

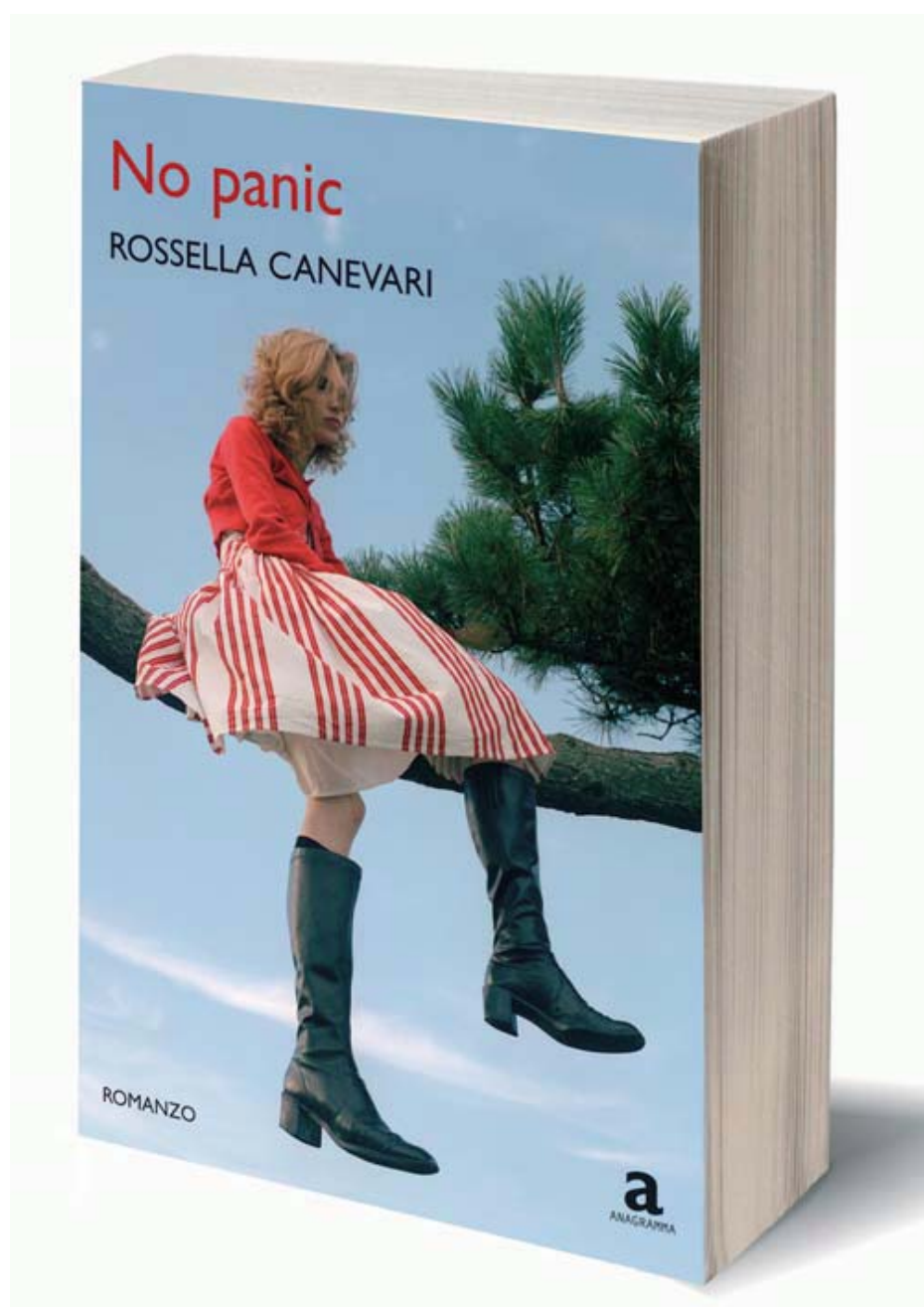
# NO PANIC

by

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(Newton Compton Editori, Italy - 2009)

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## **PROLOGUE**

**May 10, 2008**

The room is steeped in shadow. All of a sudden I leap up from the floor. My legs don't feel very steady and my head is spinning, but I continue on. I stop only to allow my eyes, struck by what for a moment appears to be a swarm of angry insects, to become accustomed. And then I head toward the closet. I open it, stand in front of the mirror that covers the entire inner surface of the door and confront myself. I look myself straight in the eye, without lowering my gaze, without succumbing to the desire to pity myself, to lie to myself. I watch and wait.

Suddenly I see myself: a coward. A well preserved coward: slim but not skinny. Long straight hair, hard-to-read eyes, breasts that fit perfectly in the curve of a hand, shapely legs, small feet. Not one wrinkle. 35 years old in just a few days. I look at least five years younger. Perhaps because I never actually lived those years, that's why they haven't left any marks on my face. No children, no pets, a relatively interesting and well paid job, just enough to live comfortably, no mortgage, a leased Volkswagen, and health insurance that covers all my needs.

Yet another bad affair that has just ended in shambles. After almost five years. Shambles: the only way I know to put an end to something. The parting destroys me, even if the person I'm leaving is always the wrong person, or, worse yet, detrimental to me. The fact is that "end" implies a "forever" and I am not a "forever" woman.

My pantry is full of boxes of cookies opened and then left there, in a reverential as much as distressful inability to find the perfect time to consume the last delicious biscuit. So delicious that the mere thought of parting with it causes me unbearable longing. The last morsel always just a bite away, fleeting solace for my troubled soul. Until one day, in a cathartic fit, I throw them all away. Without reason. Without pity. This is just my way of living. Pointless privations, tempered expectations. Fears and raptures broken up by moments of stasis that I have decided to call life. Geometric phases in the life of a coward by choice. This time, however, I feel like I've reached the limit. Probably I already passed the limit without realizing it and I can't turn back, even if I wanted to.

I did it. Mentally and physically. I ripped away the safety net that supported me over the past five years. The thought of this makes me euphoric, though at the same time it throws me off balance. I sit on the floor, disoriented, and observe the room around me. It's room number 55 of the Hotel Continental, a huge building near the Milan Convention Center. I have always loved hotels. In the same way that airports do, they arouse a feeling of excitement in me and make my perception more lucid. That which slumbers in daily existence comes back to life. Contact with transient individuals, an impersonal but basically reassuring structure,

helps me be more courageous in confronting those dark areas in which I am lost. Like a traveler discovering the world, having given up all her domestic routines but eager to experiment, to learn, even to risk.

That's why I'm here. I want to trip the switch. I'm not running away: I've confined myself in a corner with my back to the wall. That's the only way I can do it. Nights here are long and silent, identical to day. The present becomes blurred with the past. My mind prepares to battle its fears.

I get up, open the drapes. The sun is sinking and the last rays come through the window and lap at parts of my naked body. I hear light footsteps which stop in front of my door and then continue on. It must be the cleaning woman: she must want to come in and do her job, but she can't ignore the "do not disturb" sign that has hung on the doorknob for the last twenty-four hours. A few feet away, the cell phone, in silent mode, pulsates, emitting a faint bluish light that I once again ignore. There must be at least twenty missed calls and just as many messages. It electrifies me to think that others are looking for me. They want to know where I am, what's happening to me. Maybe they'd like to help me, stay close to me, know what's going through my mind. Edoardo probably wants to apologize. Now he probably thinks he loves me, that he wants me, that I'm the only one: this always happens when something you had, and didn't appreciate, disappears. Everything is destined to disappear, why is it so difficult to accept?

Moved by an uncontrollable impulse, I grab the cell phone and throw it up in the air. It makes a dull thud when it falls and breaks into three pieces. I feel like laughing. I've always dreamed of doing that. Satisfied, I lie down on the floor in a fetal position, in front of the sliding glass door. I shut my eyes and let the darkness surround me.