

LOVE AND FEALTY



Luciano E. DeSanctis

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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 — *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 *piastra* 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 for a while. 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

*J*anuary 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 Gesú, 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

The 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 latchet-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 promised: "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.

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