

LA VENDETTA

A stylized illustration of a man in a dark suit and a fedora hat, seen from behind, standing in a city square at night. He is looking towards a large, glowing full moon in the dark sky. Several dark silhouettes of aircraft are flying across the sky. The city buildings are illuminated with a warm, orange light, and a motorcycle is parked on the left. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic.

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CHAPTER ONE

December, 1993.

Death was the cheapest thing to find around here, sometimes it was given for free.

Monsters aren't born, they are made. And this one was made about two decades ago, in this very city, some miles north of here, in a house that no longer existed.

It was a winter night, and the lights were at their brightest in the Accetta home. The laughter inside was genuine, the atmosphere serene, and all was well. Christmas was just five days away, and everything was jolly—until it wasn't.

Gunshots replaced the sound of crickets chirping and broken glasses replaced the sound of the wind, in a moment, the peace disappeared and chaos became the new sheriff in town. Masked men walked into the sitting room after they had disposed of the minimal security outside, six armed invaders against three security men. The battle was over before it started.

The Accetta household was torn apart in seconds, leaving a bullet hole in The Don's head leaving his body on the floor, lifeless with eyes that were fully opened but there was no one home, he was long gone into the afterlife.

Roman watched as the remainder of the events unfolded, he watched as his loved ones were used and then killed. His eyes saw the horrors that would later come to haunt him for the rest of his life.

His show of pain was interrupted by a hand covering his mouth, it was big, hairy and familiar too, it belonged to the cook, Gustav. Gustav snuck him out into the courtyard handing Roman over to his wife, Helga. The job was simple, Helga would run with both of them and take them as far as possible to escape. Gustav and Helga weren't going to make it, she was sure, but if Roman and Aida made it, then it was a win for her, and she needed that win.

“Young Master” Helga addressed him with kind, blue eyes which betrayed the calmness of her composure, he knew she was doing her best to hold on, her final moments were fast approaching, but she held her elegance until it was over. That’s one thing he had always admired about Helga, her elegance. Even though she was an employee, she had always carried herself like an aristocrat. She walked with poise and spoke with grace. Even now, her calmness and grace were commendable, she didn’t act like someone who could hear the guns, and her eyes looked into him as if the whole world was quiet.

“Thank you, sir, for the opportunity to serve you, but I have a favour to ask. I hope a servant can request of you, sir”

Roman nodded vehemently, and Helga chuckled. He was a sweet, charming boy until the end—he always had been.

“Please take care of my daughter.”

Roman wanted to protest but she held his hand firmly and looked into his eyes.

“Please, sir” she repeated as tears pooled in her eyes.

“Take care of her, take this money and this picture. An address is written at the back. Can you hear me?”

Roman nodded. The universal sign for agreement.

“Run until you get to the main road and there you will see a shelter. Stay there till the morning and take a train to the next town, Palumbo. Ask for Major Argento and show him this picture. Please don’t look back”

She hugged Roman and kissed his forehead, before handing over Aida to him and both of them ran for their lives while she ran in another direction to distract the intruders.

He stopped a few metres short and looked back one last time before running to hug her.

“Aunt Helga, thank you for everything”

He turned back and started running with Aida.

Helga sobbed a bit before running off to be a martyr. And she was.

Roman didn't look back but he heard the gunshots, he didn't need to ask or check, he could do the math. Six gunshots. Zero survivors.

Roman ran like his life depended on it and in all honesty, it did, he had to outrun the chaos behind him with the parcel that was handed over to him, it was his duty to make sure that they both survived. Roman had never had a cause to run through the woods in their backyard before but he remembered the way, he had followed his dad for a walk before, he knew the path even in the dark and he ran pulling Aida who ran as fast as her little legs could carry her. Together they continued for about a kilometre before she complained of tiredness, walking on for another kilometre, they found the shelter and they hid in it and slept, they weren't afraid of death, they had seen the worst, whatever was going to happen now wasn't going to faze him more than what had happened. They slept in the cold, shivering and by morning, they continued their exodus, boarding a train that went to Palumbo. They asked after Argento and a cabman delivered them to his house, it was one of those loyal to the major, he was a man who was loved and more importantly, feared.

Roman presented the picture and Argento studied Aida and Roman. The picture was an image of Aida and Roman smiling together, it was meant to be a passage for Aida, and Roman didn't need to be introduced. Argento knew him very well. Roman's dad and Argento's wife were siblings and now both were dead. The first family reunion, definitely not the last.

January, 1994.

"From the earth we came, to the earth, we shall return."

The rain came down lightly, the wind blew harshly, the new year had just come and fifteen days into the new year, she was being laid to rest. The Reverend Father opened his Bible and read out loud, addressing the select people in attendance.

The tombstone carried the letters.

Elsa Carolina Benelli.

1956 – 1994

Mother, Wife.

The pallbearers lowered the casket into the soil gently, they had to be gentle, even if she was dead, she was still a lady.

Thud.

The coffin touched the bottom of the trench and pebbles followed. The last resting place of Elsa Benelli. The people in attendance included her sons, Nicola, and Michel and daughter, Rosa, the youngest of the three. She sobbed, reaching for her mother, but this was a journey that must be taken alone.

Black umbrellas covered the expanse of Benelli's courtyard; everyone came to pay their respects, this burial was the first one to come but other loose ends had to be tidied up, this was business and there was no consideration for feelings in business, the show had to go on. The funeral ended and people began to pay their respects, they came to show their support, their care and how much they wanted to be there, but it was all a smokescreen, they wanted to get in The Don's good graces. His ranking in Everlast had increased, his net had grown wider, and with those changes came a surge in his influence and everyone was here to kiss the ring before someone else did.

Funerals were considered 'neutral times', when one could come in peace and leave the same way, people hardly got killed at funerals, out of courtesy for the buried corpse. They didn't want to steal their spotlight, today was all about the person in the coffin, and everyone else should pick another day.

Benelli shook hands with those who came to greet him and waved at others, he smiled occasionally, everything was going according to plan, no hiccups yet.

"Everything has been taken care of". One of his henchmen whispered in his ear.

"that's good" he responded with a nod.

"Only the little girl is left. What to do, boss?" he asked taking a step back, and waiting for Benelli to process it.

The little girl, just eight years old, was the only one who saw something, she couldn't prove what she saw but there was something that could prove that she saw it all, a scar on her chin where she had been hit by a splinter, a memento to prove her presence. But that didn't prove anything, no one would believe the words of an eight-year-old, not that she was ever going to get a chance to tell it.

"I can't possibly kill her; I'll just send her off. She will forget the whole thing by the time she is back"

"Where are you sending her and how long?"

"I was thinking England, maybe till she finishes school, she will stay with some family over there"

"High school? Isn't that a bit long?"

"High school? I was thinking college" Benelli nodded again and his henchman, Ronald knew that he had made up his mind on this.

Two weeks later, Benelli's daughter is put on a plane and shipped off to England, not to be seen in Everlast for over a decade and a half.

Two cars peeled into the driveway that led to the Giuliano residence on the Northern side of *Everlast*. Everlast was a city that had always housed the mafia for generations after generations, the populace knew they were there, the authorities did also, but they didn't interfere. It was a silent, mutual agreement that they had, the authorities didn't intrude and the mafia kept their business under wraps. An agreement that worked for everyone.

Everlast was situated in the middle, a landlocked city, having neighbours on every side; to the north, it had Palumbo, the largest city in Granville. Charis and St. Lucia to the right, Luminor to the south and Featherine to the west, but of all the cities, Everlast was the most prosperous, crime does pay, when it's well organised. The mafia in Everlast was divided between two families; the Benelli and the Giuliano, both of them playing a delicate game of balance, one wrong move and the powder keg explodes, the peace that they had kept for almost two decades was going to be washed down the drain and both of them knew.

Si vis pacem, para bellum. He who wants peace must prepare for war.

And both families were prepared. One wrong pull of the trigger would trigger a major war and Roman was going to be the trigger. He had the most to gain from their clash because he was the one who had lost the most from their coalition.

He waited back at the Benelli residence awaiting reports on how everything went, he was ready to take the next phase, he needed their signal to put the ball in motion, he had been waiting a long time for this. The last eighteen years of his life were devoted to this very night, the night when the first domino would go down and everything else would fall into place. He had made every calculation, considered scenarios, looked into pitfalls and now it was time for everything to pan out. Just the way he wanted.

They could feel it, the moment of truth was nearing, and everything they had planned was about to be hatched. Even with the element of surprise, they still needed their vigilance. To storm a Don's house was no easy task, whether he was expecting you or not.

They headed straight for the gate. It was a gate that was fearsome, it was like the *Gates of Mordor*, only smaller and brown.

Non plus ultra.

That was the impression that the house gave, not that anyone intended to go beyond it, very few got to the gates of their own accord, and those who got there wished they didn't. It was not a site for exploration, it was a sight for fear.

Ci siamo quasi, spegni le luci. (We're almost there, turn off the lights)

"Sì, Signore". The driver responded and the lights went off. They knew where they were going and it was a straightforward drive.

The car got nearer; the gates were sure to be unlocked, but they weren't going to be open, that was for certain. Being powerful often bred an arrogance of security, it made one believe they were invincible and that was the same for Giuliano. But he still felt a need for security, however light. Not for protection, but more of

a formality. They were there to allow entry and exit, not because they believed anyone would be dumb enough to storm the house.

The car stopped short of the gate and two guys got out with automatic guns, both silenced and equipped with thermal scopes. They signalled that they were going in on foot and approached the gate.

Two shots. Two kills.

Both guards were down leaving the gates at the mercy of Benelli's men who opened the gate as quietly as they could and breached the compound, they made a call for the other men to come in as they entered the main building. Two other men came down from Benelli's vehicle and made their way to the gates, flinging them open for the vehicles to come in. It was time for a full-frontal assault.

The cars entered the Giuliano household and parked in his yard after they had dispatched the men that they needed to dispatch and they had captured his family.

They had killed the henchmen and guards that he had, they had cut off communication rounded up everyone in the house and tied them all up.

Daniel Giuliano. His wife, Maliah. Their son, Luca. All tied up on the floor of the living room with corpses lying around them, with the likelihood of them being the next. The Giuliano house was raided and within ten minutes, it was all over.

But one was missing. Claudio.

"My friend. It's been a long time". Benelli spoke with a wry smile and a coat of arrogance on his shoulder.

"I wanted to come and visit you; you know? As a way of saying thank you for my son," he smiled as he sat on the settee and levelled a gun in the direction of Giuliano's head.

"Good evening, Mrs Giuliano," he said as he waved to Daniel's wife whose eyes shone brightly enough, burning with enough hatred to rival the luminosity of the living room lights that had now been turned on.

"And you, hello my boy. You're the first son, Luca, no?" he said as he walked closer and rubbed the base of his gun affectionately on his head.

"I thought you had two sons, but I can only see one. He must be the less important one. Then he must not be the first." He said as he looked at Daniel Giuliano and cocked the gun planting the nozzle firmly on Luca's skull.

"Are you the first son, my boy?" he asked Luca, who steeled his jaw and refused to answer.

"If you don't answer me, I'll plant one in Mama's leg." He said with a crooked sneer as he removed the gun from Luca and planted it firmly on Maliah's thigh.

"Yes, yes, I am" Luca shouted.

"Now, that's a good boy" he responded.

"What do you want?" Daniel Giuliano asked him. "What's the purpose of this visit?" Giuliano asked him. Stressing the words; 'purpose' and 'visit' to connote the fact that they did carry a hidden meaning, meanings that plucked at him.

"Me?" he responded with a sneer. "it's been so long since I saw you, I thought it would be heartwarming to come see you again, and I've also come to take revenge. You see, it's a son for a son" Benelli responded. With the smile and the sneer disappearing from his face, it was replaced with a look of fury and sorrow.

"Your son?" Giuliano asked. Shock plastered all over his face like mortar. "I didn't kill your son. In my mother's life"

"But your mother is dead" Benelli retorted with a smile on his face.

"No hard feelings; you know the game, it's a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye". Benelli added as he went back to have a seat.

"My son must have suffered before you put him out of his misery, I'll pay your son the same courtesy," he said as he crossed his legs and shot Luca in his left arm.

The bullet connected and Luca let out a scream.

"A little soft for a Mafia heir don't you think?" Benelli laughed as he stroked his sparse grey beard.

He sunk into the lush chair, nothing less was expected, Mafia Dons knew how to make money well, but even better, they knew how to spend it.

While Benelli was having the time of his life, there was another piece afoot. War was about to break out.

Somewhere else. Gio, Mino and two other guys got in the car and began to gun for the Giuliano residence.

“Tonight is the last night boys, help him finish everything once and for all” Commander Argento said as he looked them in the eye before giving a nod.

CHAPTER TWO.

His voice brought her back to reality, she was remembering that evening, seventeen years ago.

“What’s happening, Rafael” Rosa smiled as she put her hands down and began walking towards him.

“Drop the gun. You Joker” she laughed.

She walked towards him brazenly, a wide smile across her face, but he wasn’t smiling, his eyes were teary and his jaws clenched. He raised the gun again and she staggered back.

He had been there for two years, her father brought him in when she needed a driver, someone who wasn’t of much importance to the organisation that could haul her around without them losing viable men. That was the thought. He remembered the interview, showing up, looking ordinary, and talking the same.

“So, you can drive?” Ronald asked him, studying him from head to toe.

Roman stood at six feet and an inch, wavy blond hair and olive-green eyes, by all accounts he looked like a pretty boy, more suited to being a model than a driver.

“Yes sir, I have my license here,” he said, stretching the rectangular plastic to Ronald, who examined it carefully and examined him also.

Ronald was one of Benelli’s most trusted men, dons didn’t get assistants but Ronald was the closest thing to an assistant that Benelli had. His decisions were trusted because he had never gotten them wrong, but this time, he was about to.

“Baldacci?” he studied him. “Where are you from?” Ronald asked him.

“I don’t know, I didn’t grow up with my parents but I was raised by the Commander”. Roman lied, just a little bit. Of course, he knew where he was from. He could never forget that, but everything else was the truth.

“Which commander?” Ronald asked inquisitively.

“Argento. Commander Argento in Palumbo”

“The Commander? That means you’re also trained”

“Yes sir. I’m trained”

“Can you shoot?”

“Yes sir”

“Expert?”

“No sir, just average”. Roman lied. He was an expert shot, perfectly attuned to pick out targets with both hands and could shoot the wings, off a moth.

Ronald looked unconvinced, the job didn’t require shooting and the person that Roman was going to be guarding was not important to them, she was expendable, and his level of marksmanship didn’t matter. If they got attacked and both of them were killed, all the better for them.

“self-defence?” Ronald asked.

“Yes sir, the commander trained me” he responded, hands behind him, eyes focused on Ronald.

“What job do you think the commander referred you for?”

“He said you needed a driver”

“Did he tell you what kind of driver?”

“No sir. He said I would find out when I got here”

“Well, you’ll be driving and guarding the Boss’s daughter. You’ll be her staff whenever she needs to go out. But she hardly goes out. You’ll report to her directly and only to her. All other things on the premises aren’t your business” Ronald said as he handed him his driver’s license, which Roman collected with a bow.

Ronald takes Roman to meet his new boss and he didn’t expect it. He met a young lady, younger than him, frail-looking but with a different type of strength in her eyes.

She regarded him with apathy and stood up from where she lay, examined him and she spoke to him for the first time.

“Aren’t you too pretty to be a bodyguard?” she said walking past him.

“The most beautiful things are always the deadliest, ma’am” he responded. Bowing his head slightly.

She turned back, taken by surprise and she smiled. The first of many. And two years later, they had gone beyond a boss and her driver, it was something different. And tonight, everything was going to change; “Rosa. I’m sorry, this was not the plan. This was not meant to happen”. He said as he signalled for her to return to bed and have her seat. He couldn’t harm her, even in his best efforts to act cold, he still looked out for her.

“Careful. Don’t hit your leg on the frame of the bed” he cautioned subconsciously, which prompted a smile on her face. She knew he cared, he might have lied to her or deceived her but his love for her was true. Even if everything else was a lie, that truth was enough.

“I know you’re going to hate me. But I must tell you the truth. And I’ll understand your actions from here on, I’m sure you’re justified in whatever response you have. I shouldn’t be the one to question your actions from here on out”.

“Okay, you’re scaring me” she answered, putting her pillow in front of her and hugging it close.

He looked up at the ceiling and made his way to the chair at her reading table. He adjusted it so that he had a clear view of her and studied her as he sat down.

He slumped into the chair and dropped his head; tears streaked down his face. She looked at him and her eyes welled up a little. She didn’t know what his tears were about, but seeing him pained was enough to make her uneasy. She felt his anguish for a moment. She felt as though they were one soul.

She stood up from the bed and walked towards him brazenly. He raised the gun in her direction but she didn’t flinch. She knew he could never hurt her, someone who wanted to hurt her wouldn’t care if she hit her leg on the bedframe.

“You say you love me and you point a gun at me. You are either going to love me or kill me. Either way, you can’t leave me confused” she said as she made her way to him and pulled his head closer.

She smelled nice, even without any perfume on, her body smelled like flowers. Her creamy skin, the light material of her pyjamas, the warmth of her abdomen and the way she ran her hands through his hair. For a

minute, he forgot everything that was going on. But he had to tell her, he didn't want to hide anything from her anymore. Even if tonight was to be their last night together, he wanted to part from her with a clean mind. "Wait, I need to tell you something" he tried to remove himself from her arms but she pushed him back and sat on his legs.

"I know you do. But I also have something to tell you too" she said, looking straight at him; taking the full sight and glow of his eyes into view.

"I love you too, Rafael," she said as she planted her lips on his and kissed him as though the future depended on it.

They locked lips for almost a minute before he pulled her lips off his and stood up, leaving her on the chair.

"I need to talk to you. Firstly, my name is not Rafael. And I'm not who you think I am"

He said palming his face with his left hand and waiting for her reaction. Nothing. That was her reaction. She just stared at him, no response from her, she kept watching him, as though she was waiting for him to tell her it was a joke but he didn't.

"I am not an ordinary driver. I'm here on a mission. And what happened to my hand wasn't an accident, it was a hit. Also, this was never meant to happen." He said gesturing to the two of them.

Still no response, she just blinked and adjusted in the chair. Looking at him with eyes that showed a mind that was trying to process every new piece of information it had received.

"What, what do you mean?" she blinked and tried for a smile but she couldn't. She was shocked, the piece of information she got had rocked her world.

"My name is not Rafael and I am not a driver. I came to this house for one reason alone. To kill everyone here" he spoke slowly, as if speed might help her comprehension or remove her unbelief.

"Why? What? I don't under..." she asked in shock. Trying to reconnect her mind to the world, trying to find what was real and what wasn't.

"Because your father killed my parents, eighteen years ago" he responded with a steeled face.

“Aida, what are you doing?” Claudio laughed nervously as the metal of the blade felt cold against his skin. She had him, if he struggled, she would cut him up.

“What’s going on, is this a joke?” he asked again.

“Tell me what’s going on” he asked again, his voice calm, mellow and sweet. Even with a knife to his throat, he was more worried than angry, could he love her anymore? She didn’t know what to do. She dropped the knife to the floor and staggered back.

He turned and saw her seated on the floor, with her head dropped.

“Aida, you can talk to me. I’ll understand you. I’m here for you, he said as he approached her and held her head up with his right hand”

“I’m sorry Claudio. I just can’t. I have betrayed you” she said as she looked up at him. “I might not be able to love you, but I want to save you. In another life, things might have gone differently” she said as she stood up and sat on the bed.

“You’re not making any sense, Aida. Explain to me, let me understand” he said as he followed her to the bed and sat beside her.

“I called you here to kill you, Claudio” she responded.

He shifted back and smiled.

“Why did you stop?”

“Because I care about you and that’s a mistake”

“Ouch. That hurt. I guess I’m not cute enough for you” he said as he put his hand over his heart and made an impression of a balloon bursting.

She hit him playfully. And they both smiled.

“You’re cute, you idiot. Maybe a little too cute for your good. You don’t look like the son of a Mafia don at all.

You’re way too kind”

“I’m confused. Are you complimenting or insulting me?” He chuckled and put his hand on hers.

She looked at him and smiled.

“But seriously, I need you to explain” he added. “Who is making you do this, are they threatening your family?”

he added.

“Family?” she snickered. “I lost that a long time ago”

“What happened? How come?”

“Your father and his partner happened.”

He looked at her, confusion taking over. A light bulb went out in his head and he shifted back a bit.

“Are you from a Mafia family?”

“You can say so” she responded.

“Which one?”

“Do you have any memory of the Accettas?” she asked him.

His eyes widened and he focused his gaze on her as if he was trying to solve a jigsaw. Yes, he had memories of the Accettas but only in stories, he never knew them well enough. He had just heard about them from his father and some of the men who worked with his father.

“In speaking only” he responded.

“Then, I’ll tell you a story”

“What?” Rosa responded, in between smiles and tears. It was funny and sad at the same time. She looked at him in utter disbelief, he had played pranks before but this didn’t seem like one of them, he looked genuinely sad.

“You’re saying something ridiculous.” She responded.

“Did you ever hear of the Accetta family?”

He asked her and she shook her head.

“There were three families of power in Rome”

“Yes. I Tre Re. The Three Kings. I’ve heard people mention it around. They say our family is one of them. Ancient households that control Mafia power in Rome and by extension, all of Italy. I know that much”

“Have you ever wondered who the other two are or were?” Roman asked.

She stammered.

“Benelli, that’s us. Giuliano, I think. I don’t think I know the third”

“How come you don’t hear of the third anymore, you were never curious?”

“Benelli. Giuliano. Accetta. Those are the three. Did you ever wonder why there are only two now?”

Rosa stayed frozen. She couldn’t speak a word.

“The three families agreed to a ceasefire a long time ago, to save Roma from the bloody city that it was, to make sure that *Everlast* didn’t return to barbarian times.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of that. It’s one of the reasons why they chose Paloma’s. Signifying the dove, the symbol of peace. I know that story” Rosa interrupted. Clearly impressed with herself and he was too. At least he looked like he was.

“The agreement was this. Each family agreed to divide the city into three; The Giulianos would take the North of the City. The Benellis, your people would govern everything South, without respite or disturbance while the Accettas, my family would take the Central parts of Everlast, a plan that would guarantee peace. But Benellis and Giulianos betrayed my father, they didn’t like the idea of a third power cutting into their share of

the city, so they took one piece of the chessboard. While my father embraced peace and governed his territory with calm and love, your father and Daniel Giuliano plotted and in one night they wiped out my family.” He fought back a tear but he lost the battle as tears streaked down his face. She saw it and all ideas of a prank faded away, she looked into his eyes, and she could feel him reliving the pain, every sentence must have sounded so vivid to him. The memories came back with every word he uttered.

“Stop, you don’t have to tell me”

He wiped his tears and continued his narration.

“About eighteen years ago, your dad and Don Giuliano colluded and murdered my family. I remember that night, it was all peaceful at first. I was in my room sleeping soundly after eating my dinner and taking ice cream that I had gotten when I went out that evening until they came, they ransacked our house and murdered anyone in sight. They set fire to our house and made sure that there were no survivors. A thorough job, even the groundskeepers weren’t spared, only I escaped through the help of the cook’s wife.”

He brought out the picture and crucifix that he collected from Aida’s mother on that night and showed them both to Rosa who looked at him bewildered, unable to say anything, short of words.

Qui amatur, ditior est.

That was the inscription on the back. Written in small, beautiful calligraphic letters.

“These are all I have left of home”

She looked at the picture, it was a picture of four people; the Accetta family with Roman in front of them.

“Are these your...” Rosa asked, slowly, as if her words were heavier than they had ever been.

“Yes, that’s my family. My dad, mom and my older sister, Layla”

“So, they’re all...”

Again, he interrupted before she finished her statement.

“Yes, Rosa, they’re all dead. Killed brutally. Courtesy of your father and Don Giuliano”

She dropped the picture beside her and looked at the crucifix. There was an inscription on the back of it.

“Qui ama...” She struggled with the words, trying hard to pronounce the letters.

“Qui amator, ditior est.” He corrected her. He said the words and closed his eyes for a minute. Tears streaked down his face again. Everything came back to him. His dad’s calm voice, his mother’s hug, Layla taunting him, everything rushed back in an instant of memories.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“It’s my family’s motto. In English, it means ***He who is loved, is richer than most.***”

She came to him and held him; he moved back at first but she moved closer still.

“You’re still coming nearer after everything I’ve told you?” he asked, trying to push her away.

“I’m sorry, Rafael, please. Don’t push me away.”

He didn’t answer. He just looked at her. Trying to commit her features to memory. By the end of the night, she might become a memory.

“I know you have to kill me and I know you have your reasons. And I understand, I always knew that my father’s way of life would catch up to him someday. I didn’t know that karma was already here” She looked at him and touched his cheek.

“If you’re going to kill me, I have two wishes. You would grant me my last wishes, no?” she said as she retreated to her bed and sat down.

“What are your wishes?” he asked her reluctantly. Straightening his back and focusing his gaze on her.

“Let me look my father in the eye one last time and ask him a question”

“Don’t worry, he’ll be here soon. What’s your second wish?”

“Make love to me before you kill me. I don’t want to die a virgin” she said as she sat down on the bed and looked at his shocked, confused face.

“You’re making a move on me, even after I told you that I meant to kill you?”

“Una vita con te, vale mille” (A life with you is worth a million) he said, with a smile and no hint of reservation.

He looked like a kid enthusing about his favourite ice-cream flavour.

“Just how in love could you be?” she asked tapping his forehead.

“More than you know” he responded as he put his other arm around her and pulled her in.

She resisted a bit at first but he pulled again and this time she came closer. He planted his lips on hers and kissed her deeply. They lost themselves in each other's embrace, forgetting the dangers that were going on.

He pulled his lips from hers and took another look at her lips, he kissed her again before he finally broke away.

“I've always wanted to do that. For about two years now”

She laughed and bit her lips.

“I need to tell you something”

“I know. I know. You're here to kill me” he laughed. But she didn't.

His eyes widened and he shifted back a bit from her.

“Okay, tell me everything from the top, I need to know what's going on”.

She thought about it for a minute then she decided to tell him. Knowing the truth wouldn't matter much now.

If he lived, he would need the truth, if he died, nevertheless, he died with the truth.

“I am not Italian but I was born here. My parents are Danish immigrants who used to work for an Italian Don”.

“Used to?” Claudio shifted his body and enquired with apt attention.

“Until they were killed, eighteen years ago”

“Who killed them? Was it an accident or was it a hit?”

“Collateral damage, I guess”

“Did you ever find out the killers?”

“Yes, I did.”

“You need to take your revenge on them, I'll help you”

She smiled and held his hand tight.

“The culprits are Luca Benelli and Daniel Giuliano”

Claudio stopped short, his face twisted, his brows furrowed.

“Giuliano?” he asked.

“Yes, Giuliano. Your father and Don Benelli killed my parents”

“Are you sure?” he asked, still surprised, trying to piece together the pieces. Everything seemed like a tall tale to him.

“Yes, I am. My parents worked as cooks in the Accetta household, my father was a cook and my mother was one of the domestic staff but they always treated us like family. My father had met my mother on the job and being from Denmark, they married each other and the Don they worked for, provided a house for them in the compound, where I was born and raised. They provided everything we needed and they didn’t treat us like workers, they treated us with respect and most days, the lines were so blurred that we seemed like family. Until that night.

He took her hand again and looked straight at her.

“Why are you scared? Are you scared that I’ll die?” he asked laughing.

“I don’t know how much longer you have. We have”.

“What are you talking about?”

“Right about now. Our men should be in your house, probably here to capture everyone and if you’re not there. They’ll search till they find you and take you to him.”

“Your boss? Your men? You lured them here?” he jumped up and tried to run to the door, but she held him back.

“Technically, yes.”

“Is that why you brought me here? To capture me and deliver to him?” he raised his voice.

“No, I want to be the one to take you with me and save you, if possible” she bowed her head.

“I will never plead for my life. Not in front of another man”

“This is not the time to be proud, just believe me, okay?” she squeezed his hand once more and he squeezed back, gently, affectionately.

CHAPTER THREE

Gio, Mino, Gianni and Paolo got out of the car and began to move on foot. Each carrying two guns that had been silenced and had extra ammo. Gianni had two canisters dangling around his belt. Smoke bombs, while Paolo carried two flash bangs with him.

The plan was simple.

Kill anyone that wasn't of value to Roman. Capture the family members and take them, to Roman.

They approached the gate with caution and saw that it was manned by two guys. That's easy. The rest were bound to be inside.

The two guys at the gate were relaxed, obviously expecting no further assault. They were easy pickings. A bullet to the chest of each was more than enough to silence them.

They made their way into the compound and looked around, they heard footsteps and hid, they saw the movements of men, they counted seven. All armed but unbothered.

It could only mean one thing; they were Benelli's men. Giuliano's men wouldn't stand guard if Benelli wasn't here, at least not this many of them. And Benelli was going to be here, the time frame fit. Also, they saw dead bodies at the gate before they added their own. Those were bound to be Giuliano's original gatekeepers.

They approached stealthily and took care of the men that stood watch. It wasn't easy but they succeeded.

They did a sweep once more. There was no one else and they moved towards the main house.

They peeped through the windows and they could count about six men standing. One sitting, they didn't know exactly how many men were on the floor.

How would four of them go in and kill seven men quickly?

That was much more difficult than it seemed in movies. The only way was to employ the element of surprise.

They got to the front door and checked the house.

Gio moved close to the door and signalled for Paolo to come closer with the flash grenades.

I'll kick, you'll throw. He demonstrated to Paolo who nodded enthusiastically.

One. Two. Three.

They counted with their fingers and Gio kicked the door open as Paolo tossed in one flash grenade to stun them.

They staggered back from the effect on their eyes, and that was what Argento's men needed. They breached the room and shot everyone who was standing and within a minute, six men became six corpses, leaving only Benelli who looked around in shock trying to get his bearings, with his prisoners who were even more confused as to who the new men are.

Mino removed his mask and addressed Benelli who raised his hands instinctively above his head.

"Don Benelli. Enjoying a good evening?" he asked with the best impression of kindness he could manage before signalling for him to pass his gun.

Benelli was not an idiot. He did the maths. He didn't stand a chance. He passed the gun and he remained seated on the chair.

One of the men who had just entered the room, Gianni tied his hands and together, they were led out of the room.

"I thought Giuliano had two sons and shouldn't we tell *Signoria* that we are leaving? Shouldn't she leave with us?" Gio asked turning to Mino.

Mino responded with a nod. He brought out a small phone from his pocket. He called Aida and she picked up, he had a conversation with her and after about ten minutes, she came in with another man. One who stood about six inches above her had kind eyes and a mellow voice.

She came and met them treating Luca Giuliano's wound.

Aida nodded and they understood.

It's time to go.

They didn't need to waste more time; they escorted the others into the minibus. Giuliano, his wife, their sons and even Benelli all got into the minibus.

They looked back one last time and zoomed off towards the Benelli compound, where Roman was waiting.

"Where are you taking me to?" Giuliano asked with his hands tied behind him and a bodyguard to his left with a gun glued to his abdomen. If he made any sudden moves, the lead would be pumped into his stomach.

"To meet our boss. Now shut up." Gio replied.

Only Claudio wasn't treated like a prisoner, his hands were bound as a formality but Aida had vouched for him and so he was afforded some courtesy.

"Hey, Claudio. Enjoying the ride with your girlfriend?" Luca asked from the back of the minibus. Laughing shakily, struggling from the pain of where he was shot.

"Shut up Luca, now's not the time for your nonsense" Claudio shot back.

Luca continued laughing. Claudio laughed too.

"Whoever shot you should have aimed for your mouth. Would have done the world a world of good" Claudio laughed at his brother, whose facial expression turned grim.

"I guess your relationship is about to turn sour, isn't it? Looks like your girlfriend has been working for someone since. Apparently, they're taking us to their boss" Luca continued.

"I hope I can convince their boss to kill you first. The joy of your death would make me die happy"

"Enough" Maliah Giuliano responded. She looked at both her boys and was shocked at how much they resented each other.

The minivan turned on Cristóforo Colombo and started heading towards a road that Benelli knew very well.

"Where are we going" he enquired with the gun still glued to his body.

“I told you already, to meet our boss” Mino responded

“This is the road to...” Benelli answered.

“Yes, the road to your house. We know” Gio responded.

The car drove quicker and when they were some metres away. They flashed their lights and honked.

“Why are you guys honking?” Benelli asked again. “Do you think my guards will open the gate?” he asked, scoffing, confident in the security of his home.

Paolo dialled the phone and it rang twice before a number picked up the phone.

“The gate is opened. Come in” the voice responded from the other end of the line.

Paolo got down and opened the gate for the minivan to come in.

The car pulled over somewhere in the compound and Mino and the other men dragged everyone out of the vehicle, except Maliah Giuliano who they led politely into the Benelli living room and sat her down in a chair, with her hands and legs tied still. That was the best treatment she could be given.

The others were sitting on the floor, while Mino dialled his phone again, it was the same number. The number picked up, spoke and the call ended quickly.

“WHAT?” Roman responded. Flabbergasted at her unusual request, if he had twenty guesses, he couldn't have guessed at her request. Even fifty guesses would still be wide of the mark.

“Make love to me. You're the only one I've ever loved and you're the only man I could give myself to” Rosa responded as she walked to him and positioned herself in front of him.

“I can't do that. It just seems wrong” he responded, shifting her aside carefully.

“If you're going to kill me, you might as well grant me my wishes.” She responded as she began unbuttoning her top. She had loosened the second button and he couldn't see any straps, he knew that the shirt was the only piece of clothing standing between him and her lovely skin. But he had to be focused, it was a request that was difficult to refuse and with every inch of skin he saw, the more difficult it got.

Roman's phone vibrated twice in his pocket and he knew what it meant. He had to go; he would handle Rosa later.

"Stop that," he said as he slapped her hand and buttoned her up.

"And you say you love me, but you can't even make love to me or grant me a last wish" she responded dropping her head.

"Rosa". He lifted her chin and looked at her eyes.

"Would you still love me after I do what I'm about to do? I don't think so. I'm sorry, Rosa. In another world, we could have ended up together" he said as he pulled her chin close.

She nodded vehemently but he doubted it. Emotions clouded judgment, she was seeing the man she loved, but she hadn't seen the monster to come.

He kissed her passionately lifted her from the ground and carried her to the bed.

He removed one of the ropes that he had left from his capture of the guards and tied her hand gently behind her back.

She looked at him in shock.

"Teddy bear, what are you doing?" she asked struggling and kicking her feet.

"You will break free in about ten minutes. That's why I'm going to lock you in. I don't want you to see what's going to happen outside. Goodbye, Rosa. Ti amo"

He walked to her door, while she shouted his name, or at least what she knew his name as. He didn't look back, he opened the door and locked her in. He heard her screams but he ignored them, it was for the best, he assured himself.

On his way downstairs, he stopped by another door on the corridor, it was Michel's door, and he was certain to be fast asleep. He kicked the door in and a shocked Michel was just waking up, he was without company.

“Who are you, what are you...” he started talking Roman’s hand grabbed his throat and punched him in the mouth. Two more punches connected to his face before Roman used the last rope with him to tie his hand behind his back.

Roman descended the steps with a bounty dragged along like a dead animal, at the foot of the stairs, he saw familiar figures in the large living room, the figures were men that he had seen before. With a female figure seated in a chair.

As he got towards them, five figures; Paolo, Gio, Mino, Aida and Gianni bowed to him.

Padrone. They all said as they bowed.

Padrone? Benelli asked in shock.

“You don’t have to bow,” Roman responded, regarding Aida who eyed him and rose up reluctantly. They had grown together and the lines had become blurred, they had become more like siblings. But she always regarded him as the boss. Because he still was. He was the only surviving member of the Accetta family, that made him her master.

“Who is he? How dare he call her a crazy girl?” Claudio struggled in protest with his hands tied behind him. His struggle was interrupted by a kick to the ribs by Gianni.

“You must be Claudio. The one in love. Love is a treacherous thing in our world, you know?” he said as he waved Gianni off.

“Good evening, Don Benelli” Roman bowed mockingly.

“Why are they calling you *Padrone*? How do you know these men?” Benelli asked.

“I would like if I may to tell you a story, Don. To clear this misunderstanding” Roman said as he took a gun from one of his men and checked if it was loaded and it was.

“It is a story about three men who divided a city into three parts; each man taking one part for himself. But along the line, two men colluded and decided to murder the third man and split his share amongst themselves.

They eventually carried out their plan and they succeeded, killing the man and his family, even setting their house ablaze, making sure there was no chance of survival.

They got everything they wanted. What do you think their punishment should be?" Roman asked Benelli.

"It should be death" Benelli responded confidently. "No man should get away with that"

"What about you, Don Giuliano? What do you think such men should face?"

"Death" Giuliano responded. "The Mafia doesn't allow betrayal as such"

"I'm glad we all agree" Roman responded as he pointed his gun in the direction of Luca.

"Whoever does that deserve death, don't they? I'm glad that you also see it from my point of view." He said as he turned off the safety of the gun.

"The two people in the story are the both of you."

Benelli and Giuliano looked at each other in confusion. How in the world was it the two of them?

"December 20, 1993. What does that date mean to you?"

They both said nothing.

"Let me remind you," he said as he pointed the gun to Luca's thigh and emptied two bullets into his lap.

Blood splattered and Luca's head dropped in pain before he let out a huge scream, the whole room went silent.

Claudio's face widened; he didn't expect that. He was white with fear, he looked in Roman's direction and saw that the gun had been pointed in his direction.

Maliah Giuliano shouted and cried, she had just seen her son shot in front of her, she had seen as the bullets pierced his legs and his blood dripped on the lush rug of Benelli's sitting room.

"Why did you shoot my son?" she asked, amidst tears. "Why did you shoot my baby?"

"Delicta patris, visitabitur in filio." He responded calmly as he made his way towards Michel who was now fully awake and saw things unfold in front of him. He looked at his father and his father looked back at him.

They looked at each other and regretted the things they never got to say to each other, they regretted the times they never spoke.

Everything is regrettable in the face of death.

Don Benelli and Michel knew that now. They were living in it.

“The sins of the father would be visited on the son,” Roman said.

“What sins?” Maliah cried.

“Ask your husband about December 20, 1993. Ask him what he did that day?” Roman said as he grabbed Benelli’s son and threw him across the floor, he went as far as about five feet.

“What did you do?” Maliah shouted at her husband

“I don’t know. I don’t remember” he shouted back.

Roman laughed.

“Does the name Accetta mean anything to the both of you?” he said as he put a gun to Michel’s head.

The two of them looked in his direction and their eyes widened, their mouths gaped, they were in shock.

“Yes. I am Don Accetta’s son. The only surviving member of the Accetta family”

“That’s impossible,” Giuliano responded. “The Accettas were wiped out. About...” he stopped short and his mind calculated it. The Accettas were meant to have been wiped out about eighteen years ago.

December 20, 1993. That was about eighteen years ago, now he knew it to be true. His suspicions were confirmed when Roman moved closer and showed him the same picture he had shown Rosa earlier.

“You’re truly Accetta’s heir. How did you?”

“I was there that night. I remember it very well. I remember sleeping and waking up to a noise and smoking. My father had been killed; his head pierced by a bullet to his forehead. I saw his lifeless body lying on the floor of the sitting room. While I was there, I witnessed one of your men force his way on my mother and defile her before he finally killed her, to make matters worse, another of your men had his way with my sister, she was just ten years old before he killed her too.” He paused and fought back tears.

“Thanks to our cook’s wife, who helped me escape, with her daughter,” he said pointing at Aida. “Everyone else perished and their bodies were burnt to ashes in the fire that engulfed our house. After years of searching, I found the man who came that night, the leader of the men who ransacked our house. And he gave up your names, I will admit that he held out but not for too long, no one can hold out that long in the face of pain”

He steeled his face.

“Everything I had done was for this day, the rigorous training, the fine education, the endurance, it was all for this. The day when I could stand and look at you, having had the means to exact my revenge on you completely. And that day is today. Brace yourselves, I’ll take everything from you as you took everything from me. The account of revenge has matured and I’m here to collect in full”.

He regarded Maliah Giuliano, who was trying her best to get to Luca but she couldn’t, she just kept looking at him and sobbing.

“Don’t cry now, ma’am. You still have a lot to cry for. I’m sorry it has to be like this. But I can’t let your husband and sons go.”

“Have mercy. Forgive my sons” she cried. “Take me instead”

“One life for two sons? That’s an unfair deal, ma’am. Don’t you think?” he responded, hands on the gun, eyes forward and unflinching. His eyes were on her and she saw the resolution in his eyes, she knew the look of a man whose mind was made up and she could see it.

“You want to save a son, ma’am? That would be hinged on my consideration. And if I’m being honest, I don’t feel merciful right now”.

He pointed the gun at Giuliano. Who was seated on the floor, quiet, watching as the night unfurled. In a well-lit room, his sins had come to light and their shadows had cast a darkness on his life. Karma has come to collect; the bill was due.

“Do you know why your son has to die?” Roman asked him and he couldn’t respond. He faced the floor and clenched his teeth.

“Because I want you. No, I need you to feel my pain and agony” he stressed the words, to show how much it all meant to him.

“I need to know what it’s like to have one’s family taken from them and for them to be a witness, just like I was a witness. I want you to be there, watching your world fall apart from a front-row seat, being a voyeur of your misery and a spectator of your doom. And I will kill them slowly in front of you, let the images sear into your brain before I even begin to consider ending your misery. You’re in for a long night. I hope you enjoy the show”

He proceeded to where Luca was and pulled him out separately. He saw the place where the bullets had pierced his leg and he laughed. Standing up, he headed for the kitchen came back with a napkin and stuffed it in Luca’s mouth. He opened the lighter, clicked it and the lighter came on and he put the fire to the wound. Luca screamed and his eyes flared, in pain. He writhed but his hands were tied and his screams had been muffled by the napkin in his mouth. But his eyes told the story of his pain, completely.

Maliah Giuliano looked at her son with tears rolling down her cheeks as he was tortured, she could do nothing. Only to weep and pray, but it was a bit too late for that.

After he had tortured him for about five minutes, he walked away and shook his head.

The gun went off twice and the grey matter went up, with blood splattering on the furniture. Everyone seemed to stay frozen, the moment became real. Maliah Giuliano opened her mouth in a scream, Daniel Giuliano clenched his face tight in agony, Michel Benelli struggled in fear, Claudio’s face was white with shock, and everyone else tried to come to terms with the event that unfolded in front of them, everyone reacting in the moment. Everyone except Roman and Luca Giuliano. Roman focused, eyes forward and hand dipping at a small angle with finger squeezing the trigger of the Glock 17 he was holding. Luca Giuliano on the other end did nothing. In a room filled with so much chaos, he was silent, dead.

CHAPTER FOUR.

Rosa rotated her wrist and she felt the rope begin to slip off, she smiled. Her time as a Mafia Don's daughter had begun to pay off, or was it? No.

He must have tied the rope loosely on purpose. Regardless, she kept twisting and turning, she wanted to break free.

Suddenly, her mind tugged at her, why did she need to break free? What did she plan to do? How did she intend to get to where he was? Even if she did, was she planning to stop him or to help him? She had no idea. But was determined to pick her battles one after the other. First, breaking free.

She had seen people loosen ropes before and most times; they either looked for something sharp or they looked for something round that could pull the rope from their wrists. Something round, the frame of her bed. She positioned her hand on one of the woods that framed her bed and slid her hand down on it. It entered; she felt the rope loosen even more. After about four minutes of struggling, she was able to free one hand, and with the hand she loosened the other, both of them were free but with ligature marks on her wrists. That was not on her list of worries.

Now, to the next problem. How would she get down from here?

She looked at the door, he had locked it and taken the key with him, she looked out her window. It was a high and a very dumb idea. She lived on the first floor for heaven's sake. Another crazy idea came into her mind, she smiled, the night kept bringing more and more crazy ideas as she needed them.

She removed her curtains and tied them together. They became quite long and she tied one end of it to her bed, she checked the remaining rope, it was long enough. That was going to be her way down.

She checked if the end of the rope that was tied to her bed was firm enough, she pulled twice and it didn't come off, she pumped her fist in the air. A sign of accomplishment.

The other end of the rope went out of the window and saw it go down, but not to the floor, it didn't reach, so she pulled it back up. Time to add her blanket to the mix. In a few moments, she had joined it to it and this, she smiled contentedly. *Victory at last*, she thought.

Like a rappelling spy, she went out of the window holding on to the rope she had used the fabrics from her room to manufacture, his creation born of desperation and ingenuity. She slipped and stopped at intervals to catch her breath and open her eyes to see the surroundings, she tried not to scream, she couldn't afford to spook him or anyone for that matter.

After four more stops, she came to the end of her rappelling adventure, landing safely. She jumped up childishly with both hands in the air, celebrating her success and adjusting her clothes. Then it hit her, she was only wearing a pair of pyjamas with no bra underneath it. Not exactly battle attire. On one hand, it could not be seen clearly but depending on the light and how she moved, it could be seen.

Well, it was too late to go back, he would have to take what he got like that, she needed answers and she wasn't about to go back simply because her nipples might show through her shirt, her breasts were medium-sized, he would have to focus on the to see them, and that wasn't bound to be his focus. She marched bravely towards the front door, without a moment's hesitation, ready to confront the man she loved and see for herself what had unfolded. But she had no idea what she was going to encounter and neither did Roman, he had no idea what was coming his way. Sixty-five kilogrammes of love and anger with a hint of curiosity.

As she headed towards the door, she heard a scream. It was that of a woman, a voice she was unfamiliar with, as much as she knew, she was the only woman in this house. Was there another?

She heard the scream, it was long, followed by sobs that got louder as she got nearer before they stopped altogether. What happened, was she dead? She stayed by the door to hear better but she didn't hear anything, for a moment all of her enthusiasm got drained and fear crept up on her for a bit.

But she trudged on, nonetheless, she needed answers.

The sobbing woman was Maliah Giuliano, the don's wife.

Maliah Giuliano's sobs disappeared into the walls, after her initial wails, she suddenly went quiet, everything went still, and only smoke wafted out of the nozzle of the gun that was covered with a silencer. Everyone seemed to stand still, waiting for the events to register, in a moment, everything had happened. Now it was the aftermath.

Claudio looked at his brother's head hanging and fear overtook him, not rage but fear, he had watched as Roman shot his brother twice without flinching, without hesitating and without missing, he knew that a man like that would have no hesitation doing the same to him. And he looked at Aida, not begging her to save him, but to look at her face for as long as he could, for all he knew, he could be next.

He studied his mother and her eyes exuded pain, her body oozed sorrow, she had just witnessed her son shot twice in the head and his brain matter had splattered the room like spilt coffee, she had watched the horror. He saw as she sat there, sobbing quietly, unable to muster enough energy to scream, she just sat there breathing erratically while tears flowed down her cheeks. Everything seemed like a nightmare, but it wasn't. This was her reality.

Pain brings out the sides of people they didn't know existed; it made some people timid, made them docile and negotiable, and they suddenly became compliant and were willing to accept any terms that were thrown at them. But it made some people feral, they suddenly became desperate to survive or to make sure they didn't go down alone. But it made Maliah become someone in between, her pain made her a negotiator.

"Please kill me and spare my other son" she said, looking at Roman's face, trying to plead to the blonde god who held the fate of all of them in his right hand, the one who decided who lived and died at the whim of his mind and the squeeze of the trigger.

He ignored her completely and regarded Benelli.

"I assume this is your next heir" he said as he walked over to Michel who had sat up and had loosened his bonds to a certain extent, he wasn't free yet but with a little squirming, he would be.

Roman was unaware of Michel's situation but he was on his toes nonetheless, he was always on his toes. He walked towards Michel while keeping an eye fixed on Benelli.

"Do you want to hear how Nicola died?" he said as he pointed the gun to Michel's head and raised his eyebrows at Benelli. When Benelli heard Nicola's name, his eyes lit up, he gasped and looked at Roman, clenching his teeth. Seething with rage, frothing in pain, he desperately wanted to break free of his bonds and strangle Roman. But that was more of a dream. Even if he broke free, Roman had men with him, they would gun him down before he got close enough to do any damage, even if he got close, Roman had a gun and could put one or two slugs in him and turn his light out. Even if Roman didn't shoot him, there was the physicality to consider; Roman was stronger, quicker and younger. Benelli was outmatched on all fronts.

"Should I tell you how he begged for his life?" he said, smiling, teasing Benelli, making sure that every word stung and that every expression struck a nerve.

Benelli looked at him with burning rage and Giuliano looked at Benelli with anger, Roman's plan had worked. It had worked quite well.

"Oh. Did you think Don Giuliano killed your son?" Roman laughed in his face, intending to sting him, to annoy him and it worked perfectly.

"That was the plan all along, to pit both of you against each other, knowing fully well that you would tear yourselves apart, knowing that you were paranoid, scared of what the other was planning. You had colluded to take out my father, but each of you was scared of the day that one of you would turn on the other and so all I had to do was throw a spark in the powder keg. And no spark was more perfect than two bullets in Nicola's head"

He walked over to Michel and placed the gun firmly on his head.

"You see. I needed to get both of you within my grasp, to kill you at my pleasure, to enjoy it and savour it, to make it all worth it. To have enough joy from your demise that it would erase my sorrows of many years. And

that's when the plan finally hatched in my head" he walked away from Michel and stood behind the settee where he had the best view of the room. Where everyone was in his scope and the door was to his right.

"If I killed Nicola, you would believe it was Don Giuliano and you would wage war against him. I could wait for both of you to take yourselves out in a bloodbath, wasting yourselves and leaving a city that had been rid of your pestilence, but that wouldn't satisfy me. You wouldn't be there to see your sons die, you wouldn't see your empire come to ruin, you wouldn't end your life in sorrow. You wouldn't know that your life became forfeit at the hands of an Accetta. And that part was very important to me"

"You killed my son?" Benelli asked. Seething, sobbing; not from pain, but from rage, from a desire to see Roman die. From a desire to end his life, but that's all it could be, desires.

"You couldn't manage it, you're not strong or smart enough" Benelli added.

"Smart enough to frame it and make it look like an accident. And you even got your daughter to take care of me, not only that. You handed me a gun"

Just as he finished speaking, the door flung open and everyone whose hands were free in the room pointed their guns towards the door. Mino, Gio and the other men all aimed for the entity that came in through the door.

Roman's eyes darted to the door quickly and widened with shock.

"Lower your guns" he ordered as the feminine figure dashed towards him and he began to wonder why. But out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Michel running towards him, eyes filled with rage, teeth gritted, nostrils flared, all shreds of evidence of malicious intent.

But why was Rosa running towards him? Did she hear what he said and was aiming for his neck also or was she trying to save him? He didn't know. Why would she come to save him? She had no reason to. Or maybe she wasn't reasoning, the heart has reasons that reason doesn't know. Was it Love?

Michel's direction changed mid-step and he aimed for the easier target, totally unexpected but logical. He picked the one he could handle well, the target that offered the least path of resistance and had the highest bargaining value, not to mention the fact that he was less likely to get shot aiming for that target.

He turned mid-step and went for his sister's throat. With one hand, he grabbed her and pinned her to the wall, slamming her back into the grey-coloured surface that bounded the living room, and squeezing her neck so tight she began to cough.

"Release my father or I'll kill her" he said, facing Roman who regarded him with only one desire in mind: murder.

"You would kill your sister? Sorry Michel, I'm not buying it" Roman looked away for a second and looked back to see if his grip had loosened, but it hadn't. He was tightening his grip around her neck and he could hear her choke and her cheeks were getting red.

"Sister? I never asked for a sister. She was always useless to us" he laughed.

Roman studied Benelli, and he saw no look on Don's face, he didn't seem bothered one bit that her life was about to be snuffed out, when it came down to it, he cared for her, but not enough. He only cared for her as his daughter, as someone he had to love because he gave birth to her, in his mind, she wasn't all that valuable. Roman saw it and scoffed.

"Who needs a soft, helpless girl like this? We need men, not the likes of her" he responded spitting on the floor, just to get a good laugh.

"I know you fancy her. I heard both of you when your arm got injured that day, and I watch you whenever you drive out together. I know she's valuable to you. You're the only one who values her in this house. So, what do you say, loverboy? Want to lose something precious too?" Michel added, squeezing her neck harder and Roman could see her veins pop out. He could see her struggling for air.

He met her eyes and saw the pain in them. She saw the rage in his, Rosa knew that Michel was sure to die a painful death and there was no negotiating.

"I could drop you at any point. You know that, don't you?" Roman answered as he took a step nearer.

"Don't come closer or your girlfriend will die"

"Girlfriend?" Benelli shouted from where he was tied. "Is she, his girlfriend?" he asked Michel who nodded.

"So, of all the many people you could date, you're dating a driver? Shame on you" he shouted, looking at Rosa with disgust.

"I won't. But how about we duel for it?" Roman asked, regarding Michel, as though he had not heard Don Benelli shouting, as though his words were just noise to him.

"Let's duel, no guns. If you win, you'll take your father, your territory and the lives of everyone here, will be yours to decide. But if I win, I'll hold the lives of everyone here in my hands" Roman explained.

"No guns?"

"No guns".

"I might not look it but I'm trained to fight, I'm the son of a Mafia Don, remember?" Michel said with a wry smile.

And that was true, as the son of a Mafia don, he was expected to have a certain level of training; to be able to defend himself should anything ever happen to him. The Mafia underworld was a violent one and one should arm themselves.

"How do I know your men won't shoot me if I win?" Michel asked. Smiling with the side of his mouth.

"You have my word" Roman responded, raising his right hand, and swearing an oath, before signalling them not to shoot him no matter what, to which they responded with a bow.

"Release her neck now. I gave you my word" he growled. A gesture which made Michel hold on a little longer. Just to tease him, something which Roman didn't appreciate either.

"And yes, my father will hold on to your girlfriend, I believe we should tie her hands too, to make it fair" Michel added, raising an eyebrow.

Roman didn't respond to that, but Michel took his silence as consent and took the rope that once bound his own hands and used them to tie Rosa's behind her back, a little too tight.

"Tie, not strangle" Roman protested when he heard her screams.

"Sorry, I didn't know she was so fragile, my bad" he responded, adding a cheeky smile for good effect. He pushed her to his father and she landed in his lap with force. He threw her aside like unwanted cargo and Roman clenched his jaw in anger.

Roman palmed his face and looked in Rosa's direction. She read his eyes; he was worried. She nodded, she was telling him not to worry, he understood and he smiled.

"I'm ready when you are" he responded.

And indeed, he was ready. The duel began, it was a fight to the death.

Michel was quick on his feet, much quicker than Roman would have expected, no one would have expected that a womaniser like him was any good at a fight but surprisingly he was.

He moved very well and avoided Roman's attacks, landing some blows to the body which Roman ignored.

Roman lunged at him and he sidestepped, which was expected; as Roman's body moved past Michel's, he swung his left hand back to catch him in the neck but Michel avoided and hit him square in the nose. It connected and he bled from his nose, his nose dropping to the ground.

Rosa gasped where she was but Roman waved away her fears. Michel laughed at the absurdity of both of them.

"You want to give up loverboy? Your princess is afraid you can't cut it" he jested while taunting Roman and laughing.

Sometimes, the best way to defeat an opponent is to give them victory, and that was something that Roman was familiar with. He knew that, very well and that was his endgame. He needed Michel to become confident, so that his fall might be more enjoyable.

“Shouldn’t you be nicer to your sister, since you’ll be dying soon anyway?” Roman responded as he got up on his feet and wiped the bloodstain from his nose with the back of his hand.

“I’m not the one bleeding, neither am I the one whose knees are shaking”

“That was a free shot. Now you’ll understand what true pain is.” Roman responded.

Michel laughed it off and signalled for Roman to attack and Roman responded, but what happened next was beyond Michel’s imagination. Roman was somehow faster than before.

A straight lunge at Michel, but he halted when he was about two feet away, he stopped and attacked with his fists. Michel’s responses could not cope with the double entendre of punches that connected with his face; one on his nose and one on his lips. He reeled back and Roman attacked him immediately, he couldn’t catch a breather. Two more punches to his lips gave a tear on his lips and blood trickled out the wound.

“You finally know how to hit” Michel taunted.

“Don’t worry, I’ll show you what a hit is, I will make sure that you die a very painful death. For what you did to her”

“You talk too much” Michel responded as he spat blood on the floor and readied himself.

Another attack from Michel, this time he aimed a kick at Roman but he missed, because Roman ducked and aimed a punch for his ribs, it connected. Michel retched and coughed but before he could recover, Roman grabbed his hair and slammed his face into the ground twice.

Roman was in no mood to be nice, he rammed his face into the floor until he felt one of his teeth come loose and he smiled, a smile of contentment. But he wasn’t done yet. He pulled his right hand and in one clean swing he broke it and Michel cried out.

Figlio di una meretrice. Bastardo (Son of a harlot. Bastard) He cursed in pain. *Ti Uccid... (I’ll kill...)*

His curses were interrupted by Roman’s hand pushing his head into the floor and ramming it further.

Roman pulled his second hand behind him.

“This is for your sister” and he broke it clean, while his victim tried his best to scream as much as his mouth allowed. Roman looked at Rosa and saw her face, she looked away as soon as her face met his, he could see the fear on her face, that was the reason why he desperately wished she wasn't there to witness what he had to do. But then again, maybe it was a good idea that she was here now. He could never get over her of his accord but if she saw the monster that he was and hated him, it would be easier for him. Maybe this was the chance to kill two birds with one stone. He would kill everyone here gruesomely, so gruesomely that she would hate and fear him. She would walk out on him of her own accord and he would be relieved of the burden of walking out on her. It seemed like a good plan to him.

He picked Michel's head up and pointed at Benelli while he maintained eye contact with the Don. And in one swing, he ran his thumb into Michel's right eye. Everyone in the room gasped, Maliah Giuliano screamed out in pain, Benelli clenched his jaw, he could do nothing, his pain was so great that he could not show it, and he didn't know where to start.

Roman's men gasped, Rosa kept her eyes glued to the floor, Daniel Giuliano looked at his only living son, while Claudio and Aida looked at each other. Only Benelli kept quiet while Michel groaned in pain with blood trickling out of his right eye socket. Leaving only the left unharmed.

“Just shoot him and don't make him suffer” Benelli screamed.

“No guns. I'm a man of my word” Roman responded, unfazed and unflinching. Maintaining eye contact while he stuck his thumb into his eye socket once more and Michel cried out.

CHAPTER FIVE

“You’re a monster” Benelli shouted.

“Says the man who created the monster.”

“I didn’t create you”

“You did. All I wanted was to be happy until your men took everything from me. Both of you” he cast a glance towards Giuliano and Claudio.

“And here I am, fully grown, ready to take everything from you. Why does it anger you so much?”

“Then take his life and have your revenge”

“It’s not your place to tell me how to exact my revenge”

Roman raised his thumb and Benelli’s eyes widened, almost as though he understood him telepathically, he had seen the thumb work out the first time. He knew what a second time would mean for his son.

“Stop it. Please don’t, you have won, isn’t that enough for you” Benelli screamed with his veins popping out and his nostrils flared and for the first time in that night, Roman smiled, he saw what he was looking for. He saw the fear. The same fear he felt that night, was the reason why he did all this. It was the fear.

“Do you know what it feels like now? This is the reason for all these, my years have been leading up to this moment”

“What feeling, what moment?”

“This moment; to see the fear in your eyes, to see what’s coming but to be powerless against it, to watch your loved ones become despaired, to see your house become desolate. That’s the reason for all these.” He sighed and his eyes thinned, they narrowed and regarded only Benelli. Michel tried to move his hands, to save himself but they had been broken, all he could do was lay there. Helpless and afraid.

“I could have killed you a long time ago, Don. I could have set a bomb; I could have poisoned the water mains. I could have done it at any point when I drove anyone of you out, hell, I could even have sold you out.

But I didn't want your death to be rushed, I wanted you to see it, feel it and know that it was me. To know the house of Accetta put an end to yours. You lose, Don Benelli. And I'm glad" he said the last sentence with malice prominent in his voice.

And with that, he stuck his thumb in the other eye and Michel cried out in pain, much louder than before, and Roman retracted a bloodied thumb from his eye socket, and inserted the thumb again, looking at Benelli, who for the first time in the night, shed tears as his son cried out in pain. And when the shouting stopped, everything had gone dark to Michel. He lay there, with broken arms and blinded eyes.

Benelli wept for his son and Michel cried out for him, trying to move himself with his elbow, crawling like a worm, trying to trace his father's voice.

"So, you've been sleeping with my daughter?" Benelli shouted from where he was tied. Roman ignored him as though he didn't matter.

"Answer me, how dare you sleep with my daughter? You've been using her, haven't you?" Benelli added, cursing under his breath.

"Use her? Is she a utensil?" Roman tilted his head in his direction. "You treat her like she's not a human being just because she's female. You say a daughter is useless but she's the best thing that ever came out of you" Roman added, raising his voice.

"And you" he responded, regarding Rosa.

"Quindi Hai venduto la tua anima e il tuo corpo. Un cane che scodinzola contro un altro uomo finira per mordere il suo padrone. (So, you've sold your soul and your body. Any dog that wags his tail at another man will bite the owner) he said as he spat on the floor.

"I knew you were the worst thing that ever happened to me," he said, regarding her with disdain and disappointment.

"You joined him, you're a traitor to your family," he said as he spat again.

“You’re a fool, you treat a diamond like a stone. You can’t see the world even if it knocked at your door. I guess you’re not just a terrible man. You’re a terrible father also.” Roman said as he turned away from him and looked straight at Daniel Giuliano.

“No one...” Roman began to speak when his speech was interrupted by Rosa’s voice.

“What did I do that was so wrong? Fall in love? Have a boyfriend?” she said raising her voice, shouting as much as she could, trying to fight the tears. While Roman looked at her at the mention of the word “boyfriend”.

This was not the time to bring that up.

“In his years here, he is the only one who ever loved me. Whoever cared. You? Papi, you never cared for me since I was a little girl and all I wanted was to make you happy” she shouted as she shook her head with eyes closed.

“I went to medical school to make you proud, I stayed at home to make you happy. Despite the rumours about you, I never cared, to me you were the perfect man. But what did you repay me with? Uhn?” she said, waiting for an answer. None came.

“You said I was useless because I didn’t condone violence, you said I didn’t matter simply because of my gender. And in all these, I still loved you. It was okay for Nicola and Michel to hate me, but not you, Papi. Not you” she continued, taking a brief moment for her tears to drop.

“Even when I knew you didn’t care about me. I cared even more. Nicola only cared about you because your status allowed him to command people and women, Michel only knows how to spend your money on women and frivolities. I was always the good daughter and what did that get me? Hatred. You have been unfair to me, Papa. Very unfair” she said as she dropped to her knees in tears.

Roman moved closer to her and rubbed her head affectionately while she held on to his leg.

“She wants to ask you some questions. But she is a bit shaken right now. I will ask on her behalf though”.

Roman said as he moved a bit off from Rosa and returned his gaze to Benelli who looked at him with rage, but he could do nothing, his hands were tied. He was like a dog in a cage.

“What question?” he responded angrily and shifted his gaze to his daughter who was shaken, standing a bit off from Roman, confused in her mind. Her survival instincts told her to stay far away from the most dangerous man in the room but her heart told her to move closer to the man she loved.

“Did you kill her mother?” Roman asked and the room fell silent.

Benelli blinked and stammered.

“What sort of question is that?”

“Your hesitation is all I need to confirm it. You did kill your wife” he palmed his face.

“Who told you such tall tales?” He scoffed. “I didn’t kill her at all”

“But you sent someone to, didn’t you?” he asked, cocking the gun and fitting the silencer firm.

“Choose your next words very carefully, Don Benelli. No one knows when their last words will be” he said as he got closer, where he could get a clear shot of Benelli without anyone being caught in the crossfire.

“I will ask you, one last time. I need a yes or no. Anything else will lead you down the path of pain” he said as he got closer.

“What? You’re doing this for her? You want to kill me because of your girlfriend, is that it? Do you think that will make you guys live a long happy life? Wake up, boy. There’s no greater illusion than love. It will all crumble like a sand castle.”

“You’re in the Mafia, if you kill me today, you’ll have more to kill. There won’t be a shortage of enemies or challengers and when you finally get to the top of the ladder, you will realise that you climbed on rungs of corpses. How then can you still call yourself a good man? Will your woman love you when she has seen the monster you could become? Even if you became the monster for her?” Benelli spoke with pain in his voice. He looked like someone who was speaking from experience, as though he was narrating his ordeal and Roman understood him. He had seen how shaken Rosa was when she saw him break her brother’s arms. And for a moment his heart pondered the question. Would Rosa, who hated violence, love a violent man like him? He didn’t want to keep his hopes up.

“I’m not doing this for her to love me. I’m doing this because I love her. We always say that true love is give and take. But in the real sense of it, true love is lonely. True love is about giving, giving and giving. And when you’ve given your all, you give some more. You can’t love with expectations. That’s one thing I’ve come to learn. True love is shouting into the void, if you’re lucky someone will shout back, if not, you shout, not because you came here to listen to someone shout back, but because you are here to shout of your own accord” he took a breather and looked up for a second.

“I’m not a good man, Don Benelli. My father was a good man and in one night, everything was taken from him. If he had been a bad man, more often, maybe things would have been different. I, on the other hand, don’t aspire to be a good man, good men always lose the ones they love. I’m an ordinary man who is willing to do anything for the greater good, including the smaller evils and in some cases, great evil. Littering the world with corpses will help the living live better. Then I’ll gladly be a genocidal maniac. A good man protects the ones they love and makes the world a better place. Anything else is propaganda” he said as he raised the gun.

“Did you kill her mother? Your last chance to come clean”

“Fuck you, you bastard” Benelli responded.

Almost as soon as Benelli finished speaking, he cried out in pain and tried desperately to grab his ears but he couldn’t. All he could do was scream in pain as he saw a chunk of his right ear on the floor. Roman had aimed a Glock straight at it and taken off a substantial part, leaving only the upper half and a lot of blood on Benelli’s neck and shirt collar.

“I’m not in a good enough mood to take that kind of talk from you. I warned you earlier to answer my questions right, didn’t I warn you?” he aimed the gun a bit lower, this time to his cheek.

“I’ll ask you again. Answer me this time around. Did you kill her mother, your wife?” Roman asked again, titling his head, keeping his eyes on Benelli’s cheek.

“Fuck you.”

Roman smiled and walked closer to him, inserted the gun in his mouth and shot it through his cheek. The room was filled with the sound of his agony and pain. Bellows of torment, screams of discomfort, he tried desperately to use his hands but they were tied. Two more shots from Roman, one into his left shoe, the other into the right. Louder bellows of pain and discomfort. Everyone in the room went still, no one dared to move, because of the spectacle that was unveiling before them.

“One last time, I’ll ask you, did you kill your wife?”

“Yes, you psycho. I did.” He said, almost in tears.

“You did well. That was all I needed from you; you could have saved yourself the pain”

“Did you hear that?” he turned his head to Rosa who stood up and nodded.

“I’ll be back for you,” he said as he walked away from Benelli.

Roman walked to Rosa who was shaken where she was, she couldn’t meet his eyes, she loved him almost totally but the little part that was left was afraid. She had seen the monster that he was, and she was scared. She was terrified. He lifted her and carried her in his arms.

“Look after them, if they move funny, shoot their ears and feet,” he said to Gio as he carried her towards the stairs.

“How did you get out of your room?” he asked as he picked her up and carried her in his arms.

“I climbed out the window with my curtain and blanket” she responded rather shyly, in a hushed tone, while avoiding his eyes, which he noticed and smiled.

“You didn’t wear a bra before coming out. I can see your breasts from this angle” he whispered to her and she nodded, she didn’t respond, perhaps not knowing how, perhaps not feeling the need to.

“I’m taking you back to your room, I don’t want you to come down for a while, okay?”

She nodded.

Their ascent of the steps was very quiet, she didn’t say a word and neither did he. He didn’t see any reason not to but he decided not to. Maybe this silence was the best way to say goodbye.

She must have been taken aback by what she saw because she never vented her anger that he tied her hands or mentioned the fact that he had locked her in. She had come down and had witnessed the man she loved, show his violent side but he didn't regret it. He wanted her to be aware of the monster he could become. He got to her door and held to her legs with his right hand while he dipped his left hand into his pocket and brought out the key to her door. He opened it and took the key with him. He carried her, dropped her on her bed and kissed her forehead.

She was shaken; he didn't need to ask or be told.

"Please lock the door behind me," he said as he walked towards the door without looking back.

"Will you come back?" she said in her most audible tone, which was a little louder than a whisper.

"Do you want me to?" he asked her, focusing his gaze on her eyes.

"Yes," she responded in the same tone while looking down.

"I will," he said as he turned around and left her door.

"Will you kill all of them?" she asked as he was about to close the door but he didn't answer. She thought he didn't hear her but he did, he just ignored her. When he had closed her door, he whispered to himself.

"In another world, it would have been nice to do laundry and raise kids with you"

As he walked the corridor, she stood up from her bed and locked the door behind her before returning to sit on her bed, head between knees, cursing her luck in love.

Roman descended the steps much quicker than he ascended, everything was still the way it was. Luca was still dead, it was hard to change that, Michel was still dying with two eyes put out and two arms broken, and Benelli had a bullet hole in his cheek and an incomplete right ear. Maliah, Daniel and Claudio all remained as they were. Roman's men had made sure of it.

"Don Benelli, I have asked you everything I wanted to ask you. Thank you for being cooperative." He raised the gun to his chest and put two bullets in his heart and immediately, Benelli's lights went out.

"No, Papa" Michel cried out weakly, searching like a blind shrew for his father.

“Let me put you out of your misery” Roman said as he shot Michel twice in the head and he too crossed from the land of the living.

Only Maliah, Daniel and Claudio Giuliano were left.

“Don Giuliano, unfortunately, I have no questions for you. Do you have any for me?” He said as he levelled the gun to his stomach. Giuliano didn’t respond for a while, then he spoke.

“Please spare my wife. She knows nothing of this”

“Your son? What shall I do with him?” Giuliano didn’t respond.

“I guess you’re not needed,” Roman said as he addressed Claudio for the first time that night as he pointed a gun in his direction.

Love made people do what they never expected and even more shocking was when it would make them do it. It would take a lot of believing for Roman, his men, Aida and everyone else in the room to believe what happened next. But it did.

As Roman pulled the safety of the gun to squeeze the trigger, A feminine figure jumped between him and Claudio, spreading her arms to stop him from getting shot. Making herself a human bulletproof. The gesture was unexpected but even more shocking was the person who did it.

It was Aida.

She jumped and shouted, pleading for Roman to spare his life. An occurrence which left everyone in the room bewildered, including Claudio.

Roman looked at her and couldn’t help but smile.

“Looks like you have a lot of explaining to do,” he said as he signalled for her to come nearer.

“Hey, don’t hurt her” Claudio shouted.

“If you address me directly again. I’ll put a bullet in your kneecap.” He said as he and Aida walked out of earshot.

“So, you want me to spare his life? What’s this? I thought we agreed to kill everyone”

“Well, he’s different” Aida responded, blinking and stammering.

“Different? I’ve never heard that one before. How original” he said mockingly.

“Yeah. And maybe this is how I want my revenge.”

“By not taking revenge? How pacifistic of you. How Zen” he responded with a scoff at the end.

“Well. Thank you. And you’re one to talk” She rolled her eyes.

“Why won’t I be one to talk?”

“Rosa Benelli” she responded pointing a finger up the stairs.

“What about her?” it was Roman’s turn to do the stammering.

“She is your girlfriend and you never even levelled a gun in her direction.”

“It’s because she’s a woman” he spread his hands.

“How chivalrous, boss. How chivalrous of you. You’re the gentleman of the year. So, you’re telling me that the gruesome way you killed her brother wasn’t because you were angry about him threatening her life?” she took a step towards him.

“And all that bit about asking her questions for her. You were just being a gentleman, weren’t you?” she asked and he did not answer.

“I’m keeping him alive.” She added.

“So, it’s one for one”

“Yes boss” she bowed, mockingly.

“Are you sure this is what you want? Will he make you happy?”

“I’m willing to take the risk” she smiled. And for the first time in a long time, Roman saw Aida smile genuinely like when they were kids. He could see that she was truly in love and he didn’t want to take that from her. They deserved to be happy. They both did.

“Well, keep him tied till I’m done, so he won’t interrupt me and if he ever comes across me or crosses me, I’ll kill him. Tell him that. Deal?”

“Deal” she smiled.

“Look at you, falling in love with the enemy. I can’t believe you” he scoffed.

“I learnt from the best” She bowed to him again, mockingly and they both went back to the living room.

Roman shifted his gaze completely from Claudio and regarded Don Giuliano.

“I have nothing to ask you, so I’ll make this quick” he raised to gun to him and shot him twice in each knee.

When he shouted, he aimed for his mouth and put a bullet in the back of his throat. That was all. He was dead.

He looked at Maliah Giuliano who sat there, unharmed physically but broken mentally. He told Aida and two of his men to take her back to their residence. While the other two men called the clean-up crew.

The Mafia were good at cleaning up corpses, and they were timely too. They arrived within thirty minutes and within another one hour, they had cleaned up the house, gotten rid of the rug and given the house a different air. One could hardly imagine that this had been the same place where some people were executed.

Rosa sat on her bed and watched the door, she waited and hoped for him to come back.

The house had been silent for a while. No screams, no movements, she could hear a pin drop. The last sound she heard was the sound of vehicles going out and after that, it was all silent.

“If he came back, what would I want to say to him?”

She hadn’t thought that far. Would she want him to love her? Would she be able to sleep next to him after she had seen the savage parts of him?

“Why not? He did it to protect me and the other part was out of revenge”

Another voice in her head spoke up.

“He did it because they killed his parents, if it was me, I’d also take vengeance, so I understand where he is coming from”

She nodded to herself. Her mind was busy making excuses and creating scenarios when she heard a knock on the door. She jumped for a second and stayed completely still.

“Rosa, it’s me. Open the door, please”

She opened the door and he took her in his arms, the moment he saw her. He held so tight that the night air could hardly sneak between them. She hugged him back instinctively, all her fears and doubts melted like an ice cream the moment she saw him.

“I want to ask you some questions, will you answer me?” she asked him softly. He nodded, despite not having a clue what it was.

“Are you here to kill me?” she asked as she distanced herself from him a bit. Keeping a distance of about two feet.

“No, I’m not” he responded. Slowly, giving weight to each word, adding hesitance to each syllable.

“Why did you spare me?” she asked slowly. Taking each word as though it weighed a ton.

“Because everything I said earlier was true” he responded, meeting her eyes and seeing that they were swollen, from crying. He moved closer, palmed her cheek affectionately and drew her closer to him.

“Do you love me?” she asked again.

“Yes. I never lied to you about that.” He responded.

He waited for a brief moment but no other questions came in. She was a simple woman, only focusing on the matters that mattered.

“Can you hold me?”

“What?” she responded.

Of the many things she thought she would hear him say, she never thought she would hear him ask to be held. She looked into his eyes and saw that they were teary. She pulled him close to her chest and heard him break down in tears. She rubbed his head affectionately while he cried into her bosom, she didn’t stop him, she didn’t rush him. One night of love and passion was what she was hoping for, but maybe this was

passion also, he was expressing the words he couldn't say. Crying in her arms made her understand him more, carrying that load of revenge for eighteen years must have been heavy, now that he had achieved that, he felt relieved, he could properly mourn his parents. He had earned the right.

They fell asleep in each others' arms but Rosa woke up alone with her window open and a note on her table. She knew he was gone; she opened the note and it confirmed her suspicion.

"I'm sorry that I have to leave, I know that it hasn't sunk in yet but one day it will and you might no longer want to live and love the man who has made you all alone in this world. Maybe we'll meet again in another life; one where neither of us is broken or damaged and we can love fully, where I wouldn't have to leave; a world where it would be alright to stay, even if it's to do laundry, pay taxes and raise kids with you.

Ti amo, Rosa, Quando muoio, ti amero ancora.

Her tears dropped on the note as she read it and she sat down in that house all alone, the desolation finally catching up to her. She was alone, with no family, no friends and no lover.

During the next month, Roman arranged through lawyers and other 'persuasive' means for everything that Don Benelli owned to be transferred to Rosa Benelli, which made her a multi-millionaire in her own right. Money which she used in establishing a hospital for orphans and underprivileged children. As well as a school for children who had been abandoned. She sold the house and moved to a three-bedroom flat in the same city, where she spent her time looking for Roman or Aida. But with no luck. They were both experts at evasion. They couldn't be found unless they wanted to, but the weird thing was that Rosa never ran into any trouble, no one ever harassed her or tried anything funny. Whenever she got in contact with someone from the criminal underworld, she was always treated with the utmost respect, meaning there was a protector and that annoyed her even more.

Roman had to be the protector and that meant that he knew where she was and if he knew where she was, why didn't he reach out? It's been months of loneliness for her.

CHAPTER SIX.

Aida walked into his three-bedroom flat with someone in tow, while he sat down in the living room, with full blond hair. His hair had grown out and curly, like that of a much older Cupid. It had taken away the harmful demeanour that he had.

He took up his phone as it vibrated and checked it.

“Why did you let her go when you would be this miserable?” Aida asked, walking past him and into his kitchen.

“Hey, Claudio” Roman greeted as the other figure sat in a chair across from him. It was Claudio Giuliano; he and Aida had become a thing, going on for about four months and since Roman was like Aida’s only sibling, they had gotten along. They were not exactly best friends yet but they could stand in the same room without one of them plotting to kill the other, that was progress. Thanks to Aida mediating between them, a lot.

“Hey man,” he said as he adjusted in the chair.

“Check the fridge, there are some fruits there” he shouted to Aida who didn’t respond but got the message. She opened the fridge and soon after he heard a knife chopping, not long after she came in with a bowl of chopped fruits and three smaller plates. They began to eat.

Roman’s phone vibrated again and he took a look.

“She is not going to text, you know? It’s not like she has your number or anything.”

“Today is her birthday, I sent a gift to her, and I was waiting to hear back from the delivery guys. I just got a text that it had been delivered” he said as he showed her the screen of the phone from afar.

“How is she doing?” Claudio asked.

“She’s doing fine. She’s doing well for herself”

“And you’re here miserable, why did you let her go, if you knew you would be miserable without her? You’re a bonehead” Aida cut in, pointing the fork she had just used to pick a strawberry in his direction.

“Just shut up, crazy girl. Remember I’m older than you. I’m still your big brother anyhow you look at it”

“Just seventeen months apart” she rolled her eyes.

“That’s enough reason for you to be quiet” he responded.

“I’m not the one who let the woman I love and who by the way, loves me more than the world go, while I sulk here, every time I see her picture. I’m smarter than that.”

“Best of luck, man” Roman turned his head to Claudio.

Aida fumed and the conversation between them went silent while they munched on pineapples and apples.

They hung out for a while longer and Aida left with Claudio. He knew she would be back. She had always come to see him once in a while. At least once in two weeks. She had come on a Friday evening; she would come around on Fridays or Saturdays.

She was happy with Claudio and Roman was happy to see that. Maybe someday, he would be happy also.

The next Saturday came by and Roman heard a knock on his door around four in the evening, that must be Aida he thought. He was right. She came in alone and went in straight to his kitchen as she mostly did.

“Where’s your boo?” he asked her.

“Mind your business” she responded.

He was used to getting unsavoury answers from her and he had an “Aida-English” dictionary in his head where he translated her answers into regular English. They acted like siblings in every way and thanks to their blonde hair, they couldn't pass up for one.

Her response meant he would be coming along so he shouldn't bother her with questions about him. He was good, he was fine. Just busy at the moment.

About fifteen minutes later, he heard another knock on his door.

He didn't answer the door but the person knocked again. That must be Claudio he thought. Claudio didn't quite have the same level of boldness in his home as Aida did.

“I think that’s your boo” Roman shouted.

“Open the door, I want to slice another round of fruits” she shouted back from the kitchen.

He strolled to the door while holding a piece of apple that had been nicely diced.

He opened the door and his eyes widened with shock as the apple dropped from his hand.

“You’re the biggest idiot in the world, you know that?” the figure shouted at him as she made her way past him into the house.

“Do you know how long I’ve been looking for you? You sat here eating apples or what are you eating?” she said as she dropped her handbag on the chair closest to the door.

She paused when she heard water running in the kitchen.

“Who is that in your kitchen?” she whispered.

“You have a girlfriend while I was waiting and looking for you?” her voice went higher.

“No, I didn’t. I don’t” he tried holding her hand but she removed her hand and turned towards the kitchen.

Aida came out of the kitchen before she could go in, she had a bowl on hand, two saucers and a smile on her face.

“Oh, it’s your sister,” she said in relief.

“Nice to see you again,” Aida said as they hugged.

“Again?” Roman shouted. “Explanations now”

“You were miserable without her, so I invited her”

“I wasn’t miserable” Roman retorted.

“You were” she said as she handed a plate to each of them.

“You guys have a lot of catching up to do. I’ll leave you alone. Roman, I’ll see you later.” Aida said as she stood up and headed for the door.

She stopped at the door and looked back.

“Rosa, he’s all yours”

“No, Aida, please don’t go....” he reached for her but she darted out of the door before he could complete his sentence leaving him behind with an angry Rosa, a bowl of fruit and a fork.

“You’ve known where I was all these times and you never reached out?” Rosa said, moving close to him and standing above him.

He had missed her, from her bunny teeth to her eyes, everything about her. The way she looked whenever she was angry, the way she spoke a bit quicker and an octave higher, her gesticulations. Everything.

I didn’t” he protested.

“Don’t you dare lie to me” She pointed a finger in his face and bent down a bit.

“You have men watching my place at night. You sent me a birthday gift” she added.

“But, the birthday...”

“You’re the only person alive who knows my birthday” she frowned.

“And your name is Roman?” she asked, frowning.

She stood close to him, with her foot stepping on his, intentionally. While she bent her neck, leaving her face about a foot from his.

“Yes. Roman Accetta. But now I go by Roman Argento, son of Commander Oliver Argento.”

“And I don’t have a girlfriend. Just clearing the record”

“I don’t care if you have one, that’s your life” she scoffed.

“What about you? Are you seeing someone?” he asked shyly.

“And what’s that to you? I’m still mad at you, just so you know. You have a lot of things to apologize for” She went to her bag and brought out the letter that he left.

“You were this poetic and you never wrote me a love letter?” she said as she handed him the note.

He looked at her, silent, smiling slightly with the side of his mouth.

“Why are you smiling? Is this funny to you?” she asked, moving closer to him until her foot was in its former position; comfortably placed on his.

She fixed her eyes on him; and took in all of his features, his hair was much fuller, and he looked younger and more innocent, almost harmless. His eyes had a different radiance, something she was used to seeing,

everything else looked the same. She loved the parts that remained the same but she was even more enamoured with the things that were different.

“Come here,” he said, pulling her by the arm into his arms and planting a kiss on her lips.

All her inhibitions melted at the touch of his lips, she forgot her anger and savoured the taste of his lips. Her body moved on its own, she locked her arms around his neck and kissed him, months' worth of kisses in a moment.

“So, are you seeing anyone?” he asked again and she shook her head shyly.

“I’m sorry I left. I am. Didn’t want my presence to burden you” She wanted to protest but he kept his index finger on her lips.

“But I realised that I should have trusted you more. But if it’s all the same to you, we can start over and this time, I won’t leave. I promise” he said raising an eyebrow.

“I don’t want to start over. Let’s just continue and if you leave me again, you’re dead. I’ll inject you lethally.” she responded.

Claudio Giuliano walked alone in the garden of his new home while looking into the distance, taking the ray of the sun on his face, enjoying the brightness and the warmth that came with it. His phone vibrated and he took it out of his pocket. It was a text message.

“Everything is ready to be carried out whenever you are”.

He put the phone back in his pocket and a wry smile spawned on his face. It was time to complete the final parts of his plan, the story wasn’t over, not by a long shot. It was finally time for him to make his move, four months of planning was going to come into play. The story was nowhere near over.