

“Exit Plan”

Out the wide train windows, the charred, broken remnants of Foggia’s once sturdy municipal buildings passed, edged in sunlight, wood girders and crumpled stone pillars strewn up and down the hillside like a child’s discarded toy blocks. Pino palmed sweat off his widow’s peak and memorized the images of destruction. If he ever painted again, this would be the first scene he’d paint. He imagined scraping burnt browns and blistered grays onto a rough canvas. War or not, the devastation of this once-proud Italian town after months of Allied bombings shouldn’t be forgotten.

Pino eyed the two uniformed soldiers playing cards at the far end of the train car and tasted the sour tang of bile climbing his throat. The greedy carabinieri didn’t drop bombs, but they were guilty still – terrorizing and stealing from train passengers whose only crime was trying not to starve. How Pino hated the guards. But he and his friends had a job to do. Time to focus.

Pino gripped the vest strap hidden under his thick, coiled sweater and forced himself to relax, timing his breaths to the murmuring rumble of the train’s gassy engine. Tension leaked from his neck muscles for the first time in days. At least until Alfredo slapped a palm across the back of his head.

“Wake up. You look too relaxed,” Alfredo said and slid into the seat next to Pino. “I figured out our escape when we hit Bari Centrale station.” Alfredo rolled three hazelnuts in his thick fist, tumbling the shells together with rhythmic clicks.

Pino jerked his head toward the soldiers. “Are you crazy? What if they hear you?”

Alfredo curled his plump lips into the crooked smirk that had won over every school teacher since first grade. “Nah, they’re too busy stealing each other’s money.”

Confident bastard. Didn’t even bother to whisper.

The self-proclaimed leader of their ragtag trio, Alfredo acted more like a swaggering war hero than a scrawny, hormone-fueled 16 year old. No one was immune to Alfredo’s charm. Not their teachers, not the pretty girls who followed Alfredo around like hungry ponies. Everyone knew Pino was the brains to Alfredo’s charm. Everyone except Pino’s father. He heard his father’s voice in his head, “Good thing you aren’t old enough to be in the army. You wouldn’t last a week. If Mussolini keeps us in this damn war, next year you’ll learn how far skipping school will get you.”

Alfredo nudged Dede, asleep in the next seat, and urged him to listen. “When the train pulls into Bari,” Alfredo whispered, “be the belly of the snake of people exiting, not the head or the tail. Let the other passengers lead and lag.”

Dede nodded as if Alfredo’s fancy snake words made sense before yawning and pressing his sweaty cheek against the train’s thick window.

“That’s it? That’s the big escape plan?” Pino said. “Hide behind the other passengers and don’t get caught?”

“What more do we need? You know Centrale station. One exit, three, maybe four soldiers. How hard can it be? Take your time, don’t attract attention and you’ll walk out rich. My cousin cleared three hundred lira on the black market last week, and he only had soap. We’ll get twice that for these lentils. Maybe triple.”

Pino gazed around the train car at the lone farmer, the pair of habited nuns, the small groups of factory workers. This mission was his idea, a surefire way to make money and help save his father’s struggling almond business. Or, equally likely, end up dead or in jail.

He breathed in the tang of dead fish and old cheese, vestiges of others who’d tried to smuggle black-market staples through Bari’s bustling station. How many of those fools made it past the trigger-happy soldiers without getting shot?

“God help us,” he said to his reflection in the grime-covered window. Pino marked the sign of the cross on his forehead and chest.

“Only two lazy soldiers this time. And neither of them play Briscola worth shit.” Alfredo spread his knees farther apart in the cramped seat. “Looks like God’s already on our side.”

Pino pulled the bill of his boxy plaid cap over his forehead and eyed the soldiers. The men, red-faced and chummy, nestled in their seat like two cannoli in a bakery box, did look distracted. Their soft bellies and easy banter contrasted with the sharp, oiled rifles at their sides. But still. They’d underestimated the carabinieri before. Pino rubbed the side of his head where a particularly fast one’s rifle butt had whacked him days before on this same train. That time he didn’t deserve it. That time he’d only been thinking about smuggling.

Across the aisle, a man’s stomach rumbled, the lingering, contagious snarl a rallying cry to other empty stomachs. With the Germans in charge across Italy, weekly food rations had diminished from paltry to pitiful. Last week, Pino’s mother stood in line for hours for a measly pouch of flour that didn’t last three days. Only the bloated soldiers patrolling the railways and families who could afford the black market’s hair-raising prices ate enough.

Pino willed away the cascades of hunger gripping his insides. No good came from fantasizing about food or even allowing himself the rare, special bite. A single taste of a fatty

salami or fresh egg awakened a beast inside him, a ravenous wolf, impossible to satiate. Pino was convinced the devil himself lived inside his hunger, waiting patiently for an invitation to strike. Better to focus on the money they’d make supplying the black market. He pictured the deep, etched lines lifting from his father’s face when Pino surprised him with the money from this mission.

Pino stretched his arms wide and pushed Alfredo closer to the edge of their shared seat. “Why are you on top of me all the time?”

“Quit pushing.” Alfredo elbowed Pino’s ribs. “Always pushing.”

“Hey, you two.” The older of the two soldiers stood and walked the aisle toward Pino and Alfredo, still holding three playing cards in his hand. Nearly as wide as he was tall, the soldier swiveled to navigate the train aisle, his belly leading the way. “What’s the problem?”

“Scuzzi. No problem,” Pino said and waved. The soldier turned back to his card game and Pino kicked Alfredo in the shin.

“Andria. This stop, Andria.” The conductor’s raspy baritone cut the stagnant air and covered Alfredo’s whelp of surprise.

Alfredo was right about one thing. Two soldiers on the train instead of the usual four was a blessing. But why the change in carabinieri today?

The boys had spent the past three days riding the train from the city to neighboring small towns bartering labor for food and scoping out the carabinieri patrolling the railways. They’d picked olives near Voltorino, threshed wheat in Tavernolo and spent nights huddled with horses in stables up and down the Puglia region. In the end, they’d bartered for lentils – impossible to find back home and easy to carry stuffed into homemade vests. Alfredo’s uncle, Giovanni, ran an

unlicensed grocery store out of his basement in Bari and would pay good money for a staple no one could buy since Italy entered the war.

Alfredo flicked his thumb under Pino’s chin. “You don’t look ready.”

Pino batted Alfredo’s hand away. “I’m always ready. Why don’t you see if Dede’s rested from his beauty sleep?” Pino gestured toward the seat behind them where Dede, slumped against the train window, slept on, his gentle snores timed with the train’s rough rocking.

“Dede, wake up. Next stop’s us.”

Dede wiped drool off his chin and hoisted a hidden vest strap higher on his shoulder. “I’m up, I’m up. Keep your stinking voice down.”

“Remember -- we follow everybody else and don’t make a scene. If anyone tries to stop you, run. These two won’t shoot,” Alfredo said with a flick of his head toward the soldiers.

“Easy for you to say. You’re not the one with an extra fifty pounds strapped to your chest,” Dede said.

“You want me to wear the vest?” A harsh sneer contorted Alfredo’s angular face. “You and Pino drew the short sticks, not me.”

Dede gripped the back of the seat, the cords in his neck thickening. “You cheated --”

“Easy, you two,” Pino said, his voice hushed, urgent. “Fight all you want later. But now, remember what’s at risk. Don’t get caught.”

“I don’t want to get caught any more than you. My father will string me up.” Dede grunted and flopped backward into his seat.

“Trust me, that’s nothing compared to what I’ll do to you if you get us caught,” Pino said. “I didn’t sleep in horse shit the past two nights to come home with nothing.”

“Enough,” Alfredo said. “Stick with the plan.”

When the train clamored to a bumpy stop at Andria station, the two nuns slipped off the train without the soldiers stirring. Pino mopped sweat off his forehead with a sweater sleeve as the nuns scooted past him, the thick fabric of their habits swirling their ankles like a dense black fog. The old women had to be sweating as much as he was.

“You two, stop!” yelled a harsh voice from the train platform. A rifle blast cracked the air and a symphony of screams erupted from passengers in and outside the train. “Stop them,” yelled a second voice from the platform. Fast footsteps clacked on wood, faster voices yelled over each other in mother tongue and dialect. The two soldiers on the train scrambled to the aisle and pointed their rifles at the remaining passengers.

“What? What did we do?” Dede stepped toward the soldiers and gestured around the train with his hands.

The wide soldier raised his rifle at Dede. “Go back to your seat. Everyone stay in your seats.”

Pino pulled Dede down onto a water-stained bench. “I bet those nuns ratted on us,” Dede whispered. “They heard Alfredo yapping.”

“Shut up or you’ll get us killed,” Pino said.

The wide soldier stepped up and yanked a saggy burlap rucksack from underneath Pino’s seat. Before the guard could unknot the rope ties, three uniformed soldiers marched in front of the train windows flanking the two nuns. The expressionless old women shuffled along, eyes downcast, heads bare, hands tied behind their backs.

“Mother of God,” Alfredo whispered. It was the first time Pino ever saw Alfredo make the sign of the cross. The sight sent chills down the back of his legs.

The wide soldier raced to the train door and yelled after his fellow guards. “What did you find – the nuns?”

A pockmarked-faced soldier pumped his fist in the air and shouted, “Soap and nuts. Under their dresses and hoods.”

The wide soldier’s shoulders slumped. “They’re called habits, you moron. Show some respect.” He stepped back on to the train car and raised his voice. “Everyone empty your pockets.”

“There’s at least five soldiers out there – two more than yesterday,” Pino whispered to Alfredo. “They must have been tipped off. There’ll be more soldiers at Bari confiscating everything they can get their hands on. We need a new way out.”

Alfredo shook him off, a relaxed, infuriating smile curling his lips. Pino’s legs itched to move, but he stayed in his seat. “If you run now, we all have to. Follow the plan,” Alfredo said.

The second soldier, young and tall with an Adam’s apple the size of a cantaloupe, pointed his rifle at Dede. “You. Empty your pockets.”

“No.” Dede shoved his hands in his back pockets. “My pants are my business, pervert.”

Both soldiers swiveled toward Dede, slick weapons pointed at his throat.

Hot-head Dede would get them all killed. Dede, the only one who didn’t need to be there, whose father ran their town’s funeral home and still made money during the war. Dede, who was only there for the thrills.

Pino raised his palms toward the red-faced soldiers. “Excuse my brother. He got kicked in the head by a horse last night, and he’s not himself today.”

Dede snickered. Pino elbowed him in the gut. “The officer said to empty your pockets. Here, I’ll help.” Pino kept his eyes on the soldiers and reached toward Dede’s baggy trousers.

“My own *brother a* pervert.” Dede batted Pino’s hand away.

A harsh sneeze from a nearby passenger jarred the silence and the train heaved out of the station in a fit of creaky rasps and groans.

“Enough you two, quit bickering. I’ve got my eye on you,” the young soldier said and pointed the sharp tip of his rifle toward Dede’s chest.

Pino dragged Dede by his sweater. “I’ve got him. He’s mental in the head -- my brother is. Our father doesn’t know what to do with him.”

“Keep him off these trains or someone will get hurt.” The soldier raised his voice over the train’s throaty whistle. “Capice?”

“Yes, sir,” said Pino.

As the train picked up speed, Alfredo signaled the wide guard. “What’ll happen to the nuns?”

The soldier sighed and rubbed his jaw. “I don’t know, son. I don’t know. Where are you boys headed?”

“Bari, sir,” Pino said. “We’ll be out of your way one more stop.”

“What are your names? You?” The soldier pointed to Alfredo.

“Paulo Gemelli.” Alfredo didn’t even blink.

Pino’s mind went blank. His mouth took over before his brain could stop him. “Pino Conti.”

“Conti?” the soldier said. “Arturo Conti is your brother?”

“Yes, sir.” God, no.

The soldier narrowed his eyes at Pino. “We were stationed together in Pescara. Your brother’s a good man. Are you?”

Alfredo slapped the back of Pino’s head again. “He’s the best one of all of us.”

The soldier straightened his uniform jacket by the hem. “Good to know. Stay in your seats and keep your noses clean.”

“I have a tip for you too,” Alfredo said. “Your buddy licks his lips whenever he has high cards. Watch, you’ll see.”

The soldier arched an eyebrow at Alfredo before walking back to his seat. Why hadn’t Pino planned for one of the soldiers knowing his brother? Stupid mistake. Everyone knew and admired his brother. Always, Arturo.

When the train picked up speed again, Pino willed his heart to slow. The familiar Italian countryside slid past. The buds on the olive trees flanking the hillside and tendrils of green shooting through the caked ground stirred something in Pino. If he could capture the haunting hope of this hillside in a painting, surely his father would understand and support his passion, his gift. An image of his father praising his artwork snuck into his mind. Maybe Pino would even be the favorite son for once? There was still a chance. His father hadn’t explicitly said Arturo was his favorite. Only that one time three years before:

After a long day of school, Pino had thrown down his book bag on the kitchen table and in two quick steps stood behind his mother at the stove, looping her in to a bear hug. Before returning the hug, his mother stirred the garlic and tomatoes with a wooden spoon, scenting the air with savory smells.

“What a day this has been, Mama. You should see my painting. I don’t know what came over me, but it took shape out of nowhere. Mr. Petrillo thinks it’s my best yet,” Pino said and dipped a hunk of bread in the pan simmering on the stove.

“Take a dish,” his mother said and caressed his cheek. “Don’t drip on my floor,”

“Mama, it’s like flying, seeing my work come to life like that. I can’t describe it.” Pino slurped the sauce off his fingers. “Your gravy’s the best, Ma. God I’m hungry. Where’s Papa? I want to tell him about my painting.”

“Please, Pino. Keep your voice down. Your father’s on the phone – it’s important.”

“What does that mean? What’s wrong?” Pino touched his mother’s shoulder. “Mama? What’s wrong?”

She bit her lip and turned back to her cooking. Pino grabbed another crust of bread and pushed through the door separating the kitchen from the front room.

“Listen, who do I need to talk to?” his father was saying into the phone, his back to Pino. “You’ve got to help me. Arturo can’t go. I need him at the factory. He’s the only one of my sons worth anything – you must know someone, someone who owes you a favor. I’ll do anything. Dear God, if only Pino was old enough I’d send him instead. After some time in the army, he’d get this idea of being an artist out of his head, maybe come back a man.”

Sharp bread slivers stuck in his throat, Pino stepped back through the doorway and listened through the crack in the thin wooden door.

“What’s Pino going to do at the factory? Decorate the almond sacks? Don’t be ridiculous. He needs skills – math, reading. He’ll stay in school. I don’t want him mixed up in this crazy business anyway.” Pino’s dad pounded the wall next to the phone with his fist. “Okay, okay. Let me know when you hear something.”

Arturo left for army training one week later and hadn’t been home in two years. Pino hadn’t picked up a paintbrush since.

“Next stop Bari. Five minutes.” The conductor’s bark shook Pino from his memory. A violent cough emerged from Pino’s throat, clearing the dank murkiness pulsing through his chest.

Dede poked Pino’s shoulder. “Switch seats with me. That one keeps eyeing me.” Dede nodded toward the young soldier.

Pino hiked his vest and slid out of the train seat. The soft shuffle registered before the cool trickle tumbled down his chest. “Leak, leak! I’ve got a leak,” Pino’s voice creaked and cracked like it had in early puberty. The pebble-like disks skittered over his hips before nestling in his underwear and the hairs of his sweaty thighs.

Alfredo clamped his hand over Pino’s mouth and pushed him back down in his seat.

Pino wrapped his arms around himself. “When I stand up, this vest is going to blow. You two run.”

“We’re not leaving you. I’ll figure something,” Alfredo said. He rolled the hazelnuts in his palm with a rhythmic click-clack, click-clack. “The string from my salami. We’ll tie it around your pants’ legs --”

“The soldiers – they’ll see.”

“Don’t worry.” Alfredo leaned over, rolled up his trouser and untied the long, thin salami he’d strapped to his calf with waxy, gray twine.

“My father was right. I am worthless,” Pino moaned. “I should have stayed in school or forced him to let me help at the factory.”

“Your dad hates that factory,” Dede said. “He doesn’t want you anywhere near that place.”

“Because I’m stupid,” Pino said.

Alfredo poked his head up over the train seat. “You? Dede’s the stupid one. We don’t have room for two stupid.”

“Wait – what?” Dede sputtered.

“Sorry, Dede. Don’t worry, Pino. You’ve saved my ass how many times? It’s my turn.”

Alfredo winked at Pino and slid a coil of slick string to Dede.

Dede licked his lips. “Our ignorant friend is right. If you hadn’t --”

“Listen to him, Pino,” Alfredo said. “Dede would be cleaning under some dead guy’s fingernails right now if it weren’t for you and this trip.”

“And Alfredo would still be asleep in the shit-filled stable we slept in last night. Gimme your leg.”

Alfredo grinned. “He’s got a point.” The train slowed and Alfredo handed Pino a long, crusted salami. “Don’t stick it in your pants and don’t go eating it on the way home. I expect it for my dinner.” With that Alfredo stood and whistled to the soldiers. “Excuse me. Over here -- yes, you.”

“What now?” The young soldier yelled over the screech of the train’s brakes.

Alfredo waved his hand and walked toward the soldiers. “I have some advice for you both. On the Briscola, the cards.”

Pino and Dede hissed at him, but Alfredo waved them off. Dede gnawed the twine into two pieces before wrapping a length around each of Pino’s pants legs and tying the ends into neat, square knots.

“This stop Bari,” the conductor’s voice rang out. The train lurched to a stop.

While Alfredo occupied the soldiers, Dede and Pino stepped off the train huddled with a small group of workers and dispersed into the mass of passengers navigating toward the station’s

sole exit. Every fifth or sixth step, a small, brown lentil slipped out of Pino’s pant leg and skittered on the pocked concrete. Dede gave a throaty snicker while Pino held his breath waiting for a rifle crack or a weighted hand to fall on his shoulder.

When they rounded the main terminal, a wall of armed soldiers blocked the exit gates, checking bags and searching random passengers.

“That’s why only two soldiers rode the train today,” Pino hissed. “They’re all here. No way we’re getting out.”

Dede scanned the scene, murmuring under his breath, before tossing Pino his rucksack. “Take my vest and get out of here. Promise me you won’t stop until you get to Giovanni’s.”

“What? What are you doing?” Pino blocked Dede from view while he lifted his sweater and unhooked the bulging vest off his concave chest.

Dede’s chin trembled. “Promise me. And hurry.”

“I promise, I promise, but what --?” Pino held his breath as Dede jogged toward the soldiers and with a rabid howl shoved one of the largest in the chest.

The band of soldiers beat through the thick crowd to circle Dede. Pino’s pulse soared, his friend’s addled shrieks the only sounds in his ears. This was insane – Dede would get himself killed over some stupid beans?

The frenzied tumult of fellow passengers scurrying to clear the temporarily unguarded exit knocked Pino out of his stupor. While Dede thrashed against the guards’ restraints, Pino shoved the vest into his rucksack and stumbled through the gates, distancing himself from the chaos.

He ran the ten blocks to Via Quarto, checking over his shoulder every few meters, and stumbled, gasping and trembling, through the wooden door leading to Giovanni’s cramped

basement. Small piles of lumpy soap stacked in tarnished metal pails lined the wall next to wooden crates vacant but for handfuls of wilted dandelion greens, caked dirt still dangling from delicate roots.

“Pino, you look terrible.” Giovanni sidled over. “Come in -- sit and catch your breath.” Giovanni, round and swollen like an overripe fig, flipped an empty pail and offered Pino a seat.

Pino’s vision tunneled and he swayed awkwardly before Giovanni caught his arm and helped him sit.

“Easy, easy -- what's happened? Your mother? Your father?”

Pino shook his head, his raspy breaths slowly calming. “Dede and Alfredo – we brought food. Dede got stopped by the soldiers so I could escape and Alfredo – on the train.”

“Calm down and listen to me. Dede's tough and Alfredo, well, you know -- he'll be fine. He always is. Tell me what happened.”

Pino breathed a full breath for the first time since leaving the train station. “I’ll show you.” He untied the string from his right pant leg and shook his leg over an empty straw basket, releasing a handful of brown lentils.

“What's this?” Giovanni chuckled. “Growing lentils in your pants?”

Pino added a stream of flat, round beans from his left leg to the basket. Before Giovanni could comment, Pino tugged the sweater and vest over his head and dumped a steady torrent of brown lentils in the basket.

Giovanni's mouth fell open and he grappled for a second basket to catch the overflow. “I haven't seen lentils like this in years. Nobody saw you, right?”

Pino glanced at the basement door and shook his head. “How much?”

Giovanni clucked his tongue. “Let me figure it out.”

“There’s more --” Pino pulled out the second vest.

“Ma-done,” Giovanni said. “This is good, Pino. You have no idea. For months all we’ve had are cigarettes and a few kilograms of semolina to sell.” Giovanni sketched numbers on a sheet of brown paper while Pino plucked errant lentils off his hairy legs.

The door to the basement store opened and a woman Pino didn’t recognize strolled in, a towel-lined basket slung over her arm. “I’m back. I forgot the soap --” Her eyes widened when she saw the baskets of lentils. “Are those lentils? Oh, bless you, Giovanni. My daughters haven’t eaten more than a fist of bread for weeks.”

“Don’t bless me, bless him.” Giovanni gestured with one hand at Pino who gulped and pulled his sweater back over his head. The woman beamed at him and asked Giovanni for one small scoop of the treasured beans.

“Let me finish with my young friend here.” Giovanni walked Pino to the door and handed him a pile of folded paper bills.

“This time, I can give you nine hundred lira for all of it. Next time, maybe more,” Giovanni said.

“No next time,” Pino said. “This is it for me. I’m going to help my father in his factory.”

Giovanni’s eyes twinkled. “Ah, Pino, I understand. Your father’s lucky to have you.”

When Pino burst into his house ten minutes later, he found his mother and father sitting at the kitchen table eating bowls of thin, steaming soup.

“Pino, where have you --?” Before his mother could finish, Pino kissed her cheek and handed his father three hundred lira.

“What’s this?” His father’s eyes drifted from Pino to the money, his face shading from gray to crimson.

“It’s for you, for the business.” Pino reached out his arms toward his father.

His father waved the wrinkled paper bills in the air. “Where did you get this?”

“We -- me, Dede and Alfredo, we worked and bartered for lentils. In Voltorino and Tavernolo. Look.” Pino dropped the dusty vests on the floor and in one motion, pulled a small burlap package from his rucksack and handed it to his mother. “I saved some for you.”

His mother let the flat, round beans fall through her cupped fingers. “How?”

“I told you, we --”

“You smuggled, didn’t you?” Pino’s father tossed the bills on the table. “This is why you skipped school and risked your life? For a few lira and a handful of beans?”

“I know it’s not much, but --”

“But what? I work every day, every hour, so you can go to school and make something of yourself and this is what you choose? To go off and play?”

“We didn’t play!” Pino lifted a wooden chair and slammed it on the ceramic floor. “We worked -- to make money to save the business.”

The muscles in his father’s neck bulged. “What do you think three hundred lira is going to do? If you went to school, you’d know this is nothing.”

“But, Papa.” Pino squared his shoulders. “I want to help. I can work at the factory.”

“Enough! I don’t want you at the factory.” Pino’s father pounded the table with his fist, startling the soup bowls.

Pino stepped back, his father’s words buzzing his brain like trapped, dizzy flies.

When he spoke again, his father’s voice sounded hoarse, restrained. “Go to school, Pino. Study. You’ll be a banker, a lawyer, something better.”

Pino’s mother patted her husband’s back. “Easy, Piero. Have some soup.” She splashed more of the watery broth into his bowl from a pot on the stove. “Pino, go wash up. I’ll fix you a bowl.”

Pino shuffled to the bathroom, disappointment stewing in his gut. A sink full of warm water washed away days of accumulated dirt and hope.

“Hey, where’s my salami?” a voice called from outside his bedroom window.

Alfredo stood outside Pino’s house supporting Dede, bloodied and battered, his swollen lip split in three places.

“Let’s do it again,” Dede said. “Tomorrow. But this bastard wears the vest.”

“We’ll draw straws,” Alfredo said.

Dede grunted and threatened with a rough, bloody fist. “Okay, okay, I’ll wear a vest,” Alfredo said.

Pino leaned out the window and shook his head. “I can’t go --”

“Of course you can, you’re a hero,” Dede said. “We all are. You should see the people lined up outside Giovanni’s, waiting to buy lentils. Everybody wants more, as much as we can get.”

Pino pictured his father’s weary, weathered face. What dreams had he longed for when he was Pino’s age? Pino licked his lips. His voice emerged with surprising steel. “This time we use the freight trains. Fewer people, different guards.”

The following morning, Pino found his mother at the kitchen table mending a faded, torn sock with needle and thread, a stack of washed clothing in front of her. Pino lifted his vest off the top of the pile and fingered the dark thread covering the newly-stitched hole.

Pino’s mother shrugged. “I don’t like to see holes. That’s all.”

Pino hugged her from behind before running the half mile to Giovanni’s store, the hum of the day in his ears and wisps of warm sun on his face.

“There he is,” someone yelled when Pino approached the small crowd gathered around Giovanni’s basement door. Before Pino could move, strong hands gripped his arms and squeezed, pushing and half carrying him into the crowd.

“Let go of me,” Pino yelled, twisting and clenching his hands into fists.

“Pi-no, Pi-no,” people chanted, clapping Pino on the back.

“Easy, easy, let him breathe.” Giovanni barreled through the crowd. “I ran out of lentils hours ago, but they won’t leave.”

The tension in Pino’s muscles released and he pulled Giovanni aside. “What else do you need? More beans? Oil? Flour?”

Giovanni lifted his eyebrows and nodded. “All of that -- top dollar.”

“Good. And I need something from you. Get me a canvas and some brushes, right away. I’ll trade when we get back.”