

One



This is how it starts. A Thursday, early March. 4 p.m.

The school bell rings. All day we've been inside, sitting still and doing what we're told. Freedom at last!

Marta and I run out of the schoolyard together.

'Coming back to mine?' I ask.

'Can't, today. I promised I'd be straight home.'

We hug at the corner before she turns off towards the tram station. 'See you tomorrow, Isabella! Call me later. Love you!'

'Love you! *Ciao!*'

For a moment longer I watch Marta, her red bag over her shoulder, the sun on her dark hair. She looks back once, waves, and hurries on to catch the tram home.

I carry on down the street. I stop to look in the window of the art shop. Today there's a new display: beautiful big notebooks and paints, pastels, and inks arranged in rainbow colours. I push open the door.

The old man behind the old-fashioned counter smiles.

I pick out a sketchbook with a green cloth cover for me, and a red one as a present for Marta. He wraps them in brown paper and ties the parcel with string.

'You will make something beautiful in such beautiful books,' he says, 'just like your father. How is he?'

'He's OK,' I say.

He slips a new ink pen into the package and smiles at me. 'A gift, for luck,' he says. 'For the future.'

'*Grazie mille*,' I say. Thank you.

I tuck the parcel into my bag and run on. I dodge the people dawdling along the pavements. I turn down a narrow street, past boarded-up shops, past the high walls of the museum splashed in new red graffiti. A crowd has gathered at the foot of the steps outside the old church. I cross the road and keep running.

I stop for a fruits-of-the-forest *gelato* at the bar on the corner—the best place for ice cream in the

whole world. By the time I reach the market square, the stall-holders are already packing up.

Boom!

A massive explosion rocks the city. Silver-grey pigeons take flight from the church roof and wheel skywards. I stare up at the bright blue sky, at the golden cupola of the church, my heart pounding. For a second it's as if everything around me freezes.

And then panic breaks out: everyone's yelling and running, pushing out of the crowded square into the narrow streets in the four corners. The woman packing up the flower stall hisses, '*Hurry home, child!*'

A second explosion blasts out over the city: the sound ricochets off the tall buildings. A series of smaller thuds echo out. The sirens start: police cars, ambulances, fire engines scream their way across the city. There's a strange, bitter smell in the air.

What's happening?

I rush with everyone else, towards the river, towards home and safety. I join the crowd of people waiting impatiently at the road-crossing for the lights to change: cars and vans and buses stream past. Everyone's terrified. *What is it? An accident at the aluminium factory? No, they're bombing the city. A*

bomb at the tram station . . .

My heart misses a beat.

Marta.

My best friend in the whole world.

Marta, close as a sister. Closer, even.

Hurrying to catch her tram home . . .

My phone pings. Two texts. But not from her.

Are you OK? Where are you? Come home now!

Dad x

Just heard—trouble in city centre. You
home yet? Mamma xxx

I text back: I'm fine. Nearly home xxx

I text Marta. CALL ME! ?????? xxxxxxxxxxxx

The lights change. People rush forward, push and shove across the road and onto the narrow bridge and I'm swept along on the same tide.

I glance back: a plume of smoke rises above the city, ink black. The smoke cloud breaks apart: it's

not smoke at all, but hundreds and thousands of birds: the starlings that roost at dusk on the trees and tall buildings near Central Station. They swirl like smoke above the city, over the river, right above me on the bridge. The sky is full of their black wings and panicked voices.

The press of people moves me on over the bridge to the quieter side of the river. I dodge the traffic without waiting for the lights, slip down the narrow cobbled streets towards home. My heart thud thud thuds. Still no message from Marta. *Please let her be all right . . .*

I run past the familiar houses, the small bars and cafés, across the square at Santa Maria, and on again. The swell of people subsides. The smells change too: greener, damper; the familiar cooking smells of tomato and garlic. I'm out of breath, almost home. High above the houses swifts swoop and dive, dark arrows. Their thin screams pierce the air.

I clatter up the steps to our apartment on the third floor. Dad's waiting at the open door.

'At last!' He folds me into his arms. 'Oh, Isabella!' He squashes me to his chest. 'Thank goodness you're OK.' His breath is hot on my head.

He sounds as if he might actually cry.

Two



We try to find out what's happening, but there's some kind of news blackout. The internet's down. The telly's showing old black and white films and quiz shows instead of news or current affairs programmes. Dad turns off the TV and retunes the radio to music while he cooks supper: pasta and pecorino and peas. I make a salad with tomatoes and rocket leaves from the fridge. I keep calling Marta to make sure she got home OK, but she doesn't answer. Maybe her phone just isn't working. Or, or . . .

Mum still hasn't come home. She's not answering her phone, either. Dad calls her office but no one picks up. He says he *thinks* she said she had a

meeting after work, but he isn't sure what for, or where. He phones my sister, Gabriella. She's been in lectures all day and then at the library and in her flat. Dad says there's trouble here and maybe it will be the same in her university city, too. He makes her promise to stay safe and not go out. He passes the phone to me.

'Is Dad still listening?' she says quietly.

'Yes,' I say.

'There's stuff going on here, too,' she whispers. 'But don't say anything to Dad.'

'He's gone into the kitchen now,' I tell her. 'What kind of stuff?'

'A massive protest in the city centre. Train and bus drivers are on strike. They shut the university library at four and told us to go home.'

I jig anxiously from one foot to the other. What does it all mean?

Gabriella keeps talking. 'But I'm fine. Don't worry about me. Or Mum. I'm sure she'll call when she can.'

I start telling her about Marta.

A door slams in her flat. Someone shouts out her name.

‘Got to go. Love you.’

And that’s it. The phone purrs in my ear. She’s gone.

We eat supper, and clean the dishes, and sit out on the verandah to watch the swifts, and all the time, Dad’s shaking. His hand trembles when he lifts his glass; his knee rattles the table.

Ambulance and fire engine sirens wail across the city. More explosions boom out in the distance. There’s a bitter smell in the air like burning plastic.

‘Bombs,’ Dad says.

‘But why?’

‘They’ll be targeting historic monuments, transport hubs, bridges. Wiping out the past.’

‘*Who* will?’

Dad doesn’t answer.

How can this be happening here, to us?

‘I can’t get through to Marta,’ I say. ‘She was on her way home. By tram.’

Dad shakes his head.

‘Where did Mum say she was going?’ I ask him, again.

‘I can’t remember. I assumed it was a work

meeting, but maybe she said something else, I wasn't paying attention.'

On any other day it wouldn't matter, but this day it does. He looks terrible.

'It'll be OK,' I tell him. 'She'll be home soon. I guess the trams and buses aren't working and it's too far to walk, so she's stayed over with someone. Don't worry.'

It's me, comforting Dad. Even then, I know that's the wrong way round.

But that's the way it goes, from then on, as if we swapped places that night, Dad and me, and now I have to be the grown-up.

Mum's still not back by my bedtime. I have a shower, get into bed, and lie on top of the sheet in the dark. I try calling Marta for the millionth time: still nothing. I try her mum's number, and Ilaria and Giancarlo from school, but there's no connection. I can't get through to anyone. The internet's still not working.

The flat is hot and stuffy. Dad moves around the kitchen putting stuff away, opens the fridge, pours another drink, switches on the radio and turns it down low, so I can only just hear the music. It stops

for some kind of announcement: a news bulletin? I stay in bed, not wanting to know. If it's something bad, I don't want to hear it, not yet. It's as if I need to stay ordinary me, nearly-thirteen-year-old Isabella—for one last night.