool sock and threw it at her bed's footboard.

The sock went wide, hitting the knob at the left end of her bed and her Glisenti automatic. It caught on the weapon and dangled down alongside the belt. Best use she'd found for the gun yet.

No wonder that the officers called the Glisenti the poor man's Luger. In practice, she'd fired six bullets and nearly sprained her wrist doing it. Yet she, a novice, still hit the target, and when the instructor showed her how to hold the weapon, she scored a bull's eye without trying hard. Not once, not a fluke, she'd drilled the target six times with the pistol and did just as well in rifle practice. Much to the excitement of the soldiers who'd gathered around.

Carmela peeled off her other itchy sock and tossed it. Being a crack shot had the opposite effect of building confidence and pride in her. She had shuddered at the thought that she herself could be a lethal weapon, and it still troubled her. Never point a gun at anyone unless you intend to shoot them, the instructor had said.

She didn't intend to kill anybody, and if she pointed a gun at someone, she doubted she could even begin to squeeze the trigger. She hadn't joined the army's postal service to fight. She'd joined to deliver letters to battle weary men.

More ugly evidence of war hung from the end of her bed; her British gas mask. He who takes his mask off dies, its warning label said.

The radiator let out a sharp hiss as if in agony with poison gas.

Someone tapped on the door. Carmela hopped off the bed, shoved her bare feet into her boots, grabbed the Glisenti and went to the door. "Who is it?"

“A letter for you, *Tenente*.” The bellboy, she recognized his squeaky voice.

Gripping the gun, Carmela unlocked and slowly opened the door.

The poor young fellow, complete with gold braid and purple uniform, stood before her, staring at the gun. Doing her best to smile, she held the weapon behind her back, and said, “*Urgente?*”

“*Si*.”

Before she had time to say, *Grazie*, he thrust the letter into her free hand, clicked his heels, turned and ran down the corridor.

After closing and locking the door, Carmela slid the gun back into its holster. The letter came from her grandfather in Florence. “Not more bad news,” she prayed. Fingers trembling, she ripped open the envelope.

As she read the first sentence, she clapped her hand over her mouth to stifle a squeal of delight. Scarcely able to believe it, she read it several more times:

*Beniamino is alive and well, Carmela.*

*He made a mistake in the departure time of the Pride of Long Island. An act of God, your Nonna and I believe. He came to Italy on another American boat, The Jersey Shore. Poor young fellow, when he arrived here in Florence he hadn't slept more than an hour. You should have seen his face fall when he realized that you believed he'd drowned when the U-boat sank The Pride, and you had left Florence to go to the war in the north. He showed us an engagement ring that he said is yours. We have never seen a ring more beautiful.*

*Ben didn't stay. He set out again as soon as we told him that you headed north. It is a pity we do not know your address. I hope he can find you through the army authorities.*

*Our best wishes to both of you. Love, Nonno and Nonna.*

Soaring on a cloud of ecstasy, Carmela slid back onto her bed and read the letter all over again, savoring its aroma of lavender, Nonna's favorite scent.

Dear forgetful, often late Ben, and now it had saved him.



Pity she hadn't found time to write to Nonno and tell him she had joined the Posta Militare and that they'd billeted her at the Alpi Hotel in Udine. Yet she'd been too busy trying to forget the most painful thing that ever happened to her, losing Ben.

Well, by the grace of God, he had survived, and if he didn't find her tomorrow, she'd soon find him.

She wouldn't be here, though. Clenching her teeth and at the same time trying to calm herself, Carmela jumped off the bed and started pacing the room. She needed to think this through clearly.

She had to leave early in the morning for the mountains, for the Tre Cime on a mission that would take a couple of days. It wouldn't do to disobey the orders they'd given her and back out on the trip, not with all those soldiers desperate to hear from their wives and children. No, Ben wouldn't want her to abandon her duties.

She'd leave a message for him with the army post office, with Cecily at the hospital and at this hotel, the biggest in town. Ben would be sure to come to Udine, looking for her, and would check with them. He'd never give up. He'd probably be waiting for her when she returned from the mountains. If not, she would find him and they'd get out of northern Italy while they were still alive.

"Yes!" she shouted, leaping back onto the bed, sitting and thrusting her head into her hands. Wildly happy, she began to shed tears of joy, droplets of love for Ben. She cared about him so much that the good news brought her to the point of bubbling over.

She remembered the pleasure of discovering his bright mind. They'd spent many happy hours together, her starting to play the role of teacher in the second year of high school, and he the student. She especially enjoyed helping him to learn the language of Italy. Sometimes, she managed to talk him into going to church with her, and as they became closer and older, she'd learned to appreciate his maleness, his hard muscles and wonderful strength.

Carmela pulled a token of love from the neck of her sweater, a silver locket that Ben gave her on the Coney Island sand. When

they managed to get back together, they would kiss again. Many times.

She grabbed one of the big pillows from behind her, hugged it hard and kept hugging. Buried her face in it and kissed, in her mind kissing him. Arms still locked around the pillow, she yelled, “Ben, I love you so much I’m bursting.”

So what if anyone heard her. She didn’t care. She wanted the whole world to hear.

## Chapter 2

**Ben** stared at the crowd of Italian soldiers in the café. Battle scarred men, half-starved, stuffing themselves with food and drowning their sorrows in wine. Through a gap in a window's blackout shutter, he saw flashes in the night sky, heard the rumble of heavy guns.

The idea of Carmela being in the middle of a war among lots of rough men bothered Ben a lot. He had to find her quickly before she got hurt. No women in here now, but it would be worth asking one of the waiters if they'd seen anyone like her.

His stomach rumbled and he couldn't recall when he last ate. No empty tables, wait a minute, that red-faced fellow with his pants wrapped from ankle to calf with puttees had finished his meal.

Ben eased his way between the tables to him. "*Finito?*"

"*Si.*" As the young man stood, Ben noticed two missing front teeth. One top and one bottom, gaps in the middle of otherwise perfect teeth.

"*Grazie.*" Sitting, Ben shoved aside a beer glass and a dinner plate littered with scraps of bread.

He'd pushed his luck poking around war-torn Italy searching for Carmela, but every time he spotted a blue and gold Carabinieri uniform, or a gray hat with a brim sticking out like airplane wings, he had to back off. Damned shame he couldn't talk to the military police, because they'd be sure to know if she were here. Although after seeing them slap the cuffs on a young man wearing regular street clothes, and marching him off, it would be too much of a risk. Rumor had it that they shot suspects without a trial and he needed to find a way to blend in before they pulled him over and arrested him as an Austrian

spy. Maybe he ought to dump his sweater, baggy pants and cap, and latch onto some of the khaki wool worn by these soldiers.

His mouth watered as he savored the delicious smell of fresh bread and garlic coming from the tables around him. Too much cigarette and cigar smoke in here, though, something he could do without.

A waiter came to the table and Ben pointed at the menu. “Choucroute.”

“You have Americano accent. I talk English good, yes?”

“I’m Italian-American, and yes, your English is good. Maybe you can help me. I’m looking for my girlfriend. Her name’s Carmela DeMitri. She’s tall and has dark hair. Nice looking.”

“Everyone look for honey like her.”

Ben didn’t like the way the waiter said it but forced himself to keep smiling. “She’s the girl I’m going to marry.”

“This café very busy, but army not always here. Come in waves, like today. Other times we pleased to serve officers, lady friends, gentlemen.”

“I’m hoping you’ve seen her somewhere.”

“Si, Americano woman come here. She with Posta Militare. Posta woman wear hat like Russian, but I sure she Americano. I see her day before yesterday with English nurse lady.”

Ben’s heart started thumping. His face felt flushed. The woman he loved must be very near if she was with the army’s postal service. “Know where she’s staying?” Beside himself with excitement, he snapped it out.

The waiter took a step backward and frowned. Annoyed at himself, Ben picked up the menu, pointing to Choucroute, hoping to calm things down.

“It mountain dish, sausage in hot wine cabbage.”

“About the Americano woman ...”

“I not understand. It sausage in hot wine cabbage.” The waiter had a tough job serving all these soldiers and had every right to be touchy.

“Look, I need help. Do you have any idea where she’s staying?”

“She here in Udine.”

The town looked about the size of New York's Little Italy. It shouldn't be too difficult to find her. "That's great! Thanks." The name of a hotel or boarding house would be even better, but narrowing it down to Udine would have to do for now. "I think I'll celebrate with the Choucroute and a cup of coffee."

"Americani soldiers come help Italy?"

"I don't know."

The waiter threw up his hands. "When are the Americani ..."

Ben flashed another smile. "They'll come soon."

He had something more pressing on his mind than worrying about his countrymen coming to fight the Austrians. He needed to find Carmela, but if he didn't switch clothes soon he'd attract too much attention. Melting into the khaki crowd could be a problem, though. If the Italian army caught up with him, he would be up to his neck in this war, and then he'd never find her. Nah, there wasn't much chance of that, blending in mattered more.

The waiter left the table, shaking his head, muttering about the Americani.

Ben drew a 4 x 5 notebook and a pencil from his pocket, adding a note about the waiter to the inch thick book he'd turned into a diary. Only twenty pages written thus far, but they spelled the beginning of an Italian adventure, a stirring time that Carmela would share, when he found her. Maybe they'd write a work of nonfiction about it together.

Carmela introduced him to reading exciting books, and writing. He owed her a lot.

Four soldiers sitting at a round table nearby kept peering at him. They were thirsty, hungry men who kept passing a flask of red wine around and carving slices from a hunk of cheese, wore khaki and had their lower pant legs wrapped with puttees. The hobnails in the soldiers' boots were so sharp they'd made tracks on the wooden floor. Their green felt hats sat on the table, hats with feathers worn down to the quill. Hats that reminded him of the book about Robin Hood Carmela read with him when they were young.

Good story, Robin Hood, but it didn't stack up to the one about Buck in Jack London's *Call of the Wild*. Mixed breed, and fought like a wild animal trying to survive. He could really relate to that. Maybe these men at the next table wouldn't have read London, but they were Alpini, mountain troops, and looked more than capable of being wild.

A bearded Alpino who dwarfed the other three faced him from the far side of the table. The man's forearm had a red puckered scar, a recent injury. A squat soldier with a monk-like fringe of hair sat to the giant's left. He waved his arms and jabbered to a skinny man across the table about women. They were tough looking bunch, all of them no doubt hardened by the fighting. A hefty soldier with his back to Ben looked about his own size, two hundred pounds of muscle and bone. The kind of brawn that had come in handy to this Italian-American for swinging a pick and earning a few bucks in the New York subway dig.

As he scribbled a description of the soldiers into his book, Ben noticed the giant Alpino staring at him with narrowed eyes. Too obvious, he must get out of these clothes.

Being from the U.S. hadn't given him a smooth passage in any part of the country. An officer in the Naples customs wanted to know why he'd come. Saying, to visit a sick relative, brought a snort of disbelief and a demand for the names of his family in Italy, and instead he gave the names of Carmela's grandfather and grandmother in Florence.

People in Naples had every right to have their nerves on edge with that U-boat sinking the *Pride of Long Island* in sight of the harbor. When he'd heard about it from Carmela's grandfather and realized he'd had a narrow escape, his heart missed many a beat.

The waiter brought his food and coffee then hurried away before Ben had a chance to say, *Grazie*. He shoved the notebook back into his pocket, focused his gaze on his plate and sawed away at a rubbery sausage. In the end, he picked up the fat lump, bit off its end and chewed the spicy meat.

He couldn't blame Carmela for not hanging around at her grandparents' Tuscany farm. If he'd been in her shoes, and

thought he'd lost someone he loved, he would have done something like head north and join the colors. It shouldn't be difficult to catch up with her now, but he ought to take a shot at getting into some khaki first.

Ben swallowed the last of his cabbage and coffee. He'd already checked out the outfitter in Udine, and had gotten nothing but suspicious stares and a request for an army ID when he asked about Italian uniforms, so he didn't waste time beating a retreat.

The soldier at the round table with his back to him stood and lurched toward the door. Standing, Ben picked up the duffel bag he'd wedged between his feet. The waiter eyed him from the other side of the room, so he slipped a few lira under his plate, enough to cover the bill and a modest tip. He didn't need anyone chasing him, complaining about the Americani.

Ben tailed the soldier, staying a few paces behind. He turned a corner, crept around the back of the café, keeping as close to its wall as possible. As soon as he got a chance, he'd talk to the soldier.

It was a clear night, cold and crisp. To Ben's right, a tall wooden box overflowed with trash. On his left, a tin pipe jutting from the wall spouted a stench of greasy food.

Yes, these Alpini soldiers looked tough, but it would be worth him taking a shot at buying this man's khaki uniform when he might not get a better chance. No military police around right now, the worst that could happen would be the man telling him to go to hell. Yeah, he'd take the risk.

The soldier disappeared into a ramshackle shed. Moonlight bathed the shed, but it smelled worse than rotting garbage. A sign hanging from a rusty nail on the door said *Signori*.

As Ben waited outside to let the man get down to business, he slipped a hand into his pocket and touched the diamond ring he'd pinned there for safekeeping, imagining it sparkling. The engagement ring he'd bought with subway digging money and had intended to give Carmela at her grandfather's house in Florence. He could hardly wait to ask her to marry him.

Ben stepped into the outhouse, closing the door behind him. He propped his duffel against the doorjamb. The moon

shone through what passed for a window, a square hole in the wall.

The soldier stood halfway along a urinal. A rut dug into the mud floor at the foot of the front wall looked long enough for several men to take a leak shoulder to shoulder. The man's left hand rested on the wall, and he gazed downward, watching his stream.

Tall man, about the same size as him, six feet, long arms, big shoulders and a thick neck. He seemed rugged enough, but all boozed up, not with it. The holster at the fellow's hip looked empty. The man didn't even glance up, didn't appear to have seen him come in.

A few feet behind the soldier, in the back corner, Ben noticed a toilet-sized hole in the dirt. The cesspit had a flat rock on either side where a man could place his feet while squatting. He stepped behind the soldier, as if making for the stink pit, but paused for a second and flexed the muscles in his arms and legs. Doing his best to contain himself, he drew alongside the soldier as if going to urinate. "*Ciao.*"

The man frowned.

Ben thought he'd said *Ciao* like an Italian, but then this fellow had sat at the next table and could have overheard him and the waiter talking.

"*Mi piacerebbe avere una ...* I'd like to have a uniform like yours to show my family in the States."

The soldier buttoned his fly and then turned to face him. Ben found himself staring across a shaft of moonlight into a weather beaten face. Crinkles ran around the eyes, eyes as hard as ice. The corner of the left eye kept twitching.

Ben fished some bills from his pocket. "I'll give you five for the jacket and pants."

The soldier's face split in what looked more like a sneer than a grin.

"Ten for the whole set of gear, you keep my clothes. You can tell your friends I talked you into this."

The man rattled off a mouthful of slang, and even though Ben couldn't translate it he got the meaning: Go put your head up your . . .



Ben forced himself to grin. “Look, I admire what the Alpini is doing in this war, and so do the people back home. I can’t think of a better gift for my family than that jacket. How about letting me buy it? You can say you left it on your chair in the café and somebody stole it.”

The soldier whipped out an automatic pistol, seized the front of Ben’s sweater and yanked him forward, off balance. Faster than an alley cat, the man jammed the gun into his throat. Ben didn’t have a chance.

“I’m taking all you’ve got, Americano.”

Grumbling, Ben shoved the money at him.

The man glanced down, grabbed it, and in doing so lowered the gun’s muzzle.

Ben punched him hard on the side of the head.

The soldier’s hat flew off. He collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Ben scooped up the automatic and the money, slid them into his jacket pocket.

He propped the soldier up against the wall. Snatched off the man’s dog tag and shoved it into his own pocket. Frantic, he began stripping off the uniform jacket. Fair game since the soldier pulled the stunt with the gun. When he’d yanked the jacket’s arms clear, he let its owner fall onto the dirt.

The soldier stirred as Ben knelt and unlaced one of the boots. Glaring, the man jerked to a sitting position and grabbed for his free leg. The other hand flew upward. The steel of a long knife flashed.

As Ben seized the soldier’s wrist, the man pulled him down. Thrashing his legs, Ben tried to twist away, but couldn’t.

Locked together, they rolled away from the urinal. Then the soldier’s head banged into a rock at the side of the toilet pit, and he let out a gasp of pain, going limp.

Exhausted, Ben staggered to his feet. He rubbed some mud off his face, picked up his cap and shoved it onto his head, then wiped mud from his jacket and pants.

Removing both boots from the soldier, he unfastened the belt and pulled off the khaki pants. He gathered the soldier’s outer clothes, hat and boots in his arms and rushed to the door.

Breathing hard, he stopped for a second to hook the rope loop of his duffel onto a couple of free fingers.

In the moonlight now, outside free and clear. Christ, he had blood on his hands, lots of it. Not his, though, the soldier must have stuck himself with the knife.

“Bastardo!” The man shouted.

Jesus, he’d come around. Ben swiveled, facing the door, expecting him to come crashing through it, but heard a string of vitriol instead. “Bastardo! I fuck your Posta woman. I cut your balls off. I gouge your eyes out ...”

Several rough hands seized Ben from behind. Lifted by the arms, swung forward face down, he dropped everything. A stone wall came at him. Blinding pain shot through his head.

Then the wall hit him hard again.

**He** seemed to be flying through the air on one of those newfangled airplanes. It dived, just missing New York’s Woolworth building, and plunged him into darkness.

He clapped his hands over his ears to stop them from ringing, too late when the blast already rattled around inside his head. The pickax he’d been swinging jabbed into his chest. Subway dust swirled around him. Muck pelted his face and sweaty shirt.

Busted gas main. A flash of flame, that’s the last thing some poor digger had seen. Gas, that’s what they all feared.

Dave, where are you?

Diggers and suits, the muddy and the clean, that’s what he and his brother called them. Forty feet above, enjoying fresh air and sunshine, the suits didn’t understand. How could they if they only peered through gaps in the planking down into these dirty depths?

Dave, where the hell are you?

Squinting, Ben focused on a pile of wreckage twenty yards ahead, peered through the murk at jumbled rocks, twisted planking and poles leaning at crazy angles. The thirty-foot poles seemed to wave their splintered ends at him. They no longer propped the planking up over the subway trench.

He spotted a bloody hand sticking out of a pile of rocks ahead, leapt to his feet, rushed to it, scrambled up the pile and clutched a lifeless hand. Dave, Dave, Dave ...

*"Muovono!"* A wave of water slapped Ben in the face. The chilling shock snapped him back to reality, to Italy.

A large, bearded soldier peered down at him, swinging a bucket from a brawny hand. Ben raised his head from the wooden floorboards and saw another Italian soldier by the door. Rifle aimed at him.

Ben pushed himself onto an elbow. Then sat upright, touching himself with his hands and staring. He still wore his sweater and baggy pants, and as he glanced up hoping to see the peak of his cap, a sharp pain lanced into his eyes, as if someone tried to gouge them out. Oh, mamma, his head hurt.

Rummaging in his pockets, Ben found them empty. They'd taken the diamond ring, his passport and must have his money and diary too. He couldn't see his duffle bag, either.

"On your feet." The bearded one said it slowly to him in Italian, perhaps not sure he understood. Ben didn't feel like cooperating with anyone, even with someone much bigger and stronger.

They hauled him up, marched him to an office and brought him to a halt in front of a metal desk. In the far corner, a woodstove with glass panes in its door blasted out heat. He began to sweat.

One of the Alpini pushed a chair against the back of his knees and he collapsed onto the seat. The other soldier threw his cap into his lap.

A truck rumbled past the building. Ben turned, glancing through the window. The sudden movement sent pain lancing through his head, making him flinch. Agonized, he caught a blurred glimpse of a vehicle towing an artillery piece, a weapon so long that he couldn't see the end of its barrel. Then his vision cleared and he saw lines of men with capes, rifles and steel helmets following in the big gun's wake. The Italians were on the move, churning up mud.

A slender blond officer entered the office, seated himself at the desk.

The man's icy blue eyes seemed to cut right through him. A captain, Ben guessed when he saw three stars in a box on the sleeve of the uniform. The capitano drew a revolver from the leather holster at his waist. A short weapon with a bore as wide as a thumb, aimed straight at Ben. One squeeze of the trigger would blow a gaping hole in his chest.

"I should turn you over to the Carabinieri, Mr. Carlotti," the captain said in clear English. "They would take great pleasure in shooting a spy who wounded one of my men, stabbed him in the leg."

"Don't know what you're talking about."

"Why are you in Udine?"

Ben couldn't come up with a story that wouldn't bring a flood of questions so he didn't answer. If he told the truth, he'd drag Carmela into this. He didn't want to get her in trouble.

The captain placed the gun on the desktop, studied him as if he hadn't decided whether to shoot him or not. Heart in his mouth, Ben noticed that his passport lay on the desktop beside what looked like a folded uniform.

The officer picked up the passport, stood and strolled over to the stove. Before Ben could protest, the captain swung open the furnace door and tossed the paperwork into the flames.

"What did you do that for?"

A cold smile spread across the captain's face as he returned to his seat. "You are no longer an Americano, Beniamino Carlotti. You are an Italian deserter."

Cap in hand, Ben leapt to his feet. "No, I'm not!"

The soldiers pushed him down again.

The captain threw the khaki uniform at Ben, hitting him in the middle, and he ended up clutching it.

"You wanted Baldovino's Alpini uniform, Carlotti. Now you have it. And you will perform his duty for Italy."