

CHAPTER 1

When Paolo reached the deserted stretch of road where it was too steep to pedal he dismounted and began to wheel his bicycle instead. He knew it was far too late for him to be out. He was not supposed to go out alone after dark at all and so, inevitably, it was something he spent a good deal of his time plotting to do. It was around two o'clock in the morning and the high walls on either side of the road gave his footsteps a curious double echo; it was, as always, frightening.

His way ahead lay uphill. He was returning home from one of his secret night rides into Florence, which now lay behind him in its bowl of hills, a dark, closely shuttered wartime city. There was very little

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traffic except for police and army trucks at that time of night. Streets and squares were dark and silent and the bridges that spanned the silvery, snaking River Arno were all unlit. If he looked back he could see the familiar ribbed dome of the cathedral and its attendant bell tower, which he had known since childhood, flattened against the silhouette of the northern suburbs. By day they were part of his ordinary world. At this time of night they were not so reassuring.

The houses on either side of the road were mostly large nineteenth-century mansions, set well apart and looming in spacious gardens behind locked iron gates. Many of them were now closed up. Their owners had abandoned them and decamped to the countryside, where food was less scarce. No hospitable light spilled onto the road and only dry leaves skittered across the fitful beam of his carefully shaded bicycle lamp. He began to wonder why he did this. The most exciting part, really, was planning his escape – the elaborate subterfuge of pretending to go to bed early and listening out for his mother's footsteps on the stairs and her heels tapping along the side landing and then waiting for her to say her last prayers of

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the day and turn out her light. Then came his own noiseless descent, the squeeze through the back pantry window and the agonizing tension of trying to remove his bicycle from the shed without disturbing his old dog, Guido. Maria, the only servant who still "lived in", occupied the room behind the kitchen, but she slept like a log. His older sister Constanza's bedroom was on the top floor and it was a fairly safe bet that if she did hear anything she would not bother to let on.

The climax of the escapade was the moment when he took off all alone, freewheeling downhill in the dark with a fresh wind in his face. And it was over much too soon. Escape was essential, though. He had to get away from the boredom, the pinched wartime austerities of his home: Constanza's tiresome aloofness, his mother's goodness and the burden of endlessly being expected to be helpful. With his father away, a household of women – relieved only by the coming and going of priests who did not count as men – was no place for him.

The city at night fascinated him. At thirteen, he liked to think he was one of those characters who welcomed the darkness to pursue their own

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particular purposes, like his current hero, James Cagney, whom he had seen in American movies: hard-boiled, not always on the right side of the law and devastatingly attractive to women in spite of being short and not very handsome. With these thoughts in his head, Paolo would cycle along streets of shops that were familiar by day but now mysterious, with all their shutters down. Sometimes he would catch a glimpse of lovers in shadowed doorways. He had learned how to dodge drunks and gangs of boys much tougher than he was and to dismount and whisk around corners to avoid the civil or military police, and to keep well within the shadow of the wall in deserted squares. The huddled groups he sometimes came upon, deeply immersed in murmured conversation, cigarettes aglow in the dark and faces theatrically lit for a second by the flare of a match, excited him deeply. So, most of all, did those side streets where doors opened and closed briefly to reveal dimly lit interiors inhabited, so Maria said, by "bad women".

But, beginning to trudge home in the small hours of the morning, he felt the usual sense of anti-climax and frustration. Nothing had happened, and now he

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had to face the anxiety of getting back into the house again without being discovered.

He stopped and slung his bicycle against a nearby wall to get his breath back and consider the situation. At that moment someone came up silently behind him and clapped a strong hand over his mouth.

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