

## Chapter 2

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### A beautiful stranger

*Florence, Italy*

John and I rolled out our sleeping bags and slept under the stars in a city park near the Porto Romano. We decided the next morning it was absolutely essential to find a way to drive our assigned Army jeep safely across the Arno River to the other side.

All of our film supplies and bulky camera equipment were much too heavy for us to carry across on foot given the distance to the other side of the river.

We also could not gauge for ourselves given what few maps we had how large the city actually was. Our Army jeep and trailer would make us mobile and then, too, since the Florentine people on the other side had before never seen one, we decided, why not give them a special treat also and drive one of the first Allied jeeps across the Arno.

The Arno River, during the summer, contains very little water and consequently the shoulder embankments are mostly bare, dry earth. Many Florentines had cultivated small victory-type gardens along the sides when the war began.

Our immediate challenge was to find a modest clearing somewhere along the Arno where the stone walls that generally lined the river bank on both sides did not exist or could be driven over.

I took my turn behind the wheel of the jeep the August 1944 morning John and I decided to cross the Arno and found it necessary to drive a considerable distance upstream before we found a small path that led down from the street to the river bed below.

Once in the river bed, we followed the contours of the dry bottom a little further until we hit a weir, much like the one we crossed on foot the day before into the city. We crossed this weir, but once on the other side, discovered we had to travel upstream by jeep to find an opening through the retaining wall, which we eventually did find with a little effort.

John and I drove the jeep up the length of a small trail and then burst out from an opening in dense brush into a main street running parallel on the opposite side of the river.

John and I proudly claimed our jeep was the first American jeep to cross into downtown Florence.

Had John and I brought a circus truck full of colorful clowns and squawking monkeys we could not have attracted the crowd we did that morning with the presence of our little jeep.

Our first stop was in Piazza Vittorio Emmanuel. People quickly crowded around us and spoke Italian mixed with English.

I think most were attracted by the unfamiliar sight of our jeep than by the two of us, two American photographers who happened to be there.

John and I were eager to take the photo of nearly anyone who asked. Waiters from the nearby Guibbo Russo bar where we had parked our jeep walked out from inside their restaurant to generously offer us cognac by the glassful. An ebullient street entertainer also came over and began a juggling act aided by a trained chimpanzee.

You could sense the immediate wave of joyous euphoria that swiftly descended over the piazza before us. These Florentines, certainly for the very first time, sincerely felt that there really was an end to the war in sight, and the presence of this one lone Allied military vehicle represented the whole mechanized force of liberation which was destined to come.

John and I drove the jeep throughout the city streets of Florence, spotting not a German in sight. We drove up and down crooked cobblestone streets, often repeating ourselves to the point of getting lost.

When we least expected it, zing—our Army jeep would shoot out into a large, familiar piazza where we would start our exploration from comfortable, known surroundings once again.

We found our way up the Via Cavour towards a large traffic circle at its end. On the other side of the circle we encountered a British infantry lieutenant and a cluster of troops then on patrol. The battle for Florence had by then quickly moved forward and these British infantry soldiers who were a different group than those we had followed the day before now had received their orders to join up with the rest of their division which were now crossing the Arno River further to the east.

John and I learned from our British commanders that the operations sector north of the city of Florence soon would be taken over by forces of the then advancing U.S. Fifth Army.

We each exchanged goodbyes with our new friend, and ended our connection with the British 8th Army. We were never to work with our British allies on a photographic assignment of this type again for the rest of the war. Between August 9 and August 24, 1944, the bulk of the British Eighth Army was secretly switched to the Adriatic sector from Florence where it would begin its own spring offensive north.

John and I watched these proud Tommies march out of site up the Via Bolognese and continued on our morning journey.

We were eager to keep our luncheon engagement with our new friend, Mr. Astor and the Paoli's.

Our luncheon turned out to be quite elaborate and handsome for a hastily put together affair on short notice in wartime. Along with the Paoli's and Mr. Astor, we were also joined by a baroness of German origin, who was described to us as a close friend of Mr. Astor's.

We also met a Mr. Vivarelli, who said he once owned a family jewelry store on the now-ravaged Ponte Vecchio, and had no place to work. He shared his hopes that the rapid reconstruction of the Ponte Vecchio by both the Allies and the people of Florence wouldn't take that long.

John and I politely asked Mr. Astor about the arrival of the additional English-speaking female guest he described to us the day before who was yet to join us. We were told that she would soon join us, but was delayed by a previous engagement.

Our lunch was a welcome full feast, the likes of which John and I had not seen for too long to remember. We had brought along some Army food staples to contribute to the affair, including portions of sugar, salt, coffee, and a can of slab bacon.

Surprisingly enough, it was a single dented can of GI slab bacon which turned out to be for its inclusion in the main antipasto dish, the very real treat of the entire meal. Our GI raw bacon, sliced very thin, resembled in look and taste, cured Italian prosciutto.

John and I provided an unexpected, welcome treat for our Italian hosts which neither of us could believe. I could read Mason's thoughts across the table as he noticeably grimaced back at me.

"Christ, Burke, how can they eat raw bacon? Oh, boy!"

I wondered to myself the very same thing.

I wasn't surprised that John and I abstained on that occasion from eating the familiar GI delicacy, preferring ours cooked as only Army mess sergeants can honestly abuse it.

Our luncheon meal consisted of freshly made egg noodles with butter, cheese and small peas, and a molded soufflé type dish made from the similar shells of the same small, fresh peas.

The main dish was a wonderful, piping-hot, flavorful, lasagna-type eggplant dish fresh from the oven. The dish bubbled over with fresh tomatoes, cream sauce and melted mozzarella cheese.

For dessert, John and I enjoyed thick slices of a large, flavorful fluffy cake made from potato flour topped with fresh wild strawberries and chilled whipped cream. Fresh fruit and several types of table and dessert wines were offered to us as well.

It became obvious to John and I that the Paoli's by virtue of their status suffered little as the war surrounded their public lives. No surprisingly, people in higher positions always seem to be in the driver's seat when it comes to obtaining food and other precious commodities in exchange for something equally valuable.

After lunch, John and I sat drinking cognac and exchanged small talk with our Italian guests. Signor Paoli soon heard a knock at the front door and returned to introduce our additional female guest—the one he said who spoke fluent English.

Mr. Paoli introduced us to Tina Calamai, and John and I were quick to put on display for her our best and most humorous American charm.

I don't know what I expected, but I know I wasn't prepared for the woman I saw. She introduced herself to me, and her immediate first physical impression seemed more English than Italian in appearance. Tina wasn't especially beautiful, but to me, she was sweet and charming, and looked to be in her early thirties. She had light, chestnut hair which fell in soft curls across her forehead.

She smiled embarrassedly and spoke haltingly, perhaps afraid that her British Institute English might not be so easily understood by us two Yanks sitting across from her.

“You are, Americans?”

I guess that phrase was the universal ice breaker in most all languages. We both agreed that we certainly were. John told her he was born in the city of Detroit and I told her I had made New York City my pre-war home.

Tina described her love for the United States and all the popular American films, music and clothes she thoroughly enjoyed before the war. She apologized to each of us, saying that her current knowledge of more recent American films and music was considerably limited, due to the decision by then Italian Dictator Benito Mussolini to embargo American products at the start of the war because of our criticism of his nation's decision to invade Ethiopia.

Sadly, Tina said, there wasn't too much of Hollywood or Tin Pan Alley to be had in Florence since the war began.

When Tina told me that I resembled one of her favorite handsome, dark-haired Hollywood actors, Nils Asther, I realized how very long the embargo had been and how effective it was in shutting Italy off from the outside world.

Asther, who did resemble me in a modest way, was born in Sweden and invited to Hollywood in 1926. He was a successful actor in Hollywood through the early 1930s. He had co-starred opposite legendary actress Greta Garbo, but his strong Swedish accent didn't help his overall popularity in sound films.

I had an immediate sense, considering the warmth of our dinner conversation that all of us, including Tina and I, were getting along rather well.

Signora Paoli soon discovered that since my interest in her had faded, she would have to get her ice trays now all by herself.

The Paoli's had a crank-up manual phonograph player and we all tried to dance along to Marlene Dietrich as she sang her popular recording of "Jonny" in German and to a song well known to most American soldiers of that era, "Lili Marlene."

I beat out a conga rhythm and taught all of our guests the conga—one-two-three-BUMP.

All of us soon formed a joyful, weaving conga line and we danced all over the whole apartment just as I had seen in the great pre-war American film, "My Sister Eileen."

Our awkward steps certainly weren't actual dance steps, but John and I were clearly having so much fun with our new friends that it didn't seem to matter very much to us. I felt just as joyous as I had in the Florence city square by our jeep earlier in the morning.

Each of our Florentine friends shared a true sense of hope that the liberation of Florence had finally come at long last, and the end of German occupation throughout Italy would soon end. Sadly, the liberation of Italy from the grip of the German control would take nine more bloody months to accomplish.

Tina and her friends each described to us their own thoughts about daily life in the United States from the perspective and recollections of their fellow Italians who left Italy before the war began to start new lives.

In between dances, I found time to talk to Tina privately. I had subtly noticed that she wore what appeared to be a silver wedding band.

I asked her, "Are you married?"

Tina looked demurely down at the modest silver band on her forefinger and sadly replied.

"Yes, I am."

"Why are you so sad?"

"I don't know," she replied.

"Where is your husband now?"

I suspected perhaps Tina's husband had been killed or taken prisoner earlier in the war.

Her swift answer caught me by complete surprise.

"He's playing bridge. That's his greatest hobby. He's actually quite good."

I was shocked, to say the least. "Here there is a war surrounding this city, the people are feeling liberated for the first time in many years, and he is busy playing bridge." I was dumbfounded and speechless.

She smiled modestly and said somewhat convincingly, "It's better that he is. Otherwise I could not be here."

I kidded her.

"So your husband's the jealous type, huh?"

"No, he's just possessive." She continued, "If I see you again, Sergeant, I will tell you about him. But for now it is just a waste of time."

Tina's look towards me told me more than she then chose to let on.

I coyly challenged her reply.

"Is that an open invitation to see you again?"

"If you are here, and you like. We can meet here. I have another female friend named Rina. She is from Milan. I think your friend John might like to meet her."

Tina sighed with resignation. "No one works anymore now, so we always meet here at this home and talk in the afternoon. We have some tea and cognac. It's our only amusement. Paolo and Eugenio are old friends from when we were each in school. At night, there is a city curfew, so we must stay at home indoors."

I told Tina how John and I had hopes of staying in the city at least for as long as we could. Fifth Army engineers would eventually construct some Bailey Bridges across the Arno River allowing troops, tanks and artillery to cross, but the city of Florence itself would not become rear operations area.

John and I extended an invitation to Tina and Rina to meet us the following afternoon after four p.m. at Mr. Paoli's home and we would try to set aside some time to sightsee in Florence.

I again became curious to learn the story behind the silver wedding ring Tina wore discretely and pressed her to tell me more details.

"It's not silver, but platinum."

Tina explained in more detail. "You see, when Mussolini needed money to pay for the war, he made all Italians donate their wedding rings for the good of the country. The government gave you a ring in return made of steel."

“My husband, Giuglio, in a moment of tenderness, bought me one made in platinum. At the same time my ring resembled all the others. But had they known it was made of platinum, Mussolini’s fascists would have taken my ring from me.”

“So, all the Italian people’s wedding rings were melted down to finance a war in the African desert?” I asked.

“Don’t you worry.

The precious metals never made it any further than Rome, like everything else Mussolini took from the people.”

I gently took Tina’s hand in mine as I bid her farewell.

I told her I looked forward to seeing her again, and I sensed in her eyes the feeling was mutual.

I did not know where Tina lived and it was probably just as well. I said to her I would come to the Paoli’s whenever I could.

I knew my return to Tina’s side was at best indefinite, but then, that’s the way wars often are.

Our first meeting marked the mere beginning of what would become a long series of missed appointments, anxious periods of waiting for me to return, but very affectionate reunions.

John and I met Tina and Rina the following day at the Paoli’s home and then later on, the four of us took a drive through the city of Florence in our Army jeep.

Tina introduced John to her good friend Rina, a very cute, vivacious, round-faced girl also in her mid-thirties. Rina’s immediate grasp of English was somewhat limited, but she always managed to connect her words and thoughts together, but not always in the right sequence. I think that’s part of the challenge and the fun of learning any new language for the first time.

Rina tried very hard to share with John and I her knowledge and appreciation for Renaissance art with only limited success. She would often use the most complicated method to arrive at a simple point that, when she did, the whole thing was so removed that it didn’t make sense.

Once, Rina wanted to say that prudish American tourists were often offended by the large naked statue of Michelangelo’s David that stood in front of the Palazzo Vecchio with all his manliness hanging out.

To make her point, Rina started out by talking about people with their clothes on, and then she would explain that they would be removed to look like David. Of course, however, they would all have to be male people.

Then John would argue, and he wasn’t of much help, that most Americans usually wore clothes, maybe not all the statues, but the people did.

Poor Rina would get on the tack that the Florentines did not wear clothes and the statues were naked.

Finally, with all trying their best to get at Rina's original statement, John came out with, "Hell, I don't care if David wore clothes or not. But I think he could use a jock strap."

Rina would turn to Tina and ask inquisitively, "Jock strap, what is?"

John and I drove our female companions up to the Piazza Michelangelo to look out over the city, a view difficult to equal anywhere.

We teasingly amused the girls by our pronunciation of the famous artist's name, pronouncing it with a "Mike" instead of a "Mick."

Near the Piazza Michelangelo, we stopped for a late afternoon meal. The owners offered us chilled wine, beignets filled with cream and some wild strawberries with whipped cream.

Gradually, John and I began to delicately unravel the life stories of our two very attractive and often coy Florentine signoras who began to tell us about their personal lives.

Rina said she was originally from Florence and was a school chum of Tina's from their early years. Her family had once owned a very fine restaurant in Piazza Strozzi.

Her older brother, Aldo, had studied art at the best schools and was on his way to becoming one of Italy's leading painters.

Her family was struck by unexpected tragedy when a colorful parrot that adorned the entrance to the restaurant contracted a fever-borne illness and quickly spread a near deadly infection to her family.

The bird passed the infection first to Rina's father and then others working in their restaurant. Rina's father died from the infection, as did one of the waiters. Her mother also became violently ill from the same infection and both of her parents remained near death for some time.

Rina and Aldo were away from the family restaurant at the time and consequently, were initially spared from what might have been a complete family disaster.

Since Aldo was in Milan, Rina went there and studied artistic weaving and later became quite well known as a designer of textile fabrics. She described how she was visiting Tina at her family villa earlier in 1944 when Mussolini's Italian Army surrendered and the Germans took over. From then on, both Tina and Rina found it was virtually impossible to travel to the northern Florentine countryside.

I wasn't prepared for the story Tina then told me. How many young Florentine women had the privileged opportunity to spend their childhood growing up in a 15th century Medici villa that had been owned by her family for successive generations?

Her family home that I came to know as the Villa Calamai, was her home before Tina was married and where her father still lived. It was an odd thing

how the people got by with the war conditions yet still managed to provide themselves with the maximum safety and also the best possible livelihood during the chaos around them.

While the front lines of the Italian campaign were for us, John and I, a long distance away, the safest place for many Florentines and Italians alike during the conflict was further out in the country, not within or near city limits.

The frequent Allied and German aerial bombings still took place mostly in the cities, large and small. The immediate need for survival demanded many families, especially those with young children or older, more vulnerable family members to refuge with local farmers in the countryside sharing food, shelter and dividing what few meager possessions that remained. Scarred by war, the rich Italian soil could still yield some form of subsistence to its citizens.

When the front came closer, even the countryside was no longer a safe place. Retreating Italian soldiers needed all they could get. They took whatever food they could find, killed what animals weren't hidden away, and took over homes, vehicles and everything that might make their route to safety, a better one or an easier one.

Tina, her husband, father, Rina and some friends had been staying in the villa during all the period since the surrender of Italy. They had moved into the safety of the city of Florence only a few months before Allied troops liberated the city.

All of us knew that the liberation of Florence was far from complete. Signs of an unfinished civil war remained.

Even now, Tina said there were people still living in the Villa Calamai who worked for them. She asked if John and I would have any chance to travel to the villa by jeep, as she was anxious to know of their fate.

Tina gave me a note to give to Beppa, whom she described as the cook and a faithful person who had grown up in the household. She also told us to find a woman named Maria who did laundry and housecleaning at the villa. We might also find Lucia, a young maid, and Ernesto, a chauffeur for Tina's father and general handyman, who had traveled with Tina and her father to Florence.

Tina then sketched me a map with the general directions to the villa. I reluctantly told her many roads in the immediate area near the villa were still blocked due to recent combat activity, and most of the smaller bridges leading there were now destroyed.

I had to tell Tina that if such a visit to the villa did become possible, John and I would make a substantial effort to try, but we honestly couldn't promise when.

We also weighed the dangers of traveling to the villa against what each of us knew the trip meant personally to Tina. I liked the idea of being able

to help her, and I didn't want to say no. I was also attracted by her curiosity about the current condition of the villa and its inhabitants, and fancied the possibility of returning there with me.

Reality demanded a different outcome.

Tina was sharing an apartment with four other families and the thought of her getting out of Florence as soon as possible and back to the villa must have been constantly on all of their minds once the Allies forced the Germans out.

I enjoyed meeting Tina for the first time and was delighted to have been able to spend some time with her, however brief it might have been.

I was especially eager for any chance that fate might offer to let me see Tina once again. I felt genuinely touched by the warmth of our first meeting and I felt clearly that Tina was someone I found very easy to like and wanted further to get to know.

How and when we would meet again were burning questions for which I had no immediate answers.