



JAMES HOLLAND

1943 Sicily. To change
the course of the war,
dirty deals must be done...

JACK TANNER IN

THE DEVIL'S PACT

'A Sharpe for the Blitz years.' *Daily Telegraph*

About the Book

July 1943. With North Africa secured, the Allies launch an invasion of Sicily, and the 2nd Battalion, King's Own Yorkshire Rangers are in the van of the assault on the Italian beaches.

Now B Company Commander, Tanner's promotion has brought him fresh problems. Not only has his new Battalion Commander decided to make his life as difficult as possible, but he and his men soon find themselves battling against some of the toughest troops in the Wehrmacht.

In the bitter fighting that follows, Tanner witnesses a new kind of warfare where the end will justify the means. Erstwhile outlaws, the Sicilian mafia are supposedly on the side of the Allies but their real purpose is feathering their own nests. And it is not just the mafia who are playing dirty. It soon becomes clear that in the quest to force Italy out of the war, compromises and brutal choices need to be made – choices where the lines between right and wrong have become horribly blurred.

Forced to question the cause for which he has fought so long, Tanner and his trusted sidekick, Sykes, find themselves embroiled in a fight that has become deeply personal, where they have to use all their resolve, skill and experience if they are to have any chance of survival . . .

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Also by James Holland

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DEVIL'S PACT

JAMES HOLLAND

For my parents and for Ned, who accompanied me to Sicily.



Glossary

2 i/c	second-in-command
angel,	1,000 feet, 2,000 feet
angels two	
bandit	enemy (in the air)
basha	house
CP	command post
croaker	a wounded person
CSM	Company Sergeant-Major
cushy	easy
dekko, have	take a look
a	
DZ	drop zone
ENSA	Entertainment National Service Association
iggery	quick, hurry up
jaldi	quickly
KOYLI	King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry
LCA	Landing Craft Assault
LST	landing ship tank
MG	machine-gun
M/T	motor transport
OCTU	Officer Cadet Training Unit
O Group	Orders Group – group of key personnel gathered before an attack or operation
OP	observation post
OSS	Office of the Strategic Services

PIAT	Projective Infantry Anti-tank (like a bazooka)
Red Devils	British Airborne Forces (nickname)
Regia Aeronautica	Italian Royal Air Force
sitrep	situation report
SMLE	Short Magazine Lee Enfield .303 inch calibre rifle
Spandau	Allied term for any German machine-gun, dating back to the First World War when some Maxim guns were made in Spandau in the western suburbs of Berlin
stonk	sustained artillery fire, usually concentrated on one area

1

Friday, 28 May 1943, around one a.m. The Dakota droned on, a low, monotonous rumble, the pitch of the two engines changing only occasionally as the plane hit turbulence or the pilot adjusted course. Captain Jack Tanner, sometime of the King's Own Yorkshire Rangers, but now, well, he wasn't so sure, closed his eyes. The noise of the plane was so constant it had become a kind of silence. He opened his eyes again and glanced at his watch, the dials only faintly visible despite the luminosity of the face. Surely, he thought, it must be almost time. A flight of one hour and five minutes, they had been told, at a cruising speed of around 140 miles per hour. 'It's just a brief hop across the Med.' The pilot had grinned. 'Piece of cake.'

Tanner had not reciprocated the smile as they had left the briefing tent at La Marsa airfield, nausea already stirring in his stomach. If he had wanted to spend his life in the air, he would have joined the RAF a long time ago. While others had gazed enviously up at, first, biplanes, then Spitfires and other modern aircraft, Tanner had been grateful to have his two feet firmly on the ground. Fortunately, during the more than ten years he had been a soldier, he had not had much cause to find himself airborne. Once or twice, that was all. He understood the principles of flight, but it still seemed

unnatural to him that a large mass of metal, oil and high-octane fuel should travel high up through the sky, and he did not like having to place his life in the hands of someone and something else. On the ground, he was confident he could handle himself as well as any man. In the air, it was a different matter.

Tanner shifted in his seat and felt the canvas safety strap dig into his waist. The Dakota, or C-47, as the Americans preferred to call it, belonged to the 51st Troop Carrier Wing, and would, Tanner had learned, be transporting British and American paratroopers over to Sicily when the invasion was eventually launched. Either side, running down the long fuselage, there was a row of fourteen metal seats, then a space towards the tail for stores and the jump hatch.

Tonight, however, the seats were largely empty – Tanner alone on one side, Major Charlie Wiseman and Colonel Max Spiro on the other. Tanner glanced across at them, the three-quarter moon casting a pale glow through the windows behind him. Spiro was playing with something – a rosary? – his lips moving faintly, perhaps muttering to himself. There was a wedding band on his left hand. How old was he? Late thirties, Tanner guessed, probably with a family back home in Washington or wherever he lived. He looked short and fleshy next to Wiseman, who sat with his back straight, head against the side of the fuselage, eyes closed, a faint smile across his face. Tanner cursed him for looking so relaxed, but rarely in the past few months had he ever seen Wiseman more than slightly ruffled. Spiro now caught his eye, then quickly looked away. At least he could speak Italian, Tanner thought. Spiro looked Italian too: dark hair, slightly greying, dark brows, dark eyes, dark skin. ‘He is Italian,’ Wiseman had told Tanner. ‘Leastways, his parents are. First-generation Sicilians.’ Spiro had grown up speaking Italian, Wiseman had said. ‘Half of all Americans speak some European lingo,’ he’d added. ‘Hell, about a quarter of us speak Kraut.’

‘What about you?’ Tanner had asked.

Wiseman had shrugged. ‘*Un poco Italiano. Grazie tante, Signorina.*’ He had grinned. ‘Put it this way, I know what a *flautista* is.’

‘What is it?’

Wiseman had laughed and slapped Tanner on the back. ‘Look, we’ll be just fine. Don’t you worry, Jack.’ Even Wiseman had a Mediterranean look about him: the same dark hair and eyes. Tanner supposed he did too. Like Wiseman, he was tall – six foot and a bit – with almost raven dark hair and the kind of olive skin that looked out of place on Englishmen, even those brought up on the land as he had been. It was no wonder after two and a half years fighting in the Mediterranean and North Africa. The difference was his very pale blue eyes, but he had noticed a number of Arabs in Tunisia, especially, shared that feature. ‘You look a perfectly convincing Sicilian,’ Wiseman had told him.

‘Look like one maybe,’ Tanner had replied, ‘but I’ve got more in common with a bloody Jerry than an Eyetie. And I can speak more Arabic and Urdu than Italian.’

He wondered how he had ever got himself into this mad enterprise but, of course, as was so often the case in this war, he had had little choice in the matter. Since early March, after the débâcle of Kasserine, he had been attached to the US II Corps, assigned as a liaison officer on General Patton’s staff. In Charlie Wiseman, one of Patton’s senior aides, he had soon found a friend and ally. Together they had fought at El Guettar, at Hill 609, and at Bizerte, Tanner trying to pass on his experience to these green American troops fighting the Germans and Italians, while Wiseman had helped him to bridge the cultural gulf between the Americans and the British. And when General Patton had had his spat with Air Vice-Marshal Coningham, Wiseman had successfully kept Tanner out of it, saving him from finding himself horribly compromised. For this, especially, Tanner

had been grateful. He was a soldier, not a politician. The argument, as most of Patton's staff had realized, was about tactical differences and the use of air cover; Patton, however, had not seen it that way. As far as he had been concerned, the Limeys had once again been sneering down their noses at their American allies. No one on Patton's staff had cared to mention that Coningham was a New Zealander.

Two weeks earlier, on 13 May, the fighting had ended. After what had sometimes seemed to Tanner like for ever, the Germans and Italians had been driven from North Africa. A quarter of a million troops and God only knew how many tanks, guns and aircraft had been captured. Tanner had seen them: long lines of dusty, exhausted enemy troops, tramping along in endless columns down sun-drenched roads into PoW cages. Defeat had been etched on their faces, expressions of despair and relief in equal measure. Briefly, as Tanner had beetled around in his Jeep, passing messages and liaising with various units and headquarters within II Corps and First Army, he had been sure that the war would soon be over.

Now he rubbed his eyes, then felt the cool metal of the Beretta on his lap. Two weeks! That was all it had been. But in that fortnight those moments of hope had gone. There would be no end to the war – not for a long while yet. The Germans were not about to throw in the towel: they were still deep inside Russia, and so what if North Africa had been lost? Fortress Europe was still theirs. The fighting would continue, first with an Allied invasion probably, he supposed, of Sicily and then – well, then, they would have to invade mainland Europe. Where was anyone's guess, but it was as certain as day follows night. *Christ*, Tanner thought. All that fighting still to come. How could he ever have thought otherwise?

And an uncomfortable idea had crept in: that surely his luck was about to run out. The odds were massively against him, he knew. Jesus, it was something that he was still alive

at all. Death was not a matter he liked to think about too much. One day at a time. That had been his philosophy ever since war had broken out. But now ... Now he was about to jump out of an aircraft onto an enemy-occupied island. *Bloody hell*, he thought. He glanced at his watch again. By his reckoning there could not be more than five minutes to go. Five minutes. Were these, he wondered, his last moments? Was this finally, after all this time, the end of the road?

Just two weeks – two weeks and one day – since the end of the fighting in Tunisia. They had all got drunk, swum in the sea, and watched the parades in Tunis. For so long, they'd been fighting for this goal: the end of the war in Africa. Then, after the euphoria, had come the realization of what still lay ahead. Even so, Tanner had expected a lengthy spell of inactivity. He'd even wondered whether he and some of the other old-timers might be sent home to England. There had been a time when he would have balked at such an idea, but not now. In truth, he'd been in England barely three months in the past ten years; he had no family, no home. Nothing. Yet England was still home. He'd saved a bit of money over the years. Maybe he'd buy into a farm tenancy, not in Wiltshire, where he'd grown up, but somewhere else. Dorset, perhaps. Devon, even. For the first time since he had left home as a sixteen-year-old and joined the Army, Tanner had begun to think of a life beyond that of a soldier. A quieter life. A life of peace.

Wiseman had put paid to that three days ago – Wiseman and the brass with their unrelenting plans to grind the Axis into the dust. He'd been woken by Wiseman at II Corps headquarters in Bizerte and told they were both needed in Tunis. They'd driven down, reached one of the grand old hotels in the capital, now used by Eighteenth Army Group, and had been ushered in to see an American two-star heading up Allied intelligence in Tunisia.

It was a large, airy room on the first floor, with a view of the sea. A cool breeze floated in, while overhead, fans whirred. There were five of them: Wiseman and Tanner, Major General Carter, then another American, introduced as Colonel Simpson but wearing a neatly cut dove-grey civilian suit, and Lieutenant Colonel Max Spiro. Both Spiro and Simpson worked for the Office of Strategic Services.

‘That’s Washington-speak for secret intelligence,’ said General Carter, as he walked over to a sideboard and poured large Scotches with soda for Wiseman and Tanner. He had passed them their drinks, then returned to his desk. Either side of him, Simpson and Spiro sat in wicker chairs, but with no further seating, apart from an old chaise-longue at the far side of the room, Wiseman and Tanner had remained standing, clutching their glasses. Wiseman had told him almost nothing on the way down; a sudden summons was not unusual. In any case, Tanner was not one to press for information if it was not forthcoming, and especially not since he had assumed it would be some instruction about training or another administrative directive. He had hoped it might be a posting back to his regiment. He liked the Americans well enough, but he had missed his friends. Seeing Peploe and Sykes had reminded him of this.

But no. It had been nothing of the kind.

‘So,’ General Carter had said, leaning forward in his seat, ‘we need you two to accompany Colonel Spiro here on a little operation in Sicily.’

‘Sicily, sir?’ said Tanner, unable to keep the surprise out of his tone.

‘Yes,’ Carter replied. ‘You’ll be dropped by plane and then you’ll rendezvous with a certain Sicilian gentleman called Don Calogero Vizzini. Spiro and Colonel Simpson here have been, er, communicating with Signor Vizzini and others in Sicily for some time. I won’t trouble you with the ins and outs of it but, suffice to say, a large element on Sicily is

sympathetic to the Allied cause or, rather, keen to see Mussolini and the Fascists thrown out – and that, gentlemen, is the Allies' current number-one objective. See the back of Mussolini and his buddies and that's Italy out of the war and a major headache for the Nazis. So Colonel Spiro is going to negotiate with Vizzini and you two are going to watch his back.'

Tanner cleared his throat. 'Why me, sir?'

'You're a Brit. We're the Allies, Captain, and we need to show Vizzini and his *amigos* that we stand together. You've served with us Americans, and you have a proven record – a most impressive one, if I might say so. And it's also, let's say, beneficial that you and Major Wiseman at the very least have a mutual trust and understanding. The major has already vouched for you, Captain.'

Tanner had shot a glance at Wiseman.

'You don't know Spiro, but he's a first-class officer and ideally placed to conduct an operation of this kind.'

Carter leaned back, lit a cigarette, then eyed Tanner. 'The hard work's been done, Captain. Long months of patient negotiation. I'm sure you understand that communications between the US and Sicily are difficult to say the least. Fortunately, the ties between certain elements of Sicilian society and those across the Atlantic in New York and elsewhere are still strong, war or no war.'

'Excuse me, sir,' said Tanner, 'but assuming all goes well, how do we get back?'

'You're heading to a place called Villalba, Captain,' Simpson now said. He was a neat-looking man, with oiled greying hair and a clean-shaven face. 'It's a small town in the mountainous interior, but only thirty miles or so from the northern Sicilian coast. We'll drop you in at night. You'll be given instructions as to where to go, but once you're with Don Calo you'll be quite safe. The next night, you'll begin heading to the coast. The following evening, you should reach it. You will then signal to a British submarine that will

be waiting off-shore. The crew will pick you up and take you home.'

'How will they pick us up, sir? A submarine can't approach the shore.'

'In collapsible canoes called falbots.'

'And what if the shore is mined, sir?'

'We're confident it's not. The Italians do not expect an attack along their northern Sicilian shores for obvious reasons. In fact, there is a long stretch of beach in that area which is largely uninhabited. As General Carter has said, the hard work has already been done.'

'So you see,' said Carter, exhaling a cloud of cigarette smoke, 'this is little more than an escort mission. I'm sure a man of your experience, Captain Tanner, has faced many more dangerous situations than this. Sicily is not overly populated. Most of the inhabitants live huddled together in towns and rarely venture out. You'll be met by friends and will be travelling under cover of night guided by Vizzini's men and away from any towns. Do you think we'd be sending you in if we thought there was a high risk of compromise?'

'When do we go, sir?' Tanner asked.

'You'll be leaving in three days' time, when the moon is a little more full.'

'And does this mean we'll be invading Sicily next, sir?'

'Maybe, Captain, maybe. Our planning teams are considering a number of options. But, as I said, getting Italy out of the war is our main objective. This mission could go some way to achieving that. It's important. If it wasn't, we wouldn't be asking you to do this.'

Afterwards Tanner had berated Wiseman. 'I thought you'd enjoy a little adventure like this, Jack,' Wiseman had retorted. 'Honestly, it'll be fine. You heard those guys. I know it sounds crazy but, really, the risks are quite small.'

'That's what's bothering me,' Tanner had snarled. 'When people say something's going to be a cake-walk, it's usually

anything but.'

'Nothing you and I can't handle, Jack.'

'What if it's a trap?' Tanner had asked.

'Then we're screwed, and we have to use our wits to get the hell out of there. But it isn't a trap. D'you think I'd be willing to put my ass on the line if I thought this was a sting? Sicily's not like the rest of Italy, you know. I tell you, Jack, get this right,' Wiseman had assured him, 'and the invasion will be a whole load easier.'

In the intervening three days, there had been parachute training, including a practice jump, briefings from Spiro and Simpson about Sicily and the current political situation in Italy, detailed ground briefs of Villalba, the villa there to which they were to proceed and the surrounding countryside, as well as their planned route to the coast. Maps were provided, with aerial photographs. Spiro instructed both Wiseman and Tanner in basic Italian. Tanner had been impressed by the thoroughness. He remembered heading to Norway a little over three years earlier and what a fiasco that had been; he wondered how different things might have been had they prepared with the same kind of thoroughness. The Allies had evidently learned something during this war.

And yet Tanner could not shake the unease that had been growing inside him these past few days. Over the years he had come to trust his gut instinct. His father had been a gamekeeper and had told him as a boy to regard instinct as a sixth sense. It was, he'd said, an essential attribute for any gamekeeper, and Tanner had found it even more important for the soldier in war. He'd never forgotten it and, he knew, it had saved his life on more than one occasion. Yet he also knew that instinct improved with experience. He was not one to criticize the inexperience of the Americans – some of the fighting he had witnessed on Hill 609 had been as brave as any he'd ever seen – but it worried him now that this venture had been planned by men who were all too new

to war. Carter was a major general, and Simpson a colonel, but their over-confidence troubled him. *These people know what they're doing*, Wiseman had assured him. *They know a hell of a lot more than you or I ever will.*

Maybe, Tanner thought. He hoped so.

The door to the cockpit opened and the crew chief emerged. Using the static line that ran down the centre of the cabin for balance, he felt his way towards the rear door. Tanner watched him remove it, a sudden blast of whistling air gushing in as he did so. Tanner's mouth had gone dry. The day before he had stood by the hatch as he had prepared for his first jump. A feeling of intense helplessness had swept over him, and then a hand had pushed him hard and he had been hurtling through the air, his body rigid and his mind unable to function, until somewhere deep within him he had ordered his hand to pull the ripcord. Moments later, the chute had unfurled and blossomed out, yanking his shoulders and enabling him to drift to earth. Relief at touching hard ground once more had been no greater than the momentary terror he had felt as he'd been pushed from the plane. This second jump, should, he knew, be easier. There was a static line that pulled the chute from its pack almost immediately; he would need to operate the ripcord only if his main pack failed, which was unlikely. Even so ...

A red light came on.

'Stand and hook up,' said the crew chief.

Tanner did so, staggered as the Dakota hit turbulence, then, following Wiseman's lead, clipped his ripcord to the static line and moved towards the open door. All three wore their normal uniforms; there was to be no pretence at being Italian, after all. For Tanner this meant denim battledress trousers, shirt and Denison smock, an item he had filched from the quartermaster's stores before Alamein. On his head he wore a dark wool hat. He had a pack of ammunition and explosives on his back, food and more ammunition in a pack on his front, and around his waist, a water bottle, a

knife, and a Colt .45 semi-automatic pistol. A further handgun, a German Sauer, was in his pack. Around his neck was his Italian Beretta sub-machine gun. His rifle, which he had carried through mountains, across oceans and deserts and had never yet lost, he had been forced to leave behind for fear it would get tangled in his chute. He felt naked without it.

A glance out through the open door. Air rushing in. Mountains, hills, fields, olive and citrus groves bathed in dim, milky light. Wiseman looked at him, grinned, then clasped his shoulder. Tanner glanced around him. There was Spiro, next to him, looking sick. Ahead a town, a mile or two off. Then the green light went on, the crew chief shouted, 'Go!' and Wiseman flung himself out.

For a second, Tanner stood there, frozen. Then he saw the crew chief's hand rise to push him and jumped, felt himself tumble through the cool, sharp air and then, *thank God*, the parachute ballooned, he felt the straps yank his shoulders and he was floating, drifting, down. He looked up. There was Spiro above him, silhouetted against the moon, while droning on, away to the north, the Dakota was nothing but a dark shape, a moment earlier so big but now the size of a bird.

Silence from below, apart from a dog barking somewhere a little distance away. He saw Wiseman land, his chute crumple, then a few seconds later the ground was rushing towards him, and he bent his legs, felt them pound painfully into the ground, and rolled over, the smell of herbs and soil filling his nostrils and the cooling billow of the collapsing chute falling around him.

Quickly, he unclipped his harness and struggled free of the cords and silk. He had landed in a field of young green corn. No more than a mile or so to his left a town stood on a rising promontory, dark against the sky. Villalba? He hoped so. Where was Spiro? And Wiseman? He glanced up, saw Wiseman crouching, gathering up his parachute, then

behind him spotted Spiro, tangled in the cord and silk and battling to free himself.

Tanner was about to hurry over to him to help when suddenly, away to their right, from where the dog was barking, he heard something and saw dark shapes moving. Instinctively, he gripped his Beretta, but it was too late: more than a dozen men, weapons silhouetted against the sky, were running to where Spiro was still desperately trying to free himself.

'Eppure, ci sei!' shouted one of the men.

'Mani in alto!' called another, now swinging around towards Tanner and Wiseman and bringing a sub-machine gun to his shoulder. Tanner thought for a moment. Should he open fire? He could probably hit them all with one carefully directed burst, and with the wooden butt of the Beretta, which fitted snugly into his shoulder, that was easily achievable. But could he avoid Spiro? Probably not. And without Spiro, the mission would fail in any case.

'Mani in alto o sparo!'

Tanner did not need to speak Italian to understand that. *Hands up or I'll shoot.* Several men ran towards him. Tanner dropped the Beretta and, still kneeling, slowly raised his arms. 'Damn it,' he muttered to himself, lowering his head. 'Damn it to Hell.'

And when he looked up, he could see, standing above him in the pale moonlight, long black leather boots and the dark, perforated steel of a Beretta barrel pointing at his head.

2

Seventy miles away from Villalba, as the crow flew, lay the small town of Motta Sant'Anastasia. At one in the morning, much of the town slept, its streets still and quiet, the only movement from prowling cats and scurrying rodents. Perched on a hilly outcrop on the lower slopes of Mount Etna, the town stood out on a limb from the plain of Catania, which stretched below to the coast, on the eastern side of the island, and the ring of towns further up beneath the volcano.

Oil lamps still burned in the doctor's house. The doctor had died the previous year, aged only sixty-one, collapsing with heart failure. Most who had known him suspected that in fact heartbreak had killed him. The house was both large and prominent, perched at the tip of the promontory on which the town had been built, and the townsfolk muttered to themselves that it was far too large for a young girl still in her twenties and her small daughter. Some supposed she was waiting for the right man; others blamed her solitude on the uncertainty of war.

That night, however, Francesca Falcone was not alone, for her brother, Captain Niccolò Togliatti, was visiting, and the two were talking late. Remnants of the evening meal still lay at the far end of the kitchen table, while at the other,

brother and sister sat opposite one another. The high French windows were open, allowing not only an early summer breeze to flow into the room but also the fresh, sweet scent of earth, olives and animal dung.

Francesca watched her brother finish his wine, put the glass on the table, then lean back and sigh. 'Perhaps it is time for bed,' she said, after a moment's pause.

'No, stay up a little longer. Let's have some more wine.'

'Are you trying to make me drunk?' She laughed.

He shrugged. 'Why not?' He stood up and took another bottle from the tall dresser that leaned against the far wall of the kitchen. 'What could be nicer?' he said, swaying slightly before sitting down again. 'I've missed you more than you can know, my little Cesca. There were times in Russia when I thought ...' He paused, straining to pull out the cork. 'That I'm here at all, my darling sister, is a miracle.'

Francesca said nothing, but took his hand.

'I have never felt so alone,' Niccolò said, lighting a cigarette. 'Or so cold or so full of despair. To die out there – to be left, frozen, for the dogs and the crows. My men were extraordinary. Their bravery was ...' He tailed off, blinked and rubbed his eyes. 'Sorry.' He tried to smile. 'Look at me. A grown man and about to cry.'

Francesca gripped his hand. 'You're safe now, Nico.'

He smiled. 'Right now, yes.'

'I remember when we heard the news,' said Francesca. 'We'd had nothing from you for so long, and then the telegram arrived saying you had been wounded. Poor Papa – if only he'd known. He was never the same after we left Palermo, but he worried so dreadfully about you.'

'It's been strange returning here and finding him gone. I wish I'd had a chance to speak to him although, to be honest, I thought I'd never see any of you again. But I was lucky, you know. A graze, really, that was all. But it's a miracle you got any news at all. Russia – it's so vast, Cesca.'

We were all constantly amazed that any post got through. There were long gaps sometimes, but we always had our mail eventually. If it hadn't been for that – that link to home ... It was very important to us.'

'And then nothing more until the fourth of April. What a happy day that was. You were back in Italy – alive and well.' She laughed, remembering.

'The fourth of April.' Niccolò smiled. 'I'm touched, little sister.'

'I prayed for you. I prayed so hard. Cara too.'

Niccolò drank some wine, then leaned back. 'Well, someone was watching over me. If not God, then who knows?'

They were silent a moment, then he said, 'But what about you, my Cesca? You've barely told me anything. Cara looks well – as beautiful as her mother. The same straw-coloured hair and blue eyes.'

'She's fine. We've been safe here. We can never escape the war but here we have carried on with life as best we can. Catania has been bombed but not us.'

'Seriously, Cesca, who could ever resist those eyes? She's going to break hearts, that one.'

'Beauty – that's all men are interested in. I fear for her, Nico. Having the kind of face and eyes a man likes is a curse.'

Niccolò frowned. 'What can you mean?'

She ran her hands through her hair. 'Ever since Papa died, there have been men, you know, sniffing around. Trying to get me to marry them. I know what they're thinking. That girl, she's pretty, she has a big house. She would be a good match.'

Niccolò smiled. 'But quite flattering?'

'No!' said Francesca. 'Annoying. Sometimes I feel I can't breathe.'

'But who are these people?'

‘Oh, there’s another doctor, but he’s over fifty and I think he got the message. There’s a young boy who was wounded and has come home, and there’s Salvatore Camprese. He’s the worst.’

‘Camprese, Camprese,’ said Niccolò. ‘Do I know him?’

‘He’s the mayor. He’s not quite forty and not bad-looking, I suppose, but he makes my flesh crawl. He thinks he’s a big shot in town. I’ve heard rumours that he’s part of the Society.’

‘Not here, surely. What about Mori’s reforms? I thought the “Iron Prefect” had all but stamped it out.’

‘So now Salvatore plays the good Fascist. It’s a game. Look,’ she said, a note of irritation in her voice, ‘I don’t know. It’s just a rumour I heard.’

‘Maybe he really is a Fascist and when they go he’ll go too.’

‘No, men like him change with the wind.’

‘Do you want me to talk to him? Ask him to leave you alone?’

‘And be in even more hot water once you’re back with your men? Don’t you dare. He’s harmless at the moment, I suppose, but I know what he would be like. He’d want to own me. He reminds me of Giovanni.’

‘Giovanni?’ Niccolò looked confused. ‘I was so sorry when I heard, Cesca. You must miss him, though.’ He leaned forward again and took her hand. ‘Do you mind me asking?’

Francesca thought a moment. ‘No, I don’t mind. You never really knew him, did you?’

Niccolò shrugged. ‘I suppose not. I was away so much. It’s ten years since I left Sicily, you know. He seemed like a decent fellow.’

‘He wasn’t.’

‘Cesca?’

‘I’ve shocked you.’ She ran a finger around her glass. ‘He wasn’t interested in me at all. I barely saw him. I was nineteen and alone in Bologna, while he spent all day and

night, it seemed, with his friends and God only knows who else.'

'He was unfaithful?'

'Aren't all Italian men?'

'Papa wasn't.'

'Perhaps not Papa. But few have his principles. His morals.'

'But Giovanni gave you Cara.'

'Yes. Yes, he did.' She sighed.

'I'm sorry, Cesca. I had no idea.'

'No one did. I've never told anyone what I've just told you. I often wonder if I ever loved him. I'm not sure I did. I think I loved the idea of him. I was young, he was handsome. His prospects were good.'

'A lawyer, no less.'

'And I so wanted to escape Sicily. To escape what had happened to Papa. To escape the filth and poverty of this town. My God, after Palermo! Remember what a backwater it seemed?'

Niccolò smiled.

'Goodness knows,' Francesca continued, 'it still seems that way. Fabia had already left - she had her prince in Rome. You had joined the Army. I wanted to escape too. This place ...'

'And now it seems magical. I never want to leave. Papa may have been drummed out of Palermo, but Motta Sant'Anastasia seems the most beautiful place in the world to me. I don't care that it's backward and dirty. This house is not.' He stood up and went out of the French windows onto the balcony. Francesca followed. The moon shone brightly, the landscape bathed in pale light. Etna, towering, magisterial, rose up to their left, while ahead lay folds of green, solid and undulating where once there had been flowing lava. Beneath them was their own small farmstead: the barn with the goats, the pigs and their cow, and beyond, the orange and lemon trees, the almonds and olives. This

small domain had ensured they had never gone hungry like so many Italians since the outbreak of war; like so many Sicilians in their daily struggle with life.

‘Look at this, Cesca,’ said Niccolò, as she joined him. He was leaning on the balcony, the smoke from his cigarette blown into darting wisps by the faint night breeze. ‘It’s so beautiful.’ He smiled, then kissed her cheek. ‘I’m so glad to be back, to be home at last.’

Francesca hugged him tightly. ‘I’m so happy to see you, Nico. Thank God you came back to us.’

Soon after, Francesca took herself off to bed but, despite the late hour and her tiredness, sleep eluded her. She thought about many things, her brain a whirl of activity. She thought of her brother when they had been children. He was three years older than her, and had teased her mercilessly when they were little. She remembered how she had prayed to the Virgin Mother to help her, to get him out of her life, but it was not until he was seventeen and gone to university in Rome that the teasing had stopped and she had grown to adore him; he was her beloved handsome older brother. She had cried when he had gone, and cried again when he came home one summer to announce that he was joining the Army. Even as a seventeen-year-old she had known what that would mean – that he would most likely end up fighting. She had seen the expression on her father’s face too. And so it had proved, although never had she imagined Italian troops dying in Russia.

Her husband had escaped such a fate, but had been sent to North Africa. Given a commission, he had returned one day in the uniform of a lieutenant and, almost the next, that of a captain. When he had gone, she had felt relieved, free of his overbearing presence that had swept into their apartment in Bologna. There had been his drunken love-making – little love was involved: rather, she had grown to feel violated every time he climbed on top of her. He had hit

her only once, a back-handed slap across the face, but he had bullied her long before then. It was the contempt he had shown her, his lack of interest in her life, her feelings, the way he had used her as an ornament, a sexual object ... She felt tears well now as she thought about him, and about how miserable she had been. Giovanni had offered an escape: a handsome, clever man with a home and prospects in the northern city of Bologna. But she had been a mere girl, whose head had been too easily turned.

You're tired, that's all, she told herself, but her mind turned to the news that he had been lost. A prisoner of war, heading to Canada. The ship had been struck by a German U-boat and every single one of the prisoners had been killed. Had he drowned or had the torpedo done for him? She had often wondered. When the telegram arrived, the postman had put an arm around her shoulders and told her how sorry he was. Giovanni's family had been devastated, but Francesca had felt only relief. She had worn black, had maintained the charade of mourning, but the only tears she had shed were for herself and Cara, then just four years old. She had stayed in Bologna for a month, but the suffocating presence of Giovanni's family had been too much, so she had gone home, to the place she had tried to escape six years earlier: back to Sicily, her father, back to the misery and poverty of the island. The widowed daughter of a small-town doctor. And then her father had died and suddenly she was alone, with just Cara for company. What could she do? Sell the house? She would do nothing until the war was over. Better to wait, see out the war, then go. Maybe to Rome, maybe to America. Anywhere but here.

At least Cara was happy, she thought. She had friends, a mother who doted on her. Lots of children had no fathers. 'You must miss your father,' one of their neighbours had said to her just a week ago.

'I have my mamma,' Cara had replied.

Francesca sighed. Niccolò alive and well, her daughter happy, and yes, her brother was right: Sant'Anastasia might be a backwater, but at least they had a house and food on the table. And at least Francesca had something to do, teaching in the village school where Cara was also a pupil. She hated Camprese's attentions, but he would give up eventually – surely. What lay around the corner was in the hands of God. And what was around the corner? Niccolò had not talked about it that day and nor had she; neither had wanted to spoil his first day home with talk of war. She wondered whether the Allies would try to invade. And if so, what then? Francesca yawned and turned over. It was incomprehensible. She could not imagine it. Foreign troops and planes and tanks. But, surely, she thought, they would not be interested in Motta Sant'Anastasia?

It was nearing two in the morning. The three of them had been picked up, made to put their hands behind their heads and marched, the barrel of a Beretta pointed at their backs, up the winding road that led into Villalba. Every time Tanner had tried to speak he had been told to be silent, while Spiro's pleas had been met with scornful laughter. A building near the town centre – a glimpse of a small central square and church – and then they were pushed inside. Tanner saw the word 'Carabinieri' beside the door, but then they were being shoved down a corridor and through a thick, heavy door, where a row of cells awaited.

Spiro began talking again, but one of the men angrily spoke back. Another grabbed Tanner's shoulder and chuckled. 'Tomorrow,' he said in English, then raised his hand like a pistol and pretended to fire.

All three were pushed into the same cell, the door clanged shut and the key turned in the lock. It was dark, although a thick shaft of moonlight poured through a small window high above them. Tanner could just make out a single wooden board that was a bed.

‘They mean to execute us in the morning,’ said Spiro. ‘Jesus Christ.’ His voice quivered.

‘They might mean to,’ said Tanner, ‘but we’re not dead yet.’

‘Well said.’ Wiseman struck a match and lit a cigarette. ‘One hidden for emergencies,’ he said, taking a deep draw, then passing it to Tanner.

‘I don’t understand it,’ said Spiro. ‘Everything was arranged. I just don’t know what could have gone wrong. It’s as though those guys were waiting for us.’

‘I’m sorry, Colonel,’ said Tanner, ‘but I’m not interested in what’s gone wrong. This always sounded like a sodding mad idea, but now we need to think about how we’re going to get out of here. With a bit of luck, that submarine will still be there to meet us. If we can get out and to the coast, we might still be all right.’

‘But how the hell *are* we going to get out? We’re locked up in this Goddamn cell,’ said Spiro.

‘We’ll leave it an hour or two,’ said Tanner. ‘Chances are, most of them will slope off to bed. Then we’ll call the guard, and you, sir, can pretend to be doubled up in agony. I’ll get the bastard as he comes in to look. Once we’ve got keys and a weapon, we’ll be away in no time.’

‘You make it sound so easy.’

‘It should be, with this bunch of jokers. Crazy bloody Eyeties.’

‘I knew it was the right call bringing you along for this, Jack,’ said Wiseman.

Tanner grunted, sat down on the bed with his back to the wall, and sighed.

It was no more than ten minutes later when he heard footsteps and talking, then a key being turned in the lock. Tanner sprang to his feet and stood beside the door. As it opened, he lurched forward and swung his right arm. He felt his fist connect with a man’s head, heard a sharp groan as