

# Stones in Water

Donna Jo Napoli



Torn from his family  
by the Nazis, he fought  
to survive



**STONES**

**IN**

**WATER**

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藏书章

**DONNA JO  
NAPOLI**

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## *A terrible surprise . . .*

The newsreel ended and the Western began. Roberto stared up at the title and actors' names on the huge screen.

Suddenly the lights went on. Roberto blinked against the brightness. Boys groaned and hooted in complaint. He joined in.

The hoots mixed with screams. German soldiers marched down the aisles. Soldiers, here in the theatre. Roberto focused on their stomping boots. The boots seemed absurd in the early summer heat. Everything was loud, deafening—the confusion made Roberto feel stupid and somehow distant, detached. He forced himself to look around and pay attention. Rifles swung from straps over the soldiers' shoulders. They shouted orders. ~~Half~~ the audience was standing by now, pushing, ~~trying to get out.~~

Roberto's heart ~~pounded~~. He reached across Samuele and grabbed his brother's hand. "What's going on?"



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**S T O N E S**

**I N**

**W A T E R**





# THE FILM

**"It's the money, isn't it?"**

Of course it was the money. Roberto put both hands in his pockets and looked down. "No."

Memo closed the fingertips of his right hand together and shook them under Roberto's nose. "Don't give me that bull. Okay, listen, I'll lend you the money, and you'll do me a little favor, right?"

Roberto looked up. A favor? "Tell me about the film first."

"It's good. American. Lots of cowboys." Memo smiled slyly. "You want to go, right?"

Roberto had been to only two American films in his life. Yes, he wanted to go. But favors for Memo had gotten him in trouble before. "What favor?"

"Tell me, you want to go or not?"

"I want to go."

Memo grinned. "Okay, now we understand each other." He threw an arm around Roberto's shoulder. "Your cousin Teresa. All I want is for you to tell her I'm a nice guy, right? She should think about maybe going for a walk with me. Maybe a boat ride out to the Lido. Just tell her."

Robert stared at Memo. His cousin Teresa was already in love with Paolo. Memo should have known that; he knew just about everything that went on anywhere in Venice. But all Roberto had to do to earn the money for the movie ticket was say yes. Only it would be a lie. "Teresa loves Paolo."

Memo's arm dropped off Roberto's shoulder. "You're kidding." His face went slack for a minute. Then he shook his head. "I guess you'll have to steal the money from your old man."

Cowboys. Gunfights in the streets of the Old West. Women in tight-fitting bodices. Who knew when Roberto would get a chance like this again? Especially with the war going on. When Italy declared war on America last December—just days after the Japanese bombed the American Pearl Harbor—everyone said that would be the end of American things in Italy for a while. It was a miracle an American film was being shown anywhere anymore. Roberto plucked at Memo's sleeve. "Lend me the money, and I'll find a way to pay you back later."

Memo lifted his chin. "When I get my next girl, you'll give us a moonlight gondola ride. Good deal, right?"

Memo thought all his ideas were "right," but they weren't. This idea, for example, was a problem. Roberto's father was a *gondoliere*, just as his father had been before him and as his father had been before him, going back as far as anyone knew. Roberto would never be a *gondoliere* because his big brother Sergio would be the one to inherit the license when his father was ready to give it up. But Roberto knew how to handle a gondola. He could easily give Memo a ride. So long as his father didn't find out. His father didn't like him using the gondola like that. If Roberto damaged it, his father would be out of work till it was fixed. Still, the chances of damaging it were small, particularly at night, when the canals were close to empty. Roberto shook Memo's hand. "Sure."

"I'll meet you at the Scalzi bridge in a half hour. We can walk the highway."

Roberto ran through the back alleys and cut across the Jewish ghetto. The ghetto was a calm and beautiful place, and Roberto made a point of passing through whenever he could. In spring the smell of hot matzoh in the bakery made his mouth water.

"Hey, Roberto, what's your hurry?"

Roberto stopped.

Samuele leaned against the water cistern in the center

of the open area—the *campo*. He smiled at Roberto. Samuele was in the same grade as Memo and Roberto, and they'd all known each other forever. It was already the start of June, and they would graduate from middle school in a few weeks. Probably none of them was going on to high school—the *liceo*—next year. They were too young to be soldiers, and the handful of civilian jobs around were quickly grabbed up by men, so the three boys were in the same boat: They'd spend the next few years scrounging up opportunities for work, trying to stay out of trouble. They understood each other well. "Come on, tell me," said Samuele. "What're you doing?"

Roberto walked over to him. "There's an American film, a western, in Mestre."

"Yeah?" Samuele's eyes lit up.

"If you've got the money, come with us. Memo and me. We're meeting at the Scalzi bridge as soon as I get my shoes on."

"I'll be at the bridge." Samuele ran across the *campo* and into his house.

Roberto crossed the bridge out of the ghetto, ran through alleys, and crossed two more bridges. He opened the door and took the two flights up, two steps at a time.

Mamma was in the kitchen with the radio blaring news—something about a new British bomb that weighed more than a thousand kilograms. She used to listen to

music and dance around the house. But ever since Italy had signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Japan, Mamma listened only to war news.

Roberto walked softly through the hall and slipped into his bedroom.

His big brother Sergio was stretched out on the bed. Roberto stopped, surprised. For months now, Sergio had spent his Saturdays drilling in Campo San Stefano. Roberto had gone a few times himself. They learned how to march; how to carry rifles; how to make the kicks of martial arts, complete with shouts and grunts. And, best of all, they learned how to box. Sergio should have been at the drills now.

Roberto snatched his shoes and went for the door.

In a flash Sergio jumped up and grabbed Roberto by the arm. "Just where do you think you're going?"

"Mestre."

"What's in Mestre?"

"A film."

"I know about films. Films don't start till the afternoon."

"We're walking. It'll take us that long just to get there."

"Who's 'we'?"

"Memo and me. Maybe others." Roberto didn't mention Samuele by name. Roberto's parents had told him to be careful about the Jews. At first he wasn't allowed to go into their homes. Then he wasn't allowed to be seen in public

with Samuele. But he did it all the same. He liked Samuele.

And, anyway, Mamma was still friends with Samuele's mother—he knew that, no matter what she said. In March the two of them had joined other women from the neighborhoods of Cannaregio and Castello and walked through the streets of Venice protesting the war. Mamma said it had nothing to do with politics—it was a matter of work and food. Italy was suffering from this war.

Sergio's eyes narrowed. "How're you paying for it?"

"Memo's paying."

"That little thief—stealing jobs that should go to men. Someone's family will go hungry tonight because of him."

Roberto squirmed at the accusation. Memo did the usual errands that boys did—he carried groceries for old women and walked dogs for shut-ins. But he also did other errands for a handful of coins—delivering telegrams to people who lived too far for the old telegraph man to walk to, even delivering money for services rendered. They were the kinds of errands that used to go to men. But men demanded decent pay. So Memo won the jobs. But surely no one went hungry because of him.

Sergio raised an eyebrow. "Why's Memo paying for you, anyway?"

"I'm doing him a favor."

"Is the movie a Western?"

"Yeah."

Sergio let go of Roberto's arm.

Roberto snuck back along the hall. Then he ran downstairs. He sat on the bottom step and tied his shoes. He ran out the door.

Sergio caught up with him, his shoelaces flapping.

"What're you doing?" said Roberto.

"What's it look like? I'm coming along."

"You're coming? But why aren't you with the other guys, drilling in the *campo*?"

"Both my black shirts are dirty."

Everyone wore black shirts to the drills—to show they were fascists. Even their teachers wore black shirts. Roberto's mother scrubbed the clothes every day, but lately Sergio had gotten in the habit of throwing his dirty clothes on the floor—and Mamma had staged a strike, refusing to wash anything that wasn't in the dirty-clothes basket.

Roberto twisted his mouth in worry. He didn't want Sergio coming along, bossing him around. "Where'd you get the money?"

"Memo will pay for me, too."

"How come?"

"You'll do him the favor twice."

"That's not fair."

"That's what big brothers are for: to teach you the facts of life. Fact number one: Life isn't fair."



They ducked down an alley without even a glance of agreement passing between them. It was a given that they should avoid Signora Rossini's eye at the newsstand. She was friends with their mother and the biggest busybody in town. If Mamma knew they were off spending money, even someone else's money, when they should have been hustling up odd jobs or drilling in the *campo*, she'd yell at them for a half hour straight. Or she'd cry. Roberto hated the crying more than the yelling.

Mamma cried a lot since the war began. Tourists were the ones who paid big money for rides in gondolas. And for the past two years tourists had hardly come at all. The only rides his father gave these days were short jogs across the canals for men in a rush on their way to work.

Samuele and Memo were already on the bridge.

"Let's get going," said Samuele.

"Hold on." Sergio took Memo by the arm with one hand and Roberto by the arm with the other. "Who invited the Jew?"

Roberto pulled his arm away. "He's my friend."

"He's a Jew, you idiot. You know about Hitler and Jews. Even someone with his head in the clouds like you has to know that." Sergio slapped his forehead with his palm. "Fact number two: Don't play with fire."

"I've got my own money," said Samuele. "I'll walk there by myself." He leaned his back against the wall of the