



## 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

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 Arno River 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 light. 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 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 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, coasting 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 and from 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 his own 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, 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, according to Maria, by “bad women.”

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

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

He stopped and flung 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.



## CHAPTER 2

“*Silenzio!* Don’t try to struggle,” said a man’s voice close to his ear. No chance of that. Paolo felt himself go limp with fear. His first thought was that he might have wet himself, and he prayed that it was not enough to notice. His next thought was *I’m going to be beaten up*. His arms were jerked behind his back and pinioned. Whoever it was—and he sensed there were two of them—they were much bigger than he was. He was swung around, and the hand was removed from his mouth. He screwed up his face, but no blow came.

In front of him was a man who, he guessed, was smaller than the one who was still gripping his hands tightly behind his back. The man wore a peaked cap

pulled well down and a scarf pulled well up over the lower part of his face. His deep-set, slightly slanting eyes glittered in the dark—eyes like a fox’s. He had a shotgun, but it was not pointed at Paolo. Instead, he held it nonchalantly in the crook of his arm like a man out shooting birds. *But I bet it’s loaded*, thought Paolo.

“You—Paolo Crivelli?”

Paolo nodded. *How do you know my name?* he wanted to ask, but his mouth was too dry to speak.

“*Attenzione*—listen carefully. We’re not going to hurt you if you know how to keep quiet, understood?” The man who held him jerked Paolo’s neck backward as though to emphasize this point.

“You’re Signora Crivelli’s son?”

Another nod.

“We have a message for your mother.”

*My mother?* Paolo turned completely cold with terror. What could men like these want with his mother?

“We need to speak with her. Not at the house. Wait till you’re alone with her, and then tell her we’re in the area and we’ll be getting in touch—tomorrow night if we can—the usual way.”

Paolo said nothing.

“Do like we tell you. And if anyone else—*anyone*, understand?—finds out and sticks their nose in, it’ll be her that gets trouble.”

The grip on Paolo’s arms tightened. Paolo nodded again. Then, quite suddenly, he was let go. The man who had held him spun him around to face the way home, then picked up his bicycle and thrust it at him.

“Get going,” he said, giving him a shove.

Without a word, Paolo mounted his bike and forced his trembling legs to carry him away, up the hill. He did not look back; he knew that if he did, the road behind him would already be empty.

He was still numb with shock when he reached home. He badly wanted to be sick, but first he had to stop his old dog, Guido, from barking. He had remembered to bring a piece of ham bone in his pocket for the purpose. As a guard dog, Guido was a complete failure. He had never been much good at it, and now, in old age, he had more or less given up trying, but that didn’t stop him from barking. Before the war, Paolo’s father had had three dogs besides Guido: two fine hunting dogs and another watchdog. But now that he had gone away, the family was left

with only Guido, and there was hardly enough food even for him.

Guido lay chained in his kennel, dozing. When he heard Paolo coming, he got up, stiff-legged, and came out, stretching his front paws and making half-hearted growling noises. Paolo produced the ham bone, and the dog snatched it eagerly, then settled down to gnaw it with what remained of his back teeth. Paolo wheeled his bicycle on toward the house, past the barn and the sheds, and propped it up against the wall next to Maria's, a high, old-fashioned model with two big baskets attached to the front and back. Then he swung himself up onto the lower part of the shed roof.

Now for the pantry window. He climbed up to where he had escaped from earlier in the night. He had left the window propped open with a bit of stick, the gap just wide enough for him to get back in again. But, fumbling with exhaustion as he was, he managed to knock the stick, and the window slammed shut. There was no outside catch.

Paolo laid his head down for a moment on the shed roof. He felt too tired to move. *Now*, he thought, *I'll have to stay out here until morning, or else wake*

*up the family to let me in. And that will mean no more night rides. Ever.*

It was some time before he remembered the old trapdoor. It was at the side of the house, set in the ground of what had once been a paved yard. The door was invisible now because it was overgrown with weeds. In the past it had been used to lower casks of wine and olive oil into a storage space off the main cellar, but that was a long time ago. *Will it still open?* he wondered. *Worth a try, perhaps?*

He braced himself and slid down from the roof as silently as he could. He found the spot and began pulling away tangled ivy and stinging nettles. It was painfully hard work. At last he uncovered a rusty iron ring and pulled on it as hard as he could. The trapdoor creaked open, revealing a rotting wooden ladder that led down into pitch darkness. Gingerly, he lowered himself onto the first rung, tried its strength, and descended. Halfway down, one rung abruptly gave way under him. He managed to slither the rest of the way down, grazing his hands badly but landing on his feet.

The storage cellar was a windowless, low-ceilinged space, reeking of damp and decay and ventilated only by a small grating. *If only I'd been*

*sensible enough to bring my bicycle light*, thought Paolo, but it was too late now.

He knew that a small door in the wall led into the main storage cellar under the house. Cautiously, he groped his way along one slimy wall, half expecting a bony hand to shoot out of the darkness and fasten onto his wrist. He located the door. It was not locked, but the latch was stiff, and he had to work hard to get it open. He was desperately afraid of making a noise and waking one of the family members asleep upstairs.

Finally he was able to push the latch up. He opened the door just enough to slip inside. Immediately, he collided with a sharp-sided wooden chest. He paused for a moment, forbearing to swear and rubbing his leg. He knew this place was full of junk: crates of old bottles and china, oil lamps no longer in use, wine racks, broken chairs waiting to be mended. Very slowly, he groped his way forward—both arms extended in front of him—to where he guessed the stone staircase that led up to the kitchen was. He prayed that the door at the top was unlocked.

There were so many objects, large and small, to be negotiated in the dark, to be felt around and

avoided. It was crucially important to make no noise. Suddenly, his foot struck what seemed to be a pile of books, which toppled over, and he froze, waiting tensely for some minutes, listening for any sound of wakeful footsteps overhead. When he was sure there were none, he edged forward again. At last, he reached the place where he judged the stairs to be. He put out his hand to grip the banister rail. But it was not a rail that his hand encountered. It was the buttoned jacket of a figure standing there, absolutely still, at the foot of the stairs.

Paolo's mother, Rosemary Crivelli, lay rigid, flat on her back in her enormous bed, staring into the darkness. She had lain like this for hours, ever since she had retired to her room as usual and heard her son, Paolo, scrambling out of the pantry window to set off on his nightly sortie into Florence. Then came the seemingly endless wait for his return. It was impossible to sleep. She was too anxious. Her mind revolved around and around in its restless groove, reviewing the situation, wondering for the hundredth time whether she should confront him in the morning to finally let him know that she knew all about

his adventures. She knew she should remind him of the dangers of what he was doing and forbid him—*forbid* him—to go out alone again at night, but somehow she could never find the heart to do it.

She knew it was her duty as a parent. He was her only son. But she knew, too, what her son's life was like, there at home in this joyless time, a thirteen-year-old boy with only his mother and sister and elderly Maria for company, his father far away for heaven knew how long. School was closed, there were no entertainments, there was a nightly curfew, and the German military was a heavy presence in the city. She reflected grimly on the old cliché that wartime, when not terrifying, was a combination of long stretches of boredom and grinding hardship. It seemed that the Crivelli family was certainly getting its fair share of both. She knew very well how a boy like Paolo needed action, adventure, and a secret challenge that he thought nobody else knew about.

She had so many other anxieties to keep her awake, too. In the darkness, she visualized a whole perspective of them, headed as always by the immediate challenge of how to get enough food for the family to eat tomorrow, of whether Maria's daily

foray into the meagerly stocked market in Florence might yield something, and of whether the weekly bread ration would last. Lurking beyond this were her thoughts of her daughter, Constanza, who was becoming increasingly uncommunicative. She seemed to want to do nothing all day but idly rearrange her hair in front of her mirror and pore over the old pre-war copies of French and American *Vogue* that lay around the house. Worse, there was her friendship with the Albertini family, who were among their few wealthy neighbors to have remained in Florence. Their daughter, Hilaria, was a year older than Constanza. The Albertinis had always been enthusiastic admirers of Italy's strutting dictator, Mussolini, who had allied their country with Nazi Germany and led them into this disastrous war.

Rosemary knew that Constanza's growing intimacy with openly Fascist sympathizers would hurt and anger her father if he knew about it. But she didn't dare to interfere. Her position here in Florence was not an easy one. She was British by birth, Italian only by marriage. Now the British forces and their American allies had invaded Italy, landing in the south, and, after a long and bitter fight, were

successfully pushing the German and Italian armies back. They had already occupied Rome. It was only a matter of time before the fighting reached Florence.

She knew it was not safe for her or her children to show any particular political allegiance. Her husband, Franco Crivelli, had never made any secret of his opposition to Mussolini's government, its alliance with Nazi Germany, and all that the Fascists stood for. It was because he was high on their wanted list that he had been forced to leave the family home and simply disappear. Not even Rosemary knew exactly where he was. It was better for her and her children that she did not.

She guessed he was working with the Partisans, those bands of recklessly brave anti-Fascist men and women who operated clandestinely in the hills around the city. Constantly on the move, they were secretly aided by local people. They engaged in all kinds of dangerous and subversive activities: blowing up bridges and railway lines to hamper German troop movements, ambushing transport trucks, and helping Allied prisoners of war escape and rejoin their units. They were known for their daring and their ruthlessness—and if they or anyone associated with them

was caught, then death at the hands of the Gestapo was a gruesome certainty.

Rosemary had not been in contact with Franco for months. It was too risky. To survive, she had to maintain a low profile while trying to keep Paolo and Constanza out of trouble and praying for the day when they would be liberated by the Allies. She relied on the respect that was felt for her locally. She was well liked for the work she did with the Red Cross and charities associated with the Catholic Church. The priest and most local people were tactful enough not to press her on Franco's absence. But she was not above suspicion. She knew she was being watched. And recently she had sensed a certain reserve among her better-off neighbors like the Albertinis, even though she had always forced herself to be polite to them, however much she despised their politics.

Her own widowed mother was far away in bomb-blitzed London. Letters were the only means of communication, and they arrived very rarely. Rosemary wrote regularly with cheerful, carefully edited chit-chat, but she was not sure how many of those letters got through. Since Franco had left, she'd felt increasingly isolated and vulnerable.

She prayed a lot. Right now it was a prayer of gratitude that Paolo was safely back after another of his mad nocturnal excursions. He was growing up to be more and more like his intrepid father: a father whom, worryingly, he was now learning to live without. Small children, she reflected ruefully, could be protected to some extent, even in these desperate times. But teenagers were another matter entirely.

Now, quite apart from having to evade the attentions of the Gestapo, she was aware that the Partisans had marked her as a possible ally, and they were as ruthless as the German secret police. Despite her sympathy for the Partisan cause, she feared they might represent the worst danger yet by trying to involve her and her family in their plans. It had happened before. And tonight they would be out there in the dark, stealthy and determined, with guns slung over their shoulders—guns that were not intended for shooting rabbits.

In her room at the front of the house, Constanza was also lying awake, too anxious to sleep. Missing her father—“Babbo,” as she and Paolo called him—was a permanent ache in her life. And knowing how much Mamma must miss him, too, meant

that she was always trying to keep her own feelings under control. As usual, she was trying to blot out the present by turning her mind to trivialities. Such as wondering, for instance, how long her lovely Ferragamo shoes—the ones Babbo had given her before he had gone away—were going to last before they started to look shabby. And if, in the absence of even the remotest possibility of acquiring a new summer dress, she could persuade Maria to make her one from that fine white sheet she had found in the linen cupboard. But then, she thought fretfully, it would never be as fancy as the kind of thing Hilaria wore every day, and it would certainly not make her look like their favorite film star, Rita Hayworth. It was just awful being sixteen—very nearly seventeen—and never having anything nice to wear or being able to go to parties and dances, as she imagined girls were doing in parts of the world far away from this relentless, dreary war.

Constanza knew very well that if you had enough money, you could buy fancy clothes and shoes on the black market. The Albertinis had plenty of contacts there. But in her family, that kind of behavior would be thought totally immoral. Both her parents felt

strongly that they must all share the pain of the shortages and lack of luxuries of any kind that was being endured by the ordinary, hard-pressed Italian population. But sometimes, stuck up here in her room, Constanza wished that she weren't expected to live up to such high standards. It seemed to be only she who suffered. Her mother managed to look beautiful in everything she wore, however shabby, and Paolo was happy to wear any old clothes as long as he had his beloved bicycle.

At that moment, she was roughly jolted from her thoughts by the sounds of Paolo arriving back from his nocturnal adventure. She suppressed a rising irritation with him for assuming that they were oblivious of what he was up to. So he needed the excitement—she didn't blame him for that—but if he only knew how tired and on edge he made them—especially Mamma, who was already so worried.

Constanza buried her head in her pillow and tried to empty her mind. All she wanted was a bit of peace, but this, it seemed, was impossible—and ten minutes later, she was still wide awake.

Rosemary was also still lying tensely awake. She had winced when she'd heard Paolo on the shed roof

and the pantry window slamming shut. *Poor Paolo!* she thought. How angry and humiliated he would be if he knew that every night she was lying awake and listening for him. Now what? If only he would get on with it and come up to bed so that they could all get some badly needed sleep before dawn. She strained her ears, listening hard. After what seemed like a long time, she heard him scrambling around in the cellar, stumbling over things. What was he doing? She waited to hear his footsteps on the stairs, but none came. Now, suddenly, there was dead silence.

Down in the cellar, Paolo was standing frozen with fright. He expected a blow, or two hands reaching out from the darkness to lock in a stranglehold on his throat. But the figure a few feet away remained quite still. All he could hear was his own breathing. Agonizing minutes passed.

*“Hello?”* he whispered hoarsely. No answer. *“Hello?”*

Very cautiously, he reached out his hand and gently prodded the front of the buttoned jacket. There was no response. He felt his way slowly up toward

the collar to where the face ought to be. There was no face, only a smooth wooden knob.

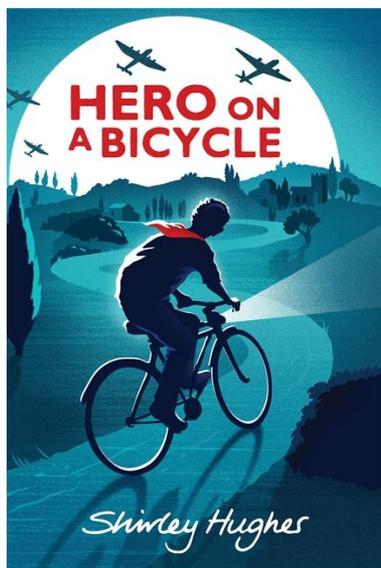
Paolo let out a great weary sigh of relief. It was the old tailor's dummy that had stood in the cellar for years, displaying his dead grandfather's military dress uniform. Once it had been the object of great family pride. He remembered how the rows of gold buttons, the medals, and the gold braid on the collar and cuffs had impressed him. Now he felt nothing but fury toward it for making such a fool of him, and he cursed it long and hard under his breath.

Then, legs leaden with exhaustion, he trudged up the stairs and tried the cellar door. It opened. Maria must have forgotten to lock it: his one piece of good fortune in an ill-fated night, he thought gloomily as he crept up to bed.

Rosemary heard him come up. She turned over, pulled the covers over her head, and tried to sleep. But it was no good. Her limbs, carefully arranged in a sleeping position, failed to relax. Finally she gave up, stretched out again, and lay there, watching the beginning of dawn already showing through the shutters.

# Hero on a Bicycle

Shirley Hughes



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