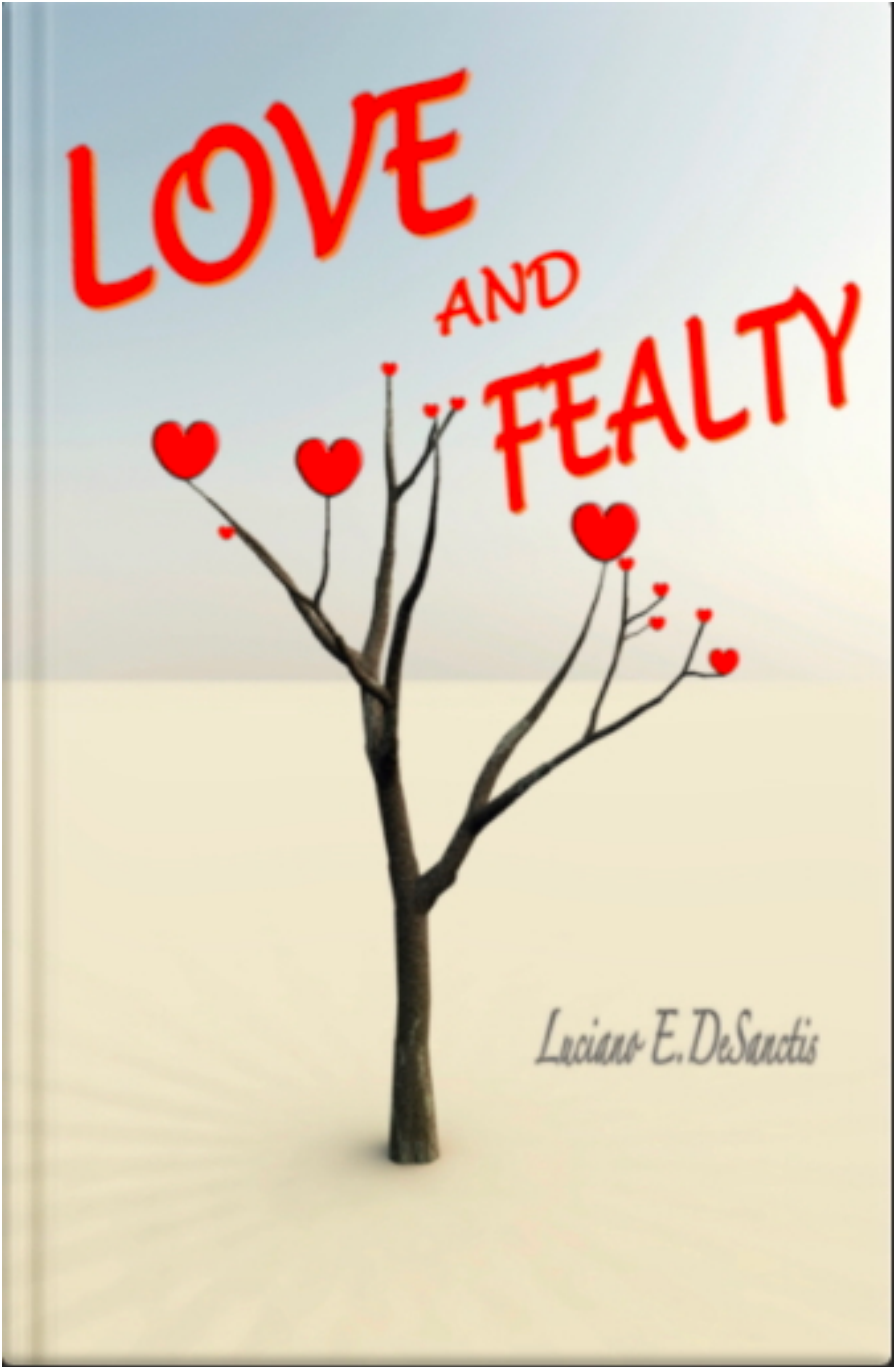




Love and Fealty



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Chapter I



BELOVED BEYOND a VIEWPOINT

Padre Valentino made two gestures with his staff on the floor to catch Amanda's attention, who was gazing out from the mezzanine balcony below the theater. When she turned to him, the aged priest gave her a wide grin in a family mindset and said in a gentle and soothing voice: "Ciao, with good health, *Figlioccia!*"

Amanda smiled welcomingly at her godfather. "Oh my-my — *Padrino, benvenuto!*" she said in a lively tone.

As he took off his monocle from his left eye and slipped it into his black cassock pocket, Padre Valentino gave an admiring glance at his goddaughter's elaborate coiffure and gown and said: "*Ti benedico* and may God's peace be with you." When he last saw her, there were sparse streaks of golden highlights in her ginger hair, but now they are more prominent, especially on the sides of her head. *She is aging well!* He thought, pleased that she was maintaining a youthful spirit and vibrant energy despite the years of war turmoil. Confidently smiling, Padre Valentino went to embrace her with a warm hug. His belief in life has been enhanced by his patience and willingness to show grace to others. His perspective on the past is like a rose with thorns, and the future is as mysterious and pointless as a cloud in the sky. To him, the most important thing was that only the present moment was worthy of being treasured, and the passing on of such a legacy of wisdom to his goddaughter filled him with pure joy.

"Thank you, *Padrino*. I trust you had a pleasant trip?"

He chuckled with a nod of admiration, answering: “With good health — yes.” They concluded their greeting by kissing each other twice on each side of their cheeks.

As Amanda looked forward to the performances at the theater in Chieti with her godfather, she became chatty because their rapport with each other was untouched by time. With the arrival of the unification of Italy and with the House of Bourbon dynasty gone with the wind, this evening’s performances were a glorious celebration for all who were present, marking a new beginning with liberty. Furthermore, it was also her mother’s 70th birthday, and she was eagerly looking forward to the celebration with her remaining family. The war had torn families apart, causing deaths and separations, leaving her with few relatives and friends.

“I’m filled with joy, *Padrino*, that you were able to come to Chieti for *Mamma’s* birthday,” she said with a reminiscing voice. She went on sharing with him her surprise and wonderment about the evening. “And along this historic evening with *Rossini’s The Barber of Seville*, Oh *Madonna mia*, what wonderful moment to be an Operagoer!!” As the orchestra’s pit filled with the sound of tuning instruments and the volume of voices from afar increased with the audience, Amanda’s public appearance prompted her to kiss his right hand, demonstrating her respect for the church to those watching her.

Padre Valentino gently pulled his hand away from her lips, saying with a chuckle: “Such tradition to me is unnecessary, my dear.” Amanda nodded as she understood his wisdom of being awakened to enlightenment; nonetheless, her love for the man was deeply rooted in her heart. With interest, he continued to say: “It’s my first time seeing this opera, you know.”

“Oh, I’ve seen it once before, in the *Teatro Argentina* in Rome,” Amanda said proudly and went on to explain: “The opera is a comedy. The plot follows the adventures of a barber named *Figaro* as he aids *Count Almaviva* in saving *Rosina* from her lusty guardian, Doctor *Bartolo*, so that she can be with her one true love.” Giggles of laughter came out of her as she continued: “You see, in an attempt to offset *Doctor Bartolo’s* plans to marry *Rosina* for her wealth, *Figaro* tries to come up with plots and disguises for the count, resulting in mismatched identities and chaotic scenes.”

“Ahh, *bene!*” He acknowledged the interesting plot with a cheerful nod and had a humorous thought come to his mind: *this sounds like something I have experienced!*

At fifty-five, Amanda aged gracefully, with dignity and humor, and her love and affection were always abundant. She was a voluptuous woman who showed passion in her speech. As she chattered away about trivial things, her voice was quite high-pitched and reminiscent of wind chimes, as though everything was fine in the world, even though she knew it wasn’t. “*Madonna mia* — you wait, *Padrino*, until you see *Mamma* in the gown that was made in Milan!” She remarked with a move of her hand in the air to display how beautiful her mother appeared. When she flashed him her sweet smile, Padre Valentino’s face shone even more. “Oh yes, well and good. I was there backstage, and your *Mamma* looked marvelous!” He insisted as he sat down on the red chair with the aid of his staff. Despite the aging and blurry left eye, his right eye was still strong in vision, as if it were like an owl. As he glanced over her from a different slant, he took note of her pastel, creamy, loose blouse and gown with pastel green and red bows and frills, which covered her red chair as if a sparrow were laying eggs. The beauty of her coiffure was more evident to him as it was twisted

and braided into a fancy bun, secured with an ivory clip, and curled with green ribbons, all mixed with leaves and blossoms of white lilies.

“I am so pleased *Mamma* is the first woman to wear my design in public. It's a relief to know that the gown was finished on time for this specific event.” Amanda continued with a gleam of pride in her eyes. “You know, in a way, each of my clothing designs is like a child of mine.” Often, as she chatted, her eyes glanced at people entering the theatre and sitting down. As a fashion designer for the new Sarta and Di Cugnoli clothing company in Milan, she was curious about who wore what. Besides *Garibaldi* shirts, velvet dresses, and *Zouave* jackets, Amanda was also intrigued by the hats and bonnets people wore with hair accessories like jewels, plumes, flowers, and even fruit. Her passion for fashion was passed on to her from a young age by her late grandmother, Béatrice. At each look, she could not help but notice that the *Garibaldi* fashion was becoming very popular and very unisex. Her life was uncomplicated, even during the turbulent period of war, because she had no children to worry about. She was well-protected and always cared for by her senior husband, Vito Di Venus, who is a descendant of a patrician family of Rome. The few rows of center *mezzanine* seats offer a fantastic view of the stage from an elevated position, and Amanda was pleased with her husband's seating arrangements. In her view, she could periodically look at most of the white and golden interior, gleaming with lights from the oil lanterns above each balcony box, decorated with red curtains and chairs that half circle the level of the stage. Its dome with allegories of theatre arts and music, was a sight to be seen. Swiftly her eyes turned to her godfather and asked with a delightful grin attached to her expression, demonstrating her pride over the community of

Chieti social movement. “*Padrino*,” she asked curiously, “what are your thoughts on the old theatre's new name, *Marrucino*?” She continued pleasantly, “I'm so delighted with the name!” And waited to his reply as she bent forward searching the crowd below for her husband.

Having Greek ancestry, Padre Valentino was quite tall and slim for a Greek man, measuring up to five feet eleven inches. His dark olive skin was complemented by his expressive ebony eyes, dark crimson lips, and straight nose. His biretta adorned his long, flowing, snow-white, wavy hair. The soft aging lines adorning his clean-shaven, proud face were reminiscent of a man with intelligence and studiousness who was both trustworthy and passionate. In addition to Latin, his extensive knowledge of ancient literatures like the *Septuagint* allowed him to gain a unique understanding of life, which he had mastered alone by studying at various theological libraries in the region. He nodded to himself and then responded in an intellectual manner: “Oh yes, I am also delighted with the name, and I am sure the ancient people of *Teate* would be proud of the name chosen. Legend says that *Achilles'* friends founded the city and named it in honor of his mother, *Thetis*.” He sat there comfortably as a relative would, and his sense of love filled the moment that any word would ever capture when he realized that after all these years, he could still see the child in his goddaughter's eyes and smiles. It dawned on him that nine or so years had passed since he had last seen her or, for that matter, the rest of his family, due to regional battles and riots. As far back as he could remember, the war was real, and the entire situation was insane. He took a deep breath and let it out with a sense of realization that the invasion of *Napoleone* and the Austrians that he and his country had been confronted with had sparked and burst

the flame of national unity. He softly blinked in amazement and thought: *Darkness cannot extinguish the light that shines within it. Similarly, hate cannot extinguish hate; only love can do that.*

“There’s Vito!” Amanda suddenly announced. Her voice shrieked with laughter as she clasped her hands and moved them back and forth in a pleasant gesture. “*Madonna mia*, he’s walking with *zio* Peppino!”

The words of his goddaughter shook Padre Valentino out of his thoughts, and he became more intrigued, nodding and smiling. “Ahh, my goodness, Peppino! I am unable to recall the last time I saw him.”

Amanda began to discuss her uncle's participation in the secret *Carbonari* Revolutionary Society and how his service and leadership brought changes that are now cherished and treasured by the community. She spoke about the new Kingdom of Italy as if it were a bridegroom. She spoke until she felt that she had told all that he would want to know. “I believe that Rome will be the capital of our new Kingdom, don't you?”

Her question brought up Plato's Republic, which he had studied in his youth at the seminary. He gave her a nod and said: “I have faith in that, *Figlioccia*, but just as the world transitions from darkness to light, there will be numerous great republics that come and go.

“What do you mean, *Padrino*?”

He put on his monocle and gazed down the main floor at the crowd's relaxed atmosphere, sensing the warmth of humor, the heart, and a new perspective on life, and responded graciously: “I am referring to the Roman Republic — It came and went. As you can see, the public has regained its independence as it once did. We can be compared to America's independence from Britain, France,

the Dutch, and to our old Kingdoms of the Two Sicilies and Spain, which led to the loss of their colonies,” he pointed a finger at the crowd, “the *Risorgimento* for Italy is a public movement that cannot be prevented, and ultimately, all monarchist states in Europe will have to compromise in order to achieve a grand collective independent state, like Rome was about to do with Emperor *Napoleone*.”

After a few minutes passed, a husky white-haired man in a high-rank *carabiniere* uniform walked onto the balcony. “Long live *la patria d’italia!*” he stated with a patriotic voice of brotherly love.

Padre Valentino slowly rose with a gentle chuckle, saying: “My goodness, Peppino, you look marvelous!” The sight of his father's face in him suddenly evoked a pleasant nostalgia for Padre Valentino, as he could tell that even after the years had passed, his appearance and manners still reminded him of his beloved friend, Dante. “It's a blessing to be with you again!”

“*Ciao Padrino* — my honor is all mine. It's been a long time!”

The men gave each other a cheek-to-cheek kiss greeting.

Vito entered in a dark frock coat and removed his top hat. He gazed affectionately at the priest and said: “*Che miseria* — It's been too long since we've been apart.”

“Yes, it's been too long,” Padre Valentino said with a nod and complimented him: “You look well, my friend!”

Peppino extended his hands and declared: “The past is behind us now.” He then removed his *Carabinieri* hat and thoughtfully brushed his mustache and beard before approaching his niece.

Amanda got up and interjected: “Our reunion is a reflection of God's aspiration that we have finally come together after all this time with good health.” She lifted her eyes to her husband and gently kissed him a hello, and then kissed both cheeks of her uncle.

With the heart of springtime in mind, Amanda proceeded to say: “I’m pleased to announce that we will be celebrating *Mamma’s* birthday after the performance at Aquilina’s bakery next door.

The three men were pleased by the announcement, and as they began to converse, the levers suddenly lowered the tinted glass in front of the oil lanterns, producing a dim illumination, and the audience went silent. Then the great red curtain opened wide, dark in the background. The four of them sat down in their chairs in captivated awe, with Amanda and her husband in the center, Peppino to their left, and Padre Valentino beside his goddaughter on the right.

A roar of applause erupted as the most famous musician in Europe emerged from the stage. He entered the pit, shook the concertmaster's hand, and then stood on the podium, bowing. At that site, the mask of a father shone over Padre Valentino's face as he applauded; as the *maestro* turned to the orchestra and brought up his baton, signaling them to get ready, a sudden wave of gratitude washed over him, expressing the importance of having done something in his life that provided him with a meaningful relationship, purpose, and spiritual wisdom: by raising a son. With that thought in mind, the overture began with a brief musical exchange between the winds and strings. He suddenly began to muse on the past while honoring and listening to the music as the whole ensemble joined in and became more cheerful and lively.

As he became fully immersed in the shiny and brassy nature of the music, along with the loud timbre and tempo, his face took on a faint expression of remembrance of his past life when he was a seminarian struggling with life after growing up in a dysfunctional orphanage. His knowledge of his childhood was limited to what the orphanage caretakers had told him, specifically that he was a

toddler who was the only one to survive a Greek shipwreck that washed up on the uninhabited shore of Pescara. On that tragic shipwreck day, the only thing he could remember was a glimpse of his parents drowning and calling out his name, Agapios. Despite his efforts to remember what had happened, his memory remained blank, and based on what he could tell, his life started at the orphanage located in the outskirts of the fishing village, near the Pescara shoreline. In his youth, religion played a significant role in his community, and he struggled to comprehend God's plan to sacrifice his son for the sins of mankind. The reason for Jesus' suffering was revealed to him as God's love for us, which was a puzzling mystery until he learned to surrender through faith. At his baptism, the name Valentino was selected for him as a surname derived from the patron saint of love. He was given the name by the villagers due to his incredible shipwreck survival, which they believed was a miracle of God's love. Going through childhood in Pescara, the misery of slavish conditions was all he could find in his cursed life. From the age of eight, he provided assistance to the fisherman as a ship's boy, who thanked him by throwing him a *piastro* coin here and there. A group of Greek Gypsies of Orthodox Christians arrived one day and set up a camp nearby the Pescara river. After becoming friends with Zina, a girl of his same age from the camp, his life improved. Their friendship provided him with strength and purpose to persevere. As Zina and he bonded closer, she taught him the Greek language over time and they eventually fell in love. His love for Zina was like a magical spell, a pure and effortless connection that felt like they were two halves of a whole. It was like nothing else he'd ever experienced. Nonetheless, it would be his only romantic relationship he would ever experience. By the time he was seventeen, Zina contracted diphtheria and died

in Chieti's Hospital. The loss of her was so devastating that it was like a light being snuffed out instantly in his mind. It was then that he changed his perspective on love, which led him to become a priest. At that juncture in his life, he despised the word 'love', as it was such a fickle emotion that he deeply feared. Before her passing, he promised Zina that she would be the only one he would love and he meant it. He vowed to never experience feelings like the ones he had for Zina again, as he was no longer willing to love anyone again. He viewed love as a source of mystery, paradox, and a puzzling experience that brought him only sorrow and pain, and he would continue to experience the same if he ever fell in love again. Love became to him an emotion that could only be handled with the detection of religion to God. So, in his interest in being a priest, he relocated to Chieti and sought solace in religion, resulting in his involvement as an altar boy at the Cathedral of *San Giustino*. Under the guidance of Reverend *Monsignore* Don Virgilio Animus, the archbishop of Chieti, he served the church with an enduring heart, shielding himself by marrying the church instead of a woman. His story of how love led him to truth started in 1789, the year the French Revolution changed Europe forever. Unaware to him at the time, the crisis in France was a result of the American Revolution and King Louis' extravagant spending on its colonial empire, which led to France being on the brink of bankruptcy. This led to a people's rebellion against the injustices of French society, the corruption of royal officials, and the depression that stems from widespread economic hardship. The public protest against the French monarchy undoubtedly caused apprehension among other European nations. Before then, since the mediaeval era, European society had been broken into three distinct classes dictated by birth: the wealthy of the nobility and clergy and the poverty of the

peasants and serfs. You were told what to live and think by the rulers. But at the cusp of the 19th Century, reason and science began to challenge this age-old culture that had swept Europe among the merchants, craftsmen, and the aristocrats of a new philosophical movement which gave a fresh voice for liberty to control one's own destiny and above all: equality. This great flourishing of knowledge of aging beacon of possibility was called: the Age of Enlightenment.

It wasn't until the year 1793 when he was ordained as a priest that it brought him purpose and recognition. In that year, the French monarch was facing its most severe crisis, and its economy was in a state of collapse due to bankruptcies. This made the monarchs of other European countries very, very nervous. For it became a time when evil took over the imaginations of men and they became the manufacturers of evil.

It is in this way that Padre Valentino's story of love takes hold. He sat in a regal mood, listening intently to Rossini's overture. The music seemed to burst forth like dazzling sparks, like moonlight on water, stirring up more memories.

Chapter II



RAVISH LOVE

January 21, 1793, marked the start of the narrative for the search of the meaning of love. On a historic day in mid-morning in Paris, the so-called ‘*national razor*’ stood in wait for the French King of the House of Bourbon as he attempted to address his subjects. “I am innocent of all the crimes imputed to me,” he declared, “I pardon the authors of my death and pray to God that the blood you are about to shed will never fall upon France,” shouted the King of the House of Bourbon dynasty. Only to have a lion's roar of drumbeats muffle his speech, along with ridicule from the angry crowd.

Following his hair being cut down, the King was quickly pushed into a prone position onto the tilting board. The lunette was closed over his neck, the release handle then was swiftly lifted, and the suspended angled blade fell. In a fraction of a second, blood sprayed and splashed from his body as his head fell into a basket, and King Louis XVI was no more.

For the time being, in the city of Chieti, about 1163 km from Paris, inside an adobe-structured convent where many abused and rejected women lived like nuns, the young maiden, Sarafina, lay on a straw mattress bed to give birth. The non-ordained nun was writhing in pain with puffy girlish sky-blue eyes on the sorrowful faces of the midwives, Sister Rita and Sister Verina. As Sarafina forced back her body forward, pushing as much as possible, the immense pressure of contractions on her small cervix felt like a

series of blows. Next to her, on the nightstand, a single candle glow of mutton tallow burned a rancid smell, making most of the cramped dormitory smoky and drab. The only other source of light was through a narrow open brick and a wooded window, which occasionally provided a brief burst of fresh air. From the window from time to time, the nuns would overhear the thunder of the Bourbon army's horses' hooves and soldiers' boots marching north through the wintry street of Chieti. The Kingdom of Naples was making a bold move with the Papal States in preparation for the outbreak of the French Revolution of its ideas of the Age of Enlightenment.

Later on, after some hours of labor, Sarafina had no strength to continue. At that point, the nuns were expecting a stillbirth because the child was too quiet in the womb. *If the bleeding doesn't stop soon, surely, she will die as well*, thought Sister Rita as she wiped the sweat with a moist cloth of herbal water from the girl's delicate, beautiful, adolescent-like face with flowing, fine flaxen hair.

Sister Verina rubbed her chocolate brown hair under her black veil, feeling a sense of panic. She came to the realization that the situation had become significantly worse and quickly pressed her fingers to her mouth; she then held her wooden cross from her necklace, kissed it, and whispered a prayer for mercy for the life of the girl.

Although both middle-aged nuns were used to witnessing motherly death and stillbirth, juvenile death was never something they would easily get over in time, especially with a favorite pupil like Sarafina. She was a very smart girl of sixteen with a vivacious personality and a remarkable memory, showing a keen interest in learning music. The nuns turned to each other, feeling terrified that the girl was about to die. "It's unfair that this is happening to her! It

was not right for her to be left alone with him!" Sister Rita said with a loud, fearful, and angry voice. "What happened to her at this convent should never have happened!"

"Shush! Sister Verina's words were alarming. "You well know that we are prohibited from talking about it," She whispered, as she added more antiseptic tonic of tart wine to the bowl on the nightstand.

"I pray that His Holiness in Rome will be made aware of this." Sister Rita went on.

"I doubt His Holiness has any idea how girls are treated here. Now stop talking about it. It's a possibility that *Don Monsignore's* acolyte waiting in the hall is listening.

"I don't care, to say the least, this is not acceptable or appropriate!" Sister Rita whispered."

"Don't go mentioning this to Mother Superior. She thinks that it is imperative for the church's good that we remain silent on this matter. Do you understand?"

Sister Rita gave Sister Verina a look of frustration, "Oh, sure," she murmured a retort and kissed her cross. "Oh Gesù, benevolent and loving, I beg you to have mercy on this girl!"

By now, Sarafina couldn't help herself but to stiffen and gasp, and clench tightly the wool sheet that covered the mattress. The middle of the bed was wet with a mixture of urine, herbal olive oil, tart wine, and blood. When she gasped again, trying to catch her breath in a 'whoosh' sound, another strong wave of pain shot through her pelvis and belly, spreading over to her delicate slim figure.

Suddenly, Mother Superior came into the room, and Sarafina's droopy, wide eyes moved straight to her, hoping she could do something. Upon seeing the girls' ashen-gray face and the dire look

of the Sisters, Mother Superior stood in stunned silence, while Sister Verina soaked up more tart wine on the rag to treat the broken wound of her small cervix.

"Hoy — !" Sarafina gasped again. A shrill scream then stuck in her throat as a painful sensation escaped from her body.

During that time, while pacing the hallway, Agapios Valentino waited with his hands clamped over his ears, as the horrible images of his old love, Zina, resurfaced with the piercing cries of the girl. Although he didn't want to be there, he was required by *Don Monsignore* to oversee the birthing process.

"Take hold. My child! Breathe ... push ... keep pushing!" Sister Rita begged, while she was getting ready to set a wool blanket in a straw basket. Hoping that she could give birth and be done with it. When Sarafina's shallow breath was heard, the nuns turned to each other in dismay, realizing that the condition of the girl had worsened. All Sarafina could do was shut tight her eyes while the gushing tears pressed themselves through her eyelids, running down her face. Immediately, Sarafina felt a feeling of lightness in her whole body and heaved a faint sigh. As more blood flowed out of her womb, she went silent as if stunned.

In the meantime, through the commotion, a blue-whitish head of her baby pressed forcibly onto the light of day. Sister Rita was overcome with emotion when she grasped the baby in her hands and quietly shook her head. When the room suddenly filled with baby screams, the nuns realized the baby was alive.

"It's a boy ... I suppose," Sister Rita said, oddly enough, expressing her confusion with the baby's ambiguous genitalia.

The placenta and its flow were rapidly removed as much as she could from the baby, and then Sister Rita placed him into the wool-blanket basket. While she continued to wipe away with warm water

the shiny white substance from the baby's flexible body, suddenly, her jaw dropped, her chestnut eyes bulged upon overlooking the odd-looking webbed hands and toes. Mesmerized in an appalled state, Sister Rita turned to Sister Verina and Mother Superior for an explanation.

Mother Superior gave a shocking stare at the baby and said: "Yes — it's a boy."

As for Sister Verina, she was unable to examine the deformity completely, for Sarafina's eyes crossed as if she were going unconscious. She was too busy stuffing the rag of tart wine into Sarafina's wound, hoping it would stop the bleeding.

Sister Rita shook her head, doubting what she saw and attempted to wipe the baby's frog-like, palish hands and feet to no avail. Her lips quivered as she said in a low voice: "Oh *madre di Dio*, look at the hands and feet—is this a monstrous birth?" She then raised the basket to show Mother Superior the baby's six digits, webbed hands, and feet.

Sister Verina looked in the basket, her blue eyes widening with fear at the sight of the baby. She didn't know what to make of him because he was thin, small, and as white as a ghost.

"Such a birth is an omen from God!" Mother Superior went on, trying to be optimistic and hoping that everything would turn out well.

"But ... my dear Mother, is this a good omen or a bad omen?" Questioned Sister Verina as she continued to care for the girl in desperation.

Mother Superior looked over both Sisters with a dreadful face, answering: "We are simply souls of beings. I'm afraid that we are too inexperienced to know such things. Mother Superior was aware that political self-interest and men with licentious behavior were out of control, but she felt too powerless with powerful men to take

matters into her own hands and do something about it. Besides, making known their behaviors could get them all killed. She then showed the nuns a hint of confidential understanding in her slate-gray eyes as she continued: “Unfortunately, we have to let His Grace know so that he can pray for his son.”

“He’s the cause of this mess...” Sister Rita mumbled irritably with a foot stomp.

“Silence!” Mother Superior said loudly. “God will judge him, not you!” She looked down and paused for a moment, then, with a stern gaze and a protective voice, she said to both of them: “You both have delivered babies out of wedlock multiple times before, and this time is no different when it comes to being discreet. As nuns, we serve *Gesù*; we follow His teachings. We won’t pass judgment on anyone; instead, our main focus is to nurture and pray for people’s salvation.

Sister Rita and Sister Verina both bowed their heads in submission and with their hands on their chests, nearly in a prayerful position. They took a profound breath as they were thought to do, saying with an unsympathetic expression: “Of course, Mother — in the name of *Gesù*!” At that moment, with those words, they were quickly reminded of the evil thoughts of illicit sex that sometimes occurred in the convent, making both nuns more stoic than they were.

As Sister Rita spoke to Mother Superior, a sudden facial twitch returned. “I believe His Grace’s acolyte is waiting in the Chapel. Should I go and get him?”

“In due time,” Mother Superior responded, “He was in the hallway when I came across him.”

“The nerve of him! He, not his acolyte, should be present here!” Sister Rita returned loudly to Mother Superior out of bitter

resentment due to her past experiences with men; it was known in the convent that she disliked them and everything they stood for.

Mother Superior ignored Sister Rita's ranting as she noticed Sarafina shivering with her eyes shut and taking irregularly shallow breaths. After whispering a prayer to herself and making the sign of the cross, Mother Superior turned to Sister Rita with sorrow and said: "You may ask the young men to enter the room." She then gazed at her sternly, "Sister — kindly keep your place."

As Sister Rita complied, the nuns then remained silent and stared at each other for a prolonged and agonizing moment, anxiously anticipating the girl's survival. While Sister Verina used a new cloth to treat Sarafina's hemorrhage, there was an eerie silence when she silently opened her eyes, and when the flush greenish and sallow appearance of her pretty face became evident to them, Mother Superior quickly told Sister Verina: "Sister, show her the baby."

Sister Verina quietly removed the baby from the basket and positioned him in Sarafina's view. When Sarafina took a look at her son, the nuns could feel the aura of love coming from her. As feeble as she was, Sarafina gently raised her right hand and went on to touch his small chest as if she was linking her soul with his. She whispered a trembling word: "Orlando!" Being one with her baby brought a smile to her face, and she felt like she was floating on air. A moment went by when she suddenly felt a hazy and euphoric sensation in her mind. She held her gaze at her son with bewitching eyes as if she was aware of something beyond her field of vision. Then, with a mysterious facial expression, she faded away with the angel's whispering light into the spirit world.

Chapter III



ESTRANGED LOVE

he unknown frightened *Don Monsignore*, and he usually managed panic groans with alcohol. But during these February days, the alcohol cure was making it worse, rather than better, and this evening he drank more than he should have. The Archbishop was a sixty-eight-year-old plump man whose previous position was at the *Basilica of Santa Chiara* in Naples before being transferred and taking control of the Diocese of Chieti two years ago. He was considered a favorite of the Bourbon king of Naples, *Ferdinando IV*, who had at times served in his chapel. He stood next to the canopy bed in his mansion's bedroom, surrounded by baroque furniture and Renaissance art. He was dressed in a white lace nightgown and pulled out his custom-built powder clergyman's bob periwig while contemplating his dilemma. Despite his disregard for having a malformed son, there was a need to do something before the toddler boy got older. *But what — should I have him eliminated?* he thought. *No, that would make me a villain and unpopular with the convent order.* According to what he was told, the boy was well-liked for his quiet, bright, and pleasant personality. He hoped that those in the convent who knew him to be the father of the illegitimate boy would accept his guilt; with that thought, his sentiments of the girl suddenly sparked his ego to explode again. He led out a sharp breath and whispered into the air: “*Oh, you demone of beauty—you trapped me — I rebuke you every day for my bastard son you have brought to this world!*” He perceived that

his intense and often irrational feelings of attachment, possessiveness, and jealousy towards the girl were a consequence of a malediction of Satan against him. Such perspective kept him sheltered and in control. Even though he considered having the boy killed, the fear of divine retribution was too strong for him to overcome. No matter how he dealt with the boy, he was certain that he needed to take immediate action in order to protect his reputation, as his pursuit of becoming a cardinal was not going to be hindered by anyone. *Don Monsignore* placed the periwig on the peruke stand located on the dresser as he brushed and rubbed off as much as possible the periwig powder on his sparse-haired head. “*Mannaggia* — itchy!” He muttered a complaint as he took a *fazzoletto* from his pocket and wiped more of his head. He then opened his bedsheet and took out a warm copper plate of ashes underneath his footrest. He cast the ashes into his urine chamber pot on the ground under the window. He then placed the plate on the nightstand, blew out the candles, and slid into his heated bed. With the cold weather in Chieti, not only was he numb from the cold, but he also felt drained from anxiety. He kept thinking anxiously, becoming more convinced that the new scientific theory of evolution, along with the new theory of enlightenment, with its individual liberty and religious tolerance, was a threat to Rome and all European kingdoms. *This conflict, if it persisted, could postpone my ambitions to become a cardinal and possibly a pope, or it could even ruin me completely.* The terrible news he had heard of the new general from Corsica caused his fear to become uncontrollable. With his French troops, *Napoleone di Buonaparte* was able to besiege the city of Toulon, resulting in a series of insurrections across France. *Under the new rulers of France, what will he conquer next: Rome?* He pondered, *and then, after Rome, will he then cease?* The triumph of the American

colonies during their revolution years ago was another mess that left him feeling deeply disturbed and worried. Now, he believed that a similar occurrence could take place in the Papal States alongside the Royalists of Europe. The rumbling of panic persisted, since he understood that by conquest, it was necessary to obey all the legitimate commands of the occupying power. He pondered further. *Now, it wouldn't surprise me at all if that stonzo general waged war with His Excellency, Pope Pius VI.*" He, as a close confidant of the King and as his former priest, believed that the situation could get worse for the monarch because of the French King's beheaded performance two years ago. *Yes, I do believe that it would be a smashing opportunity for this general to dominate certain European kingdoms.* He thought, his mouth twisting with distaste.

Furthermore, with the new wave of the plague sweeping the southern side of the Kingdom of Naples, the fear of the wrath of Satan taking over Chieti was unbearable. The years of superstitious medieval beliefs like Satan and sorcery being the cause of the plague had a profound impact on the public, causing all sorts of chaos. And because of fear, he reasoned that the tale told of his malformed son circulating the city had become an unwelcome reminder to the people of Chieti of what awaits them. And with the new plague spreading, there were wild rumors going around town that Satan had something to do with the little monster he brought into the world. *Don Monsignore* never wanted to see his secretive son and never has. Even though he tried to disregard him and sweep paranormal events aside, his fiery eyes of scorn for the boy were filled with fear because of the mystery surrounding his existence. He knew that the Mother Superior wouldn't welcome him into the convent, and since she kept his secret, he left her alone. Therefore, during those two years, he gave his acolyte the

responsibility of visiting and reporting the business details of the convent, as well as providing information about the boy when he wished. *If the French discover the identity of this boy, my good name will be ruined*, he thought. After a pause, *Don Monsignore* again analyzed his dilemma and reached a decision. *The boy must go before this ideology of independence makes it to Rome*, he thought. His former acolyte, who had just been ordained to the priesthood, came to mind. *Agapios will carry my wishes*. He then thought about a small church he had visited in the mountains. With his thoughts in mind, he stretched a little from his bed, and after a good moment, he breathed a sigh because he found a solution to his dilemma. *Chieti will soon forget about this*, he figured. Swarmed with thoughts like bees in a honeycomb and giving too much thought to what people thought of him, *Don Monsignore's* inability to sleep eventually caught up with him, and he drifted off to sleep.



The afternoon of the following day was warmer outside, and the snow fell down with a soft and sticky feel than the day before. In the Sacristy room of the cathedral, covered in a heavy wool purple robe, the *Monsignore* waited for his former acolyte to discuss the young man's future priesthood plans. He sat alone in a *Rococo* chair and briefly rubbed his plumped red hangover face. He wore a white cassock, a white curled periwig, with his purple robe of authority while working on the desk to navigate his situation with his son. He picked up a silver goblet of rich wine and drank a good mouthful before putting his quill pen to paper to work. Hoping that it would quell his headache. His face squirmed a little after signing the order of 'Inbarnation of a New Priest Parish.' He took his goblet with hesitation and moved it close to his mouth and thought, *"There you are, my fine servant Agapios Valentino— now you are a pastor."*

He thought as he finished signing. *Though I'm not pleased to see you go, however, you have gotten what you have been praying for.* Then, he shook his head back and forth, murmuring to himself, "Although it's the right decision, I still find it awful to see you leave." He paused and thought it over. *Well, for now, I'll let him go until this is sorted out.* And he dismissed the thought because he couldn't bear to think of losing someone he was so dependent on.

In the meantime, under the doorway awning of the Cathedral, Padre Valentino stomped away the sticky snow from his green velvet latched-tie shoes and shook off the remaining snow from his black cassock robe before entering inside the heavy doors. The change caused by his priesthood prevented him from returning to his former self, as the authority and power bestowed upon him by God gave him a sense of independence. He entered the Cathedral through its large wooden doors with his head held high, proud of his seminary education, which was inspired by Greek philosophy. Inside the narthex area of the Cathedral, Padre Valentino quickly removed his biretta and straightened his white clerical collar. He was gripped by suspense as he smoothly ran his fingers through his black wavy hair, and then he put back his biretta on his head and hurried across the white marble floor and went straight to the Sacristy room. As he walked, he wondered if *Don Monsignore* had actually given him the responsibility of pastoring a church, as he had mentioned during seminary. *Oh, dear Gesù, let it be so!* He thought. With a cross sign in his hand, he then gazed down the nave at the mostly nude Jesus on the cross behind the altar with a whispered promise: "I will do my utmost to become your priest." As he hurried into the nave of the cathedral, his tall and slender body, like a beanstalk, became increasingly tense in expectation of knowing if he was the chosen one.

It must be so, he thought. Then *why would he make me a priest?* *He was so desperate to change his life for the better that such thought overwhelmed him.* On the day before, he had learned about a parish opening due to the sudden, unexplained death of a middle-aged priest. What was exciting about it was that the church was located in a different region in the Kingdom. *But where?* He had no clue. *It seemed more likely that someone else from the diocese was the one.* He thought. After all, he was quite young, inexperienced, and even though with all the years of service and fealty to the Archbishop, perhaps at his age of twenty-five years old, it was more likely that he would be serving as a clergy member here in Chieti. He dismissed the notion of skepticism, maintaining his fantasy, for the moving away was music to his ears. He had always wanted to escape Chieti since he was a child. He craved something fresh in his life, a break from the routine of serving the *Don Monsignore*: a freedom of a no-strings-attachment relationship to a narcissistic paternal figure.

When he reached the oak door of the Sacristy room, Padre Valentino took a deep breath and then struck softly on the door.

"Is that you, Agapios?" called the *Don Monsignore*, holding a goblet in his hand, and then took a sip of wine.

"Yes, your Grace."

"Come-come my son," his enthusiastic voice was loud and welcoming in a manner that was in accordance with church protocol. "We have much to discuss."

Padre Valentino entered the room and slowly raised his gaze to the *Don Monsignore*. When he approached the table, he bowed and kissed his right hand in the usual manner. "Your Grace, you have summoned me? May I ask what this is about?"

The Archbishop smiled curiously and placed his goblet on the table, aware that the priest appeared timid and impatient. He then put on a genuine grin, answering: "Oh come now, I'm sure you know the reason why I summon you."

Padre Valentino blinked and gazed at *Don Monsignore* with wide ebony eyes and acknowledged him by saying: "Well... yes, your Grace, I have heard rumors about a pastor of a parish position."

"Of course you have, the news of the pastor Padre Luno's passing is absolutely heartbreaking to all who knew him here in Chieti." *Don Monsignore* said sweetly but sternly with a sign of the cross. "He is in the presence of our Savior now. Amen."

"Amen." Padre Valentino followed with the sign of the cross, trying hard to be respectful, but he didn't know him and felt no connection to the name.

Don Monsignore then glanced at the priest and offered him comfort. "Come and have a seat, son." As Padre Valentino sat there, the Archbishop poured a goblet of wine from a vase and then passed it to him.

"Thank you, your Grace." Padre Valentino said as he took the goblet, showing a small gesture smile of gratitude.

Don Monsignore raised his goblet and toasted: "To our health, in Gesù name!"

"*Con buon salute* your Grace, in the name of *Gesù*!"

After a mouthful or two, while getting his thoughts together, *Don Monsignore* cleared his throat and said in a solemn voice: "Well, let's get to it!" He then voiced in a tone of church business: "Now that you have become a priest

and have sworn fealty to God as I have, I summon you here to inform you that I'm assigning you as a pastor to run the parish of St. Stefano church in Turri. He looked down momentarily, ignoring the delight on the priest's face and the sparkle in his eyes.

"Turri ... why, I am not familiar with this village?"

"Not many do — it's a quaint little village, nestled away in the distant mountains."

"Turri?" Padre Valentino suddenly thought and asked: "But, in what region...?"

"The village is a part of the fief land of the Valignani family." *Don Monsignore* said with a chuckle: "This discreet little village has a small, quaint church about a good hour or so's walk from the *Cappuccini* Order in the village of Manoppello."

Padre Valentino silently nodded, gesturing gratitude for giving him a chance to pastor a church, no matter how small.

"Oh, my good Agapios, I have practically raised you as my son! We have been together serving this Cathedral for a long time. Ah, where has the time gone?"

Frozen in awe, Padre Valentino kept his silence as he acknowledged the Archbishop every word.

"Well now it's sad to say that you're leaving."

"I will do my very best..."

"Yes-yes of course you shall, " *Don Monsignore* interrupted, "I'm proud to say that I have taught you well and that you, as a priest, will be a source of inspiration for many others." *Don Monsignore* gave him a proud expression and continued, "It's not easy for me to let you go! All the

same, I will release you, because everything has its end; Since you're prepared and ready to move on to serve the *Signore's* work, with the Holy Spirit guiding you."

The words of recognition caused Padre Valentino to shake his head with joy. He then drew in a breath and said: "Oh — Amen, your Grace, I am grateful beyond words." He gave *Don Monsignore* a genuine smile and a bow of respect. "In the name of *Gesù*, *I will serve this village and I will make every effort to serve the parish in accordance with your holy teachings.*"

"Then you shall, my son. I trust you with all the confidence of the world that you will serve the *Signore* faithfully, as you did with me." Says *Don Monsignore* with an agreeable look on his face.

"Thank you, your Grace."

The two sealed their words with a nod, followed by a sign of the cross, and then a sip of wine. After *Don Monsignore* emptied his goblet, he pondered his next words thoroughly before he went on saying: "It's fortunate that you have enough time to flee from this town that's on the verge of being affected by the plague, and it would be advantageous for you to reside in the higher mountains." He looked at the priest in the eye, looking for something the priest might say, perhaps an indication that he figured out what he was thinking. "I am concerned that the plague gossip that is happening in our community is leading to ungodly foolish superstitions, such as the frightful gossip about a demonic boy." He scratched an itch under his periwig, adding: "This boy, who lacks a family to turn to, is

entitled to the chance to lead a normal life with a family and avoid threats from those who believe in superstitions.”

Knowing that *Don Monsignore* was talking about his son, Padre Valentino avoided his gaze to avoid offending him. “You’re referring to the one in the convent, aren’t you?” He questioned, pretending to have no idea who the boy’s father was, because it was considered heresy to talk about it. Although Padre Valentino viewed himself as a considerate person, he was not foolish, as he fully understood the power held by the Archbishop.

“Correct. My intention is to grant him the chance to live in a private location without him ever learning about his past. Is that understood, Agapios?” *Don Monsignore* spoke authoritatively.

Despite his disagreement, Padre Valentino slowly nodded in acknowledgment. “Demonic — Orlando? From what I have known, the boy is quite bright and doing exceptionally well in his manners at the convent.” Padre Valentino said protectively, for he held a special connection with orphans, having been one himself. He gulped to hold back his emotion and added: “Your Grace, I know no such thing of the boy; he is a gentle boy and the Sisters seem to be taking good care of him. He would do well living in the convent!”

“Up to this point, it has been good, but with the revolutionary changes taking place in Rome and the rest of Europe, it’s not safe for such an unusual boy to be raised in convents. I’m concerned...” He paused to articulate his thoughts and went on... “from what I’ve heard from the north, where malformed people are being killed, it would

be better for the boy to accompany you and be adopted by some peasant family in a remote region of the mountains.”

Padre Valentino’s mouth dropped, “But, your Grace, you know full well that I have no experience with children.”

“This boy was orphaned just like you and I know enough that you care about him, otherwise, you wouldn’t have taken issue with my not visiting.”

“Because he’s your son?”

“Enough!” *Don Monsignore* narrowed his eyes warningly at the priest. “You well know there is a belief among many that malformed individuals are the work of Satan, not God.”

Padre Valentino’s eyes widened, recalling his past, and he focuses his gaze on the Archbishop, feeling compassion for the boy. He said: “God knows I was only trying to help you, your Grace.”

“Which is why I’m granting you clemency.”

“Knowing the boy as I do, I find it hard to believe that he is demonic.” Padre Valentino said, mindful of the boy.

“Yes, of course you do, which is why I want him to leave with you before anything serious happens to him.”

Padre Valentino didn’t know what to say. He was stunned. Even so, he immediately sensed that *Don Monsignore* cared enough about his son to protect him.

Don Monsignore went on talking: “You make him holy for me, whether he be a brother or a priest.”

Padre Valentino nodded and said in a sympathetic way. “All children belong to Gesù, not Satan, and this boy is no exception. We must have faith that the purpose of his strange birth was to display the works of God in him.”

The Archbishop paused briefly for the thought of the priest’s words, and then he reluctantly forged a smile, demonstrating a

pleasant understanding. "Indeed, all children belong to Gesù!" He thought more before proceeding: "I have to tell you, my son, of what I have always admired about you. It's your gentleness; your obedience; and most all your fairy-minded disposition."

Padre Valentino bowed boldly, saying: "I am an instrument of the living God, and my life is a melody to his name."

Don Monsignore nodded and looked away as he accepted the priest's words. "You are a good man, Valentino, much better than I ever will be." He then looked up straight at his eyes with a very queer look on his rosacea-stricken face and said in a low voice: "Then everything is fine with you taking the boy and having him adopted?" He remained silent for a moment as he stared at the priest's gentle eyes with a perplexed expression.

"Yes, your Grace, if God wills, I could take Orlando with me and give him a saintly life."

Don Monsignore smiled and said: "Of course, *Santo Stefano* will be pleased with you as I'm with you!"

At those words, they got up from the chair and then they gave themselves a hug, and Padre Valentino kissed *Don Monsignore's* hand goodbye.

"Call him something other than Orlando — do make him holy!" Said *Don Monsignore* as Padre Valentino was leaving the room.

Padre Valentino had no words to say; he had no alternative. He felt that hiding the boy up in the mountains to a remote village was another obligation he had to fulfill for *Don Monsignore*. The only exception to that obligation of care was that the boy's name would remain unchanged, because just like him, it was given by his mother. For now, all he can do is hope that he can take on the responsibility of finding the right family for the boy. In his heart, in

a mysterious way, Padre Valentino felt good about accepting the challenge.

Chapter IV



The DEMISE of ONE'S HUMANITY

Even with the sweet fragrance of April blossoms carried by the gentle wind and the pleasant warm weather, the Austrian baker, Narcyz Belgia, ignored it. Since his avenging obsession of finally killing the enormous wild boar was over, the chase drove him farther than he wanted to go, and with so much work waiting for him, the trip home was too long and unpleasant, for there were hardtack biscuits waiting to be baked in his bakery house for the Bourbon Army of Naples.

He and his nine-year-old titian-haired son, Desi, trudged along the mountainous terrain in their black and brown peasant outfit and Bavarian alpine hat. The pale moon behind them shone faintly and quietly, becoming known beneath the cliffs that stretch along the coast of the Adriatic Sea. Along with his son, the exhausted white and speckled gray mare donkey carried a hefty carcass, and it moved behind its owner in a slow and feeble rhythm, climbing the steep dirt road, hours from the town of Manoppello. Strapped to his back, Narcyz carried a rare firearm, a *Girardoni* air rifle, and a dagger fastened on his hip. The leather kit bag that contained two additional shoulder stock air reservoirs, a pump system, and speed loaders was attached to Desi's right side of the donkey. Ahead of them, two brown and white *Spinone* dogs quietly patrolled through the swelling greenery of *Montepulciano* grapevine buds, occasionally stopping to scent for prey. When Narcyz turned to the corner of the road, it allowed him to see the top of the Roman tower of

Turri emerging slowly between the ground of rocks, bushes, and trees. The tower stood up on the ridge of the hill, and upon Narcyz's view of it, he knew it would be late evening before arriving home. He just kept hiking, being more angry than tired, angry at being at this distance. At times, he would turn to the carcass and yell at it some vulgarity. "*Pezzo di merda!* You cursed me — put me behind my work — but you're dead now, boar—dead as hell!" With that wail: "*Cazzo!*" He went on to mumble more vulgarity.

Meanwhile, Desi led the donkey silently, ignoring his robust father for he was accustomed to his angry outbursts. As a young incarnation of his father, he reflected his father's control and manipulation traits, and like his father, he could be unpredictable at times.

At the age of twenty-eight, Narcyz was quite capable of hiking the mountain height for a long period of hours. His experience as a marksman during the battles in the Swiss Alps against the French had left him physically tough, cynical, and pessimistic. The destruction of his home and family bakery in Vorarlberg, along with the loss of his friends and relatives, especially his brother Leopold and wife Greta, caused him to thirst for vengeance, which caused him to lose his humanity and become consumed by darkness. From that point onward, he was no longer the person he had been before, and he vowed to assassinate the Commander General who had invaded his home: *Napoleone di Buonaparte*. Narcyz would often brag to his surviving son about being the best shooter in the Austrians Tyrolese unit, and pride himself on hitting a target one hundred and fifty meters away with his unique rippling barrel air-compressed rifle. He saw his son as his natural successor, the

one who would carry out his vengeance against the general if he failed.

As Desi rode the donkey, his thigh and buttocks could feel the body of the animal trembling from exhaustion. After hours of pushing itself too hard and with all the weight on it, the donkey barely had any strength left to continue, and since its father was being quite stern with the animal, it feared the donkey would fall down on the steep hill and take him with it. When Desi attempted to mention the worn-out donkey, Narcyz stopped him with a hand gesture. Upon noticing the dogs were motionless and vigilant, he then gave the dogs a hard look with his sharp coal eyes to see what they were sensing. He raised an eyebrow and smirked instantly when he saw the dogs pointing at a movement behind a massive, yellow-flowered bay leaf tree. He then looked through the moving branches with a wild predator's face poised to kill. Narcyz stroked his long rusted beard as he anticipated an animal size of a pheasant or a hare, and for a good moment, he allowed the dogs to watch and sniff the cast shadow image. Seeing the hunting instinct of the dogs coming through, Narcyz removed his rifle from his back. He then put his hand on his mouth and waved to his son to be quiet and keep still the donkey. "We shall eat well tonight!" He softly muttered to himself as he waved to his son to get off and be ready to give him ammunition.

Desi then gradually descended from the donkey and quietly pulled out a tubular speed loader that held twenty 46-caliber lead balls from the bag.

At once, Narcyz pushed the rifle's loading bar over, allowing the lead ball to enter the firing range. He carefully cocked the hammer and with the rifle on his shoulder, he pointed it towards the moving shadow. After noticing what he believed was an animal, he

squeezed the trigger, releasing compressed air. A mechanical clang sound emanated from it, unlike the loud crackling sound of a musket, and the dogs ran up to the prey.

Mystified, Narcyz was quick to call the dogs when he saw a ghost of a boy still standing. It was even more surprising when he saw that the boy was curiously looking at him as if he were a playmate. As he gave the boy a good look over, ensuring that he wasn't injured, Narcyz's face then scrunched up in a pout. *What is this?* he thought. He looked on with an open mouth at the strange-looking kid in his brown frock and red Phrygian cap. For a well-trained Tirolese marksman, the shot was effortless, and he couldn't have missed it. *He couldn't have dodged the shot — not a chance!* He thought. He examined the boy more closely for a shotgun wound, but there was no evidence of one; his eyebrows suddenly raised, and his face twisted with disgust when he realized the boy was malformed. *Che cazzo, I've never missed a shot — cant be — It was a very close shot,* he thought. After a second pause, Narcyz dismissed the boy after surmising that it was quite a lucky move on his part. He then quickly swung his rifle over his arm and motioned the dogs to keep away from the bizarre creature. “*Imbecile!*” he shouted at him angrily in a heavy Alemannic accent.

“I am Orlando, and what are your names?” asked the slim, flexible, muscular four-year-old boy; his clear, deep, and vivid purple-pink eyes were brilliant and piercing, leaving Narcyz baffled while Desi couldn't stop laughing. His skin was smooth as a baby's and pale with no hint of color. As a light breeze moved his long, snow-white hair, the boy laughed when he didn't get the answer, making him appear as a ghost. “Ah-ah — you missed me!” he said 'playfully' as he went in and out behind the massive tree, embracing

nature as his friend. He was a boy who found excitement and wonder in every aspect of nature.

Narczyz gave the creature a bewildered look in front of the bay tree. *What is this ... a dwarf?* He thought. As he looked again, he came to the realization that he was an albino. *What ... an albino kid?* He guessed. He heard about an albino individual, but had never seen one in the flesh. He then shouted again. "Are you looking to die, you little *merda*?" He wanted an answer, but he saw the boy watching him as if nothing had happened.

"Catch me if you can!" The boy yelled, encouraging him to play hide-and-seek with him. He then took off back behind the tree.

Narczyz quickly turned to Desi, uttering: "What an imbecile! But what's wrong with this little *stronzo*?"

Desi was too engrossed in laughter. He just had an amusing look on his face. "I saw the creepy kid before from a distance in Manoppello." He said with more laughter.

"What an idiot ... he should be old enough to know better not to travel afar!" Narczyz said with a disdainful voice. On the spur of the moment, he and his son heard a cry echoing in the distance of the hillside.

"Oh, my dear Gesù, mercy, may he not be killed!" The man lamented.

Narczyz and Desi then turned and looked over their shoulder at the screamer approaching: a tall young man in a linen brown tunic, gray leggings, and leather latchet-tie shoes was frantically running down the road in an urgent cry. Desi became amused and turned to his father, recalling what he had seen with the maidservant. "He must be the priest's kid." He said, somewhat hesitantly.

"What are you talking about—the priest's kid?"

“Aquilina and I saw him in Manoppello Square.”

“You and that *choocha* know this brat?”

“No — but someone at the square pointed at the kid and said that he was the boy's priest from Turri. According to what we were told, he has six fingers and toes.” Desi replied; his hazelnut eyes were amusing as he observed his father's reaction.

“*Che cazzo* is he — a devilish *bastardo*?” Narcyz asked disturbingly, having never heard of such a thing.

Desi chuckled, “You heard me, *Papá* — he's the priest's kid with six fingers and toes!”

Narcyz pointed to the man running down the road,

“*Mannaggia!* But he's not dressed like a priest?” Desi said nothing as he neared up closer to the donkey, knowing his father's short temper well enough to stay out of his way.

Narcyz looks towards the bay tree and scowls a little, indicating a sense of luck that he didn't kill the boy. Being the shooter who brought down the French General Marceau in Altenkirchen on the Lahn river last September, and having been discovered by a spy which caused him to promptly relocate down south under the wings of an Austrian ally, he sought no trouble with a priest, to say nothing of the Papacy, for he wanted to be shielded from the French military. Therefore, he recently paid homage to the '*Signore*', or the Lord of the manor, who oversaw the military's bakery workshop on the fiefdom land near Manoppello. He turned around and confronted the agitated man like an attentive veteran and silently watched the man approaching him. Despite his wish to be alone and avoid social interaction, it proved to be impractical.

Distraught by anguish, Padre Valentino looked at the rugged, brawny, unknown, rusty-haired man with thick hands as if he was a monster. His heart pounded as he stared at the unusual weapon,

licking his lips, and then gazed at Narcyz's coal-tortured eyes, asking: "My Orlando ... why ...you ... you killed him!"

Immediately, Narcyz backed away on guard, only standing down after realizing the man was harmless. He stared at him and asked: "Stand down, I don't know you?"

As he regained his breath, Padre Valentino looked at the strange firearm and cried out: "I am a priest. You shot my godson — why?"

Narcyz raised his hand and gave a soft bow to the priest and with a sigh, he pointed to the tree, answering: "No-no Padre, look ... just look there ... he's behind that tree."

Padre Valentino then gazed at the tree and saw a shadow in motion. "Is he injured?" He asked, not able to rely on the blurred vision of his left eye.

"Padre, he's fine." Narcyz answered with an apologetic tone in his voice and a pleasant manner, as his aim was to calm the priest.

Padre Valentino then raised an eyebrow, since the man's accent was not local, and a sense of wariness came to his mind. However, given that it was common to encounter foreigners at the time, particularly during wartime, he didn't inquire about the man's homeland because his godson needed immediate attention. He quickly lifted his monocle, which was suspended from his neck by a leather necklace, screwed it into his eye, and called: "Orlando!"

"Catch me if you can, Padrino!"

When Padre Valentino was certain that his godson was not hurt, he rubbed his face and shook his head, uttering: "Gesù, *have mercy!*" He then turned to Narcyz and his son, saying: "Good God, I thought you killed him!" He took another moment to catch more of his breath before introducing himself: "I am Padre Valentino, the new pastor of the church of *Santo Stefano*." After a moment of a

breather, when his heart rate normalized, he then took another look at the man and his boy and said: "I apologize for my hysteria."

"No-no Padre, it is I who should apologize." Narcyz said softly. "I'm called Narcyz."

"Sorry to meet you in these circumstances." Padre Valentino said and gave him a small bow. He then turned to the young fellow and asked: "And you, my son?"

Desi turned to his father for approval before answering, and once he received permission from his eyes, he said proudly: "Désirée, but everyone calls me Desi."

"Well, please to meet you both. Now, do pardon me," Padre Valentino respectfully said and then looked over to the bay tree with a petulant shake of his head and yelled, "Orlando, you must learn to stop wandering off like this!" Then he walked towards the tree. As he got closer, he could see clearly some of his godson's thin, flexible legs in between the lower branches. "I can see you, Orlando, come out?" He went on yelling, "Good God, why on earth are you disappearing without telling me?"

"Why don't you ever play with me?" Orlando asked playfully, encouraging his godfather to spend time with him.

"I've mentioned to you before that I'm too busy for this, and right now you're being a nuisance."

Meanwhile, Narcyz and Desi, along with the donkey, followed the priest. They smiled with amusement and had sickening thoughts on their minds as they were looking for a good beating for the boy. Narcyz then said, "Padre, this kid needs a good spanking to force the evil out of him." And he and his son went on to make an ironic laugh.

Padre Valentino overlooked Narcyz's remark and went on walking toward the tree, yelling, "Orlando, I demand that you come out now and show yourself?"

At that said, Orlando showed up from the tree. He was perplexed by what *Padrino* had asked of him. He flapped his hands because he didn't like what he didn't understand.

Nobody's playing with me here, not even you, *Padrino*? I was hoping to play with someone as I did in the Convent." He glared petulantly, crossing his arms over his chest defensively. His purple-pink eyes sparkled like sunshine, full of courage and truth through his ivory face and hair as he went on: "I don't like it here — can I go back to the convent?" The nuns always played with me."

Knowing that his godson was the adorable child of the kind-hearted motherly nuns in the convent, Padre Valentino put on a brave face and composed himself. He closed his eyes momentarily and politely ignored the boy's silly question. He bowed his head respectfully and whispered a prayer with a soft, soothing voice: "My dear Gesù, give me the patience to overcome these small annoyances from this child!" He then hurried towards the perplexed godson and held him in a loving manner and gently shook him. He said to him in a restless voice: "You worry me so! How in heavens did you manage to come down here?"

Orlando pointed towards the steep hillside with rocks embedded under the Roman tower, saying: "Over there — I got down from there."

Padre Valentino turned to the steep hill and then to his godson, astonishingly, and blurted out: "What are you, an Alpine ibex?" His impulsive remark caused him to unexpectedly chuckle. Nonetheless, he shook his head, almost regretfully, as if to ask: "What am I going to do with you?" And then he sternly glared at

him while lamenting: "Climbing down that hill was dangerous with all the loose rocks. You could have slipped and fallen and gotten yourself killed." Upon seeing his godson remain still and attentively waiting for an answer about his return to living in the Convent, Padre Valentino looked again into his eyes, sighed profoundly, and said to him: "I told you before why you can't return to the Convent. God has given us a mission to serve this village and create a better church." He sighed once more, scratching his head under his tricorn hat. "Listen, son, we are a family now. I am planning to start a *catechism* class soon, just like the one there in the Convent, so give it more time, for goodness' sake." He then smiled brightly, adding: "And so you'll be among families and have lots of friends to play with!"

Orlando gave it a good thought about what his *Padrino* was saying and, knowing no wrong in the world, he kissed his own hands for forgiveness while looking at the priest with a genuinely curious face. After the persuasive explanation, Orlando looked around and then pointed to the bay tree, divulging: "The sweet-smelling tree called me to play, and I came down because the tree shows me things."

Padre Valentino shook his head and explained with a concerned voice: "Do you know that vipers and dangerous animals are present in this area?"

"But I have no one to play with, and the tree wanted to play with me." He said as if the tree were a friend.

Listening to Orlando's answer, Padre Valentino then circumvented his behavior by moving on to another concern: the boy's lack of fear. "Your imagination is impressive! But I must say that you are getting too curious for a four-year-old—much too curious." Then he stared closely at his godson and spoke with a

teacher's voice: "You know, there's a danger of going off on your own. Do you know that you were shot? Thank goodness you didn't get killed!"

"Killed? What do you mean killed?" Orlando asked, looking totally confused.

"That's right, killed, such as what happened to your pet robin with the cat."

Orlando experienced a brief moment of sadness as he remembered the loss of his bird. Meanwhile, a few feet behind, Narcyz watched the foolishness of the priest unfold, for he was flabbergasted by the leniency towards the boy. He wanted to ask the boy how he managed to avoid the shot, but he did not say anything, because he wasn't about to interpose in the amusing spectacle. He simply rested and looked at the interaction of the two with his godson.

After becoming aware of what it meant to be killed, Orlando displayed his understanding by raising his apologetic eyes to his *Padrino*, saying: "Sorry, *Padrino*, I shall not go on my own anymore."

"Very well then! You are so fortunate that he missed you?"

"Something moved me."

Padre Valentino was impressed at the child's sensibility despite his young age. "That something was Gesù who wants you to live," he said with a voice of fealty to god. He took a pause in thought and then said: "Orlando, I want you to understand what happened to you today was a miracle; therefore, when we leave here, we will go to the altar and pray for gratitude — for not doing something that happened to your bird." He smiled and added: "You understand what I am saying?" His eyes filled with serenity as he looked at his godson, expecting a favorable answer.

Orlando's eyes suddenly gleamed with a smile as he held Padre Valentino firmly and answered: "Yes, I believe I do!"

"Very well then," Padre Valentino held him tight as he went on saying: "All right then, we'll have none of this anymore."

Narcyza raised his eyebrow over the kid's senseless treatment. He concealed his smirk by turning away to Desi, where her son was at a short distance, sitting on a rock next to the donkey, and with a firm eye he raised his hand signaling to get on the donkey for he wanted to get going, for he was spending too much time with the priest. Narcyza then made a few steps towards the priest and suddenly extinguished a slight smile of gratitude, "He is a quite lucky kid, Padre?" He said in a respectful voice, while composing himself from losing ammunition. He stroked his rusty beard twice, showing a thoughtful look, and then frowned. "You know, I rarely miss."

"Thank goodness — it was a miracle," Padre Valentino said with an exhaled sigh.

"Apparently so," Narcyza remarked blandly, as he had lost faith in miracles. He then excused himself with a small head bow of farewell and started walking back to his son.

"Wait!" said Padre Valentino and walked with him with his godson in his arms.

Narcyza signaled with his hands to the priest that he was late getting home. He whistled to his dogs, who were lying close to each other under the bay tree, and quickly the dogs rushed behind him. Upon reaching his son, he used his eyes to indicate that they were leaving. As Narcyza made his way to leave, Padre Valentino then tightened Orlando in his arms and followed suit. He inquired: "Narcyza, may I ask, in what village do you live?"

Narczyz then reasoned that he better satisfied the priest's curiosity, for he reminded himself that even though the priest was young and a *stronzo*, he still carried a weight of authority in the region and that he was still a stranger biscuit baker. Nevertheless, his waist of time there could be useful since he discovered the meek weakness of the priest, and believed he could exploit it; since the priest being needlessly much too lenient and gentler with the kid was quite revealing of his character. He twisted over his shoulder and answered: "I'm the new baker for the army of Naples and I live in the lower hills of Manoppello, close by Chieti." During their walk, the dogs and donkey with Desi followed them along. Narczyz then looked up to the priest, curious of his attire, asking: "With all respect Padre, I wasn't aware you were a priest when I first saw you?"

Padre Valentino glanced at his peasant clothes. "Oh — I see, I am afraid under Rome's new rule, I was ordered not to wear my clergy uniform outside my church." He answered with a retractable sigh. "Apparently it's the *Napoleone*'s new code of law to Rome."

Narczyz raised an eyebrow, realizing that *Napoleone*, whom he despised, must be succeeding so far with his plans of world domination, and he understood that with Rome under his control, likely a war against the Kingdom of Naples was next on his list. "I didn't know about the new law," he said with a forced calmness that did nothing to lift his spirits, showing his disappointment at the French win with the Papacy. Thus far, his refuge under the shadow of King *Ferdinando* was both discreet and friendly with the locals. Narczyz kept studying the priest, and he patiently waited for an explanation of the strange-looking kid. But the priest went on with his own questions.

"Your dialect, Narcyz, obvious it is not of Manoppello?" asked Padre Valentino, highlighting his curious eyes towards him. "Austrian, I suppose?" He then sat Orlando onto his shoulders as they continued walking together up the road.

"Yes, Padre, I arrived here from Vorarlberg several months ago, after the invasion of Limburg by that bandit *Napoleone*." He said in a soft, vengeful voice in consideration of his twin brother who died fighting with the Imperial Austrian Army. The thought of the invasion brought back torment, and he quickly changed the subject before losing his temper. He pointed to the boar tied to the donkey's back, saying in a satisfied manner: "You know, I have chased this beast this far out from my region because he's been eating my milled flour in the storage, and I would not give it up by killing it for anything." He smiled away the wrath, adding: "The hind legs will make a good prosciutto, won't they?" Then he laughed. A strong laugh, sending shockwaves rippling through his husky body.

Padre Valentino laughed with him, showing his bright agreeable manner, then reached out and shook hands while walking. "Despite the strange circumstances, I must say I am pleased to meet you, Narcyz."

Narcyz shook his head in an agreeable and cooperative manner. "It's good to meet you both." He said with just a trace of a smirk, covered his lips, while concealing his blazing wrathful eyes with a still and calm demeanor. As an egocentric social climber, he was able to manipulate situations or people to achieve his objectives, often using strategic or cunning methods.

"You say your home is not far from Chieti, Eh?"

"Like an hour or so away."

"Well, I was practically raised in Chieti," Padre Valentino said modestly. "Actually, I was there just last month." He made a sign of the cross. "I was obligated to go to *Don Monsignore's* funeral. May God grant him peace." He then looked at Narcyz curiously. "Do you know anyone there?"

"No one — I was there only once, but I never went back." Narcyz was careful to answer and smiled. He paused and then thought it over before continuing: "I was there as an allied veteran only to declare an oath of fealty to the Minister of War for our King *Ferdinando IV*. I was granted land and a bakery operation for my service for His Excellency."

"May I ask what service?"

"I'm only permitted to tell you, Padre, that I served as a soldier in the Austrian army." He showed the priest a reluctant grin, sweeping it as though it were nothing. "Let's just continue walking."

"As you are aware, as a priest, I keep the seal of confession and if there are sins to be purged, I can assist you in church with a confession."

"No-no Padre, I don't consider seeking asylum by an ally to be sinful. The actions I have taken and those I must take to avenge my Emperor, Rome, and this Kingdom are solely for my son and myself." Narcyz said coldly and low. He then looked around to see if anybody was hiding, because he didn't want anyone to know what he was about to tell the priest. "However, Padre, I'll tell you this since you're a priest and *Napoleone* is our enemy, this *mascalzone* will not stop until he controls every kingdom in Europe. Anyway, he must be stopped." He paused wondering if he should go on and after a moment of thought he continued: "I can only tell you that I fulfilled my fealty to Emperor *Franz II* by fighting for the Austrian

Imperial Army against the French, and I am now safeguarded by the Naples' Minister of War."

"Oh My!" Padre Valentino was unsure of what to say because he believed that war was an evil of Satan that should be avoided at all costs. "These territorial wars fought over kingdoms and colonies have been going on too long. He changed the subject by raising his head up to look at his godson who was sitting on his shoulders, saying: "His name is Orlando and he is my little treasure!" He said giving the boy a big smile "Now—go on, do say hello, Orlando?"

Little treasure? Ah ... how foolish! Narcyz couldn't help the thought. The boy's white skin reminded him of a leftover soldier killed in battle.

Orlando could feel down to his toes the creeping of doom, a wolf's circle, the hover of a vulture when he looked at Narcyz's face. "But *Padrino*, he wants to kill me?"

"No! How can you say such a thing?" Padre Valentino then shot an apologetic glance in Narcyz's direction. He twisted his head to his godson, explaining: "That was an accident, not a killing. Now, say hello and please do apologize?"

Narcyz felt nothing for the albino boy, which reminded him of a maggot. He viewed him as something other than human, more like an animal in the woods. *How the hell could I miss the shot at such a close distance?* He thought, for it still puzzled him.

"Sorry, sir!" Orlando said as he waved 'hello'.

Narcyz turned to the priest and held a hand to say, 'it's all right'. He glanced at Orlando like he would a bratty boy, "I'm not being disrespectful, but he has a lot of learning to do with obedience."

"And so he shall, with God's grace," Padre Valentino said solemnly, as they began to step on ancient Roman granite stones, closing in on the church.

Narcyz smiled agreeably, saying: "Of course, with God's grace!" They kept their conversation going until they came to the center of the Square, which was between the church and the Roman tower.

Then when there was nothing else to be said, Padre Valentino took his godson off his shoulders onto the floor and in his lively manner, he pointed to the church with an invitation: "Narcyz, you can come inside and relax all you want?"

Suddenly, they heard a rattle from a *Chianina* oxen pulling a cart along the hillside road. Padre Valentino looked on, saying: "Ah, my good neighbor is returning from sowing wheat, would you like to meet him?" The peasant man with a navy tricorn hat was Dante Belvedere, who lived across the street from the church and was becoming Padre Valentino's reliable friend.

"No-no, Padre, I'm going home late enough and I must say *arrivederci*."

"Well then, take care of yourself, Narcyz! Tonight, I will pray for you and for your welfare." He looked at Desi and then back to Narcyz, saying with a blessing sign with his hand: "*Arrivederci*, all my blessings to you and your family!"

Both Narcyz and Desi bowed in respect and gratitude. With that, Narcyz resorted to one tiny smile as if to say goodbye.

And just as they were about to part ways, the priest looked back at Narcyz and smiled again, saying: "Oh, and by the way, please come for a visit whenever you find yourself here in Turri. You never know when you might need someone to listen to you rant. From my experience, it's not ideal to spend all your time alone."

"Of course, Padre!" Narcyz said; he turned away and smirked in disappointment to himself, knowing the priest was easily fooled. On his way, he whispered loudly to his son, shaking his head, almost angrily: "I would have beaten that maggot until that little ass of his was swollen red!" He said glancing to his son, adding: "That would give him some common sense!"

Desi raised his eyes at his father with a slight smile, knowing his father's temper well enough to agree with him. Since in his younger years, he had taken in enough of the beatings from the impulsive man who was prone to violence, especially after he had been drinking; his father's wrath can be worse than that of a beast, in which, for Desi, it has been an enduring experience.

When the oxen and the donkey crossed paths, Dante tipped his hat and smiled at the stranger and said: "Hey *paesano* — nice kill on that donkey!"

Narcyz noticed the man was holding a holster containing a beautiful *Lazaro* flintlock pistol on his right hip and assumed he was a veteran of the Navy. He noticed then that a wooden shovel and some empty cotton sacks were on the back of the cart. He gave him a smile and then tipped his Bavarian alpine hat, saying: "The legs are going to make good prosciutto!" He smiled.

Dante looked back at Narcyz with an agreeable smile: "*Con buono salute!*" He said as he moved on.

Meanwhile, when Padre Valentino entered the dark oak door of the church, Orlando was behind him, and he sensed that something was shadowing him. He quickly turned across the square and saw his neighbor, who was watching him from the window. It was the six-year-old girl Filomena, who kept ignoring him since he moved into the neighborhood. After a moment of staring, they became fixated on each other, until she finally smiled

at him. When the moment of childhood infatuation struck, he could not bear the feeling and then turned reluctantly and fled inside the church.

Chapter V



SANTO STEFANO

The day after Christmas was the celebration of the first martyr for Christianity, *Santo Stefano*. In the middle of the Mass inside the fourteenth-century medieval church made of gentle white limestone, Padre Valentino led a procession that would take them through the square, down the street of granite stones, and back to the church. The church stood next to the Roman tower, both on a rocky spur of sandstone at a height of thirty and ten meters above sea level. Beneath, the Pescara valley's magnificent landscape, which is surrounded by a large mountain range called the *Gran Sasso*, would enchant visitors and the inhabitants of the village alike. During that day, Padre Valentino felt a chill spread across his thin body as he exited the church. He saw that the mid-morning air was cooler than the day before, more like stepping into a walk-in refrigerator. The sky was a brilliant azure, dotted with cotton-like clouds that slowly moved with the great white sun across the sky. He walked the procession with his parishioners along the sparse melting snow on the ground while passing the market stands that were being set up for the afternoon. Sollemonia, an elderly woman, was left behind by Padre Valentino to take care of the youngest. Covered in a lace *mantilla* veil and a heavy black cloak, she sat on the corner of a low limestone shelf running along the side walls of the building while tending to a sickly baby girl for the baby's mother. As she oversees a small group of children, she was

accompanied by two teenage girls who wore the same gray sheep wool hooded clothing.

As Padre Valentino walked the route of the procession, he followed an eight-year-old altar boy, Giovanni, who was carrying an olive wood crucifix. Giovanni was one of the three sons of the silk merchant, Vincenzo di Cugnoli, who came from a noble family in Chieti. The altar boy is flanked by Dante Belvedere, the village headman for the *Signore* of the manor, and his newlywed bride Béatrice, who are both carrying a lit procession candle. His thinness made Padre Valentino dislike the winter season, as he walked feeling like a cold-blooded amphibian with his warm hands inside his alb robe. He was followed by the statue of *Santo Stefano*, carried by the merchant's other two sons, Fabbro and his older brother, Carmine, who wore a Navy lieutenant's uniform that consisted of a blue tailcoat, white pants, black boots, and a matching red plume on his cocked hat. Behind them, Vincenzo and his fashionable wife Splendora led the other parishioners in singing the saintly hymn as they made their way down the stone street to circle around the great iron cross monument, and then back to the church. In the meantime, Sollemonia's accompanying girls, Vittoria and Berta, sat along the cool floor with seven younger children, huddling together for warmth. As they sat in their coats, the two teenagers played a word game, while the others avoided the chill by playing closely together. The several oil-filled lanterns hanging from the church walls provide little light, not to mention the heat. As Vittoria and Berta engaged in a game of words, in a blink of an eye, the four-year-old Orlando took by the hand his neighbor and only playmate, Filomena Belvedere, and they flew like two free birds. Both dressed in silvery hooded capes, they ran along the nave of the church and hid in the front row of the few

overshadowed reserved boxed pews. The girl, who was six years old, had become very close to Orlando and enjoyed playing the role of the mother of the malformed albino boy. Like mirrors, they became acquainted with each other. After sitting down, they started playing by imitating the elite Pew owners, Vincenzo and his wife Splendora: "Have mercy on us, Oh *Signore!*" Orlando whispered a prayer with the mannerism of the owner of the seat. Filomena pulled away her hood, revealing her chapel veil on her head. Her diamond-shaped face somewhat resembles Sophia Loren, as if she were a sibling. With her sapphire-green almond-shaped eyes, dark, lush brows, and lashes, she went on imitating the man's wife in a whisper: "Grand us your salvation, Oh *Signore!*" They both suddenly giggled at themselves at their abilities in independent play.

Afterwards, when the playing became less thrilling and engaging, Filomena then whispered: "Let's play *S'taccia* and *S'taccie!*"

Orlando smiled at her words and nodded: "Sure," Since her singing voice is something he enjoys listening to, and besides, she enjoys his attention. They then turned to each other and positioned themselves on the bench with the legs open, wrapped at the waist of the other, and started the nursery rhyme by holding hands and swinging back and forth as if holding a sieve and sifting the flour from the husk, and sang the rocking lullaby song: Sift for me, sift.

Setaccia per me, setaccia

Sift for me, sift

Che ne faccia con questa bambina me?

What am I going to do with this child

La razzo a lu fosso

I let her drop into a ditch

La raccogliere lu Paparozzo

But she was caught by the bogeymen

Che la raccogliere la chiocciola

Who let her drop and caught by the snail

Pass lu papà si

But suddenly daddy passed by.

Filomena and Orlando then suddenly embraced and sang a little louder and more exciting:

Questa è la piccola bambina di papà!

This is daddy's little baby girl!

“Cativoni bambini, come here!”

Upon hearing the scolding voice of Vittoria, Orlando suddenly pulled Filomena hand and in defiance, they ran out of the pew.

“Orlando, come back here ... now!” Hollered Berta. When they refused to obey, both girls became more angry and chased them all the way under a pew. With Orlando firmly hid, Vittoria eventually was able to catch Filomena and then gave her a good spank. "You little brat! You ought to know better, but you are nothing but trouble for us!" Vittoria said, grasping the child's white silk veil with her soft wavy dark hair.

At the same time, Berta had difficulty apprehending Orlando, because he was concealed in the darkness under the boxed pew. Yet, upon hearing the weeping voice of his friend, Orlando suddenly rushed from under the pew and then went to Vittoria, who was tugging at Filomena's hair. He bitterly pinched her arm hard as if to say 'let her go!'

Vittoria yelped as she jumps away from him. She rubs her arm, while more anger came across her face. "Padre Valentino won't be happy about this, Orlando! I hope you will be well punished."

To that, Berta gives Orlando a slap on his snow-white head and yells: "You're old enough to know better that you're not supposed to be sitting on the pews."

When Orlando turned to Berta, he appeared like a predator and was poised to strike with his six-fingered hands. The girl quickly backed away after seeing the boy's hands and his purple-pink eyes glow in a reddish hue. She unleashed a fearful yelp: "Padre will know about this — YOU BRAT!"

Orlando just laughed it off. He didn't care what the girl thought of him. All that mattered was that he had saved his friend. He grabbed Filomena's hand and they dashed back to the back of the church. Lately, Orlando has been feeling a bit restless, bored with his village life. His only friend was Filomena, and his imagination. Beside being with Filomena, he loved spending time under the bay tree where under the broad, umbrella-like leafy branches of it, he would play imaginative games with nature: the great tree was a wise companion who he talked to. The sun is the father, the moon is the mother, the clouds are the children, and the sky is the home. He would spend hours there playing with all sorts of creatures that came his way.

Shortly after, when the children resume playing, Orlando stood with Filomena alone by the corner of the church and comforted the weeping girl.

"She pulled my hair!" she said in sobs. Filomena then looked towards Orlando concerned, saying: "Padre Valentino will be very angry with us, which means we're going to be punished."

"Don't worry, Filomena, I'll see that nothing happens to you." He said with a reassuring touch and embrace.

Filomena trusted him because he has become family to her, and like her father, he always made an effort to protect her. She calmed down and rejoined Orlando to play with the other children as though nothing had happened. As soon as the oak entry door opened and the old lady shouted: “Shush!” The children went quiet, and they waited to reunite with their families. Padre Valentino walked through the door shivering with cold pink cheeks, and when all the parishioners settled in, and the statue of *Santo Stefano* was placed in a stand in-front of the altar, the mass resumed.

At the end of the Mass, the remainder of the day was celebrated with ample happy conversation and laughter for both locals and nearby villagers ‘*paesani*’, who left their vehicles and horses secured to the church's hitch rail to take part in the feast of *Santo Stefano*. The traditional way of celebrating the festive day is to stroll through the local Nativity scene in the village square, which includes carnival food stands, games, with a folk music band. People interact and wish each other well on this day. And with the aroma of *arrostiticini*, a traditional lamb skewer cooked on a *fornacella* over charcoal, along with *porchetta*, *crispelli* donuts and pizzelle waffle cookies, linger in everyone's nostrils, people were quick to spend their *cavallo* copper or *piastre* silver coins for the food. Padre Valentino stood by the church door saying his goodbyes and later on, upon his discovery of Orlando and Filomena unruly behaviors, he hurried inside the church and approached them both with a chagrin face, and pointed them to go to the Sacristy room.

Inside the room, Giovanni had just pulled out his surplice and he hung it on the wall. He was on the point of saying goodbye when he curiously glanced at Filomena and Orlando and saw they were in some kind of trouble. He then saw Filomena staring back at him, with her smiling lips and unsettling eyes; he ignored her as

he would with any child and turned to the priest, asking: "Is there something more I can do for you, Padre?"

"No-no, my son, please go and enjoy yourself with your family." He said more out of eagerness for the boy to leave than out of acceptance, for he was a bit distressed by his godson's rebellious behavior.

When Giovanni noticed that the priest was distraught, he stated: "Good day Padre!" And made his way to the door to join the *fiesta* that was taking place in the square. In thoughtful reflection, Padre Valentino suddenly turned to the boy and said apologetically: "Oh, Giovanni, thank you for your service and good day to you also." His eyes showed his disappointment in losing the boy, as someone who inherits the family's merchant trade as a son, he will be traveling with his father, and he would need to find another altar boy who is equally talented as him.

Giovanni smiled an approval and then left the room.

Padre Valentino then turned to Filomena and said in teacher's voice: "My child, are you aware that sitting on well-paid pew during the Mass is not permitted?"

Filomena stared at the priest with frightful eyes and replied: "Yes, Padre, I do."

"Well, why did you do it?"

Filomena looked down, but didn't say anything, she had simply forgotten the rules and in fact never thought about it before.

Orlando then suddenly interceded, stating: "She didn't want to play there, but I insisted."

Padre Valentino sighed impatiently and glanced at his godson, because he recognized him well enough that he wasn't sincere. "At the moment, I am not speaking to you!" He said in one voice of disappointment. He turned back to Filomena, as his thoughts

about church projects came to him, saying: "Child, you have a lovely singing voice and you are destined to be my leading cantor. We have no cantor in this church and I would love to have one in this old church." His eyes glowed with delight as he spoke, aware that the new Archbishop of the diocese had allowed him to be more flexible in leading the church. His mind was flooded with ideas for church activities and events aimed at improving people by promoting Christian unity through Bible studies and support groups. "You see, child," his eyes turned solemnly on the girl as he went on. "You violate canonical law when you don't respect the rules of the church. Do you understand?"

"I think so, Padre."

"Well, anyway, you will learn more from my Catholicism's teachings that are coming soon. Now, go kneel in front of the altar and ask Ave Maria for forgiveness five times and never do it again," he told her.

Filomena lowered her eyes and bowed to the priest. She then rushed to the altar, relieved. Her hope was that Orlando would not be severely punished for taking the blame.

Padre Valentino turned to his godson, rebuking: "You're supposed to set a good example for the rest of the children. Why are you defying me?"

Orlando retorted with a defiant frown: "The procession delayed the Mass, so I thought it was okay to play on the pews."

Padre Valentino let out a sigh of frustration. "Ridiculous, the procession is part of the Mass — you're inventing things for selfish reasons." He said, looking at him with more disappointment. "You are not being sincere?" He rolled his eyes and rocked his head, and sternly said: "You know perfectly well that those pews during the Mass are paid and you can't play there."

Orlando scratched his nose and conceded, asking: "What's my punishment?"

Padre Valentino sighed again, a big puff of air after exhaling: "Punishment — what good will that do?" He rubbed his chin. "I do believe you're going to be turning five years old this January, aren't you?" He pursed his lips in a pout as he cast his mind back to the past, and then brought up: "You know, I remember the day of your birth well."

Orlando looked at his *Padrino* oddly, not knowing what to say, and after a moment, he asked: "What about my birth?" When his *Padrino* showed a hint of compassion and a smirk, it suddenly intuitively came to him that he seemed to know about what was troubling him: His unanswered questions that he had hesitated to ask him.

"I suppose it's time to talk about it now," Padre Valentino said in a guarded tone. He took a moment to tilt his head to Filomena by the Sacristy door, saying: "You may go home now, Filomena?"

Filomena swiftly rose from the altar and glanced at Padre Valentino by the door, indicating, 'See you later,' and dashed out of the church.

Padre Valentino then turned to Orlando with a questionable face, demanding: "You keep defying me, why?" Although he knew the answer, he wanted to extort a response from him to make a point about their relationship with each other.

"I remember Sister Rita and Sister Verina telling me that my *mamma* went to paradise the day I was born. They told me that she was beautiful, like a princess, and God chose to bring her with Him. Is that true?"

Padre Valentino nodded, answering sympathetically: "Yes, I was there."

“Why did God do such a thing and have her forget me?”

“We must respect God's plans for her and not question them. God has a plan for everyone, and the journey of your spirit has been a part of it. It's apparent that you're supposed to be with me.”

Being disappointed at the answer, Orlando then asked in a voice that was aware of the answer, and watched his *Padrino* with an expression of resentment on his face. “Who is my *Papà*, tell me why he doesn't like me?”

Padre Valentino retorted almost sullenly at his questioning and then evaded his godson's question by saying: “You don't have a *Papà*, Orlando.” Padre Valentino didn't want to deceive him, but he couldn't tell him the truth in order to prevent a Church scandal in the region. He said: “You have Gesù and me.”

Orlando crossed his arms on his chest and then stated with a pout: “Everyone here has a *mamma* and *papà*, but I don't!”

“Not everybody does.”

“There's nobody else here who doesn't!” Orlando insisted.

“No, that's not quite true — I didn't get to know my parents either.”

“You?” Orlando was kind of surprised. You never told me?”

“Well, I thought for now you were too immature to know such things,” Padre Valentino said in a retorted tone. When he saw his godson's reluctant expression on his face, he then went on: “Well, no ... of course you're not immature. Actually, I am quite astounded at your age, how bright you are! I mean, you are the only boy I know who has figured out the meaning of words in the Bible!”

Orlando shrugged a shoulder like it's not important, and said in a logical tone: “Your reading led me to it by helping me understand the meaning of words.” Orlando paused and thought, then raised

his white eyebrows, showing his purple-pink eyes lit up, asking: “I am the only boy, really?”

“Yes, really! You have an exceptional memory!” Padre Valentino assured him. He rubbed his pointed chin in thought and then remarked: “Why — most of our parishioners here can’t even read at all, and there you are, reading the Bible like nothing!” Padre Valentino then frowned and pressed his three fingers on his chin, as if he was contemplating deeply. “Well, hopefully your reading will teach you to be obedient to Gesù as I have.”

“How can I be obedient to Gesù?”

Padre Valentino then went to his Sacristy desk and picked up the Bible. He said as the page was turned to Luke's gospel and pointed verse 17:20-21 for his godson to read: “Go on, let me hear you read these verses if you can?”

Orlando held the Bible and slowly read: “The kingdom of God cometh not with observation, nor will they say, behold here, or behold there. Behold, for the kingdom of god is within you.” He looked at his *padrino* confused and said: “God is within me — explain?”

“In my opinion, the verse is referring to the presence of the Spirit of God within you.” Padre Valentino answered and extended his hand around the room, adding: “We are the true church of God, not this building. I believe that God wants you to be true to yourself because your true self was created by Him.”

Orlando was more confused. “What is my true self?”

“Your true self is the peaceful spirit and loving part of you that is the kingdom of God. Therefore, by pledging your fealty to Christ, the blinding light of God, I encourage you to become aware of that part of yourself as I have.” Padre Valentino then pointed his finger at him and continued with an authoritative voice:

“God has granted you a gift, and I expect you to use it for the good, you understand?”

“Yes, *Padrino!*” He said in a low tone. He then pouted again, his eyes turned upward, like he was considering something new and for the first time. “But, how can I be good? — look at me — I’m not like you or anybody here. There are those who find me amusing and cruel.”

Padre Valentino sighed, answering: “Life would be extremely dull if we were all the same. What matters is that you learn to articulate your unique difference for the service of the good.” He paused for a moment, rubbing his chin and his mouth, and looked at his godson’s wide purple-pink eyes with charm and interest, saying with a prideful disposition: “You know, it’s almost a year since we’ve been together here in Turri, and just so you know, you and I, with our *Signore Gesù Cristo*, we are a family.”

Orlando batted his eyes and said, showing more of its dubious face: “But, you are not my *Papà?*”

“I am the closest thing you have to a *Papà*, and I thank you for the privilege of being in your life.”

Orlando rolled his eyes: “I thought you were looking after me until you put me up for adoption?”

“Well... ” Padre Valentino then sighed, as the days of foster caregiving for the boy had developed into a fatherly bond. He rubbed his chin as he went on saying: “This was supposedly the arrangement, but not anymore.” He paused for a moment to articulate his thoughts, and then said: “You know, there’s a reason God brought us together. The bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other’s lives.”

“So ... I’m not going for adoption?” Orlando asked with a flash of an unexpected look in his eyes.

"No. I consider you my son, and the only reason I let you call me *Padrino* is because I am a priest. Being a family is to be part of something marvelous; it means you will be loved and cared for the rest of your life.

"Padre Valentino then pointed sternly to his godson's misdeeds: "Now, are you going to keep defying me?"

Orlando's eyes gave full credibility to his *Padrino's* explanation and nodded quietly, no.

"Fine, now, go kneel at the altar and recite nine *Ave Maria* and five *Nostro Padre*."

Chapter VI



DEAR is the ROSE

With the French *Grand Armée* winning European victories, as well as the imprisonment of Pope Pius VI in Valence, France, the last year of the century was an extremely difficult time for Europe. The financial crisis in France, which is believed to have been caused by supporting the American Revolution, resulted in more food shortages and economic crises that spread to all European monarchies, leading to the formation of European armies to defend *Napoleone's* invasions. As member of the *House of Bourbon*, *Ferdinando IV*, the King of Naples was a natural adversary of *Napoleone's* French Revolution and he had launched a military campaign against the *Napoleone's* Republican forces in Rome.

In the meantime, the war was putting a great strain on the food supply on Valignani's estate, and the peasants or *contadini*, as they were called, were working longer and faster to meet the demands of the King's Army. Although the roar of war was quiet for now, battles were more concentrated in the north, making the south Apennines mountains appear peaceful. The villagers were trying to live their lives as normal — well, as normal as they could.

Even in late summer, the scattered snow patches lingered above the peaks and slopes of the Apennines Mountains. Looking down Mount Majella from a bird's eye view, where the plains and valleys converged, and the wheat fields appeared to be a sea of gold on the flat mountain side. Along with the great ditches, forestry and prairies spreading across the mountains, dotted here and there,

meadows of red poppies and yellow flowers bloomed parts of the ground. Among the chirping of birds and insects, and among the working dogs sniffing the air for predators, an acreage of the wheat field manor was being amplified by echoes from the folk singing *contadini* as they harvested the crop. For the labor at hand stretched five acres, and the bulk of the work was behind them. The *contadini* kept on working quickly, after all it was their very last harvesting to be done in their responsible section of land across their mountainous region. Therefore, every villagers in the region were quite excited to end the harvest season by participating in the celebration that followed afterwards. For the harvest celebration, it was a major event to thank God for the crops they received, and it was an annual event for the village communities of the kingdom of Naples.

On a lined formation, boys from Turri village as young as eight years old stood bent down as they collected wheat stalks and cut them down with their sickles, while men used their scythes to work the field. Others, worked behind them, by harvest the wheat into bundles and then tossing it into a sleigh cart. The stacked-up sleigh was then hauled away by the oxen to the *Seigneur's* mill house that stood by the Pescara river. Sleights were used because the wagons or carts was not possible in that part of that region due to steep hills and valleys. When the sun reached its zenith, and the tolling of *Santo Stefano's* bell perked everyone's ears, then, everyone slowed down upon hearing the voices of women coming down the high grounds carrying on their head's baskets filled with food. Most of the women were joined by their children, who often assisted by carrying a jug of wine or water for their respective family members. By the time the women arrived, most of the men had put an end to their singing, for the smell of food was welcomed by

their noses. A few of the eldest men came to a stop for a break, and they stood by there, wiping their sweat from their faces with their *fazzoletto*. In the meantime, others kept working as they respectfully waited for the headman to shout-out the call. For generations, the Turri community had a close bond with a large extended family, and those in the region who became their most significant friend in their lives were called a *Compàre*'.

"Okay, let's quit, lunch is on its way!" Dante shouted, and placed his scythe by the uncut stalk of wheat. At a distance of roughly twenty-five feet, he gradually turned and looked over to the shady trees where the women were about to set their baskets down, and then smiled when he saw his daughter, Filomena, by the side of her aunt and stepmother excitedly waving at him. Dante was head over heels for the gorgeous eight-year-old girl. Her playful nature and enchanting voice made her an absolute delight to be around. She was a treasure to him, not just for the things she could offer in exchange, but also for her beautiful voice. As her only child, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy whenever he thought about her future. In the midst of war, his little girl had no idea of the world she lived in or the incredible person she was destined to become. At the moment, she was what she was, a little girl. At the age of twenty-nine, Dante was a firm, muscular man with a dark beard and chiseled jawline who was able to move with ease. His chestnut brown hair complemented his brown skin, which had been hardened by exposure to the weather. His clothing consists of a white linen collarless shirt, light brown, loosely fitted trousers, and navy boots on his feet. He wore a tricorne hat from his naval days when he served as a flag officer on the Spanish *Santísima Trinidad*, something, he treasured along with the boots. Except for the hat and boots, his clothing resembled that of other

men in the village. They were either passed down and endlessly repaired, or made by their women.

While waiting for his uncle, young cousins, and brother-in-law to join him, Dante stretched his back and wiped his sweaty forehead with a *fazzoletto* from his pocket. It had been a few days that he hadn't seen his daughter, nor his wife, on the account of his responsibility of overseeing the milling production work at the mill house. Therefore, in order to fulfill the *Signore's* obligation to the military, he had been sleeping overnight in the mill house. For it became necessary to monitor the production and the distribution of grain and flour due to the war. The nearest military bakery of the King was to receive the sacks of flour immediately.

While the women lay down their picnic blankets beneath the shaded trees, the youngest of the children started playing a game of hide-and-seek. In front of the tree where his family were to eat lunch, Dante attention suddenly turned to his wife, Béatrice, who happened to be the sister of his late wife, Gloria. As usual, his robust libido surged as he stared at her youthful figure as the rays of the sun momentarily exposed her elegant, slender ballerina figure through her close-fitting peanut-brown bodice and eggshell-white flowing skirt. Béatrice's dark brunette hair, which was tangled long and loose behind her had a caramel hue with her white *fazzoletto* headdress. Her freckles made her fair skin smoother, and while some view them as blemishes, others find them charming. Neither her mother nor sister resembled her, for her features were more like her father's side of the household. Her appearance was reminiscent of that of a Hungarian princess, with a prominent nose, lips, and upper forehead, as well as her lively personality, fiery temper, and sensual nature. And when Béatrice turns to him with her ocean blue eyes and flutters her eyelashes, while he winks and

grins. letting her know with a raised passionate glance that he was craving for her. Simply then, suddenly, Filomena interrupted them by quickly hugging her father and kissing his lips.

Dante chuckled and concentrated his bluish gray eyes on his daughter, saying: "Whoa oh-oh, now, Filomena, tell me my *tesoro*, have you helped your *Zia* with the cooking?"

The rejoicing gaze of the child when she nodded for him captured Dante's soul; for the child resembles her mother, who passed on five-years ago from being bitten by a long-nosed viper while hiking in the high mountain range.

As Béatrice lay the basket of food on the blanket, she could hear her husband and niece chitchatting. She chortled to herself and was amused by her niece's playful manner with her husband, as she had once had a similar playful relationship with her older sister. As a nineteen-year-old wife to Dante, she slowly rebuilt her life after losing her sister to the viper's bite and her mother due to an incurable intestinal disease. She held the belief that Satan was to blame for their deaths. Regarding her long absent father, who was supposed to be cooking for Austria's high-ranking military, the question of whether he was alive or dead was always on her mind. She turned to her husband with a divulging look and then gave another chortled with a broad smile. The soft chortle sound of her slender throat ran gently as she spoke in a motherly tone: "She tried to help me peel the onions, but then the princess got lazy and quit!" She then turned back and took out the sliced brown bread and the porcelain bowl canister of onion and egg stew."

Dante looked upon Béatrice, saying: "Oh, she did, did she?" He turned to Filomena looking at her fondly as he did her mother Gloria, and he said in a silly manner, but with a curious tone of

voice: "Well, tell me, did the onions peeling cause you to shed tears?"

At her age, Filomena was no different from other girls who admired their father for being their protector. Her father was everything to her and in a sense ran her life and her survival. She quickly softened a nod with a slightly disappointed expression, paralyzed by fear of offending him, "Yes, *Papà*, onions have made me cry, but I'll get used to them!"

Dante cackled a laugh. He then said: "That's right, you'll become accustomed to it! Now look at your *Zia*, she's used to not tearing, and you, too, will learn to peel onions without having tears."

Béatrice looked at her husband with her sensual eyes and smiled by mutual agreement. She raised her eyebrows at both of them and sighed humorously as she said: "Enough of that ... now, come this way, Filomena, help me fill each bowl with stew."

Filomena quickly jumped from her father's arms and ran meekly towards her stepmother, whom she perceived as her aunt. While she and her aunt were filling bowls with onion and egg, Dante could suddenly feel a sense of hunger, for the aroma was most savory to him. Knowing that after hours of strenuous labor, he along with the others, were more than ready for a meal along with a relaxing half of liter of wine.



After everyone finished their lunch, the conversation unfolded between the gossips. As Dante's uncle, Caio Belvedere, picked his teeth with a straw, he sat on a blanket close to his wife, Cinna, and a son, Adamo, and feeling relaxed from the wine, the old timer then called out to his niece, "Hey, *cara nipota*, sing for us!"

"Yes, let us hear your splendid voice," said Béatrice's brother, Marcus Ferrara, sitting next to his wife across from Caio. The villagers were especially aware that the child was gifted with a natural talented soprano voice, and when Dante saw around him that everyone went silent, displaying their facial expression of pleasure to be entertained by his daughter, he then proudly turned to his daughter and encouragingly guided her with his eyes to a higher ground. "Go on, sing that song your *Zia* taught you!" Dante said softly.

Filomena then ran quickly to a higher ground with an obedient smile, as she was passionate about making her father proud, while also possessing a passion for singing. It was then that Dante eyed his wife to take a walk with him. Béatrice complied by quietly following him towards a shrub across the field.

Caio chuckled and said in a playful, suggestive tone to his nephew: "Make some babies will you. *Mannaggia*, we can use some help here!"

Porcia, Marcus' wife, observed with amusement. "Do it *con buona salute!*" She uttered, believing that women were expected to tend the garden, cook for the family, take care of the children, and see that their husbands' needs were met. Her words entertained the family who was sitting nearby, aware of Dante's sexual urges. Even though the sex was a private matter, it was considered a pastime and for them, sex was natural and therefore a thing in itself.

At that instant, Filomena stood proudly by herself and began to sing: Dear is the Rose:

Cara è la rosa e vaga

Dear is the rose that is elegant

Pur se in giardin, dov'ella è posta, è sola

Even if in the garden, where she is placed, she is alone

Con la bellezza sua l'occhio men paga.

With her beauty the eye pays for it.

Ma se misto è con quella Il candidetto giglio,

But if it is mixed with that the candid lily

ò come è bella!

Oh, how she is beautiful!

Oh, come il disir vol

Oh, how desire flies

Dentro a quel misto e gode aure amorose

Inside that mix and enjoys loving auras

Restando pago in mirar gigli e rose.

Remaining satisfied in gazing lilies and roses

Così la viva rosa

Like this the rosa lives

Che nel candor di bella guanci splende

That shines in the candor of beautiful cheeks

Con la vaghezza sua l'anima accende.

With her vagueness, her soul lights up

Ma se manca il bel sangue del porporato fiore

But if the beautiful blood of the cardinal flower is
missing

ò como langue

how it languishes

Deh sempre il candor vago

Always the vague candor

Discopra Amor nel suo gentil vermiglio

Discover love in the gentle of vermilion

Restando pago in mirar rosa e giglio.

Remaining satisfied in gazing the rose and lily.

In the time being, Dante and his wife hid behind a dense group

of bushes. He lay down on wild ryegrass with blooming poppies and opened his trousers, revealing his penis. “Hurry *cara* — hurry!” He whispered.

Béatrice looked at him as if she was prepared to gorge herself on him. She grasped his penis, lifted her hips, slid it inside her, and sank down with a soothing sigh. Béatrice understood that lunchtime was about to end soon for her husband, who had to get back to work. She moved quickly, raising her skirt and placing her hands on his waist, and her legs between his legs, mirroring his position. After loosening her knickers, she revealed her vagina, which caused his body to tighten even more with pure lust. From a long time ago, she had a precise understanding of how to please him, having watched him through a hole in the wall while making it with her sister.

Dante appreciated the sweet fragrance of olive oil and balsam in her hair, which made up for the onion odor in her clothing. When he couldn't contain himself, he grabbed her face and kissed her long and hard, making her moan with every inward thrust. When the warmth and wetness inside her intensified, creating both pleasure and pain, he held her tight, almost too strong, crushing her body against his. As the movement accelerates more, he shook and groaned in a climax, with each sigh followed another.

Béatrice then gave a moan of pleasure and shuddered as her head leaned forward and pressed her body against his. Then it was over, and they both slumped, panting.

As the sun moved slightly to the west above them, everyone knew they were ready to return to work in the field when the church bell rang. Upon hearing the sound of the bell, Béatrice raised an eyebrow as she straightened her bodice, her braided hair, and *fazzoletto*. Despite the lust disappearing from her husband's

eyes, she was still satisfied by the affection that remained. She was a woman of faith and no matter what, she wanted to be a good wife and wanted to give her husband something that her sister couldn't give him: a son. Like many in her teens who were forced to marry young, she craved some sort of tenderness from a man. She was quite aware of not nearly being as attractive as her sister, and she handled it based on her husband's expectations.

They walked softly, knowing that they wouldn't see each other for some time. Dante looked at Béatrice and said: "It's possible that I'll be back home from the mill house by tomorrow afternoon."

Béatrice turned to Dante with curiosity in her eyes and said: "Well, you should be done with harvesting by this evening, and it shouldn't be another week of working at that mill house."

"No, *cara mia*." He said and sighed with a sense of relief. "Tomorrow morning, *paesani* from Manoppello will be working in the mill house, and I'm looking forward to sleeping with you in my own bed again." As they continued walking, he looked at his wife with regretful eyes and said: "You know, I'm going to miss Fedele!"

Béatrice slightly twisted her head in confusion, "Why is there something wrong with that funny man?"

Dante paused before saying: "Well, I thought I mentioned to you that the old man was among the victims of the earthquake that occurred last year."

"I don't recall you saying anything about anyone dying in the earthquake."

"Yes, the earthquake caused a landslide that buried the whole wheat field in the village of Lettomanoppello, along with some *paesani*."

Béatrice let out a sigh of woe. "Oh, *Madonna mia*! I was not aware that those who worked on the field died as a result of the

landslide.”She uttered a gentle word and then swiftly exhibited a sign of the cross to herself in honor of his death, which pleased Dante.

Dante smirked regretfully, declaring: “Yes, *mia cara*, regrettably, our departure celebration at the Mill house with his fine white Moscato wine has come to an end.”

“Who’s the new headman?”

“I heard that it’s his son, Sergio.”Dante said, and then gazed over his wife’s slim, girlish body, and smiled with a provocative sidelong glance and said in a sexy whisper, “Anyway, I’ll be seeing you tomorrow night!”

Béatrice sheepishly smiled back at him, as she was expected to do, for she knew what he was indicating.

As they rejoined with everyone, Filomena suddenly ran and hugged and kissed her father goodbye, realizing that she wouldn’t be able to see him as he will be working overnight in the mill house.

Cinna and Porcia had cleared up the picnic mess, rolled up the blankets, and waited to join Béatrice to go back to their homes; for more domestic work awaited them all.

Arrivederci or *ciao* were the two words that were spoken by many people as they went on their way. After Béatrice kissed her husband, she turned and joined the women. Then, she walked away with her niece, hoping that tomorrow night she would make love with him once more. For Béatrice, motherhood was the most important, all-embracing, and incredibly rewarding part of life.

Chapter VII



FRIENDSHIP is the VIRTUE of CHARITY

Power for the mill house came from the waterwheel, which was powered by the stream force of the Pescara river that was channeled down from the higher grounds by Turri. Along a dirt and grassy pathway, the baker, Narcyz, rode in an empty cart pulled by a donkey. The gray limestone mill house was the destination of the pathway as he followed the turbulent stream of white foam and blue-green water. He had a tendency to complain about the ride because he was behind on his biscuit-baking, but he did need more flour. As a foreigner with a heavy *Alemannic* dialect, meeting others or making friends is not something he was interested in, and since he is in charge of the military's bakery house, he prefers to keep his interactions with the locals as private as possible.

In the meantime, as the crew replacement arrived, Dante recognized Manoppello's new headman and waved to him along with his crewmen.

"Good day, *paesani*, we are glad to see you all!" Dante said loudly in a happy relieved voice. "Because we are now more than ready to turn the workload over to all of you!" He

continued with a gesture of greeting the new headman, “*Ciao* Sergio, how are you?”

“Surviving with God's grace!” He answered shaking his hand with a grin.

Dante then gave Sergio a solemn face, saying: “Pity about your *Papá*, — you two were so close!”

Sergio agreed with an unfortunate look on his face, saying: “Yes, some of us did managed to get away from that landslide, but not my *Papá*. He’s always in my thoughts.” In a dignified manner, he retrieved a ceramic bottle of wine from his pouch and presented it to Dante, saying: “Take this home with you, I know he would want you to enjoy it — it's his last batch.”

Dante was taken aback by the act of friendship and responded: “Oh, how marvelous, *molto grazie*, Sergio.” After taking the bottle, he insisted: “Well, let’s go inside and have a drink to commemorate his honor.”

Sergio touched his hand, and said: “No, ” he retrieved from his pouch another bottle, “but with this wine I made this year.”

Dante then brought a sense of humor to break the solemn occasion, saying with a soft chuckle: “Then we will keep our parting tradition with your wine. I'm pleased that you're using your *Papá's* Moscato grapes effectively.”

They both laughed at the thought, and then started walking to the mill house kitchenette.

“Well, congratulations on your promotion of a headman!”

Sergio smiled at the compliment as he watched his men enter the mill house.

All of a sudden, Dante lifted his head and turned his head to the sound of cart wheels squeaking on the grassy path, and he then looked at Sergio with curiosity.

"I believe he is the military's baker." Sergio stated with a curious expression on his face.

"It seems so, I haven't met the man."

Sergio chuckled. "I have been told that he is not very friendly; the man likes to be alone."

Dante looked over again at the baker and waved hello, saying to Sergio, "Well, let's go meet him!"

After a whip and a good pull on the donkey's reins to halt it, Narcyz turned to the approaching men and said, "*Buono giorno* gentlemen, I'm the baker, Narcyz."

Both Dante and Sergio responded: "*Buono giorno paesano!*"

Narcyz went on saying as he signaled his donkeys to completely stop. "Under the Minister of War, I came for the flour."

"Well, *benvenuto* — I'm Dante, Turri's headman," Dante said, staring deeply into Narcyz's face as he began the gathering with a sincere smile. Still, like a piece of a puzzle, there was something about the man that he couldn't figure out. The thought quickly faded as they shook hands with each other.

"The war doesn't wait and I'm in a hurry to load this cart!" Narcyz said in an anxious tone.

"Well, then you could use some help loading."

Narcyz glanced quickly at Dante and, just as quickly, looked away, surprised at the friendly offer, and then with an appreciative sigh tossed into the wind, he turned to Dante and said: "Why — thanks, *paesano*. You see, I must return to work at the bakery as soon as possible."

"My name is Sergio," Sergio spoke with a slight reverence. "The headman of Manoppello — it's a pleasure to meet you."

Narcyz flashed the two men a well-acquainted smile, and they did the same.

Dante waved at Narcyz to come inside the mill house and have a drink of wine; Narcyz hesitated at first, but then with a nod, he raised a wry smile of agreement. He thought some wine would do him good, as he became confident that he would receive assistance loading his cart quickly.

The mill house inside had a factory-like appearance, except for the kitchenette, fireplace, table, chairs, and benched resting area. The big rolling stone wheel on the side of the room was the focal point, crushing the wheat with a loud, crisp, and sharp sound. The noise merged with the crack and pounding coming from men trashing bundles of dry wheat stalks with their flail, as well as the sifting of flour from bran through large sieves by men on the other side of the wheel, which went below to a-shoot with a sack holder.

During the crew shift process, Sergio poured three cups of his wine, handed one cup to Dante and Narcyz, and raised his cup in a toast: “To victory for our King *Ferdinando* with lightening speed — *Salute!*”

Dante and Narcyz raised their cups. “*Salute!*”

“And let’s hope that *bestia Napoleone* head will roll soon, like it was done to the French King.” Narcyz spoke with irritation.

Dante and Sergio both approved and then took turns explaining the functioning of the mill house to Narcyz. When there was nothing more to say, Sergio excused himself by saying to both men: “Well, I have to get to work and I suppose both of you have some loading to do!”

“Oh yes, I need to get moving!” Narcyz said, looking impatient.

Dante waved his hand to his brother-in-law Marcus to come over. “Yes, right away, we’ll get you going,” Dante said as he waves more of his hand to his crewmen for assistance.



Outside, Dante and some men formed a human chain and began to transfer the flour sacks from the storage room to the waiting cart. It took them about five minutes to load the cart.

When the loading was done and Narcyz was on his cart seat and ready to depart, Dante approached Narcyz and stared at him with questioning eyes, asking: "You know, I can't let go of the fact that you look familiar to me. Could we have met before?"

Narcyz looked at Dante curiously and answered with a smile, while unconsciously scratching his nose. "I have a good memory for faces and I don't believe we have met before!" He leaned forward from his seat and followed up with a chuckle and a tap on Dante's shoulder, intending not to be recognized, adding: "I believe *paesano*, that you are mistaken for someone else."

Dante looked closer and even though his face was obscured in his memory, his long rusty beard and hair suddenly reminded him that they had met before. Right away, the church of *Santo Stefano* came to mind and said: "With that wild boar, did the prosciutto go well?"

Narcyz eyes sprung open, and then looked him over, resulting in an expression that was recalled and said: "Oh, of course, my hunting trip ... we crossed paths some time ago," He added with a smile: "The meat came a bit darker, and it as quite a sharp, gamey taste. How is that priest?"

Dante smiled answering, "Oh, Padre Valentino is doing well!" He chuckled proudly. "Our church is being transformed by the good priest, who teaches our children on Saturdays."

"Are you a veteran?" Narcyz asked, recalling the fine flintlock pistol.

"Yes, served has a navy sailor for the *Santisima Trinidad*."

"I served for the Austrian army."

“I held the position of an ensign banner.”

Narczyz made up something, refraining from admitting to being a shooter for security concerns. “I was a sergeant major.”

The two of them had established a rapport and began to feel at ease with each other. Narczyz then said in a thoughtful voice: “I should pay a visit to the priest, but I have been so busy.”

“Come ... then we can have a drink of wine and some of my prosciutto and *pecorino* cheese.” Dante said, echoing with a friendly laughter.

Narczyz nodded in approval. “I’ll bring the bread.” The thought brought a smile to his face, but then he became solemn and said: “I’ll think about it, but I must go now...”

“Until we meet again . . . *Arrivederci!*” Dante said with a smile.

They waved their goodbyes at each other, knowing one thing for sure that this moment of meeting was inevitable. What no one knew in the region was that the King had lost Naples to *Napoleone* and would need to make concessions to regain his kingdom

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