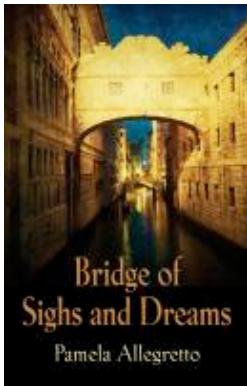




Bridge of Sighs and Dreams

Pamela Allegretto



In Nazi-occupied Rome, the lives of two women collide in an arena of deception, greed, and sacrifice. While political cartoonist Angelina Rosini zigzags through a labyrinth of compassionate allies and cunning spies, Lidia Corsini quenches her greed by turning in Jews to the Nazis. Lidia's spiral into immorality accelerates as swiftly as the Jewish population dwindles and, soon, not even her husband, her son, nor Angelina are immune to her madness.

Bridge of Sighs and Dreams

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**Bridge of
Sighs and Dreams**

Pamela Allegretto

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This is a work of historical fiction, based on actual persons and events. The author has taken creative liberty with some details to enhance the reader's experience. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, with the exception of documented historical figures, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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DEDICATION

For Mom and Di

I think about you both every hour of every day.
I miss you!

&

For Lia

My Star Child

Bridge of Sighs

The **Bridge of Sighs** (*Ponte dei Sospiri*) in Venice, Italy was built at the beginning of the Seventeenth century. It spans a small canal and connects the Old Prison and interrogation rooms in the Doges Palace to the New Prison.

Opinions about the naming of the bridge are plentiful. However, there are two theories more popular than the rest. One involves the prisoners who walked across the bridge on their way to the executioner. The prisoners would "sigh" as they crossed the bridge and caught sight of their last sunrise. Another story maintains, if a couple kisses under the bridge while gliding below in a gondola at sunset, they will ensure eternal love. Thus, the "sighs" are lovers' refrains.

"I stood in Venice on the Bridge of Sighs, a palace and prison on each hand."

Lord Byron

1

(Faicchio, Southern Italy, 1938)

A flock of boisterous geese muffled the twigs snapping underfoot, as the intruder crept through the orchard and took cover behind a vine-choked well. Dressed in black shirt and pants that trapped heat from the noonday sun, he wiped sweat from his brow, tried to steady his hands, and raised his rifle.

Angelina Rosini ignored the spark of light from the nearby well; reflections off the metal pulleys were as predictable as the noisy geese en route for a lunchtime snack. She concentrated on climbing the makeshift ladder set against a cherry tree. She was helping her parents with the June harvest and saving this particular tree for last. Her father had made it a joyful event when he planted the tree on her third birthday, and since then she helped him nurse it through pests, drought, and frost. Now, twenty-three years later, the tree continued to yield a bountiful crop. However, the sirocco winds that plagued the region a month earlier had weakened a few of the tree's fruit-laden branches, and the ladder rested against one of those injured limbs.

At the top, while adjusting the cotton skirt she had pulled between her legs and tucked into her

waistband to fashion makeshift trousers, she took a moment to look out across the valley, where a cloudless sky highlighted lush orchards and pink heather dusted the outlying hills. Her parents' small but carefully tended farm sat at the base of the Matese Mountains, with the Titerno River separating the property from the village of Faicchio. The farmhouse, converted from a 12th Century feudal barn, displayed stone and mortar walls that stood vigil over the Lombardi family for hundreds of years.

In the distance, two figures on the dirt road caught her attention and drew a smile to her lips. Her year-old daughter Gina had recently learned to walk, and her husband Pietro's silhouette playfully mimicked Gina's waddle. The ladder shifted, and she refocused on the job at hand.

"Hold it steady," she called down to her mother.

"*Stai attenta,*" Clara Lombardi warned, tightening her grasp on the ladder.

The wind picked up the first burst of gunfire and scattered its echo throughout the orchard. A bullet grazed Angelina's ear and hit the branch. Splintered bark exploded in her face, and the ladder lurched forward.

"Come down!" Clara shouted, losing a tug-of-war with the top-heavy ladder.

Angelina squeezed and fluttered her eyelids to dislodge the wood chips that scratched her eyes and blurred her vision. She inched down one rung and then the next, but at the second blast of gunfire, she froze, as the bullet struck a fatal blow to the wounded branch. The limb broke off and

propelled downward, striking Clara in the head and pitching her facedown.

“Mamma!” Angelina yelled, hugging the ladder while it sliced through the sticky air. Seconds before it hit the ground, she released her grip and jumped. She landed hard, and her body buckled. Pain seared her left ankle, but she ignored the throbbing and crawled to her mother’s side.

Clara lay motionless with her cherry stained fingers planted in the soil. At first, Angelina thought her mother was lying in a pool of blood, but it was smashed cherries from the harvesting bag slung around her neck. However, the red dribbling from Clara’s mouth was not from cherries.

“I’ll get Papà.” Angelina kissed her mother’s cheek, and a faint smile curled Clara’s lips. She kissed her again, but the smile remained fixed.

“HELP, PAPÀ, HELP!” Angelina envisioned her screams bounce from one tree to the next and back into her throat, as she scrambled to her feet and hobbled through the orchard.

At the far end of the orchard, Vincenzo Lombardi was hoisting baskets of cherries onto a cart when the blast of gunshots startled him. Seconds later, his daughter’s frantic shouts sent him sprinting between the trees, where he spotted her limping on a bloated ankle, and her wild-eyes darting in all directions. Her hands and knees were scraped, and lacerations peppered her bloodied face. He ran to meet her, and she collapsed in his arms.

“It’s Mamma,” she gasped. “I was on the ladder...there were gunshots...the branch broke...”

“*Dov’è?* Show me where!”

Angelina clutched his arm for support and led him to the tragic scene. “There...” Sobs choked her words as she pointed to her mother, sprawled out under the tree that now offered cool shade in repentance.

“*Fascisti!*” Vincenzo cried out.

At Clara Lombardi’s funeral, weeping mourners filed past Angelina and declared admiration for her mother. She dutifully shook their calloused hands and kissed weatherworn cheeks. Like her mother and father, these farmers dedicated their lives to the land; but unlike her parents who bravely defied oppressive Fascist decrees, these frightened individuals obeyed the government constraints. Flanked by her husband and daughter, Angelina looked across the wooden coffin to her grief-stricken father, who removed his hat to reveal a white forehead that separated his gray hair from his sunbaked face. As she watched him roll and unroll the brim of the sweat-stained hat, she understood and shared the anger that brewed behind his sorrowful eyes: whether the shots were a warning or a deliberate intent to kill, no doubt one of Mussolini’s Fascist Blackshirts fired the bullets that transformed an ailing branch into a lethal weapon.

Angelina paid little attention to the priest’s final prayers as he sprinkled holy water over the

coffin. Instead, she recalled a recent conversation with her mother that concerned the vegetable plants her parents hid among their government mandated wheat crop, and her mother's hand-printed leaflets that encouraged their neighbors to follow suit. She warned her mother to be careful, as this anti-Fascist rebellion, even on such a small scale, could land her parents in prison. Her mother told her not to worry, and although greedy spies lurked everywhere, she refused to bend to Fascist bullies.

While the gravediggers' ropes lowered the casket into the ground, Angelina studied the tear-streaked faces and wondered if one of these mourners carelessly let slip her mother's anti-Fascist activities, or had she shook the hand and kissed the cheek of a "*greedy spy?*"

"Your mother is at peace," Pietro said, placing his arm around Angelina's shoulders.

Angelina appreciated the comfort of Pietro's embrace, but only for a moment. She took in a long breath, wiped her eyes, then bent over and raked her fingers through the rich soil that for centuries had nurtured the crops in this impoverished region. She scooped up a handful and sprinkled it over the pine box. "Rest peacefully, Mamma," she whispered. "Your battle is over, and my fight..." She let the words trail off.

She wondered what her fight was or if she even had a fight. She always had admired her mother's daring to challenge the Fascist government; but for herself, she had been content to stay away from politics and focus on Pietro, Gina, and her

painting. Mussolini had been Dictator since she was ten-years-old; it was the only form of government she knew, and so she took it in stride. Even though her parents tried to educate her on the evils of Fascism, she had only half-listened, preferring to set up her easel and paint the landscape rather than fret over what crops the government ordered the farmers to plant on it. She disagreed with many of Mussolini's policies, but again, she hadn't spent much time pondering the Fascist decrees. Now, she regretted her past complacency and reproached herself for turning a blind eye, likening herself to the local farmers her mother had tried to educate. Mussolini's Police State murdered her mother, and she had remained silent for too long. So yes, she did have a fight.

She knew that to bring her mother's killer to justice was a delusion. Mussolini gave his Blackshirts free reign to create fear and thus gain obedience to his orders. Consequently, like a gluttonous plague of locusts, the black-clad terrorists swarmed the countryside unrestricted. She put aside the idea of distributing her mother's most recent anti-Fascist handbills; since many farmers couldn't read, she concluded that the words, no matter how honest, were meaningless. She wanted to find a more inclusive method to defy the Fascists and expose the injustice and absurdities of Mussolini's oppressive laws. For the moment, it seemed improbable that she alone could affect change; but to stand back and do nothing was no longer an option.

2

Two weeks after her mother's funeral, Angelina's ankle had healed, and only a few hairline scars lingered on her cheeks and ear, as visual reminders of the assault. Her heart had not mended so easily. She not only longed for her mother, but since her mother's death, she witnessed her father's robust body grow thin and take on a premature stoop. And although he had a few workers to help with the farm, she worried about leaving him. However, when she broached the subject to stay on at the farm, her father rejected the proposal.

At her father's insistence, Angelina and Pietro loaded their cardboard suitcases into the back of a borrowed truck and climbed into the cab. Pietro stood Gina on his lap, so "The Queen," as he called her, could look out the window. Gina had inherited Angelina's tight curls, full lips, and enthusiastic nature, and Pietro's round, intense eyes and inquiring mind. Her long lashes that fluttered like little wings and the notion of tinkling bells when she giggled were her own. Vincenzo settled into the driver's seat and drove them the sixty kilometers from his inland farm in Faicchio to their home in Vico Equense on the north coast of the Sorrento peninsula.

The village, perched on a cliff, cast out narrow dirt path tentacles that snaked between bougainvillea and rock outcroppings before reaching isolated coves on the Mediterranean Sea. Pietro joked that people in this region had one foot in a boat and the other in a vineyard. However, neither fishing nor harvesting grapes held any interest for Pietro Rosini. In fact, his dedication to the craft of inlaid wood was what first captivated Angelina.

She had come to study art in Vico Equense the summer after her high school graduation and stayed with her uncle, Antonio Lombardi, who was devoted to *intarsio*. He was a tall, heavy-set man with a shock of bushy gray hair, untamed eyebrows, and a moustache that buried his upper lip. A confirmed bachelor, his life revolved around his workshop where he engaged in the complex process of the inlaid wood art form.

Angelina met Pietro on her first visit to the workshop. She was immediately intrigued at how his muscular arms and broad hands contradicted his delicate *intarsio* application, as he cut and fit each wood fragment onto an intricate pastoral scene. Three years later, they married. They discussed taking a honeymoon trip to Venice and kissing under the Bridge of Sighs to assure eternal love; but their financial situation was bleak, and Venice remained a distant dream.

Their home was a two-room attic apartment atop Lidia and Aldo Corsini's house. Lidia was Pietro's older sister, and her husband Aldo, Angelina's art mentor. Rather than bemoan the

close quarters, Angelina bragged that their view of the Bay of Naples was the best in Vico Equense. Living under the same roof as Lidia wasn't always pleasant, and Angelina sometimes wondered how Pietro and Lidia could be siblings. Whereas, Pietro had soft, rounded features and was sincere and fair-minded, Lidia was callous and opinionated, with lips set in a straight line that mimicked her nose and jaw.

That first evening home, after having tucked Gina into bed, Angelina and Pietro went downstairs to supper: at Aldo's invitation.

"I've missed you," Aldo said, greeting them with energetic handshakes and a smile that reached from one gray temple to the other. His middle-aged paunch suggested a hearty appetite and his paint blemished shirt and pants spoke of long hours in his art studio.

Lidia kissed Pietro's cheeks, but to Angelina she offered her well-manicured hand without a word, only an indifferent nod. The grasp was brief, and after releasing it, she wiped her hand on her starched apron. She led the group into the dining room where the table was set in a manner that reflected her personal grooming: everything perfectly matched and meticulously arranged.

"May I help?" Angelina offered, hoping to warm Lidia's frosty demeanor.

"No," Lidia answered, and disappeared into the kitchen.

"Is something wrong?" Angelina asked Aldo.

“Oh, Lidia is just being Lidia,” Aldo said, while he adjusted his eyeglasses with nicotine-stained fingers, tipped by chewed nails.

In the kitchen, Lidia tucked an errant strand of black hair back into the tight bun at the nape of her neck, reached above the stove, and grabbed a glass. She filled it with brandy and took a long swallow. She didn't want Angelina in her home. She recalled how news of Clara Lombardi's anti-Fascist leaflets came to her by chance when she overheard a whispered conversation at the local market. She had jumped at the opportunity to report Clara's offense, not only to earn extra Lire but also to ingratiate herself with the Fascists. They held the power she was determined to tap. However, if Angelina's mother was an anti-Fascist, then most likely Angelina was too, and being stuck with an anti-Fascist sister-in-law could easily ruin her plans. She grumbled and drained the brandy glass.

During supper, Aldo dominated the conversation with his ideas for an artist's workshop. Pietro barely listened. His concentration was set on the green flecks that dusted Angelina's dark eyes and the exquisite shapes her mouth formed when she spoke.

Angelina made every effort to pay attention, but she caught herself returning Pietro's ardent gaze.

After supper, the topic turned to Mussolini.

“Angelina,” Lidia said, as she laid out espresso cups and liqueur glasses, “it's a shame about your mother's accident. However, when one adopts the posture of a rebel, bad luck can be expected.”

“Lidia!” Pietro admonished his sister.

Angelina appreciated Pietro’s readiness to confront his sister on her behalf. Their exchange of flirtatious glances amused her, and Lidia’s callous remark had broken the spell. She lifted the demitasse to her lips, took a sip, then said, “My mother’s death was not, ‘an accident.’ It was murder, and Mussolini is responsible.”

“I recommend you keep that accusation to yourself,” Lidia warned. She pulled a bottle of liqueur from the sideboard and filled each glass, over pouring Angelina’s glass. “You don’t understand the complexities of our government.”

Angelina pushed the glass aside and dabbed at the spilled liqueur with her napkin. “There’s nothing complex about terrorizing farmers into plowing under gardens to make room for Mussolini’s wheat crop, or to overtax childless couples and bribe women into bearing children they can’t feed.”

“Clearly, you’re unable to grasp the link between a strong population base and world power,” Lidia heckled.

“I grasp that over-population doesn’t relieve hunger,” Angelina shot back. She immediately reproached herself. She had overlooked Lidia’s perfected skills to manipulate and provoke, and she had fallen into Lidia’s trap. She clutched her throat and felt as though the soupy fog that blanketed the peninsula had seeped in and sucked out all the air in Lidia’s dustless house, threatening to choke her.

“It’s late,” Pietro said, recognizing Angelina’s discomfort. Although she possessed an energetic spirit, he doubted she could hold her own much longer against Lidia’s saber-like tongue, and he wanted to save her from further harassment.

Angelina rose and smoothed her skirt. She faced Lidia and said, “Thank you for the delicious supper.”

Lidia didn’t respond. She turned her back and cleared the table. In the kitchen, she poured another brandy while she cursed Mussolini’s Blackshirts and wished Angelina had been the one whacked in the head by their botched scare tactics.

At the door, Aldo seized Angelina’s hand and gave it a noisy kiss, in an effort to convey his apology for Lidia’s behavior. “*Buona notte*. I’ll see you at the studio in the morning.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Angelina said. She accepted Pietro’s hand and stepped outside, taking in a welcome breath of night air.

Pietro led her to a bench that overlooked the Bay of Naples and used his handkerchief to wipe away the fog’s mist. “Let’s sit for a minute,” he said. Their first evening home had been a disaster, and he was eager to make amends.

They sat quietly holding hands, each enjoying the comfortable fit. The fog had lifted to reveal a canopy of stars, and in the distance, lights from the Bay of Naples danced on the water.

“Well, Lidia seems to have mellowed since we’ve been away,” Pietro said, curving his mouth into a smile.

His sarcastic humor, in concert with his engaging smile, broke the dark mood, and laughter bubbled up through Angelina's lips.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Maybe I can explain about Lidia."

Angelina smiled and nodded her assent. She had finally relaxed and didn't want to spoil the moment by discussing Lidia, but obviously, Pietro felt it was necessary.

"As you know, when our parents died, I was two and Lidia was twelve. And although our Zia Carmela took us in, Lidia designated herself my guardian. I suppose that's when she acquired her fondness for control. As disagreeable as it is, you and I are both accustomed to Lidia's crass words, but this attraction she has for the Fascists is unsettling. I don't understand it, and I don't like it."

"I don't either, but enough talk about Lidia. Let's go upstairs," Angelina said, raising his hand to her lips.

Later that night, while Pietro slept at her side, Angelina stared at the moonlit ceiling. The evening had been an emotional filigree she needed to uncurl. The confrontation with Lidia had not been their first, but this argument coming on the heels of her mother's death stirred up her resolve to vilify the Fascists. However, she reminded herself to tread cautiously and not forget her mother's warning about *greedy spies*.

3

The following morning, after placing Gina in the care of a trusted neighbor, Angelina arrived at Aldo's studio loaded down with canvas, palette, and paint box, and bursting with enthusiasm. However, the sight of Lidia standing in the doorway melted her fervor. Lidia wore a smile that seemed to have been prepared ahead of time and then fixed to her tight cheeks with pins. She held the hand of her three-year-old son Carmine, whose sullen eyes lit up at Angelina's arrival.

"*Buon giorno*," Lidia said, maintaining the synthetic grin. "I apologize for my behavior last night." She hated to grovel, but Pietro was furious with her, and she promised to make amends. She consoled herself with the knowledge that it's easier to manage a situation from the inside.

"I'm sorry, too," Angelina said, surprised by the apology, although nonetheless grateful. She didn't want to have a conflict with Lidia that would make life uncomfortable for Aldo and Pietro. Eager to change the subject, she transferred her attention to Carmine. "Look how you've grown."

"I'm this big," Carmine said, grazing the top of his hair with his fingertips.

"No, you're not. You're only this big," Lidia corrected, pressing his fingers firmly on his scalp.

Tears welled in Carmine's eyes, but they didn't spill down his cheeks; they remained fixed, like his mother's smile.

Aldo arrived at the door and rescued Angelina from the uncomfortable scene. He led her into the studio where a lanky young man with unruly brown hair and eager green eyes wielded a paintbrush sword-like across a large canvas.

"As you see, our friend Michele Ponza continues to be a wild man with a paintbrush."

"*Ciao*, Angelina," Michele said, extending a paint-stained hand. "I'm sorry about your mother. We must find a way to exact justice for her killer."

Angelina accepted the handshake without hesitation, ignoring the red paint that transferred from his hand to hers. A mischievous glint in his eyes told her that, as usual, he was testing her spirit. "There is no '*we*.' You've already gotten yourself into trouble by harassing the Fascists."

"Well, *I* have no intention of standing idly by while Mussolini's Fascist Blackshirts terrorize and kill their own countrymen and, I might remind you, *women*."

Michele's words stung, but Angelina considered their source. She and Michele had been friends for several years, and she admired his lust for justice, even though at times he was a bit too outspoken. Michele's technique with a paintbrush reflected his personality. He painted broad, heavy-handed strokes with the same fervor he exhibited to condemn the Fascists; yet, the delicate images on Michele's canvas contradicted his method. However, she doubted his frequent anti-Fascist

outbursts were a transparent glaze to disguise a pro-Fascist stand. On the contrary, they were real and becoming more and more potent. “Don’t worry, Michele, I won’t forgive or forget.”

Later that evening, Angelina sat in their attic apartment and doodled on a sketchpad. The drawing developed into a parody of Mussolini’s “Battle of Natalità.” She depicted him pinning a medal on an overly pregnant woman surrounded by emaciated, barefoot children dressed in rags.

“*Brava*,” Pietro said. He had come up behind her and was admiring the cartoon.

“Pietro, this is it!” Angelina exclaimed. She tore the page from the sketchpad and waved it above her head. “A picture says a thousand words, especially for those who can’t read. I’ll unmask Fascism through satirical cartoons.”

“This is bound to cause trouble. Do you know how many anti-Fascist writers and cartoonists have already been arrested?”

“Yes, but I can’t sit back and do nothing.”

“I know.” Apprehension creased Pietro’s brow, as he took the drawing to get a closer look.

In the days that followed, Angelina began in earnest to draw political cartoons.

“Pietro, I found a *tipografo* who is willing to print my cartoons,” she announced, as she

marched into Antonio's workshop, clutching an armload of fliers.

"You can't hand those out on the street. They'll arrest you within five minutes."

"That's why I've come for your bicycle."

"I don't know what you're up to, but I do know that I won't enjoy kissing you between prison bars." He tried to make light of what they both knew was dangerous.

"You love kissing me no matter where we are," she teased.

"You know me too well," Pietro conceded. Not only did her green-flecked eyes and sensuous lips charm him, but also her gusto. Gusto, he reminded himself, which could easily land her in prison.

Angelina gave Pietro a quick kiss and headed outside to load the fliers into the basket on his bicycle. She tied back her hair with a ribbon and rode off, but she hadn't peddled more than a few blocks when she heard Pietro call out to her. She glanced over her shoulder and saw him riding her uncle's bicycle, whose pimpled wheels wobbled mercilessly against the squeaky frame.

"At least when we kiss in jail, we'll be on the same side of the bars," Pietro said, catching up to her and panting heavily. "*Dove andiamo?*"

"Follow me." She raised her arm and dropped it like an officer leading soldiers into battle.

They bumped over cobblestone streets, passing under red tiled roofs and green shuttered windows. The village disappeared in their dust, as they bounced along unpaved back roads toward

outlying farms. They skirted Monte Vesuvio that was blanketed with wildflowers whose memories were too short to recall the dangerous giant they concealed.

The idea that she was finally taking action exhilarated Angelina. She peddled hard, as sunlight cast red highlights on her dark curls that had escaped the ribbon and blew free to take on a life of their own.

They stuffed fliers into mailboxes and tacked them to trees and fence posts, horse carts and plows. When the sky paled to dusk, they returned to Vico Equense.

"I have an idea," Angelina said, riding into a back street. She climbed off the bicycle, folded a flier into a paper airplane, and handed it to Pietro. "What do you think?"

"I think, I love you," Pietro said, sailing the airplane into a nearby piazza.

The next morning, the people of Vico Equense awakened to find a squadron of paper airplanes had invaded their village. And without the necessity of the written word, Angelina's caricatures exposed the evils of Fascism.

Lidia unfolded the flier that had crash-landed in the rosebush on her terrazza, and at first glance, the cartoon enraged her. Then, she greedily speculated the sum the Fascist government would award to expose the traitorous artist. She recalled the leaflets Angelina's mother had passed around and wondered if Angelina had

taken up the futile cause. She returned to the bedroom where Aldo sat pulling on his shoes. She pushed the flier in his face and said, "I suspect Angelina is responsible for these vile cartoons. Pietro's talent could reap him a comfortable life, but his marriage to Angelina will ultimately land him not in a villa, but in jail."

"Pietro's career is none of your concern," Aldo said. He pretended to ignore the pamphlet and bent to tie his shoes. Lidia had a keen sense of knowing when someone was holding back information, and he didn't want his eyes to betray him. He knew Angelina sketched the cartoons, but he didn't trust this information with Lidia. Recently, after Lidia's persistent prodding, he had accepted a commission to travel to Rome and paint the portrait of Colonel Bianco, one of Mussolini's top aides. Aldo hated the Fascists and took no pride in the commission, but Lidia's unashamed satisfaction signaled to him that for her the commission offered a taste of power and wealth, and she was hungry for more.

Later that morning, when Angelina arrived at the door to Aldo's studio, Lidia and Michele Ponza were embroiled in an argument.

"What the hell is this?" Lidia challenged Michele, as she picked up a preliminary sketch for one of Angelina's cartoons from a drawing board.

"I don't see anything, Signora," Michele taunted her. Before she could stop him, he

plucked the cartoon from her hand, tore it into small pieces, and stuffed them inside his pocket.

“I’m warning you, Michele, I know Angelina is drawing these cartoons, and I suspect you’re helping her. If they continue, I’ll report you both.”

Lidia’s threat stunned Angelina, yet she wanted to believe the admonition to be nothing more sinister than a demonstration of Lidia’s acid tongue. Still, these words, spoken in this hostile tone, unnerved her, and once again her mother’s term *greedy spies* came to mind. “But, Lidia, a spy? That’s ridiculous,” she told herself. Nevertheless, she reproached herself for having left the drawing out in the open and vowed not to repeat the carelessness that not only put her at risk, but it also endangered her dear friend Michele.

4

Within a month of Angelina and Pietro's return to Vico Equense, Mussolini's alienation from the rest of the world resulted in crippling embargos that drove the economy into a rapid downslide and forced Antonio to modify his woodshop.

"It may not be *intarsio*, but I believe furniture restoration to be equally artistic," Pietro told Angelina, as he applied varnish to a chair. "To take a piece of furniture that has been in a family for generations and find a new grain beneath the surface can be just as rewarding. I see the grain in wood like the complexion of a woman, no two are alike, and yet all are beautiful."

"Only you can compare a woman's face to a piece of wood and get away with it," Angelina teased. "*Ciao*, I'm off to the *tipografo*. Don't fall in love and run away with a stick while I'm gone."

"Not unless it's mahogany."

They both laughed, and Angelina was still chuckling when she picked up her most recent cartoons at the *tipografo*. Her political cartoons had become notorious in the region. She was pleased. Her cartoons were making a difference. Illiterate farmers, enlightened to Mussolini's totalitarian regime, secretly planted small vegetable gardens on land that was State designated for wheat only. Her most popular

cartoon depicted a Fascist-loyal, pregnant farm wife, surrounded by her brood of emaciated children, stirring a vat of soup with threads of wheat drooping over the sides.

After visiting the print shop, she went to Aldo's studio and set up her easel next to Michele. A few minutes later, Aldo shuffled in reading a letter. A scowl pinched his brow into a single chain of unruly hairs, and an involuntary twitch tugged his cheeks.

"I just received a disturbing letter," Aldo said, flipping the page several times, from front to back, as though somehow the motion might redistribute the words into more pleasing sentences. "It's from my friend, Enrico Pacini. He's an Italian Jew who lives in Rome. He writes about the hostility toward Jews in Germany. He's afraid that Mussolini's desire to please Hitler could result in a backlash against Italian Jews."

"I think your friend is worrying needlessly," Angelina said, while she applied fine strokes to her canvas. "You know how much I despise Mussolini, but at least he does oppose anti-Semitism. After all, he has Jews in his Cabinet."

"Angelina, your love affair with your husband makes you blind to the real world," Michele admonished her.

"*E` vero?*" Angelina shot back. "And your involvement with that renegade pack of Black Marketeers will get you arrested. If I'm aware of it, with my 'blind' eyes, I'm sure the Fascists are as well."

“And what about your cartoons, tacked onto every tree between Salerno and Napoli? It’s only a matter of time until the Fascists trace them back to you.”

“*Basta!*” Aldo interrupted the two friends who, despite their banter, shared a genuine concern for each other. “Enrico Pacini was one of my professors at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome,” Aldo said, redirecting the conversation. “A likeness of style motivated our friendship. In fact, I spent my last academic year as a guest in his home. Someday I’ll find a way to repay his generosity.”

“Someday!” Michele exclaimed, as he slapped wide strokes across his canvas to emphasize his loathing for the Nazis. “If Hitler has his way, someday may come too late for your Jewish friends.”

After Angelina and Michele had left for the day, Lidia paced across the studio. Despite aggressive efforts, she had yet to prove Angelina’s responsibility for the cartoons.

“These political cartoons are a disgrace,” she told Aldo, as she wadded up a flier she had found tucked under their doormat.

“What do you care?”

“I *do* care, and so should you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No, Aldo, you seldom understand anything not related directly to your art. I’m convinced that Angelina is drawing these cartoons. What if Mussolini hears about this? After all, Colonel

Bianco has been referring portrait clients to you. What would Mussolini think if he discovered your own sister-in-law was responsible for the disgusting cartoons that litter the countryside?"

"Lidia, you're embellishing our importance to Mussolini, of which, by the way, we have none."

"You're a fool." Lidia pushed past him and stormed out of the studio.

The warm night air did nothing to calm Lidia's nerves. She didn't want to risk falling out of favor with Colonel Bianco. He was her link to Mussolini, her link to power. Migration to the larger cities was restricted. She had petitioned, without Aldo's knowledge, to move to Rome, and any affiliation with anti-Fascists would jeopardize this move. She was convinced that living in Rome would improve their lives. The proximity to Colonel Bianco and his rich Fascist friends was bound to reap more portrait commissions for Aldo, and thus, they would live in an atmosphere of culture and wealth. She knew, when the time came, she could persuade Aldo the move was in Carmine's best interest. Once in Rome, she would fully indulge her passion for power.

The good news arrived the following week. Lidia received a letter from Mussolini's secretary stating that her request to move to Rome had been approved. Included with the letter was an invitation to a reception Mussolini would be hosting for Hitler. The Fuehrer had scheduled a trip to Rome, and Mussolini was making elaborate plans to impress him, which included introductions to a select group of artists.

Lidia fingered the embossed official seal and envisioned the benefits, should Mussolini appoint Aldo to paint his portrait. Aldo's career, and accordingly, her prestige, would soar. An envelope with the same official seal arrived for Pietro. Lidia surmised that Pietro's masterful *intarsio* had earned him a coveted invitation. She was confident she could talk Aldo into attending the reception; she knew exactly how to manipulate him. The challenge would be to persuade Pietro of the important role the reception might play in his career. If she arrived in the company of three gifted artists, she included Signor Antonio Lombardi whom she assumed had also been invited, she believed it would increase her status in Rome.

"What do you mean, you won't go?" Lidia demanded. She sat at her kitchen table with Aldo and Pietro. Aldo had already reluctantly agreed to the move and the reception. Pietro wanted nothing to do with it.

"Do you think I would attend a reception given by that Fascist pig?" Pietro asked in amazement.

"Imagine the boost to your career," Lidia pressed. "Mussolini has the power to open a whole new world for you. You could go back to your beautiful *intarsio*, instead of stripping and sanding used furniture for peasants."

"Is there no limit to your arrogance?" Pietro retorted.

"I'm sure Lidia didn't mean to use those words." Aldo was equally appalled, but he hated conflict, especially within the family, and most certainly with Lidia.

"Of course I didn't mean it," Lidia apologized, taking Pietro's hand. "It's just that I love you, and I want what's best for you...and Angelina."

"What's best is for me is to avoid Mussolini and his murderous thugs," Pietro said, pulling his hand free. Lidia didn't fool him; he had a lifetime's experience with her calculated cunning. "I advise you to stop this fixation you have for the Fascists. You're wading into a dangerous sea that sooner or later will pull you under."

"I presume Signor Lombardi received an invitation as well?" Lidia asked, ignoring Pietro's rebuff.

"Yes," Pietro answered. "He's not going."

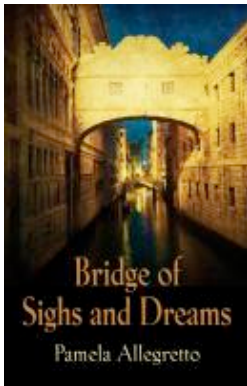
"What?"

"Antonio wants nothing to do with Mussolini, and even less with Hitler. It's an example you'd be wise to follow."

Seething, Lidia gripped the edge of the table and pushed herself back, grinding the feet of her chair into the floor. She drew in a deep breath, stood up, and walked outside with the ceremonial posture of one who has just declared war. From the terrazza, she looked out at the turquoise water of the Mediterranean and envisioned her wasted life in Vico Equense. She reached down and plucked a rose from its flowerpot, ignoring the thorns that punctured her fingers and drew blood. She crumpled the rose in her fist, squeezing the

life from its velvety petals. “Angelina,” she mumbled through a sneer that twitched her upper lip. “She’s poisoned everyone’s mind with her anti-Fascist ranting. She’ll pay for this.”

She released the dead rose petals, and they dripped to the white tiled terrazza, staining it red with her blood. For Pietro’s sake, she wouldn’t report Angelina’s suspected guilt for drawing the political cartoons, at least not yet. First, she’d deal with Angelina’s uncle Antonio. Since Mussolini had no tolerance for Italians who spoke out against him, she decided an informative letter to Colonel Bianco would turn this situation to her advantage.



In Nazi-occupied Rome, the lives of two women collide in an arena of deception, greed, and sacrifice. While political cartoonist Angelina Rosini zigzags through a labyrinth of compassionate allies and cunning spies, Lidia Corsini quenches her greed by turning in Jews to the Nazis. Lidia's spiral into immorality accelerates as swiftly as the Jewish population dwindles and, soon, not even her husband, her son, nor Angelina are immune to her madness.

Bridge of Sighs and Dreams

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