

THE LIGHT AFTER THE WAR

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To my mother



CHAPTER ONE

Spring 1946

Vera Frankel had never seen the sun so bright or streets teeming with so many people. Lovers held hands, teenagers zoomed by on Vespas, and old women carried shopping bags laden with fruits and vegetables. Vera smelled sweat and cigarettes and gasoline.

The experience of arriving in Naples from Hungary made Vera remember the early spring days in Budapest when she was eight years old and recovering from diphtheria. The curtains in her room had been drawn back and she was allowed to sit outside and eat a bowl of plain soup. Nothing had ever tasted so good, and the scent of flowers in the garden was more intoxicating than her mother's perfume.

All around her, people felt the same way now. The outdoor cafés overflowed with customers enjoying an espresso without fear of bombs exploding. They nodded at neighbors they had been too afraid to stop and talk to, and kissed boys returning from the front until their cheeks were raw. Eleven months ago the Allies had defeated the Nazis and the war in Europe was over.

“I didn’t know pizza like this existed,” her best friend Edith said as she bit into a slice of pizza. For the last year and a half they had been hiding in the small village of Hallstatt in Austria, where all they had to eat was soup and potatoes. “The tomatoes are sweet as honey.”

Vera consulted the clock in the middle of the piazza. They sat at an outdoor table with two slices of pizza in front of them.

“My appointment is at two p.m.,” Vera announced. “I won’t get the job if I’m late.”

“We’ve been in Naples for forty-eight hours,” Edith protested, tying her blond hair into a knot. “We haven’t seen the palace or the gardens or the docks. Couldn’t you schedule your interview for tomorrow?”

“If I don’t get the job, we won’t be in Naples tomorrow,” Vera replied grimly. She thought of the pile of lire that was carefully folded under the pillow in their room at Signora Rosa’s pensione. It was barely enough to cover a week’s accommodation for her and Edith. “You need to find a job, too.”

“When was the last time you saw women who weren’t wearing gold stars, men not in uniform, people eating and drinking and laughing.” Edith scanned the piazza. “Can’t we have one day to relax and enjoy ourselves?”

“You eat my slice.” Vera pushed her plate toward Edith. “I’ll meet you at Signora Rosa’s in the evening.”

“I promise I’ll look for a job after the noon *riposo*.” Edith’s blue eyes sparkled. “We are in Italy now, we must behave like Italians.”

Vera walked briskly through the winding alleys, consulting the map Signora Rosa had drawn her with directions for the American

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embassy. Signora Rosa owned the boardinghouse where they were staying, and in two days, she had already taken Vera and Edith under her wing. The American embassy was in the eleventh quarter, which had once been one of the most elegant parts of Naples. But the war had left gaping holes in the streets, obstructing her route. Daisies grew where buildings once stood, and sides of houses were missing, leaving their abandoned interiors exposed. Vera thought of her home in Budapest, the shattered windows of her parents' apartment building, the women and children huddled together in the dark. Hungarian soldiers, young men who in another time would have asked her to dinner, had herded families toward the trains.

She thought of her father, Lawrence, who had been sent to a forced labor camp in 1941 and hadn't been heard from since. And of her mother, Alice, who had continued to set the table for him every night, as if one evening he would appear in his dark overcoat and scarf and sit down to her schnitzel.

And she thought of Edith, who was more like her sister than her best friend. They were both almost nineteen years old, born three days apart at the same hospital. They lived across the hall from each other their whole lives, and the doors to their apartments were always kept open.

Edith had always been the wild one: at fifteen she had borrowed one of her mother's dresses and convinced Vera to crash a New Year's Eve gala at the Grand Hotel when Vera would have rather sat at home with a book. Edith hadn't wanted to flirt with boys; she wanted only to see the fashions worn by the most glamorous women in Budapest.

But Edith had changed when her childhood sweetheart, Stefan, didn't return from the labor camps. She was like a racehorse whose spirit had been broken and could barely trot around the course. It was Vera who propelled them forward after the war: acquiring the train tickets to Naples and finding Signora Rosa's pensione. It was Vera who encouraged Edith to get dressed in the morning and do her hair. It was only when Edith was all dressed up and socializing at one of the piazzas that she seemed like her old self. Edith never let anyone see her without a belt cinched around her waist and her hair perfectly brushed.

Vera put the map away and turned off her mind. She could worry about Edith later; right now she had to focus on finding the embassy.

"Excuse me." Vera approached an old man selling dried chestnuts. "I am looking for the American embassy."

"The Americans," the old man scoffed. "They bombed our city and now they eat our pasta and steal our women. A pretty girl like you should marry an Italian boy!"

"I'm not looking for a husband." Vera smoothed her black hair, suppressing the fact that she was Hungarian, not Italian. "I'm trying to get a job."

"Behind those gates," the man said, pointing across the street. "Tell them we can rebuild our own city. We've been doing it for centuries."

Vera walked quickly to the villa. It had a rounded entry and marble columns. Ivy climbed the walls and the shutters were painted green. She straightened her skirt and wished she had splurged on a pair of

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stockings. But the money had to last until she and Edith were both working, and it didn't stretch for makeup or hosiery. Vera wet her lips and climbed the stairs to the front door.

"Can I help you?" A man wearing a khaki uniform answered the door. He was tall and blond, and his face was freshly shaven.

"I'm looking for Captain Wight," Vera said, trying to keep her voice from trembling.

The man slipped his hands in his pockets. He stood in the doorway, but Vera could see the circular entry behind him.

"I'm Captain Wight. But I'm sorry, we're not making donations today. You could try back on Friday." He tried to shut the door, but Vera put her hand out and stopped him.

"Please, wait. I'm here for the secretary job." She gave him a sheet of paper. "Captain Bingham sent me."

Captain Wight glanced at the paper. He looked as if he was about to say something, but then shrugged.

"Come in. It's too hot to stand outside."

Vera followed him through rooms decorated with marble floors and intricate frescoed ceilings. Sheets half covered brocade furniture, and velvet drapes hung from the windows.

"It's like a palace," Vera breathed.

"It was a palace," he said, leading her to a room lined with tall bookshelves. There was a large wooden desk in the center and an Oriental rug covering the floor. "The Palazzo Mezzi was built in the eighteenth century. We commissioned it in 1943 from the Count and Countess Mezzi. The Mezzis fled to Switzerland, but we have not been able to contact them. We are lucky it escaped the bombs; some of the frescoes are priceless."

“The old man on the corner who sells chestnuts thinks the Americans are taking everything that isn’t theirs,” Vera said lightly.

Captain Wight’s eyes grew serious. He sat in a leather chair and motioned Vera to sit opposite him. “I want to leave Naples the way it was before Hitler got his hands on it.”

“I’m sorry.” Vera sat down and twisted her hands in her lap. “If the Americans hadn’t won the war, a German would be sitting in that chair. And he wouldn’t be offering me a job.”

At least, she hoped Captain Wight would give her the job.

“I’m not offering you a job either.” Captain Wight frowned, the letter sitting unread on his desk. “Captain Bingham promised me an experienced secretary who was fluent in four languages.”

“Five,” Vera gulped. “I’m fluent in five languages: Italian, French, Hungarian, Spanish, and English. I can type and take shorthand, and I know how to brew American coffee.”

Captain Wight gazed at Vera for so long she turned away, blushing. His hair was short and slicked to one side; his eyes were a pale blue. He had a dimple on his chin and a small scar on his left hand.

“How old are you?”

“Eighteen and three quarters,” Vera replied. “I can press your shirts and make a bed,” she added in desperation.

“I’m not looking for a maid. Gina comes to clean every day. And I’d much rather drink Italian espresso than American coffee.” He tapped his fingers on the desk. “It is a difficult position, not suitable for a young girl.”

“Please,” Vera pleaded. She felt the breath leave her lungs. Captain Wight was the only lead she had. If she didn’t get the job, she’d have to find work in a restaurant or bar, and she wasn’t well-suited

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for that. Her secretarial skills were much stronger. “Read Captain Bingham’s letter.”

Vera glanced at the desk while he read the letter. A collection of gold fountain pens and an ashtray full of cigarette butts sat off to the side. Papers were strewn everywhere; a crystal paperweight was covered in dust.

She grabbed the ashtray and emptied its contents into the garbage. She collected and fastened the papers with a paper clip. Then she screwed the tops on the fountain pens and dusted the paperweight with the hem of her skirt. When Captain Wight looked up, his desk was in perfect order.

“I’m very organized.” She smiled, sitting back in the chair.

“Is all this true about what happened to your parents?” Captain Wight waved the paper in the air.

Vera flashed on the picture of her mother and father taken before the war that she kept in her purse. Her mother wore a mink coat and evening shoes with satin bows. Her father had a bowler hat and carried a briefcase.

“Yes.” She nodded, blinking away tears.

“The pay is twenty lire a week,” Captain Wight said as he fiddled with a fountain pen. “Dictation can be very boring. You’ll get cramps in your hands and a bad back from sitting so long.”

“I’m a hard worker,” Vera said simply.

“My last secretary ran off with a sailor.” Captain Wight stood up and strode to the fireplace. “I was hoping for someone with more experience.”

“I could never marry a sailor.” Vera smiled. “I’m afraid of the sea.”

“In that case”—he held out his hand, and there was a twinkle in his eye—“the job is yours.”

Captain Wight showed her the morning room where he drank his coffee and read the newspapers. He led her into the kitchen, which had thick plaster walls and worn oak floors. The gray stone counters were covered with dirty plates, cups, and silverware.

“I thought you had a maid,” Vera reminded him, instinctively collecting knives and spoons and loading them into the sink.

“Gina’s husband was killed in Africa and she has five children at home.” Captain Wight picked up a red apple and polished it on his sleeve. “Sometimes she has to leave early or come in late.”

“I could help,” Vera offered, noticing the pot of congealed oatmeal, the half-eaten pieces of fruit.

“I’m happy with dry toast in the morning and an omelet at lunch,” Captain Wight answered. “But you’re welcome to help yourself. Louis, the gardener, grows excellent fruits and vegetables.”

Vera followed him through halls hung with crystal chandeliers. The walls were lined with paintings in gilt frames and doors opened onto salons and ballrooms. She imagined men in silk tuxedos, women in glittering evening gowns, the tinkling of glasses, the sounds of a ten-piece orchestra.

They returned to the library, and Captain Wight took his seat at his desk.

Vera tried to concentrate on Captain Wight’s words, but her eyes started to close. She had barely slept, sharing the narrow bed at the pensione with Edith. That morning she woke early so she could bathe and iron her cotton dress.

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“Vera,” Captain Wight repeated.

“I’m ready.” Vera started, shifting in the chair on the other side of the desk from him. She grabbed a pen and notepad. “Please begin.”

“I have a better idea.” Captain Wight looked at her. “Go to Marco’s trattoria on Via del Tribunale. Tell Marco to feed you his best linguine with prawns and prosciutto and put it on my tab. We’ll start in the morning.”

“I can’t take your charity,” Vera protested, her stomach growling with hunger.

“In America we call it an advance.” Captain Wight stood up and moved to her side of the desk. He took her arm and gently led her toward the entry. “Don’t worry, you’ll earn it.”

Vera skipped through the streets of Naples like a schoolgirl freed for the summer. She felt lighter than she had since they arrived. She had a job! Now she could pay for their cramped room at Signora Rosa’s; she could buy lipstick and stockings for her and Edith.

Vera passed the Piazza Leone and saw Edith sitting at a table. Edith was eating a gelato and whispering to a man with slick black hair. Their chairs were pressed close together; the man had his hand draped across Edith’s shoulder.

“You’re back so soon!” Edith exclaimed. “This is Franco. He bought me a gelato.”

“We don’t accept presents from strangers,” Vera announced as she approached the table. The sun was bright and Edith’s pale cheeks were flushed.

“A present is jewelry or stockings,” Edith protested. “A gelato is something to share. Franco has a motorcycle; he’s going to drive me around the Bay of Naples.”

“Tell Franco another time,” Vera instructed, ignoring the young man with brown eyes and long, thick lashes.

Edith leaned in and whispered something to Franco. He laughed and tucked a stray blond hair behind Edith’s ear.

Vera started walking, waiting for Edith to catch up with her. She passed trattorias with pasta hanging from the windows and bakeries with cannelloni and chocolate tortes displayed on silver trays.

“Franco was lovely,” Edith said as she strode beside her. “He called me *bella*.”

“Italian men call all women under the age of ninety ‘bella.’” Vera scanned the shops for Marco’s trattoria. She found it on the corner, a narrow restaurant with red awnings and tables covered in checkered tablecloths.

Vera entered, a bell sounding over the door. A woman swept the floor and a man counted money at the cash register.

“Signor Marco?” Vera inquired.

“We are closed,” said the woman. “We will open again for dinner.”

Vera smelled olive oil and garlic and onions. Her stomach rose to her throat and suddenly she felt dizzy. Her knees buckled and she sank to the floor.

“Drink this,” a voice said.

Vera blinked at the man who stood over her. He pressed a glass to her lips and shouted commands in Italian. The woman brought two plates of spaghetti to the table. There was a loaf of bread and a pot of olive oil.

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“Captain Wight sent me. I’m his secretary,” Vera explained, eyeing the spaghetti. “He said to put it on his tab.”

Marco handed them each a fork. “Start eating, but not too fast, your stomach will not allow it. Then my wife will bring dessert.”

Vera and Edith waited until Marco disappeared to the back room. Vera twirled the spaghetti around her fork, inhaling the fresh oregano. The tomato sauce was rich and oily and dripped onto the plate.

“Why is your boss buying our dinner?” Edith dipped a chunk of bread in olive oil. “Did you sleep with him?”

“Don’t talk like that,” Vera snapped. “He is only kind.”

“He’s probably old and wants to get his hands up your skirt.” Edith chewed the bread.

“Not old at all,” Vera mused. “He looks like an American cowboy.”

“And you wouldn’t let me ride on the back of Franco’s Vespa,” Edith grumbled.

“I’m working for Captain Wight, not dating him.” Vera soaked the tomato sauce up with bread. “You have to be careful with Italian men; they only want one thing.”

“Franco has the most beautiful eyes,” Edith sighed. “I want to wrap my arms around his waist and hold on forever.”

Vera looked sharply at Edith. When she wasn’t lying in bed all day with the curtains drawn, this was the way Edith had behaved ever since the camps were liberated and Stefan wasn’t accounted for. She spent her days mooning over photos of actors in movie magazines and flirting with any male that crossed their path: the engaged American soldier on the train to Naples, the boy who helped Signora Rosa with chores and smelled like fish. It was only at night, when Vera

curled her arm around her, that Edith whispered Stefan's name and let the tears roll down her cheeks.

Vera started to reply, but she didn't have the strength. She concentrated on scraping every strand of spaghetti from the plate. Only after Marco had given them thick slices of chocolate cake and cups of black coffee did Vera turn to Edith.

"You can't throw yourself at a man because he reminds you of Stefan."

"You think I should save myself for him." Edith's brown eyes flashed. "You think I should sit in our room and wait for Stefan to appear at the door."

"He could be alive." Vera avoided Edith's eyes. "You have no proof he's dead."

Edith's voice rose. "I don't need them to identify a body. I know here." She touched her chest.

"The war has only been over eleven months," Vera pleaded. "They're finding survivors every day."

"Even if Stefan were lying wounded in a hospital, he would find a way to get word to me. Stefan and I loved each other. He wouldn't let a few gunshot wounds keep us apart. Nothing you say can convince me that he's not dead." Edith's cheeks flamed and she pushed her chair back. "We're in a new country with men who are alive. Men who can buy us flowers and chocolates and recite poetry."

Edith flung open the door and ran down the street. Vera thanked Marco and hurried outside. She ran after Edith and wrapped her arms around her. Edith sobbed onto Vera's shoulder, her breath coming in short gasps and a low, guttural sound emerging from her throat.

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Vera pictured Edith and Stefan strolling along the Danube. They used to swim in the baths, splashing and playing like young seals. She remembered Stefan's large brown eyes, his hands holding Edith's face to say good-bye. Stefan vowed he would return, and Edith promised to wait for him. But Vera and Edith hadn't returned to Budapest after the war. She was certain her parents and Stefan hadn't made it back. The war had been over for almost a year. Someone would have alerted them by now. Without the people they loved, there was nothing for them in Hungary.

"You're right." Vera stroked Edith's hair. "We're in a new country, and everything is before us."