

ONE GOOD THING

By Georgia Hunter

We Were the Lucky Ones
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*For my parents, Tom and Isabelle,
and for my boys, Robert, Wyatt, and Ransom,
with love*

PROLOGUE

She could carry the boy, but it would slow them down. He's too heavy. She grips his small hand as they run, trying not to fall. Twigs snap underfoot, the ground uneven.

'Faster,' she tells him. 'Pick up your feet.'

A bullet lodges with a sharp thunk in the trunk of a pine a few metres ahead. Lili stoops reflexively, resists the urge to turn around, her breath ragged in her ears like an ocean in a storm. She isn't sure if it's a farmer shooting or another band of partisans or Mussolini's men from the Salò. It could be the Italian police or a German soldier. They'd scanned the field carefully, she and the others, before veering from the safety of the forest canopy to inspect the vegetable garden of what they thought was an abandoned farm. They'd unearthed five potatoes and were trekking back towards the tree line, giddy at the prospect of a meal come sundown, when the first shot was fired and someone up ahead – Ziggy, maybe – shouted. *Run.*

'This way,' Lili orders, weaving to the right, the group now scattered. 'Jump!' She hoists the boy into the air. They leap over a log in unison and land without breaking stride, sprinting on, deeper into the woods, their dirt-caked palms sticky with sweat.

The lace of Lili's boot has come undone and a bright red gash blooms on her forearm from the scrape of a branch, she presumes, but she feels nothing.

Don't stop, she tells herself. *Don't let go of his hand. Just keep going.*

PART I



CHAPTER ONE

Ferrara

December 1940

Eight thirty-two. Lili slides a pencil from behind her ear and writes the time in her chart. 'It's every seven minutes now,' she says from her seat on Esti's sofa. 'I think we should go.'

Esti paces the perimeter of the room. She waves a hand. 'My water hasn't broken. I'm fine.'

'Are you sure? You don't look fine.'

'Thanks,' Esti says, making a face at Lili.

'Sorry. You don't look *yourself*.'

'I hardly feel myself. But I refuse to sit around the hospital for days. My mother laboured for forty-eight hours with me. Besides, Niko's not back yet. I don't want to leave without him.'

Lili sighs. 'All right. But when your contractions come five minutes apart, we're going. You know I'd do anything for you, Es, but please don't make me be the one to deliver your baby.'

Esti laughs, emitting a deep bark of a sound, and Lili shakes her head.

'You're as stubborn as they come, you know that, right?'

'So my husband tells me.'

'Speaking of your husband, where is he?'

‘He didn’t say.’

Lili chews the eraser of her pencil. Niko’s been out a lot in recent weeks, she’s noticed, his whereabouts always vague. It’s unlike him. ‘I’ll write a note, then,’ she says, ‘in case we leave before he’s home.’

‘Suit yourself,’ Esti says, then winces. She props herself in a doorframe and closes her eyes, pressing her forehead into the back of her hand as she breathes through another contraction. Lili checks the time.

‘Six and a half minutes,’ she says when Esti straightens.

‘Noted.’

Esti resumes her slow lumber around the room, and Lili frowns, wondering how she might convince her friend she’d be smart to labour with a doctor nearby. But to argue with Esti, she’s learned, is to waste her breath.

They’d met three years earlier, in Lili’s first week at university. Lili had just moved to Ferrara from Bologna and didn’t know a soul; she was missing home and trying to find her footing. When she slipped into the seat beside Esti’s in her Modern European Literature class, Esti turned and said hello and her smile was so warm and self-assured, Lili forgot to be shy. Esti’s Italian was excellent – Lili had no idea, at first, that she was Greek. They struck up a conversation, making a plan to meet for lunch later that day, then every day after, and within a month, they arranged to share a flat on Via Belfiore, a short walk from school.

There were times in those early weeks when Lili wondered why Esti had chosen *her* to befriend. Lili was seventeen then, still girlish, reserved. She was most comfortable with a book in her hand or at the keys of her typewriter. Esti, in her third year at the university, was nearly twenty, and, in Lili’s mind, every part a woman. Smart. Opinionated. Beautiful. With her smooth curves, cobalt eyes, and stylish wardrobe, she was the envy of most of the girls on campus. Perhaps it was the fact that they were so different, Lili told herself in the beginning, that they got on so well. Lili was a planner, careful in her ways; Esti a champion of spontaneity. But in the end, Lili realised, their differences didn’t matter. They were inseparable.

Lili has barely a memory from her years in Ferrara that doesn't include Esti.

Esti was there when Lili's first opinion piece was published in the *Corriere Padano* – she'd insisted they celebrate with dinner and dancing. *This is my writer friend Lili Passigli!* she told everyone they met that night. *You'll do well to remember her name, she's going to be famous someday.* It was Esti who stole Lili away on her eighteenth birthday for a weekend in Venice, where they got lost for hours in a maze of impossibly narrow alleys, feasted on fried sardines and tender green *moleche* crabs, and chatted up the gondoliers who gave them free rides back to their hotel by flat-bottomed boat, the water glistening beneath them like polished lacquer in the moonlight. Esti was there, too, on the afternoon when Lili received the telegram from Bologna with news that the cancer had finally taken her mother. She'd wept with her and boiled pasta for her, travelled back to Bologna with her for the funeral and the shiva, and later attended Lili's classes to take notes until Lili found the strength to return to her studies.

Esti was there, always, like the older sister Lili never had.

'Six minutes, twenty seconds,' Lili says, the next time Esti muscles through a contraction. 'Let's check your bag again, make sure you've got everything you need.' She reaches for the canvas tote at her feet.

'It's all in there,' Esti says, her face pinched. 'You packed it, remember?'

Still, Lili rummages through, matching the contents of the bag to the inventory in her head: nightgown, slippers, underwear, a flannel blanket, a miniature white knit jumper and a matching hat. She's refolding the blanket when Esti makes a small sound, like a hiccup.

'Oh,' she says, and Lili looks up. Esti stands stock still, a puddle between her feet.

'Oh!' Lili cries, knocking over the tote as she leaps from the couch. 'I'll get some towels.'

It's three in the morning when the doctor finally gives Esti permission to push. Niko stands at the head of the bed, a hand on Esti's shoulder.

He'd arrived at the hospital just after ten, panic-stricken at the thought of missing the birth of his child.

'The waiting room is just down the hall,' the doctor tells him now.

Niko swallows and makes a meek offer to stay, his face pale, but Esti shoos him away.

'I'll be fine, love,' she manages. 'Lili's here.'

'You sure?'

'I'm sure.'

Relieved, Niko kisses his wife on her forehead then nods once at Lili, as if to wish her good luck before leaving. Lili returns the nod and steels herself, realising how unprepared she is for what's about to come.

The minutes pass slowly. Lili presses a damp cloth to Esti's neck between contractions and offers up words of encouragement that feel entirely inadequate. The room is cold but Esti's skin is hot to the touch and slick with sweat. Dark tendrils of hair plaster her forehead. Every few minutes she moans as the pain builds, crunching her chin towards her sternum, and Lili has to hold back tears as Esti screams out in agony. She's glad Niko isn't here. It's nearly impossible to stand by, helpless – to watch her friend endure such pain.

'Just one more push,' the doctor says from the foot of the bed.

Lili's certain that Esti has broken a bone in her hand by the time the sound of a baby's wail fills the room.

'It's a boy,' the nurse calls out a moment later, and Esti, panting, lets her head fall back to her pillow.

'You are a hero,' Lili says, kissing Esti's cheek. She smells of salt and lavender. They can hear the doctor giving orders at the foot of the bed, the snip of the umbilical cord.

Niko is called back once Esti has been cleaned up and the baby bathed, weighed, measured, and swaddled.

'Come meet your son,' Esti says. She sits upright, her eyes bright, her cheeks flushed, the pain of her labour already a thing of the past.

Lili steps aside and Niko moves to his wife, staring at the bundle in her

arms. All that's visible of the baby is his face – round cheeks, velvet skin, dark lashes, mauve, heart-shaped lips.

'I'll be damned,' he stammers.

'Here,' Esti says. 'Take him.'

Niko blinks. 'Right now? He looks so comfortable.'

'Niko.'

'Are you sure?'

'Niko! Take him!'

Niko bends, manoeuvring the baby gingerly into his arms, and Lili watches his hesitation meld to wonder and then joy. A broad smile stretches across his face, and he sways gently.

'Welcome to the world, little one,' he says softly.

Lili smiles, too, her limbs heavy, as the adrenaline, the worry, begin to drain from her. Esti is okay. The baby is healthy. Niko is here. 'I'll let you sleep,' she says, making her way towards the door. 'Give you all some privacy.'

'What?' Esti shakes her head. 'You can't leave now. The party's just started. Stay for a while, would you?'

Lili laughs, realising the only thing missing from Esti's hospital bag is a bottle of prosecco. Sleep can wait, she decides, grateful to be a part of these first few moments, together as a family of four.

The maternity ward is quiet, the world outside the window in Esti's room still dark. Niko is dozing, curled up awkwardly in a chair in the corner, Lili propped on her elbow beside Esti in the hospital bed. Theo, named after his paternal grandfather Theódoros, is asleep belly-down on Esti's chest. Lili studies him closely: the wisps of his eyebrows, the spiderweb of tiny pink capillaries threading through his eyelids, the paperthin fingernails.

'I can't believe you *made* him,' she says softly.

'I can't either.'

'He looks like you.'

Esti peers down at the top of his head, adjusts his cap over his ear. 'You think?'

'Your faces are shaped the same.'

Esti smiles. 'I wonder what he'll be like.'

'He'll be confident, like his mama. And playful like his papa.'

'I hope so.'

'I know so.'

Esti strokes the back of one of Theo's fists with her index finger. 'I've been telling myself for the last nine months the timing doesn't matter,' she says after a while. 'But now that he's here . . . Look at him. He's so innocent. So helpless.'

Esti's right – it's a terrifying prospect, to raise a child at a time like this, with Europe at war and with the Racial Laws in Italy restricting their every move – but Lili isn't about to say so.

'I imagine there's no such thing as perfect timing,' she says. 'Look at us – you were born during the Great War; I was conceived on the heels of it. Our parents made do. And I'd like to think we turned out okay.'

'Well, *you* did,' Esti quips. 'Your life is so *in order*. I can barely remember to turn in a paper or to make it to a dentist appointment.'

Lili laughs. 'As if any of that stuff matters. You're going to be an amazing mother, Es.'

Esti raises her brow.

'The war is being fought across borders, not in Italy. And anyway, it'll be over soon,' Lili adds. 'They're calling it a *blitzkrieg*, right?'

'The war may end, but what state will the world be in? And who says the Racial Laws aren't here to stay?'

Lili wants to argue but she can't. Mussolini put his laws into place a full year before Hitler sent his men into Poland. 'Don't worry yourself with any of that right now,' Lili says. 'You've got more important things to think about.'

Esti lets her eyes flutter closed, a hand resting on Theo's back. Lili watches her fingers rise and fall to the quick rhythm of his breath. At least

they have access to private medical care, she thinks. Something the laws haven't taken away. She makes a mental note to write down the dates of Esti's follow-up appointments before she leaves the hospital.

Theo flinches and Esti opens her eyes. 'I fell asleep,' she says.

'I'm glad,' Lili says. 'You should sleep more.'

'I was dreaming.'

'Oh?'

Esti smiles faintly. 'Yes. About the day Niko proposed.'

'It was a good day,' Lili says.

She remembers it well, despite the fact that more than two years have passed since. Niko had come to her beforehand – *I want to make it special*, he said – and Lili had helped him to organise it all: the picnic in the park, the bottle of Taittinger, Esti's favourite sparkling wine. She'd even gone with him to pick out the ring, a simple gold *fede*, moulded in the shape of two hands, clasped together at the bezel. The three had celebrated over dinner at their favourite trattoria, Al Brindisi, then walked through town with a bottle of half-drunk Lambrusco to the ancient *bastioni*, the massive stone wall encircling the city. They'd sat for hours atop the wall, admiring the shimmer of the canal below, faded and mist-bound beneath the star-studded sky, talking about weddings and plans for once they'd graduated.

It wasn't until the end of the otherwise perfect night that the subject of Mussolini's *Manifesto della Razza* finally arose – it had just been announced, the week before. *Real Italians*, the manifest proclaimed, *are descendants of a pure, Aryan Race; Jews are descendants of an inferior race*. The announcement had blindsided Lili; she'd never considered herself Jewish *or* Italian, but both. She'd sat quietly that evening, her arms wrapped around her knees as Niko and Esti argued over the meaning of it. *Look what's happening in Germany*, Niko said, jabbing his cigarette north. *With the Nuremberg Laws. And with Il Duce sitting pretty in the Fuhrer's pocket . . . it feels like we're up against the clock*. Esti had rolled her eyes. *It's just a stupid piece of paper*, she countered. *Some sort of concession. A way of appeasing Hitler*. Besides, she

added, *the pope is Italian! And he's human. He wouldn't allow it.*

Esti was certain nothing would come of the decree. (*Easy for you and Niko to say*, Lili had argued, *when it's not your country issuing it* – Niko is Greek, too, and like Esti, had come to Italy on a student visa.) And for a while, it seemed Esti was right. Piazza Trento e Trieste still teemed with bicyclists pedalling home from work or out to dinner; the streets were still full of children chasing one another, cones of soft gelato in hand. Niko kept up his Sunday matches at the tennis club, and Lili and Esti spent their weekends perusing the market by Castello Estense for just ripe peaches and bags of Vignola cherries, or meeting for a glass of wine and plate of *ciupeta* bread before heading to the cinema for a show. That September, Lili travelled to the island of Rhodes for Esti and Niko's wedding, where the friends spent five magical days swimming and eating and celebrating before returning to their classes in Ferrara. It felt entirely possible that their lives would continue on exactly as they always had.

They were living in a different reality then, Lili thinks now, her eyes tracing a crack in the plaster ceiling over the hospital bed. A delusional one, perhaps, but one she'd return to in a minute if she could.

'Thanks for making that day so special,' Esti murmurs in her half sleep, and Lili warms. She'd never made a to-do over the effort she'd put into the planning; the day was about Esti and Niko, after all. Now, Esti's gratitude feels like a balm, smoothing the edges of her worries.

'Of course,' she says, but Esti is still, her expression once again slack.

Lili watches her sleep for a moment, considering how rare it is for her friend to worry. Fretting over out of control things is Lili's area of expertise, not Esti's. No matter, she decides. They'll manage whatever comes their way. Together. And when the world feels like it's closing in on them, Theo will be just the distraction they need.

The room is silent, save for the gentle rasp of Theo's breath. Lili watches him for a while longer, letting the pull of exhaustion numb her thoughts. She nuzzles closer, her head heavy on the pillow, Esti's body warm against hers, and succumbs, finally, to sleep.