

# The Saltamontes Chronicles, Part 1:

## Escape from Darkness

### Chapter 9

#### Alex and the Macchi MC.205

So what happened to Alex as soon as he left Parma and his beloved Catarina? As you already know, he sneaked out of Sofia and Giovanna's house in the middle of the night, when everyone else was asleep. He took his Happiness Production Machine and a bundle with a change of clothes, which Sofia had given him. He set off, not knowing where he was going, and looked back only once, hoping that he might see Catarina at the window. But she was still asleep, along with the rest of Parma. He decided not to look back again and to do everything he could to find a means of transport to take him towards Iano, if Iano actually existed. He still believed that he would forget about the feelings he'd had, which were completely new to him and which he couldn't cope with.

The sun climbed slowly higher as Alex carried on walking, oblivious to the passers-by and the rising temperature. When it got very hot, he sat down for a rest on some stone steps in front of one of the houses and put the Happiness Production Machine down beside him. He watched some children playing in the street. Some of them must have been the same age as him, but Alex felt a lot older. Perhaps all the experiences he'd lived through made him feel that way, or perhaps it was wanting to catch up with Catarina so she wouldn't treat him like a little boy any more. He was losing himself in his thoughts, gathering his strength for the onward journey, when he noticed some lorries driving past. He was reminded of the journey from Poland to Heidelberg, and then the trip with Catarina to Parma. He had the impression that it had all happened such a long time ago. His train of thought was interrupted when the lorries stopped. They were quite a distance away, but close enough that he could see them properly. He jumped up, grabbed the machine and dashed off after them. When he arrived, it turned out that they were transporting soldiers who were there to hand out food. Alex joined the long queue, because his stomach had started reminding him that he hadn't had breakfast.

'Oi, you!' one of them shouted at him. 'What have you got that box for?'

Alex didn't understand. He looked around and saw a sturdy lad with a cocky expression and a mop of unkempt hair, somewhat taller than him and holding his hands provocatively in his pockets.

'Are you deaf? What have you got that box for, I'm asking you!'

The boy's posture and tone of voice made Alex very nervous, so he decided not to say anything, just in case.

'Are you taking the mickey? Cat got your tongue?!'

'Calm down, lads!' came a voice from the queue. 'People have come here to get bread, not to listen to you arguing!'

In a flash, the boy had ripped the Happiness Production Machine out of Alex's hands and had run off with it. Alex set off after him. Ignoring all the bricks lying around and blocking the way, he ran as fast as he could to catch up with the thief. But with every twisting corner of the narrow streets, the boy was gradually disappearing from view, and Alex slowed down. But then he caught sight of the boy again, and within a few more minutes both had reached the last building and beyond, there was only a field dotted with a few small

olive trees. On the horizon stood an old wooden barn. The thief was running towards it, still clutching the machine.

'Give it back! It's mine!' Alex yelled, distraught.

He wasn't going to give up. His legs ached, he was weak and he was hungry, but his fighting spirit kept him chasing the thief. Suddenly two soldiers appeared in the distance. They looked as if they were coming out of the barn to head for town. The thief ran headlong into one, losing his tight grip on the machine.

'And where are you in such a hurry to get to, laddie?' the soldier said, grabbing the boy by the arm. The boy gave no reply but struggled frantically to escape, eventually dropping the machine entirely and scarping in the opposite direction. Alex dashed up to his invention and, his eyes full of tears, began picking it up off the ground. One of the tubes had fallen off, but with some fiddling he finally managed to put it back into the hole.

The soldier went up to him.

'What's going on? What's the hurry?'

Alex looked up sadly at the man.

'This is my machine. And that boy stole it from me. So I ran after him.'

The man crouched down.

'Oh, so you speak German. Fine. A machine, you say? I also make all kinds of machines with my little boy. I'm just on my way to see him. And my wife.'

'Are you going back home?'

'Everyone's going back home. Aren't you?'

Alex lowered his gaze. There was a long pause.

'I'm not. I'm going to find a home.'

The soldier laughed, not quite understanding what the boy meant.

'So be it. But congratulations on the machine. Nice bit of engineering, that.'

For the first time in his life, Alex felt warmth in someone's words.

'Do you really think so?'

'You bet I do! It takes a heap of imagination to make something like that. How old are you?'

'Ten. Maybe more.'

'Another twenty and I bet you'll give the whole world a surprise with something absolutely incredible. Just make sure you don't rest on your laurels!' the soldier said, setting off towards the town.

Alex was left standing next to the barn with his machine, with no idea where to go. It was noon. He was in no hurry to go anywhere and he had no plans. He decided that he'd first have a rest and then keep going wherever his legs and eyes took him. As he was looking for the door to the barn, which he'd settled on as a good spot for a breather, he came across a small window, but there was nothing behind it apart from a mountain of hay. He kept going and eventually found the door. Consisting of several planks randomly hammered together, it was open. Alex gave it a gentle push and went inside.

The barn was large, although there was nothing in it apart from a huge pile of cut grass. Alex laid the machine on the ground and decided to take a nap. He thought he would cover himself with hay and wait until the afternoon, when it would have cooled down a little. As he was starting to scoop together his makeshift bed, his hand suddenly brushed against something hard. Curious, he started digging, until he could feel metal under his fingers. He began scrabbling furiously until a wing section appeared. It was

exactly what he had thought it was! There was a plane hidden in the barn! Alex couldn't resist seeing it in all its glory, but he was afraid someone might be watching. He instinctively sought out the cockpit, climbing up a small staircase. After a struggle, he lifted the cumbersome cover up and jumped into the seat, giving a sigh and also a laugh. It wasn't exactly spacious, but that didn't matter to Alex. In a single bound he jumped back out of the plane to go and get his Happiness Production Machine. He threw it behind the pilot's seat and then sat back down comfortably. And then he forgot he was hungry. He imagined himself flying over the fields and towns and the people dearest to him in the world waving from below – Adam, Barbara, Catarina, and also Heinrich and Irene, who'd wanted to adopt him in Heidelberg. In his mind he climbed high above the clouds then swooped down, and he suddenly felt very happy. The feeling didn't last long, though; there was a sudden noise, and the soldiers he'd met that morning going into town came into the barn. Alex held his breath, hoping that he'd stay unnoticed, as the soldiers began to chat.

'When are we off then?' one of them asked.

'That all depends on whether I can get any fuel. But I might even manage to get some today.'

'And then what? You're going to do as you planned?'

'My plans are the same as they always were. To go back home to the wife and kid.'

'And the plane?'

'I'll leave it at the base. It wasn't and isn't mine.'

'It's that easy for you to part with it?'

'Not at all ... But there are priorities in life, aren't there? Mine's my family. And the plane comes second.'

'Sure, sure.'

'If you haven't got a family, you've got nothing to lose. And if you have, well, you think about them above all. At least I do.'

'I'm just saying, I'd love a plane like that.'

'And I'm saying that I'll leave it at the base as soon as I manage to get it filled up.'

'You know how much hardware got destroyed in the war? Who's going to know that this plane wasn't? Just look what you could do with it if you just kept it for yourself! It's got a range of more than a thousand kilometres! You could go and live anywhere on earth that you pleased. And be free! You get it? Free!'

'What are you blithering on about? You're only saying that 'cause you haven't got anyone to go back home to.'

The soldiers stopped talking and started eating instead.

The smell wafted up to Alex's nostrils and he could feel his stomach rumbling again. He curled up tighter, clutching himself. Meanwhile the men, their mouths still full, had resumed their banter.

'If I could just fly as well as you ...'

'But you can't, so just shut it!'

'I can't persuade you then?'

'I'm supposed to be persuaded to steal a plane?'

'I wouldn't think twice about it.'

'Don't forget that plane was loaned to me for the duration of the war and I have to take it back. Anyway, I have no idea if they're looking for me. I don't want to have any problems.'

'You're a right chicken – what can I say?'

'I'm not a chicken, I'm an honest man!' The soldier was outraged.

'An honest man? If you were honest, you wouldn't have joined up and you wouldn't have killed people.'

Silence fell. There were more munching and chewing sounds. Alex let out a soft moan, which fortunately no one heard.

'Do you think I wanted to? I wanted to kill?'

'Whether you wanted to or not, that's what you did. People judge you on what you do, not what you intended to do.'

There was another pause in the conversation. Then Alex swallowed so hard that his spit went down the wrong way, and he suddenly let out a splutter. The men jumped up from their seats and ran up to the plane. Alex was still sitting there, curled up. He was afraid to look up at them.

'I know this lad!' one of the soldiers yelled, but then pulled himself together. 'Don't be scared – we won't hurt you.'

Alex raised his head.

'Really?'

'You have to do some proper serious training to get a machine like this going. You weren't thinking of taking off in it yourself, were you?' said the man, chewing on his bread and clutching a hunk of it.

Without a word, Alex held his hand out for the food. The men looked at each other.

'You hungry? Have some!'

With the speed of lightning, their bread and dripping vanished right before their eyes. Once Alex had finished, he sat up cross-legged and gave a deep sigh. He looked up at them.

'I'm sorry I came and sat in here.'

The soldiers laughed.

'It's a Macchi MC.205. D'you like it?' Alex nodded. 'So we've got ourselves another technology fan then,' the soldier said.

'I spotted that earlier before we went into town for the food. The lad's built his very own machine! Show it to us.'

Alex pulled out his invention.

'What's this, then? An extra engine?' the second one said, and chuckled.

'It's my Happiness Production Machine,' he said, flustered. The men glanced at each other. 'I made it with my friend, I mean my brother, Adam. It's to bring us luck and help make our dreams come true as well as those of anyone else who happens to be nearby!'

The men looked at each other, utterly amazed, then the one who was planning to go back to his wife and son looked away to hide the fact that his eyes were welling up. Once he'd composed himself, he looked back at Alex.

'You see, my lad, whether you're young or old, your heart never changes. That's why you should always listen to your heart and not your head, which changes its mind from one minute to the next.'

'You're right, there,' said the second one. 'This boy can't let go of his machine and neither can we.' He laughed out loud.

'Speak for yourself. I'd like to remind you that I was, and still am, the pilot of this plane!'

'Alright, alright, forget about the plane. We've got this kid to worry about now. So, what now then, laddie? Where shall we drop you off home?'

Alex shook his head.

'Haven't you got a home?'

'No ... But I will soon! In this place in Italy called Iano.'

The pilot put his hand into his thick head of hair and started straightening it out. He looked over at his friend.

'Have you heard of this Iano?'

'I haven't, quite frankly. I've been wandering around Italy for as long as I can remember, but I've never heard of it. Well, unless it's just a hole out in the sticks.'

Alex nodded.

'So it's a hole, then. In that case, why don't we go and see where that hole is, eh?' From his pocket the man pulled out a crumpled piece of paper, which turned out to be a map. 'Would you happen to know the name of a bigger town nearby, where we should start looking?'

'Yup,' Alex replied. 'It's near San Gimignano ... if I remember rightly,' he added under his breath.

The men started poring over the map and running their fingers over it. They went on like that for over a minute, before they spoke up again.

'It's a hole, that's for sure – you can hardly see it on the map. Just a hamlet. You got someone there? Relatives? A friend?'

Alex had a think. He didn't know whether to tell the truth and get himself accompanied to the nearest police station, or lie and seem that bit more serious.

'Yes. My family'll be waiting for me there,' he said diplomatically.

'Right then, so we'll take the lad to Iano and fly wherever our eyes take us.'

'I've already told you. The plane's mine. There's no "us". I decide what'll happen to it.'

It took an age for the soldiers to stop arguing. All this time, Alex was watching both of them in turn, and his head going first left, then right and back again was quite an amusing sight. They finally finished bickering.

'I'm going into town now to sort some fuel out,' said the pilot. 'You two stay here. Once we've filled her up, we'll decide what to do next.'

The pilot left, leaving Alex in the barn with the soldier who wanted to get his hands on the plane.

'You see, laddie, you don't often get the chance to be alone with a baby like this,' he said, proudly stroking the wing. 'A man can get close to a machine just like he can to people. A mere mortal won't understand that, of course, but a real enthusiast ...'

'Are you keen on planes, then?'

'Mate!' he said to Alex, who suddenly felt all grown up. 'I dreamt of nothing else than flying in a Macchi. But I was only destined to be the shoe-shine boy.'

'The what?'

'Well, the mechanics guy. Repairs, welding. Fun, but nothing to do with flying.'

'Can you fly?'

'Well, not exactly. I mean, I did the training, but –' Alex stared at the soldier with his mouth wide open, hanging on his every word. 'But I didn't pass the practical exam 'cause my eyesight's a bit iffy. And what use to me now are all those books in my head and all the stuff I learned?' He gazed into the distance, as if he was trying to pick out an invisible picture on the barn wall. Alex noticed that he was squinting. 'The problem is, I'm totally short-sighted. Blind as a bat, I am. But my mate loves flying with me, 'cause he reckons I'm not daft, since I've got an encyclopaedia in my head and I can speak a bunch of languages. So alright, I don't pilot the plane, but my dream's come true anyway, 'cause I'm flying, aren't I.' He bowed his head sadly and was planning to have a moment of quiet reflection, but then he noticed his sandwiches lying on the ground. 'Shall we have some more to eat?' He gave Alex a pat on the shoulder. 'They're on me! And I'll tell you what else – it's time you starting calling me by my first name. I'm Alberto. And my pilot mate's Enzo.'

'And I'm Alex.'

When the pilot returned, Alex and Alberto were polishing off another piece of bread.

'I've got the fuel sorted – there's a truck on the way. Get a move on! We need to get her out,' Enzo said.

The three of them set about digging the plane out. When they'd finished, Alex just stood there, spellbound. He rubbed his eyes just to be sure that what he was looking at was real. He looked again, and this time he was sure that before him stood a real fighter plane painted brown and grey so it looked something like tiger stripes.

'That's what I like!' said Alberto. 'Speed, range, weapons.'

'Don't bore the lad, just help me fill her up!'

While the men were pumping the fuel, Alex stood admiring the metal bird. Eventually, sheer delight pushed him to walk around it. With every few steps, he reached out and touched the fuselage, still unable to believe that it wasn't all a dream. When the soldiers had finished, they went back to the sandwiches. By now, Alex was full. No longer feeling fear or hunger, but sensing the invisible bond between the two soldiers, he dared to speak up.

'Do you think I could have another sit in the cockpit?'

Enzo shrugged.

'For all I care you could sleep in there, provided it's not too cramped.'

'The lad's small enough – he'll manage,' Alberto said, chuckling.

'Could I really?'

'Sure. Jump in!'

Evening was approaching. Alex decided to spend the night in the cockpit. He lined it with a blanket that he'd been given by the soldiers. He stuck the Happiness Production Machine in and squeezed in behind the controls. Now he needed nothing more than the people he missed. The soldiers were telling each other hilarious tales and drinking wine they'd got from the town, and they'd stopped paying him any attention. The pulsating hum of the cicadas and the warm evening gave no indication of the impending threat. But just as Alex was dropping off, he suddenly heard the sound of shouting, which was gradually coming closer and closer, like a herd of galloping animals or, worse, a crowd of angry people bent on causing trouble. He sat up with a start and peeked out of the cockpit. Alberto and Enzo had jumped to their feet. They were both rather merry from the wine and it didn't occur to them that they might be in any danger. But then it dawned on them that something was wrong. From outside, clearer and clearer, came the cries of, "Kill them!"

Without giving it a moment's thought, both soldiers rushed to the plane. The mechanic leapt onto the wing and began fiddling on the right side. The pilot jumped into the cockpit, while Alex curled up tight into a ball

behind the seat, holding tightly onto the Happiness Production Machine. The voices outside were getting louder and louder.

'Kill them! Get them!'

'Someone must've mistaken us for somebody else,' the pilot said. 'We have to get out of here!'

Somehow they got the engine started and the propellor quickly began whirring at full speed. Squashing himself down next to Alex, Alberto yelled, 'Move it!'

The aircraft inched forward towards the wooden wall. The planks began to wobble and then peeled away, leaving a large gap through which the plane made its escape, fleeing an angry mob armed with rakes, pitchforks and rifles. It gathered speed and slowly lifted off, leaving behind the barn, which lay in ruins, and the people, who gradually got smaller and smaller until they looked like ants.

'Hold on tight!' shouted Alberto, right into Alex's ear. 'Single-seater fighters weren't built for three!'

Alex, who was both fascinated and terrified, raised his head and found himself looking on a sight he'd only previously dreamt of, with clouds at his fingertips and the golden-orange setting sun. Not for the first time he wished that Adam and Catarina were there with him.

Once they'd climbed high enough the roar of the engine subsided, settling into its own rhythm as if it were a living thing. The minutes passed.

'This is the life!'

'Whaaat?' Alex shrieked.

'WE-ARE-IN-SE-VENTH-HEA-VEN!' Alberto shouted. 'We're in our element, my lad! You've got yourself a couple of lunatics who love to fly!' He roared with laughter.

The plane dipped into the clouds like a spoon into whipped cream. It was now flying smoothly and evenly. It seemed like the heavy lump of metal had melted off the clouds and was floating weightless, trailing behind it only a noise like a buzzing hornet.

And then Alex felt a wave wash right over him, of the love that both men felt for their machine. His legs stopped hurting and he was suddenly overcome with an enthusiasm he'd never had before. The plane was rising and dipping, which had initially scared him, but he now felt that its every movement was in unison with his quivering body. As he looked out again at the clouds, they seemed so close that he could reach out and touch them. They reminded him of the icing that Irene in Heidelberg used to put on her cakes. Icing at his fingertips, an exhilaration that was causing his entire body and soul to tremble, all his troubles and worries left far behind on the ground – on that day, when Alex, for the first time ever sat on board a plane, his love of flying was born. He closed his eyes, and in that moment he found himself in a dream-like state which he never wanted to wake up from. Unless, of course, it was to tell Adam and Catarina about it.

Suddenly the pilot leaned his head back and yelled, 'French Riviera down below us! Want to take a look?'

For a brief moment the plane carried on flying at its own pace, still making that terrible racket, but it suddenly dipped its metal body down to one side to reveal a world where the heavens met the sea. Alex let go of the Happiness Production Machine and clung on to Alberto, who just guffawed and yelled into his ear, 'Don't be scared! We'll be fine! We've done this a million times!'

From that height it was impossible to see that the world was tired of war, or the waves crashing onto the shore.

'Have you any idea where we're going?!'

'What are you saying?!' Alberto asked, leaning in even closer.

'Where-are-we-go-ing?!'

Alberto turned to Enzo and shouted something, but he didn't hear him, so he decided to grab Enzo by the arm. The pilot levelled off and then leaned his head back.

'WHERE ARE WE GOING?!' Alberto repeated.

'Andorra!'

'Of course!' he yelled, hoarsely. 'We're going to Andorra! Our pilot's going back home!'

Alex looked pensive.

'What's up, laddie? Aren't you pleased we're landing?!'

'Is this Andorra a long way from Iano?!'

Alberto started laughing.

'Miles away, my lad! We're almost at the Pyrenees!'

'So we're not in Italy any more?!'

'No, mate! Italy's a long way behind us!'

Then Alex thought that although the plane had given him something, it had also taken something away from him. He'd found a love of flying, but he'd probably lost the chance of meeting his friend, who he would probably never see again. He curled up even tighter, hiding his head between his knees, so the others couldn't see the tears streaming down his face.

As the plane circled slowly over the mountains, Alex had the most breathtaking views imaginable, but he wasn't enjoying them half as much as before, since he was now worrying about his future. Eventually Enzo found a field they could land on. The ground had a nasty shock as the metal monster came thudding down onto it. Alex's ears were now hurting even more than his knees, and he realised that he couldn't hear a thing.

'Swallow hard!' Alberto bellowed at him, while Enzo opened the hatch and let in the fresh mountain air.

'Home at last!' he exclaimed triumphantly.

Alberto stood up and stretched.

'I advise you to do the same,' he said. 'You won't be so stiff.' Alex pulled himself up from behind the pilot's seat and grabbed hold of his Happiness Production Machine.

'Let's get out, lads!' the pilot declared in a loud voice. 'Both of you can come to my house for a slap-up dinner. After all that excitement, we deserve a bit of peace and quiet!'

Enzo, Alberto and Alex set off down the valley towards the town, passing old stone houses on the way. Finally they came to a small building with shutters and window boxes. Enzo knocked. There was a pause, followed by the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs. The door opened to reveal a woman in a brown polka-dot dress. In an instant, her eyes moistened with tears, her lips formed a smile and she flung her arms around her husband's neck. Alex and Alberto stood in silence, waiting to see what would happen next.

'Honey, these are my friends,' said Enzo, pointing to them. 'They're going to be staying with us for a while until they find their feet. Little Alex here only speaks German and a bit of French.'

The woman was so happy that she just stared at her husband and said, 'Yes.'

'Well, let's not stand around here for ever, shall we?' Enzo said, and laughed. 'Can we come in?'



The woman released her husband from her clutches and wiped away her tears of joy.

'I'm sorry, of course! Do come in!'

As Alex stood to go inside, he noticed a boy with a kind face and a clever, roguish expression about him, who first looked him up and down with curiosity and then ran over to his father and jumped into his arms.

'Dad, I'm so happy you're home! I've missed you so much!'

Enzo's son Roberto was thirteen. He had dark hair just like Alex, a similar demeanour and even pulled similar faces. Without taking his eyes off Alex, he gave a big grin.

'Are you coming in?' he asked cheerfully.

Alex didn't reply.

'Roberto, you're going to have to teach our friend here a few words in our language. Like I did with you once, alright?' Enzo said.

The boy nodded, and switched straight into German.

'My dad's got a knack for teaching foreign languages. I'll teach you. It's easy peasy.'

'You can speak German?' Alex was amazed.

'When I need to. My mum reckons that learning foreign languages is the most useful thing you can do.'

'If you travel a lot, you just pick them up as you go along,' his mother added. 'Besides, they give you a sense of security.'

Alex smiled tentatively at the boy, who he had taken an instant liking to, and shyly stepped inside. He looked around. It was plain, modest and clean. The walls were covered with photographs, with Enzo clearly visible in many of them. Roberto went up to Alex and grabbed his sleeve.

'Now you've got no choice. Mum's going to feed you so full you won't need to eat for a week.' Alex burst out laughing. 'So? Shall we go and eat?'

'I thought you'd never ask!'

In the blink of an eye, the table was laid and the room was filled with warm candlelight. Without a murmur they all sat down to dinner.

'I can see why Alex caught your eye,' Enzo's wife suddenly blurted out.

'Naturally. As soon as I saw him, he reminded me of Roberto,' Enzo replied.

'Why don't you tell us something about yourself?' the woman said, turning to Alex. 'Where you come from, and how you came to end up here in the Pyrenees ...'

So Alex began to tell them about the orphanage in the German city of Stettin which then became the Polish city of Szczecin and how they were evacuated to Heidelberg. He told them about Adam, the co-constructor of his Happiness Production Machine, about Barbara, the best carer he'd ever known, and about the old couple that he used to visit for tea. Then he suddenly remembered Catarina, and hesitated. Should he tell them about her?

'But how did you end up in northern Italy? It's a bit of a way from Heidelberg, isn't it?'

Alex had wanted to keep Catarina to himself. Not because he was embarrassed, but because he thought the fewer people who knew of her the more likely it would be that his feelings, which were still growing, would last. He sat in silence, hoping that the others would change the subject but instead, several pairs of eyes kept staring at him, waiting for him to go on. He had no choice but to tell them.

'In Heidelberg I met this girl, Catarina. Her father, well her stepfather actually, decided to get rid of her and send her back to her home country. So I went with her to the station —'

'And what happened then?' Enzo's wife asked.

'I saw her getting onto a freight train ... She was all by herself. Just her and her suitcase.'

'So what then? Did you jump in after her?'

Alex nodded. The woman stood up from the table and went up to him.

'Let me give you a hug. You do realise that what you pulled there was the most irrational, idiotic stunt ever?'

Alex's eyes widened.

'As if a stunt could be rational,' Roberto quipped, but nobody paid him the slightest bit of attention.

'But if you were idiotic out of love, well that's an entirely different matter!' she went on.

'Too bad you're not older, or I'd pour you a glass of wine and raise a toast to your courageous deed,' Enzo added, with a conspiratorial smile.

'Yeah, right ...' Roberto quipped again, and again there was no response. Alex had to agree with the remark concerning his age; he was constantly wishing he was older.

Enzo glanced over at his son, then turned to his wife.

'Darling, I wonder what your reaction would be if Roberto jumped into a train after a girl?'

'First and foremost, I would like to know that my son had a girlfriend. And that if she was in trouble I would know that he was in trouble too. And I would like to be a part of that, not to punish him, but to support him.'

'Even a ten-year-old?'

'What does it matter if it's a ten-year-old, a three-year-old or even a fifty-year-old? People have hearts at every age, and their hearts can also fall for someone at every age.'

A strong wind was blowing up outside, and the shutters were starting to bang open and closed of their own accord. Enzo stood up and went to the window to shut them. Roberto gave his new friend a poke and a wink.

'Are you going to stay with us forever?'

'Eh?'

'Are you going to live with us, then?'

Alex had a think.

'I can't. I have to find my best friend Adam. I have to go back to Italy,' he replied unhesitatingly.

'But if you want to do that, then what? My mum loves romantic stories provided they have a happy ending. But now she's got you under her wing there's no way she's going to let you put yourself in any danger. When it comes down to it she fusses over children like a mother hen.'

'So has she got plans for me, then?'

'Dunno. But if you want, I'll ask her about you tomorrow. My mum talks to me a lot.'

'About everything?'

'I don't know about that, but everything I ask her about, for sure. But anyway,' Roberto went on, 'I've got a surprise for you.'

'A surprise?'

'I certainly have! It's an opportunity not to be missed! I'll just ask my parents.'

He went to the other end of the table, then came straight back with a big grin on his face.

'We've got half an hour. I'm taking you for a walk.'

'Um, I don't know if you've noticed, but there's a thunderstorm coming.'

'Precisely! Mate! This is Andorra! We might not get this again for a long time. Come on – let's go!'

Roberto pulled Alex up by the sleeve and they ran outside, almost tripping over the doorstep in their hurry to get out. Luckily they caught hold of the door frame in the nick of time.

'We very nearly lost our front teeth, there!' they said, almost in unison.

As the boys went out into the street, lightning sheeted across the sky. Only now did Alex realise that the thunder had been rumbling for quite some time now, so it should have started raining ages ago. Just in case, he asked, 'Shouldn't we have brought something to protect us?'

'Like what?'

'Oh, I don't know. Something to stop us from getting soaked?'

Roberto laughed out loud.

'I knew I could catch you out! We don't need anything for the rain, 'cause there won't be any!'

'It's not going to rain?' Alex was surprised.

'Exactly! It'll be a rain-free storm. Hurry up!'

The boys dashed down a cobbled street, lined with grey stone and rust-brick houses. At the end, Roberto grabbed Alex by the sleeve again and showed him a path leading through some overgrown grass. They ran for over a minute before coming to a small clearing. From there unfolded a view of the entire valley surrounded by mountains. When they reached the middle of the clearing, Roberto lay down on the grass and gestured for Alex to do the same. Then they both looked up at the midnight-blue sky filled with thousands of twinkling stars. All around the mountain tops the dirty brown clouds were dancing as if they were alive and knew that they were forbidden to enter the valley. They swirled around and seemed to bounce off each other, setting off the thunder and lightning. Suddenly, the mountains themselves seemed to be moving, and the illusion was so great that with every passing second the boys became more and more convinced that the clouds had stopped moving and that it was the land that they were lying on which was starting to sway gently, and then spinning around. Alex grabbed Roberto's hand to keep him from flying away. He felt like the meadow was floating up to the mountains, taking them with it, then reaching the very summits, behind which a proper storm was soaking the fields, houses, people and animals. The boys were still holding hands and Roberto was laughing out loud. His voice echoed off the mountains.

'Alex, are you alive?' he yelled.

It was all so magical that even the long silence, punctuated by flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder, could drown out his words.

'I said, are you alive?'

Alex nodded, but then realised that his friend couldn't see him.

'Yes!' he replied.

'Well, then? What do you think?'

'It's amazing! If I could just get one of those lightning bolts to charge my Happiness Production Machine, it'd be enough to last it for the next hundred years!'

Roberto stopped watching the clouds and leaned up on his elbow.

'That reminds me! I was meaning to ask you about that box!'

Alex sat up on the grass.

'It's not a box. It's my invention. Me and my friend Adam, who I lost but I'll find again, we decided to build a machine that would bring us a little luck ... and that's exactly what I've had so far.'

'What have you had so far?' Roberto asked, still leaning on his elbow.

'Well, er, luck.'

Alex looked up at the sky as another bolt of lightning lit it up. He thought about Catarina and felt as if an invisible thread was holding them together. Roberto lay back down again, watching the sky. Suddenly it seemed to Alex that he could smell the lavender-scented soap that Catarina used. He missed her terribly and decided to hide this feeling deep down somewhere in his soul, as if he was scared that someone might steal it. The only keepsakes he had of her were his memories and longing for her. He gazed up at the peaks, where once more the glaring light flashed behind the mountains. He glanced over at Roberto to make sure he couldn't hear, then, barely moving his lips, whispered, 'If this storm goes all the way to you, Caty, I hope it tells you I miss you ...'

The boys jumped up and sprinted back home. When they got back they were out of breath. In front of the door, Roberto stopped.

'Are you sure you're only ten?' he asked Alex. 'You look a lot older. 'Cause I'm thirteen and – look! – we're exactly the same height.'

'I know. Everyone keeps telling me I don't look like I'm ten,' Alex joked.

'Seriously! When I look at you, I think you could be thirteen, or even fifteen!'

They had their feet on the doorstep, but Roberto went on, 'So how do you know that someone didn't want to hide you and then changed your birth date?'

Alex thought about it. He was reminded of the time when he was looking for a map in Barbara's room with Adam and how he'd come across his file with his name on it.

'Maybe you're right.'

'You bet I am! Who'd believe that you're only ten? Well, who?'

'What are they supposed to believe? They just accept what I tell them.'

'Well, do you believe it, then?'

Alex thought about it some more. He stared up at the clouds dancing over the mountains and the grey file with his name on reappeared. Not looking directly at Roberto, he said in a quiet, yet determined voice, 'No, I don't.'

'Well, there you have it! You look like you're thirteen to me!'

Alex smiled.

'That'd be wonderful, 'cause Catarina's thirteen, as well.'

'So is this Catarina cute, then?' Roberto asked.

'If you're asking me, well –'

'Don't lie! Is she pretty or ugly?'

'Jeez, alright! Very pretty.'

'Great. 'Cause you know, I also know this girl ...'

As Roberto was starting to tell him all about the girl from round the corner, the front door opened.

'Right then, lads! That's enough hanging around outside for tonight. Come and have some supper,' said the woman in the polka-dot dress.

'I told you my mum would fatten us up!' Roberto said, before turning towards his mother. 'What's to eat?'

'Your favourite – trinxat and rostes amb mel.'

'Yummy!' cried Roberto.

'What?' asked Alex. 'What are we having?'

'Ant chops with squished spider gravy.'

'Ugh, no!'

'Ha ha! I was only joking! It's just potatoes with cabbage and ham in honey,' he said, laughing. 'I've just noticed how hungry I am!'

The following day, Alberto was up at the crack of dawn, and stood waiting at the kitchen table, clutching his small grey bag with his belongings. He was staring wistfully out of the window.

'You don't have to go just yet,' said Enzo.

'I know I don't. But all this wandering around has reminded me I need to find myself my own place, and maybe even a wife ... although I don't know if any woman would be able to put up with me.'

'You're incorrigible, Alberto, but I do like you.' Enzo went up to him and slapped him on the back. 'You can't just forget all the years we've spent together, and all the times that plane could've been our grave.'

'Yeah. If we'd been shot down, we wouldn't be here now.'

'But we made it. I believe we managed to cheat death because life hasn't finished with us yet. And if you do find yourself a wife, she'll tie you right down.'

'I don't believe that for one moment,' Alberto said, smiling at his friend.

'You'll see, mark my words.'

'In that case, I need to find myself a wife to take on my travels with me!' He laughed.

They'd been talking in low voices so as not to wake anyone up, but suddenly there was Alex, standing in the doorway. He was fully dressed and held the Happiness Production Machine in his hands. The men looked at each other.

'What are you doing up so early? Aren't children asleep at this hour?' Enzo asked.

'I'm not a child,' Alex replied.

'Alright. In that case, everyone who's tired should be asleep. And you're most definitely tired.'

'I'm not going to sleep, because I have to get back to Italy. I came here by accident. From Parma to Iano via Andorra isn't exactly the most direct route, is it?'

'But what a spectacular adventure it's been! Don't say you wish you'd never been in fighter plane!' said Enzo.

'Of course not, but I've still got a long way to go to find Adam. And I have to find him – he's my brother!'

'Alright, then!' Alberto scraped his chair back from the table and stood up. 'You can come with me.'

'Really? Can I really?' Alex was thrilled.

'Aren't you going to say goodbye to Roberto and my wife?' asked Enzo.

'We're not going to say goodbye, because we'll be seeing them again soon,' Alberto replied mischievously, giving Alex a wink. 'We'll come and visit or we'll invite them to see us when we've found our own places, won't we? Anyway, we've already got a lot in common – you haven't got a home, I haven't got a home, that's something we share, isn't it, eh?'

And so it was that the mechanic Alberto and Alex found themselves standing in the street. Alex had his Happiness Production Machine under his arm and his heart was filled with a new hope.

‘Have we got any idea where we’re going?’ he asked.

‘Where we’re going, we don’t know. But we know how!’ Alberto gave a wave, as if to say “come with me”. ‘While you were off with Roberto chasing the storm that wasn’t, I sorted something out that I’m sure you’re going to like.’

They took a few steps and arrived at a big wooden double door, with a circular cast-iron knocker. Alberto knocked but nobody answered. He knocked again, louder and more assertively this time. From inside came a voice which didn’t sound very amused.

‘Who on earth is that? Can’t an old man get any sleep?’

‘It’s me! I’ve come for the motorbike. As we agreed!’

‘Oh, it’s you!’ From behind the door appeared an unshaven man with a face covered in a thousand wrinkles. ‘Come in!’

Alex and Alberto went straight ahead into the courtyard. It was a total mess; there were car, motorbike and aircraft parts all over the place. Alex grinned from ear to ear.

‘It’s fantastic here!’ he said.

‘You like it, do you?’ asked the old man. ‘And what’s that with the box?’

Alex looked at Alberto with his puppy dog eyes.

‘Don’t you understand?’ the old man asked, but Alex didn’t even get the question. Alberto looked at him affectionately and tutted loudly, then whispered into his ear, ‘If you’ve decided you’re going to go wandering round Europe with me, you’ve got no choice but to learn some languages. It really isn’t all that difficult, and it’ll make our lives that much easier. From today on, you’ll repeat every word I say to you a hundred times in any language other than German, and get them into your head, is that clear?’

‘Clear as day, but right now I can’t understand what that man’s saying.’

‘Today I’ll translate for you, but don’t forget, from tomorrow you have to practise with me, ’cause I won’t always be able to help.’

Alex nodded. Alberto translated the old man’s question for Alex, who then proceeded to give a cheerful explanation.

‘It’s not a box, sir. It’s my invention. It’s a Happiness Production Machine.’

‘You’re an inventor?’ The man’s laughing eyes lit up the wrinkles around them. ‘In that case, we have a lot in common. Because, as you can see, I try to make things from nothing.’

‘Me too. I just have to think up a way to get the machine working ...’

‘I see. But perhaps it already works, but you just don’t know?’ the old man asked, giving a toothless grin.

Alberto started getting impatient.

‘Here we are yapping away, and what about my motorbike?’

‘What about it? It’s right here.’ The old man pointed at a black sheet. ‘Why don’t you take it off? You gave me a good price for it, so I’ve given it a polish. It’s as shiny as a bald man’s head.’

The cover came off to reveal a sight that Alex would never forget. Before him stood a majestic shiny red motorcycle with a sidecar attached. On the petrol tank was an inscription, painted in black: *Moto Guzzi*. Alex looked over at Alberto.

‘What’s the passenger seat for? Did you know you would be bringing me?’

'I guess so ... And even if you hadn't wanted to come, look at it this way – the bike's only got one seat. And if I met a nice girl who wanted to become my wife, where would she sit?'

Alex agreed with Alberto. The motorbike was beautiful, but only for one rider.

'So until you find a wife I can go with you?'

The old man laughed out loud. 'Where did you find this one? And the box as well!'

'I already told you, it's not a box!'

'Maybe not, but it's not going to fit in there, is it?'

'It fit in the plane, so it'll fit in here,' said Alberto. 'Give it to me. The life's work of our young constructor must not be desecrated! We'll work something out so we can take it with us.'

Alberto looked around the courtyard, frowning.

'You haven't got a bit of rope, have you?'

'What haven't I got!' the old man replied. 'There's bound to be some rope lying around. How much?'

In no time at all they had the machine tied to a metal rack over the rear wheel.

'Since it's so important to the lad, I must respect it. Who knows, if he's already thinking about making the world around him happy, maybe he'll make the whole world happy when he grows up?' Alberto said.

Alex raised his head and stuck his chin out to make himself look taller. It was a very long time since he had felt this proud. *Now* he looked like he could be fifteen.

'Right then, Alex. Jump in! The Pyrenees are calling!' cried Alberto, squashing his bundle next to the Happiness Production Machine and tying it down.

Alex hopped into the sidecar and Alberto kickstarted the engine. There was a loud, rhythmic *vrrroom*, to which the old man cocked his right ear.

'It works like a dream! It'll last you for years! I'm just not sure that you should be setting off today.'

'What's the problem? The war's over!'

'I was thinking more of the weather.'

'The weather's fantastic! It's summer, isn't it? The perfect season for a bike trip,' said Alberto, who was still in a jolly mood.

'It might be summer, but up there in the mountains, summer's completely different. Think about it.'

'There's nothing to think about! We've been through so many hair-raising adventures already, I'm sure we'll survive another one.'

'I hope so,' the old man replied, and waved goodbye.

Alberto and Alex sped off through the gateway, the engine's roar reverberating off the stone houses. A few seconds later and they'd disappeared around the corner.