

THE ITALIAN ROSE

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Dedication

I dedicate this novel to:

Mia Famiglia

To all my family ~

Those gone, and those with us.

To me, there is nothing more important than family.

I am grateful for all who make up my family tree!

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MANY INDIVIDUALS HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THIS BOOK. IT WOULD BE A LONG LIST TO SHINE THE LIGHT OF GRATITUDE ON EACH OF THEM. THANK YOU TO ALL THOSE, LIVING AND DECEASED, THAT HELPED ME FORMULATE THIS NOVEL.

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CHAPTER 1

"YOU MUST GO!" HE SAID AS HE LOOKED OUT THE WINDOW.

HIS EYES LINGERED FOR A MOMENT ON EACH FIGURE THAT WALKED ALONG THE STREET. EVERY MOVEMENT MADE HIM NERVOUS. HE WAS PARANOID, THE DEVIL'S SERVANT WOULD SOON APPEAR, AND HE WAS NOT READY. AS THE EERIE MORNING FOG SLOWLY LIFTED, A SOFT GLOW FROM THE SUN ILLUMINATED THE BEIGE AND GOLD WALLS OF THE CITY. ROBERTO NOTICED A SHADOWED FIGURE ON THE METAL BALCONY ACROSS THE STREET. IT MADE A QUICK MOVEMENT THAT CAUSED A LOUD POP. HE JUMPED BACK AND CLOSED HIS EYES, THEN LOOKED AGAIN AT THE FIGURE. HE DREW A DEEP BREATH AND SIGHED IN RELIEF. IT WAS ONLY A WOMAN HANGING THE LINEN.

"NO, I WILL STAY!" SHE SAID AS SHE WATCHED HER HUSBAND STARE OUT THE WINDOW.

HER VOICE PULLED HIM FROM HIS PARANOIA "PLEASE MY LOVE. YOU MUST GO!" HE TURNED HIS GAZE BACK TO HER SUITCASE. IT WAS COVERED IN AN OVERFLOWING MESS OF FABRIC AND COLORS. QUICKLY, HE SHOVED HER DRESSES INTO THE OLD LUGGAGE CASE.

"STOP! STOP, YOU WILL RUIN THEM IF YOU TREAT THEM SO!" SHE SAID AS SHE RUSHED OVER TO PLUCK HER RED SILK DRESS FROM THE PILE.

"IT IS NO LONGER SAFE FOR YOU HERE. YOU MUST GO!"

"WHY? THE WAR IS NOT COMING HERE. ITALY JOINED THE ALLIES AND THAT EVIL HITLER WILL SOON FALL FROM POWER," SHE SAID CONFIDENTLY WHILE SHE PARADED AROUND THE ROOM WITH THE DRESS PRESSED TO HER BODY, AS IF SHE WERE DANCING IN A BALL.

"THAT IS NOT THE DANGER THAT CONCERNS ME," HE SAID WITH A NERVOUS GLANCE OUT THE WINDOW.

"WHOM ARE YOU WATCHING FOR?" SHE DEMANDED, AS SHE STAMPED HER FOOT. "YOU MUST TELL ME!"

"MY LOVE, PLEASE LEAVE, PLEASE GO TO MY FAMILY IN ALESSANDRIA. I SENT A LETTER A WEEK AGO THAT YOU WOULD BE COMING AND THEY ARE READY TO RECEIVE YOU." HIS BROWN EYES FILLED WITH WORRY AS HE BEGGED HER TO OBEY HIS COMMAND.

"I WILL NOT GO WITHOUT YOU," SHE SAID AS SHE TURNED HER HEAD TO HIM. THE FEAR IN HIS EYES DISTURBED HER.

HE REACHED INTO THE CLOSET AND REMOVED HER SHOES. IN THE BACK, HE SPOTTED AN OLD PAIR, WORN AND RAGGED. HE PULLED THEM FROM THE DARKNESS. A TEAR ROLLED DOWN HIS CHEEK. THESE WERE THE SHOES THAT BROUGHT HIS LOVE INTO HIS LIFE. SHE WAS ON HOLIDAY WITH HER MOTHER, OR SO THEY SAID. MANY HAD TRAVELED SOUTH FROM GERMANY TO FIND SAFE HAVENS FROM AN EVIL TYRANT. SOME ARISTOCRATS KNEW THE TRUTH BEHIND HITLER'S PLAN AND THOSE WHO WERE NOT WILLING TO ABIDE BY HIS RULES LEFT, ON HOLIDAY. MANY WEARY TRAVELERS STOPPED AT HIS SHOP TO HAVE THEIR SHOES REPAIRED AND ROBERTO'S BUSINESS BOOMED.

WHEN HIS BELOVED WALKED INTO HIS STORE ONE BRISK APRIL MORNING, IT WAS AS IF HEAVEN OPENED ITS GATES. THERE FRANCESCA STOOD, A VISION OF GRACE AND BEAUTY. HER LONG GOLDEN RINGLET CURLS CASCADED DOWN HER SHOULDERS, AND HER RADIANT BLUE EYES SPARKLED IN THE MORNING LIGHT.

"YOU KEPT THEM?" HE ASKED HER. "YES, OF COURSE!" SHE SMILED, "THEY ARE WHAT LEAD ME TO YOU!"

HE SQUEEZED THEM, HOW COULD HE HAVE BEEN SO STUPID. HIS STOMACH TURNED WITH GUILT AND REGRET, YET AT THE TIME HE THOUGHT HE ACTED OUT OF LOVE, NOT STUPIDITY.

"FRANCESCA, YOU MUST GO. I AM SORRY, BUT I DO NOT WANT THEM TO HARM YOU."

HE KNEW HE HAD TO PROTECT HER. THE THOUGHT OF WHAT THEY MIGHT DO TO HER WAS TOO MUCH. IT WAS HIS MISTAKE, NOT HERS. SHE HAD NO PART IN IT, EXCEPT PERHAPS TO ENCHANT HIM INTO THE VENUS OF LOVE. HE SHOVED THE SHOES INTO HIS OVERALLS. HE WOULD KEEP THEM, AS A REMINDER OF HER RADIANT BEAUTY. THE THOUGHT OF HER LOVE WOULD CARRY HIS SPIRIT OUT OF THIS WORLD AND HE PRAYED GOD WOULD FORGIVE HIM SO THEY COULD BE REUNITED IN THE AFTERLIFE.

SHE PLACED HER HAND ON HIS BROAD MUSCULAR SHOULDER AND SHE COULD FEEL THE TENSION. HER TOUCH CAUSED HIM TO JUMP. "WHAT IS THE MATTER, WHY ARE YOU SO TENSE?"

HIS MIND STRUGGLED TO EXPLAIN, HE DID NOT WANT THE BURDEN OF HIS ERROR TO WEIGH ON HER. HAPPINESS AND LOVE WERE ALL HE WISHED FOR HER, AND NOW SAFETY FROM THESE MONSTERS. HE GLANCED AT THE CLOCK, IT WOULD BE ONLY A MATTER OF MINUTES BEFORE THE DEVIL'S HENCHMEN WOULD ARRIVE. SHE WAS NOT FROM HERE AND DID NOT UNDERSTAND HOW ONE MAN COULD OWN EVERYTHING. THE CONCEPT OF A MAFIA BOSS RULING THE RICH AND THE POOR, AND TAXING EACH FOR EVEN THE RIGHT TO BREATHE, SEEMED FAR-FETCHED TO HER.

"ROBERTO, PLEASE TELL ME, I AM YOUR WIFE!"

HE LOOKED OUT THE WINDOW AGAIN, HIS BREATH HEAVY ON THE GLASS. IT WAS ALMOST 8:00 A.M. AND SOON HE WOULD HAVE TO OPEN THE SHOP AND ALLOW

THE DEVIL TO ENTER THE PEACEFUL SANCTUARY HE HAD CALLED HOME ALL HIS LIFE. ROBERTO'S GRANDFATHER STARTED THE COBBLER BUSINESS, LONG BEFORE DON SALVATORE INHERITED HIS POWER. IT SEEMED A CRIME THAT IT WOULD BE DESTROYED BY A MAN WHOSE OWN FATHER WAS NOT EVEN ALIVE WHEN THE FIRST SHOE WAS MENDED IN THIS STORE. THE HEAVY BURDEN OF DISAPPOINTMENT FLOWING FROM HIS ANCESTORS WASHED OVER ROBERTO. HOW COULD HE FALL PREY TO THE EVIL OF THIS TOWN, WHEN THOSE BEFORE HIM HAD NOT?

"MY LOVE, I CANNOT JEOPARDIZE YOUR SAFETY, AND THE LESS YOU KNOW THE BETTER."

"BUT I WILL NOT LEAVE WITHOUT YOU!"

"YOU MUST, YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE TERRIBLE THINGS THEY WILL DO TO YOU."

"YOU WILL NOT LET THEM! I KNOW YOU, YOU WILL NOT," HER VOICE QUIVERED AT HIS INTENSITY.

"FOR AS LONG AS I LIVE, I WILL PROTECT YOU. IT IS WHEN I AM NOT HERE THAT I FEAR FOR YOU," HE SAID AS A TEAR RAN DOWN HIS CHEEK. A MATCHING TEAR STREAMED DOWN HERS. SHE DESERVES TO KNOW, A VOICE ECHOED IN HIS HEAD. SHE IS YOUR WIFE, DO NOT LEAVE HER IN DARKNESS. LIES WILL FESTER AND IF SHE DOES NOT KNOW THE TRUTH, YOUR LIFE WILL BE A BLACK MARK ACROSS HER MEMORY.

"I AM SORRY MY LOVE," HE SAID AS HE SAT HER ON THE BED AND KNEELED IN FRONT OF HER.

HOW COULD HE CONFESS TO HER THAT HE WAS A DEAD MAN? SHE WIPED THE TEAR FROM HIS CHEEK, PRESSED A KISS TO HIS FOREHEAD AND URGED HIM TO FREE HIS THOUGHTS.

"I KNOW THIS IS HARD TO UNDERSTAND MY LOVE. I HOPE YOU CAN FORGIVE ME."

"THERE IS NOTHING YOU COULD DO TO UPSET ME," SHE SAID WITH A SMILE FILLED WITH LOVE.

"I HAVE DONE SOMETHING AGAINST THE DON..."

"BUT..."

"PLEASE!" HE SAID AS HE PRESSED HIS FINGER TO HER LIPS TO SILENCE HER. "I DO NOT WANT TO DISCUSS IT. THAT IS NOT HOW I WANT TO SPEND MY LAST MOMENTS WITH YOU" HE SAID AS HE STROKED HER SOFT FACE GENTLY. "KNOW THAT I LOVE YOU MORE THAN MY OWN LIFE. WHAT I DID WAS FOR LOVE. WHAT I DID WAS FOR YOU AND THE CHILD YOU CARRY."

HER EYES DANCED WITH JOY. "YOU KNOW?"

"YES MY LOVE, I HAVE KNOWN FOR SOMETIME. I COULD SEE IT IN YOUR FACE, YOUR SKIN GLOWS LIKE THE MORNING SUN," HE SAID AS HE RUBBED HER SMALL BELLY.

"I WANTED TO TELL YOU WHEN THE TIME WAS RIGHT."

"YOU MUST BELIEVE ME, MY LOVE, YOU HAVE TO LEAVE THIS PLACE. THERE IS NO TIME. A TICKET IS IN YOUR PURSE FOR THE 8:50 TRAIN, AND YOU MUST BE ON THAT TRAIN. TAKE THE ALLEY BEHIND US UNTIL YOU COME TO SEVERINO STREET. YOU WILL BE ABLE TO WALK TO THE STATION FROM THERE. YOU KNOW THIS WAY?"

"YES." SHE SAID AS THE TEARS STREAMED DOWN HER CHEEKS.

"GOOD, NOW LET US SPEAK OF MORE IMPORTANT THINGS" HE SAID WITH A SMILE. "IF IT IS A GIRL, NAME HER JOSEPHINE AND IF IT IS A BOY..."

"I WILL NAME HIM AFTER HIS FATHER" SHE INTERRUPTED.

"THANK YOU MY LOVE, I COULD ASK NO MORE OF THIS LIFE," HE SAID AS HE KISSED HER STOMACH. "TELL MY CHILD I WAS A GOOD MAN."

"YOU ARE A GOOD MAN, ROBERTO."

HE SMILED AT HER, THEN KISSED HER SOFT CRIMSON LIPS. HIS HAND ROAMED THROUGH HER GOLDEN HAIR AS THE SOFT CURLS WRAPPED AROUND HIS FINGERS. KISSING HER WAS HEAVEN AND HE SWORE HE HEARD ANGELS SING OFF IN THE DISTANCE. THEY HELD EACH OTHER IN A LOVING EMBRACE, UNTIL THE CLOCK CHIMED THE EIGHTH HOUR.

"I MUST OPEN THE SHOP AND YOU MUST HURRY TO MAKE THE TRAIN."

HE ROSE FROM THE BED, CLOSED HER SUITCASE AND WALKED IN A HURRY TO THE BACK DOOR. HE OPENED THE DOOR SLOWLY AND PEERED ALONG THE COBBLESTONE PATH. IT WAS VACANT EXCEPT FOR A BLACK AND GREY CAT IN PURSUIT OF A SMALL FIELD MOUSE.

"GO AND DON'T LOOK BACK," HE SAID AS HE PLACED THE SUITCASE IN HER HANDS AND USHERED HER OUT THE DOOR.

SHE LEANED IN, KISSED HIS LIPS ONCE MORE, AND THEN QUICKLY WALKED DOWN THE ALLEY. HE LISTENED TO HER FOOTSTEPS AS THEY ECHOED OFF THE STONEWALLS. HE THEN CLOSED THE DOOR, DREW A DEEP BREATH AS HE MADE THE SIGN OF THE CROSS, AND PRAYED FOR HER SAFETY.

A KNOCK AT THE ENTRANCE PULLED HIM FROM HIS PRAYER. HE SWALLOWED HARD, THEN MADE HIS WAY TO THE FRONT OF THE SHOP. HE COULD SEE THE TWO TALL SHADOWS LOOM OVER THE DOOR. ROBERTO GLANCED OUT THE WINDOW AND NOTICED HOW HIS FELLOW SHOP OWNERS HAD CROSSED TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STREET TO AVOID THE MEN AT HIS DOOR. NO ONE DARED ACKNOWLEDGE THE EXISTENCE OF THE DEVIL'S HAND, FOR FEAR IT WOULD LAND ON THEIR DOOR NEXT.

HIS HAND TREMBLED AS THE UNHOOKED CHAIN CLANKED AGAINST THE THICK WOOD. SLOWLY HE TURNED THE HANDLE AND PULLED THE DOOR OPEN. THE OLD RUSTY HINGES CREAKED LOUDLY. HE SHIVERED AND DEEP INSIDE, HE KNEW THIS DOOR THAT WAS ONCE A GATEWAY TO HEAVEN WAS NOW A PORTAL TO HELL.

"GOOD MORNING, ANTONIO. HELLO, BRUNO!" ROBERTO TRIED TO SOUND CHEERFUL.

"IT IS FOR US!" ANTONIO SAID, AS HE WALKED INTO THE BUILDING. HIS PARTNER, BRUNO, WHO WAS MUCH TALLER AND WIDER, STROLLED IN BEHIND HIM.

THE TOWN WHISPERED ABOUT THESE TWO EXTENSIONS OF DON SALVATORE, AND BOTH WERE FEARED FOR THE TORTURE THEY INFLICTED. AS HIS HAND, THEY PUNISHED ANY MAN OR WOMAN WHO DID NOT OBEY THE DON'S COMMANDS.

"WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU GENTLEMEN THIS MORNING?" ROBERTO SAID AS HE STEPPED BEHIND THE COUNTER, MORE FOR THE COMFORT OF SPACE BETWEEN THEM THAN ANYTHING.

"DO YOU HAVE WHAT YOU PROMISED?"

ROBERTO PAUSED FOR A MOMENT. HE KNEW HE COULD NOT TALK HIS WAY OUT OF THIS, AND HIS LIFE WAS RACING TO ITS FINAL MOMENT LIKE A HORSE CHARGING FOR THE FINISH LINE. HIS ONLY HOPE WAS THAT HE COULD STALL LONG ENOUGH FOR FRANCESCA TO MAKE IT TO THE TRAIN SAFELY.

"YOUR NAME IS ANTONIO, BUT THEY CALL YOU 'DEMONI DI FUOCO', THE DEVIL'S FLAME, YES?" HE MOVED CLOSER TO THE CASH REGISTER TO BUY A FEW MORE MOMENTS. HE HAD EMPTIED IT THE NIGHT BEFORE, AND PLACED ALL THE MONEY IN FRANCESCA'S PURSE. AS A DEAD MAN, HE HAD NO NEED FOR COIN.

"YES THEY DO." ANTONIO SMILED. HIS FACE WAS AGED AND LEATHERY, WHICH ADDED TO HIS NATURAL DEMONIC APPEARANCE. "YOU HAVE DONE YOUR HOMEWORK."

"YOU COULD SAY."

"DO YOU KNOW WHY THEY CALL ME 'DEMONI DI FUOCO'?"

ROBERTO'S MOUTH WENT DRY. "BECAUSE YOU LIKE TO BURN THINGS." ROBERTO'S VOICE SHOOK MORE THAN HE WISHED. HE THOUGHT AT ANY MINUTE HE WOULD PISS HIS PANTS FROM FEAR.

"AH, CLOSE!" ANTONIO SAID AS HE IN LEANED CLOSE TO ROBERTO, HIS BREATH SOUR LIKE OLD CIGARS. "I LIKE TO BURN PEOPLE!" HE SAID AS HE FLASHED AN EVIL GRIN THAT EXPOSED HIS YELLOW TEETH. "THE SOUND OF THEIR FLESH CRACKLING AS IT MELTS FROM THE BONE, THE TORTURED SCREAM, IT IS LIKE NO OTHER!"

ANTONIO RELEASED A LOUD HAUNTED LAUGH.

ROBERTO FLINCHED, HE KNEW THE MAN STANDING IN FRONT OF HIM WAS EVIL, BUT THE THOUGHT OF HIM BURNING SOMETHING AS SPECIFICALLY AS A HUMAN BEING WAS SICKENING. HE FELT HIS STOMACH WRENCH AND WAS GLAD HE HAD NOT EATEN BREAKFAST, OR HE MIGHT HAVE VOMITED.

ROBERTO HAD HOPED THAT IF DON SALVATORE DISCOVERED HOW HE HAD HELPED THE AMERICAN DON, HE WOULD BE ABLE TO BUY HIS SAFETY WITH MONEY. BUT DON SALVATORE WAS NOT INFLUENCED BY CASH, AND IT WAS NOT LONG BEFORE THE ORDER WAS GIVEN FOR ANTONIO TO BURN THE BUSINESS, ALONG WITH THE COBBLER INSIDE.

ROBERTO NOW REALIZED BY THE LOOK IN ANTONIO'S EYES THAT HIS FLESH WOULD BE THE MATCH TO LIGHT THE FIRE AND BRING HIS FAMILY HERITAGE TO ASHES. MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS OF HISTORY WOULD SOON TUMBLE AROUND HIM IN A HEAP OF FLAMES AND RUBBLE.

"BRUNO, POUR." ANTONIO'S COUNTERPART OPENED HIS LONG TRENCH COAT AND UNSTRAPPED TWO TALL CANS. THE MOTION CAUSED THE FLUID TO SLOSH INSIDE.

"COME HAVE A SEAT." ANTONIO GRABBED ROBERTO BY THE BACK OF HIS SHIRT AND DRAGGED HIM TO THE CHAIR. "NOW PUT YOUR ARMS ON THE TABLE LIKE YOU ARE WORKING." ROBERTO SAT FROZEN, NOT WILLING TO MOVE. ANTONIO GRABBED ROBERTO'S RIGHT HAND AND SLAMMED IT ON TOP OF THE WORKBENCH.

"BRUNO!" ANTONIO MOTIONED WITH HIS HEAD FOR HIS PARTNER TO HOLD THE COBBLER AGAINST THE CHAIR. ANTONIO REACHED INTO THE METAL CAN. THE SOUND OF NAILS GRATED AGAINST THE EDGE AS HE PULLED THEM OUT. ROBERTO TRIED TO STRUGGLE AGAINST BRUNO, BUT HE WAS TWICE HIS SIZE. HE WATCHED AS ANTONIO PLAYED WITH THE HANDFUL OF NAILS.

ROBERTO NOTICED HIS HAMMER WAS ONLY A FEW INCHES AWAY. FOR A MOMENT HE THOUGHT MAYBE HE COULD HIT ANTONIO IN THE BALLS AND BRUNO IN THE HEAD, GIVING HIM TIME TO RUN AWAY TO BE WITH HIS LOVELY BRIDE AND WATCH HIS SON GROW TO BE A MAN.

HIS VISION DISTRACTED HIM UNTIL A LOUD SCREAM ERUPTED AND PULLED HIM BACK TO REALITY. HE LOOKED AROUND TO SEE WHO WAS IN AGONY. THEN THE PAIN RADIATED FROM HIS HAND AND HE REALIZED IT WAS HIS OWN SCREAM.

"YOU SHOULD BE HAPPY I AM NOT A VIOLENT MAN. I DO NOT BELIEVE IN TORTURE." ANTONIO DROVE ANOTHER NAIL INTO HIS HAND. ROBERTO SCREAMED AGAIN AS HE WATCHED THE BLOOD ERUPT FROM THE FRESH WOUND. ANOTHER, LOUDER YELL, WAS RELEASED AS ANTONIO DROVE TWO MORE NAILS INTO HIS OTHER HAND.

"NOW, NOW, YOU DON'T WANT TO DISTURB THE NEIGHBORS!" ANTONIO SHOVED A RAG INTO ROBERTO'S MOUTH TO QUIET THE FOUL WORDS THAT SPEWED FROM HIS MOUTH. "THERE, THAT IS BETTER."

ANTONIO REMOVED A LARGE SILVER FLASK FROM HIS PANT POCKET AND SLOWLY POURED THE LIQUID UP HIS VICTIM'S ARM. THE STRONG SMELL OF GASOLINE FILLED ROBERTO'S NOSE AND CAUSED HIM TO GAG. HE GASPED FOR AIR AND THE RAG FELL FROM HIS MOUTH.

"WOULD YOU LIKE A DRINK?" ANTONIO WAVED THE CANISTER UNDER HIS NOSE. "IT WILL MAKE THE PROCESS GO FASTER!" HE SAID WITH A LAUGH. "SEE BRUNO, I AM NOT A VIOLENT MAN, I AM A MAN OF MERCY!" THE TWO MEN CHUCKLED AT THE JOKE.

ROBERTO TURNED HIS HEAD TO FIND CLEAN AIR FROM THE STRONG SMELL OF GASOLINE. HE FOUGHT TO REMAIN CONSCIOUS FOR FEAR OF WHAT ELSE THEY WOULD DO TO HIM.

"IT'S DONE." BRUNO'S SAID WITH A DEEP, RASPY VOICE AS HE TOSSED BOTH CANS DOWN BY THE FRONT DOOR.

ROBERTO LOOKED AROUND THE ROOM, A TRAIL OF GASOLINE SPANNED FROM THE TABLE WHERE HE SAT TOWARD THE BACK OF THE SHOP, THEN FLOWED ALONG EACH WALL AND STOPPED SHORT OF THE DOOR.

"ANY FINAL WORDS?" ANTONIO SAID AS HE PULLED OUT ANOTHER FLASK. HE OPENED IT SLOWLY, THEN DREW A DEEP BREATH. "NO? PROBABLY BETTER," HE POURED A THIN TRAIL FROM ROBERTO TO THE DOOR, THEN DISCARDED THE CANISTER.

"OH, AND VERY SORRY WE CANNOT STAY FOR YOUR FINALE. AS A FAVOR, FROM THE DON TO YOU, WE WILL SEE THAT BEAUTIFUL BRIDE OF YOURS OFF PROPERLY," HE SAID AS HE LOOKED AT HIS WATCH. "I THINK WE HAVE JUST ENOUGH TIME TO MAKE THE 8:50 TRAIN TO ALESSANDRIA." HE FLASHED AN EVIL SMILE AT THE COBBLER.

ROBERTO'S FACE RAN PALE, HIS HEART RACED AT THE THOUGHT OF HIS FRANCESCA BEING HANDLED BY THESE MONSTERS. HE STRUGGLED AGAINST THE NAILS. EVERY MOVEMENT CAUSED A NEW ERUPTION OF PAIN AND BLOOD TO FLOW FROM HIS WOUNDS. THE BLOOD STREAMED OVER THE EDGE OF THE BENCH INTO THE POOL OF GASOLINE. THE SIGHT MADE HIM LIGHT-HEADED AND HIS VISION BLURRED.

ANTONIO PULLED A CIGAR FROM HIS POCKET. HIS YELLOW TEETH TORE THE END OF THE CIGAR LIKE A TIGER RIPPING AT FLESH. IN A MIX OF SPIT AND SALIVA HE LAUNCHED THE TIP AT ROBERTO. HE PULLED THE MATCH ACROSS THE WOODEN BOX AND THE FLAME REFLECTED IN HIS EYES. THE DEVIL HIMSELF HAD OPENED THE GATES OF HELL, AND ROBERTO COULD SEE THE FIERY INFERNO BEYOND ANTONIO'S COLD DARK EYES.

ANTONIO HELD THE MATCH TO HIS CIGAR UNTIL IT IGNITED THE TOBACCO. A CLOUD OF SMOKE ROLLED FROM HIS MOUTH AND THE DEVIL'S ANGEL SAVORED THE FLAVOR FOR A MOMENT BEFORE HE ALLOWED THE FLAMING STICK TO FALL TO THE FLOOR.

ROBERTO'S EYES WERE TRANSFIXED ON THE BURNING STICK AS IT SLOWLY TUMBLED TO THE FLOOR. IN A FLASH OF LIGHT THE GASOLINE FUMES IGNITED AND THE TRAIL OF FIRE MOVED LIKE A RAGING RIVER TOWARD HIM. AS HIS MIND FOCUSED ON HIS DEATH, HE BARELY HEARD THE DOOR SLAM AS THE DEVILS RETREATED OUTSIDE WHERE THEY WAITED FOR THE GATES OF HELL TO CLAIM THE COBBLER.

"ARE YOU HUNGRY?" ANTONIO ASKED BRUNO AS HE LISTENED FOR SWEET SOUND OF DEATH'S SCREAM TO RESONATE FROM WITHIN.

"SURE." BRUNO GRUNTED

"THEY HAVE A NICE CAFÉ AT THE TRAIN STATION"

ROBERTO RELEASED A LOUD AND PAIN-FILLED SCREAM FROM THE INFERNO
BEHIND THE DOOR. THE SOUND BROUGHT AN EVIL GRIN TO ANTONIO'S FACE AND HE
PUFFED HIS CHEST UP.

"ANOTHER GOOD DAY, BRUNO!"

CHAPTER 2

ROSARIO BERETTA STOOD PROUD OVERLOOKING HIS VINEYARD. FROM THIS VIEW HE FELT LIKE A GIANT, EVEN THOUGH HIS STOUT BODY ONLY CAST A MUCH SHORTER FIGURE. HIS MANY YEARS OF TOILING OUTSIDE HAD AGED HIS HANDSOME FACE AND A FEW STRANDS OF GREY ACCENTED HIS DARK HAIR. HARD WORK MAY HAVE AGED HIM, BUT LIKE HIS VINE BELOW, HE WAS HEALTHY AND FULL OF LIFE. HE DREW IN A DEEP BREATH AND ENJOYED THE VIEW OF ROLLING HILLS FILLED WITH VIBRANT GREEN ROWS OF GRAPES. NOT MANY, ESPECIALLY DURING THE TRYING YEARS OF A WORLD WAR, WERE ABLE TO MAKE THEIR DREAMS COME TRUE. HE HAD IT ALL, A GOOD LIVING, A THRIVING BUSINESS AND A HOUSE FILLED WITH HIS CHILDREN AND HIS BEAUTIFUL WIFE, SOFIA. HE ALLOWED HIS MIND TO DRIFT BACK OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS. THE ELDEST SON, MARCUS, HAD LEFT TO SERVE IN THE WAR WITH GERMANY AGAINST THE REST OF THE WORLD, BUT NOW THE TIDES HAD SHIFTED AND ITALY FOUGHT WITH THE ALLIES AGAINST HITLER. HE SHIVERED AT THE MEMORY OF BATTLE, HAVING SERVED HIS TIME IN WORLD WAR I. THE FACES OF HIS FALLEN COMRADES PLAYED LIKE A FILM IN HIS MIND. EACH MEMORY LEFT A SCAR THAT WOULD NEVER HEAL.

HE SAID A SILENT PRAYER FOR MARCUS. HE KNEW HE WAS EXPERIENCING THE SAME EVILS AND HE PRAYED THE YOUNG MAN WOULD FACE HIS DEMONS WITH HONOR AND RETURN HOME SOON TO HIS FAMILY WHERE HE WAS SORELY MISSED.

SINCE THE CHANGE OF SIDES AND THE FALL OF MUSSOLINI, RUMORS SPREAD THAT THE WAR WOULD END BY SUMMER. AND ROSARIO KNEW WHAT CAME AFTER A WAR. HE FELT THE EXCITEMENT RISE INSIDE HIS CHEST. COMMERCE BOOMED AFTER A WAR. PEOPLE CELEBRATED EVERYTHING AND WHAT IS A CELEBRATION WITHOUT WINE. LIFE WAS GOOD, BUT SOON IT WOULD BE EVER BETTER. HIS WIFE WOULD HAVE HER SON HOME AND HE WOULD SEE HIS DREAM COME TO A REALITY.

AS ROSARIO MADE HIS WAY DOWN THE HILL FROM HIS PERCH OVERLOOKING HIS LITTLE KINGDOM, HE SMILED AT HIS HANDY WORK. HE HAD TURNED THE MODEST ESTATE HIS WIFE INHERITED INTO A THRIVING WINERY. AND AT THE BASE OF THE TRAIL WAS HIS EXPANDED ESTATE: HIS CASTLE AMONG THE CLOUDS, A CASTLE THAT HE SPENT THE LAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS BUILDING.

WHEN HE AND SOFIA FIRST ARRIVED IN THE EARLY 1920'S THE HOUSE AND OUT BUILDING WERE OVERRUN WITH WEEDS AND ONLY A FEW ROWS OF VINES STILL

PRODUCED GRAPES. TOGETHER THEY WORKED AS A TEAM TO REBUILD WHAT HER UNCLE HAD LET FALL TO DECAY.

THE ONCE SMALL HOUSE REQUIRED SEVERAL ADDITIONS BEFORE IT COULD ACCOMMODATE THEIR FOUR SONS AND TWO DAUGHTERS. THOUGH IT WAS NOT AS GRAND AS THE WEALTHIEST OF THE TOWN, IT WAS A CASTLE TO ROSARIO AND SOFIA. IT WAS PERFECT IN EVERY WAY.

AS HE ENTERED THE HOUSE FROM THE STEPS THAT LEAD TO THE KITCHEN HE COULD HEAR HIS WIFE SOBBING QUIETLY IN THE DINING ROOM.

"BELLA MIA?" ROSARIO ASKED SOFIA.

SHE JUMPED AT THE SOUND OF HIS VOICE. HER HEART STUCK IN HER THROAT AND SHE QUICKLY WIPED HER FACE TO MAKE HERSELF MORE PRESENTABLE.

"WHAT IS THE MATTER BELLA MIA?" ROSARIO SAID AS HE SAT BESIDE HER. HE WRAPPED HIS ARM AROUND HER AND GENTLY STROKED HER SHOULDER. "WHY IS MY LOVE CRYING?" HE LOOKED DOWN AT HER HAND, HOLDING A LETTER STAINED WITH FRESH TEARS. "DID MARCUS SEND YOU ANOTHER LETTER?"

SOFIA NODDED. HE COULD SEE THE LINES OF WORRY IMPRINTED ON HER FOREHEAD.

"WHAT DOES THE LETTER SAY?" HE ASKED AS HE REMOVED IT FROM HER TIGHT GRIP.

DEAREST MAMA,

I MISS THE SMELL OF YOUR HOME COOKED MEALS. THE FOOD HERE IS TERRIBLE AND THE WINE, WHEN WE CAN FIND IT, TASTES MORE LIKE VINEGAR. I FOUND SOME GRAPES DURING OUR MARCH NORTH LAST MONTH AND WAS ABLE TO MAKE A SMALL AMOUNT OF GRAPPA. DO NOT TELL FATHER, HE WOULD BE ASHAMED AT HOW HORRIBLE IT TASTED. HOWEVER, IT WAS BETTER THAN WHAT THEY USUALLY SERVE.

I HAVE STOPPED COUNTING THE DAYS I HAVE BEEN GONE. AFTER THE SECOND CHRISTMAS AWAY I LOST HOPE OF EVER SEEING MY FAMILY AGAIN. THE DISTANCE BETWEEN REALITY AND HOME SEEMS TOO FAR TO REACH. KEEP PRAYING FOR ME, MY DEAREST MOTHER. PRAY GOD KEEPS ME SAFE AND DELIVERS ME HOME SOON.

PLEASE SEND MORE HOME-BAKED GOODS, A NEW BOOK AND SOME CIGARETTES. YOUR LETTERS & CARE PACKAGES KEEP HOPE ALIVE IN A WORLD THAT GROWS DARKER AND LONELIER EACH DAY.

GIVE MY LOVE TO THE REST OF THE FAMILY,

LOVE,

MARCUS

"OH BELLA MIA," HE SAID AS HE HELD HER TIGHTLY. "HE WILL COME HOME SOON, I PROMISE! WE HAVE SWITCHED SIDES AND THE WAR WILL BE OVER SOON. I KNOW IT SEEMS LIKE FOREVER, BUT LOOK HOW HE WRITES, YOUR...OUR BOY IS STILL ALIVE," HE SAID AS HE LIFTED HER CHIN AND GENTLY HE WIPED HER FACE WITH HIS HANDKERCHIEF. ONLY A FEW FINE LINES OF AGE ACCENTED HER EYES, YET SHE WAS JUST AS BEAUTIFUL AS THE DAY HE FIRST SAW HER.

"I MISS HIM SO." SOFIA SAID AS A STRAY TEAR CASCADED DOWN HER CHEEK AS HE KISSED HER FOREHEAD.

"I KNOW YOU DO. HE WILL BE HOME SOON. THEY CANNOT KEEP HIM FOREVER." HE ROCKED HER SLOWLY. "WHAT WERE YOU THINKING WHEN I CAME IN AND STARTLED YOUR THOUGHTS?"

"I WAS REMEMBERING THE DAY HE LEFT."

"YES, AND WHAT PART?" ROSARIO SAID SOFTLY.

"HOW HE SET THE OTHERS AFIRE WITH HIS COMMENT OF BEING MY FAVORITE."

"AH, YES!" HE SMILED AT THE MEMORY. "THAT MADE YOU GIGGLE, YES?"

"YES, HE ALWAYS MADE ME LAUGH." SOFIA SAID.

"THEN LET HIS WORDS RETURN THE SMILE, BECAUSE THAT IS WHAT HE WOULD WANT FOR HIS MAMA!"

SOFIA SIGHED, SHE KNEW HE WAS RIGHT.

"HE NEVER LIKED TO SEE YOU CRY, EVEN AS A BABY HE WOULD DO SOMETHING TO MAKE YOU LAUGH!" ROSARIO CHUCKLED. "YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU FELL AND BROKE YOUR ARM? YOU WERE CRYING IN PAIN. HE WANTED SO BADLY TO MAKE YOU HAPPY, SO HE FILLED HIS MOUTH FULL OF GRAPES AND WALKED TOWARD YOU LIKE A GROWLING MONSTER. HIS LITTLE VOICE WAS BARELY AUDIBLE." ROSARIO CHUCKLED AGAIN FROM THE VISION. "THE JUICE DRIPPED FROM HIS LIPS AS HE MUMBLED."

ROSARIO CONTINUED TO TALK ABOUT MARCUS AS A YOUNG BOY UNTIL HE FELT SOFIA'S TENSION FADE AWAY. SOON HE HAD HER SMILING, REMEMBERING GOOD MEMORIES. HE QUIETLY TUCKED THE LETTER INTO HIS SHIRT, SO HE COULD PLACE IT WITH THE OTHERS LATER THAT NIGHT WHEN SHE WAS ASLEEP.

"NOW DO YOU FEEL BETTER?"

"YES, A LITTLE." SOFIA SAID AS SHE DRIED HER EYES.

"IT IS HARD TO BE AWAY FROM FAMILY, BELLA MIA. WE ARE HIS LIFELINE. YOU SHOULD WRITE HIM RIGHT AWAY. WRITE OF HAPPY THINGS. TELL OF HIS SIBLINGS AND WHAT THEY ARE DOING. MAKE HIM FEEL AS IF HE IS HERE WITH US, LIVING AMONG THE FAMILY. LATER TODAY, I WILL GO BUY HIM A NEW BOOK AND A CASE OF CIGARS. BY TOMORROW MORNING WE WILL HAVE A CARE PACKAGE FIT FOR A KING. IT WILL BRIGHTEN HIS SPIRIT AND YOURS!" HE SAID AS HE KISSED HER

FOREHEAD AGAIN. "WE MUST ALL STAY STRONG FOR HIM AND HAVE FAITH THAT GOD WILL BRING HIM HOME TO US SOON."

"YES CARA MIA, I SHALL START BAKING HIS FAVORITE COOKIES NOW," SHE SAID AS SHE PULLED HER LIMP BODY FROM THE CHAIR. HER HEART WAS STILL HEAVY AND HER BODY FELT AS IF IT HAD BEEN ROBBED OF LIFE'S ENERGY.

"AH, THAT IS MY GIRL!" ROSARIO WATCHED HER LEAVE THE ROOM. HE COULD TELL HIS PEP TALK ONLY HELPED A LITTLE. THE LONGER MARCUS WAS GONE, THE GREATER HIS CHANCES FOR THE WORST TO HAPPEN. HE TOO PRAYED FOR THE YOUNG MAN TO COME BACK SAFELY. TO SEE HIS BELOVED TORTURED BY MARCUS' ABSENCE WAS HEART-BREAKING.

HE KNEW IT WOULD TAKE MANY YEARS TO RECOVER FROM THE HAUNTED DREAMS OF BATTLE. EVEN NOW, MANY YEARS LATER, IF ROSARIO HEARD THE LOUD SOUND OF A CAR BACK-FIRING, A FLOOD OF NEATLY TUCKED MEMORIES WOULD EMERGE AND OPEN THE DOOR TO WEEKS OF NIGHTMARES.

HE PACED THE FLOOR THINKING OF THE ATROCITIES MARCUS MUST ENDURE. HOW HE LONGED FOR THE WAR TO BE OVER AND HIS FAMILY ONCE AGAIN REUNITED OVER A TABLE FILLED WITH MARCUS' FAVORITE DISHES, AND TO HAVE THE WORRY WASHED AWAY FROM HIS BEAUTIFUL WIFE'S FACE.

HE WALKED OVER TO THE WINDOW AND GAZED DOWN THE LONG DUSTY ROAD, HIS MEMORIES OF THE DAY MARCUS LEFT FLOATED AROUND HIS MIND, ALONG WITH HIS EXPERIENCES FROM WORLD WAR I. HIS GUT WRENCHED. HE WOULD NEVER WISH THE HORROR OF WAR ON EVEN HIS WORST ENEMIES.

HE PAUSED FOR A MOMENT. THERE WAS ONE MAN WHO DESERVED THE WRATH OF WAR. A VISION OF HIS FACE CONSUMED HIS THOUGHTS AND ROSARIO'S CALLOUSED HANDS CLINCHED TIGHT AS ANGER FILLED HIS HEART.

"SOME PEOPLE DO DESERVE THE MISERY OF A WAR." ROSARIO MUMBLED TO HIMSELF. "SOME DESERVE A SLOW PAINFUL DEATH." HE SAID QUIETLY AS HE LOOKED IN THE DIRECTION HIS WIFE JUST LEFT, THE SMELL OF HER SWEET PERFUME STILL LINGERED IN THE AIR. "AND SHE WAS WORTH IT!"

CHAPTER 3

"THEY ARE HERE, SIR."

"WHO?" THE SHORT, FAT MAN REPLIED NONCHALANTLY, HIS MIND LOST IN THOUGHT.

ANTONIO WAITED PATIENTLY FOR DON SALVATORE TO PROCESS HIS THOUGHTS AS HE SPRINKLED A FEW MORE KERNELS ACROSS THE GROUND FOR THE PIGEONS. THIS WAS THE DON'S PLACE TO THINK. AN ELEGANT COURTYARD FILLED WITH FRUIT TREES AND FLOWERS. IT WAS DESIGNED TO BE A PLACE OF SERENITY, AN IRONY SINCE THE OWNER WAS NEVER KNOWN TO BE A MAN OF PEACE.

"OH YES, YES, I REMEMBER." HE RESPONDED. "BRING THEM IN." DON SALVATORE MUTTERED. "HAVE CARINA SET OUT A TRAY OF WINE AND FRUIT."

ANTONIO WAITED IN SILENCE FOR HIS FINAL DISMISSAL. THE SOFT SOUND OF THE WIND GLIDED ACROSS THE LEAVES AND THE BIRDS SQUAWKED AT EACH OTHER IN A RACE TO EAT THE GRAIN SCATTERED ON THE GREY STONE PATH. DON SALVATORE WAS DEEP IN THOUGHT, CALCULATING HIS NEXT MOVE. SOMEONE HAD SOMETHING HE WANTED AND HE WOULD STOP AT NOTHING TO GET IT. ANTONIO KNEW THIS WAS NOT A GOOD TIME FOR A NEW BUSINESS OFFER. BUT THE DON NEVER PASSED AN OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE MORE MONEY. AFTER ALL, WHAT ELSE WAS THERE IN LIFE?

"SO MANY COME ASKING FOR MORE THAN THEY OFFER. I AM TIRED OF MY TIME BEING WASTED." THE DON SAID AS HE LOOKED UP AT THE TALL, MUSCULAR MAN WHO STARED ATTENTIVELY AT HIS MASTER. ANTONIO'S DARK BROWN HAIR AND LIGHTER SKIN TONE GAVE AWAY THE FACT HIS ANCESTRY WAS FROM NORTHERN ITALY.

"DESPITE YOUR RECENT FAILINGS ANTONIO, YOU MAY STAY FOR THIS MEETING." THE DON GRUMBLED.

"YES, SIGNORE, IF YOU WISH." ANTONIO REPLIED. DON SALVATORE REACHED INTO HIS BAG OF BIRD FOOD AND SCATTERED MORE SEEDS FOR HIS FEATHERED FRIENDS. "I AM IN NO MOOD FOR A LONG MEETING, SEE TO IT THEY KNOW THEY MUST BE BRIEF." THE DON SAID AS HE WAVED HIS HAND TO DISMISS ANTONIO.

ANTONIO WALKED OUT OF THE PEACEFUL COURTYARD AND INTO THE EXPANSIVE MANSION. THE ELABORATE HOME WAS LAVISHLY DECORATED. EVERY STUCCO WALL WAS FILLED WITH PRICELESS ART AND EACH ROOM CONTAINED WELL PRESERVED, CENTURY-OLD FURNISHINGS. MOST EVERYTHING THE DON OWNED WAS EITHER INHERITED OR EARNED BY AIDING THE RIGHT POLITICAL PEOPLE. OF

COURSE, THERE WERE SOME ITEMS THAT HE TOOK AS PAYMENT FROM AN INSUBORDINATE DEBTOR. THOUGH THE BUILDING ITSELF WAS BY FAR THE MOST EXPENSIVE IN THE REGION, ITS CONTENTS WERE WORTH NEARLY DOUBLE.

ANTONIO ENTERED THE ROUND, DOMED FOYER, WHERE THE TWO MEN WAITED HIS RETURN. THEY STOOD CLOSE TOGETHER IN A QUIET CONVERSATION. THE YOUNGER WAS A TALL, WELL-BUILT, GOOD-LOOKING MAN IN HIS MID TO LATE TWENTIES. THE OTHER WAS OLDER, SHORT, WITH GREY HAIR, DARK EYES AND HIS AGED SKIN HAD DEEP LINES ACROSS HIS BROW. ANTONIO ESTIMATED HE WAS CLOSING IN ON SIXTY, BUT COULD BE AS YOUNG AS FIFTY.

THEY WOULD HAVE SEEMED LIKE THE USUAL HUSTLERS IN SEARCH OF MONEY AND THE DON'S BLESSING FOR ANOTHER CRAZY BUSINESS IDEA, BUT THE SHOW OF STYLISH CLOTHING AND EXPENSIVE GOLD JEWELRY THAT DRIPPED FROM EVERY LIMB WAS A SIGN THEY AT LEAST WOULD NOT BE EXPECTING THE DON TO FRONT ALL THE MONEY. A BONUS IN THEIR FAVOR.

ANTONIO NODDED TOWARD BRUNO IN THE ROOM ADJACENT TO THE ENTRY. IT WAS HIS SIGNAL FOR BRUNO TO PULL HIS GUN. BRUNO LOADED A ROUND INTO THE CHAMBER AND THE SOUND CAUSED THE TWO MEN TO END THEIR PERSONAL CONVERSATION. THEIR EYES WIDENED, AS THE NATURAL INSTINCT OF DANGER ALERTED THE REST OF THE SENSES. THE HAIR ON THEIR ARMS RAISED, THE CALM REPETITION OF BREATHING ACCELERATED AND MUSCLES TENSED WITH ANTICIPATION OF WHAT THEIR FATE MIGHT BE.

"I UNDERSTAND YOU ARE HERE TO VISIT WITH THE DON. HE IS A VERY BUSY MAN AND HAS ASKED ME TO INQUIRE MORE AS TO THE PURPOSE OF YOUR VISIT TODAY?" ANTONIO'S VOICE WAS FIRM AND SMOOTH, LEAVING NO ROOM FOR ARGUMENT.

"WE HAVE A BUSINESS PROPOSITION FOR THE DON." THE YOUNGER MAN RESPONDED ARROGANTLY.

"THAT IS NOT AN UNUSUAL REQUEST. IN FACT YOU'RE PROBABLY THE FIFTH PERSON THIS WEEK, AND IT IS ONLY TUESDAY AFTERNOON. BUT I AM SURE YOUR BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY IS DIFFERENT." ANTONIO SAID AS HE PULLED A BOX OF MATCHES AND A CIGAR OUT OF HIS POCKET. HIS TONE REMAINED EVEN. "SOMEHOW YOU WILL HELP THE DON AMASS A WEALTH UNKNOWN TO HIM." ANTONIO SAID AS HE RAISED HIS HANDS TO DISPLAY THE LUXURY THAT SURROUNDED THEM.

THE OLD MAN FOLLOWED THE GESTURE AND DREW IN A SLIGHT BREATH. THE HIGH ARCHED CEILING WAS PAINTED WITH FRESCOS. GOLD FILIGREE-TRIMMED PILLARS ACCENTED THE FOUR ARCHWAYS THAT LED TO OTHER AREAS OF THE EXPANSIVE ESTATE.

ANTONIO COULD SEE THE OLDER MAN UNDERSTOOD HIS MEANING. "I AM SURE THE DON WOULD FIND HIMSELF DESTITUTE IF NOT FOR YOUR OFFER OF TREMENDOUS WEALTH." ANTONIO FLASHED A GRIN AT BRUNO. THEY EXCHANGED SMILES. THEY

WERE ENJOYING THE GAME. "SO, LET ME ASK YOU AGAIN, AND PLEASE DO NOT WASTE MY TIME ANY FURTHER, WHAT IS THE NATURE OF YOUR BUSINESS WITH THE DON?"

THE YOUNG MAN ROLLED HIS EYES AT HIS INTERROGATOR. BRUNO STEPPED CLOSER AND PLACED HIS GUN AGAINST THE YOUNG MAN'S HEAD.

"DOES THE CAT HAVE YOUR TONGUE? SPEAK!" ANTONIO SAID FORCEFULLY.

THE YOUNGER MAN DIDN'T FLINCH. HE HAD BEEN IN WORSE SITUATIONS. "TELL THE DON THAT THE SON OF VINCENT, HIS LATE BROTHER, IS HERE TO INTRODUCE HIMSELF AND OFFER AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXACT REVENGE."

ANTONIO NOTICED HOW CALM THE MAN WAS EVEN IN THE FACE OF DEATH. A QUALITY NOT TYPICALLY FOUND IN THEIR USUAL VISITORS.

"INTERESTING TALE. HOW CAN I BELIEVE YOU ARE...?" ANTONIO SAID AS HE LOOKED AT BRUNO QUIZZICALLY, "WHOEVER'S NEPHEW?"

"THE DON'S NEPHEW!" THE YOUNG MAN REPLIED. HE PUFFED HIS BROAD CHEST AND STIFFENED HIS BODY READY FOR A FIGHT.

"YEAH, SURE! SO HOW DO I KNOW YOU ARE THE DON'S LONG LOST DEAD NEPHEW?" ANTONIO SAID COMICALLY. HE WAS PLAYING THE GUY. TRYING TO GET A RISE OUT OF HIM SO HE HAD A REASON TO SHOOT HIM.

"WOW, SO THE DON HAS AN IGNAFUCK AS A WATCH DOG. THAT IS DISAPPOINTING!" THE YOUNG MAN RESPONDED.

"WHO THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, YOU LITTLE PRICK!" ANTONIO SAID AS HE STEPPED CLOSER, HIS TEMPER FLARED.

"SINCE YOU FAILED 'FAMILY 101', I WILL SPELL IT OUT FOR YOU."

"EASY! EASY!" THE OLD MAN SAID SOFTLY AS HE PLACED HIS MUCH SMALLER STATURE BETWEEN THE TWO YOUNG MEN. "PLEASE, SIGNORE ANTONIO. WE ARE HERE TO BRING PEACE TO A TROUBLED HEART. WE MEAN NO HARM OR INSULT TO THE HOUSE OF DON SALVATORE," THE OLD MAN SAID AS HE SMOOTHED THE LAPELS OF ANTONIO'S SUIT. "PLEASE, SIGNORE, WE ARE FAMILY WISHING TO RECONNECT WITH FAMILY. THAT IS ALL!"

ANTONIO STRAIGHTENED HIS TIE AND WAVED FOR BRUNO TO STEP DOWN. BRUNO TOOK TWO STEPS BACK. "YOU ARE LUCKY YOUR OLD MAN HAS MANNERS."

"YEA, REALLY LUCKY!" THE YOUNG MAN SAID. "IF THE DON DOES NOT RECOGNIZE THE SIMILARITIES," HE GESTURED TO HIS FACE "THEN PERHAPS HE WILL RECOGNIZE THIS." HE REACHED INTO THE FRONT POCKET OF HIS SILK PANTS.

THE MOTION CAUGHT BRUNO'S ATTENTION AND QUICKLY HE WAS BACK BESIDE THE MAN WITH HIS GUN PRESSED FIRMLY TO HIS TEMPLE, READY TO SPLATTER HIS BRAINS ACROSS THE WALL.

"EASY!" THE YOUNG MAN SAID AS HE SLOWLY RAISED HIS HANDS INTO THE AIR. "I HAVE NOTHING TO HARM THE DON. I AM NOT AN IDIOT!"

"NOR AM I!" ANTONIO RESPONDED. HE PULLED HIS GUN FROM INSIDE HIS COAT AND HELD IT TOWARD THE OLD MAN'S HEAD. "CHECK THEM BOTH FOR GUNS."

BRUNO PUT HIS GUN AWAY AND PATTED THEM DOWN WITH HIS GIANT HANDS. "CLEAN," HE GRUNTED.

"WHAT IS IN HIS POCKET?" ANTONIO ASKED. BRUNO REACHED INTO THE YOUNG MAN'S FRONT PANT POCKET TO RETRIEVE THE ITEM THAT WOULD PROVE HIS RELATION.

"ARE YOU ENJOYING YOURSELF? A LITTLE MORE TO THE LEFT. AH, YES, THAT'S NICE." THE YOUNG MAN SAID COMICALLY.

BRUNO QUICKLY RETRIEVED HIS HAND AND GAVE THE YOUNG MAN A DIRTY LOOK. HE STEPPED AWAY AND RESISTED THE URGE TO PUNCH THE ARROGANT PIECE OF SHIT. BRUNO KNEW HE WAS BEING PLAYED AND IF THIS PUNK REALLY WAS RELATED TO THE DON IT WOULD BE CONSIDERED AN INSULT TO THE DON'S FAMILY TO TOUCH HIM.

"HEY IT WAS GOOD FOR ME! COME ON, YOU ENJOYED IT TOO...RIGHT?" THE YOUNG MAN SAID TO ANTAGONIZE THE LARGE BRUTE.

"ARE YOU TRYING TO GET US KILLED, BE A LITTLE MORE RESPECTFUL?!" THE OLDER MAN CHIMED IN. "I HAVE NO DESIRE TO MAKE THE DON AN ENEMY!"

"WELL SAID, OLD MAN!" ANTONIO SAID AS HE LOOKED OVER THE OLDER GUEST. "WHAT IS YOUR NAME OLD MAN?" ANTONIO INQUIRED. HIS EYES WERE STILL MAKING MENTAL NOTES OF THE MAN'S APPEARANCE.

"PLEASE, TAKE NO OFFENCE, HOWEVER, I...WE WOULD PREFER TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS IN NAME." THE OLD MAN RESPONDED.

"WELL IF YOU DO NOT TRUST THE DON WITH YOUR NAMES, HE WILL NOT TRUST YOU WITH HIS BLESSING!"

"I UNDERSTAND, IF THE DON WILL JUST HEAR US OUT, WE..." THE OLD MAN STUMBLED ON HIS WORDS.

"IT SEEMS YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF YOUR SITUATION. IF I DO NOT APPROVE OF YOUR PRESENCE, YOU WILL NOT BE ALLOWED TO PROCEED ANY FURTHER!" ANTONIO REPLIED SHARPLY.

"MY APOLOGIES, IT IS NOT OUR INTENTION TO AGITATE YOU, SIGNORE..." THE OLDER MAN REPLIED.

"OH COME ON, I AM THE DON'S NEPHEW, I AM FAMILY AND YOUR IDLE THREATS MEAN NOTHING TO ME! I WILL SEE MY UNCLE...NOW!" THE YOUNGER MAN SHOUTED. HIS VOICE BELLOWED THROUGH THE MARBLE FLOORED ENTRY AND INTO THE COURTYARD. THE COMMOTION CAUSED THE BIRDS IN THE COURTYARD TO STIR INTO FLIGHT.

THIS TIME BRUNO STEPPED IN FRONT OF THE YOUNG MAN. THEY STOOD FACE TO FACE LIKE TWO BULLS READY FOR A FIGHT, BREATHING HEAVY, EYES ENGAGED, WAITING FOR THE OTHER TO MAKE THE FIRST MOVE.

"ANTONIO, WHERE IS THE WINE?" A DEEP VOICE SAID FROM THE COURTYARD.

"SO YOU ARE REALLY JUST HIS BITCH, NOT HIS WATCH DOG!" THE YOUNG MAN SAID ARROGANTLY AS HE PUSHED BRUNO AWAY FROM HIS FACE AND WALKED TOWARD THE COURTYARD BEHIND ANTONIO.

"YOU WILL REGRET YOUR INSULTS. YOU SHOULD CHOOSE YOUR NEXT MOVE WISELY," ANTONIO SAID AS HE GRABBED THE YOUNG MAN'S ARM.

"FOR THE RECORD, I'M NOT IMPRESSED BY YOU OR YOUR LITTLE ROTTWEILER EITHER," THE YOUNG MAN SAID AS HE MOTIONED HIS HEAD TOWARD BRUNO. "WHY DON'T YOU FETCH YOUR BOSS HIS WINE AND TAKE THE DOG OUT FOR A WALK WHILE THE GROWN-UPS GET ACQUAINTED?" HIS DARK EYES GLARED AT ANTONIO FOR A SECOND BEFORE HE BRUSHED HIS GRIP AWAY LIKE A PESKY FLY. "YOU COMING, OLD MAN?" THE YOUNG MAN SHOUTED OVER HIS SHOULDER.

"SURE," THE OLDER MAN SAID AS HE STRAIGHTENED HIS WHITE CUFFS. A LARGE GOLD AND DIAMOND RING ON HIS FINGER SPARKLED IN THE LIGHT AND CAUGHT ANTONIO'S EYE.

ANTONIO STOPPED THE OLD MAN AND THREATENED HIM. "YOU HAVE FIVE MINUTES TO MAKE YOUR CASE OR BRUNO WILL HAVE YOU FOR LUNCH. AND I WILL HAPPILY TAKE THAT RING FOR MY OWN."

"YOU REALLY SHOULD TRY WORKING ON YOUR SOCIAL SKILLS. THE DON TRULY DESERVES BETTER!" THE OLD MAN REPLIED BACK. "I SUGGEST YOU BRING THE WINE AND MAKE IT SNAPPY, I DON'T HAVE ALL DAY!" THE OLD MAN'S BLACK EYES MET ANTONIO'S. THOUGH THE OLD MAN EASILY PLAYED MEEK, WITHIN HIS SHORT STOCKY BODY, LAY A DARK SIDE. AND HIS WICKED TONE WAS UNMISTAKABLE. "OH, AND IF YOU EVER THREATEN ME OR MY FRIEND, I WILL PERSONALLY KILL YOU AND YOUR PUPPY! DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?" THE OLD MAN GROWLED.

ANTONIO ALLOWED THE OLD MAN TO PASS. HIS TEMPER WAS HIGH AND HE NEEDED TO BURN SOMETHING TO SOOTHE HIS MIND. BRUNO INSTINCTUALLY HANDED HIM A LIT CIGAR AND THE TWO WALKED INTO THE COURTYARD BEHIND THE UNWANTED GUESTS. THIS WAS THE FIRST TIME ANYONE FORCED THEIR WAY PAST BRUNO, ONLY SEEING HIM AS A 'PUPPY'. ANTONIO LEANED OVER AND WHISPERED SOMETHING TO BRUNO AS THEY FOLLOWED THE TWO MEN.

ANTONIO WATCHED FROM THE DOORWAY AS THE TWO MEN GREETED THE DON. THE YOUNGER MAN BOWED IN RESPECT AND KISSED DON SALVATORE'S RING. AFTER A FEW WORDS OF RESPECT THE YOUNG MAN PRESENTED A SMALL ROUND GOLD COIN.

THE DON STAGGERED BACK AND HIS HAND GRIPPED HIS CHEST AS IF HIS HEART WAS GIVING OUT. ANTONIO RUSHED INTO THE COURTYARD TO AID HIS MASTER, BUT THE YOUNG MAN HAD ALREADY GRABBED A CHAIR AND GENTLY RESTED THE DON IN THE SEAT TO ALLOW HIM TO CATCH HIS BREATH.

"ARE YOU OK, SIGNORE?" ANTONIO ASKED CALMLY.

THE DON WAVED HIS HAND TO WARD OFF ANY OTHER ASSISTANCE. HE SAT STILL AND HELD THE COIN IN HIS HAND. HIS THUMB GENTLY STROKED THE SURFACE AS A TEAR STREAKED DOWN HIS CHEEK. HE CLOSED HIS HAND AROUND THE SMALL TREASURE.

"HOW DID YOU COME TO POSSESS THIS COIN?" THE DON SAID AS HE CLEARED HIS THROAT AND REPOSITIONED HIS BODY IN THE CHAIR. HE LOOKED UP AT THE YOUNG MAN IN FRONT OF HIM AND EXAMINED THE FAMILIAR FEATURES OF THE CHISELED FACE. HIS SQUARED CHIN, DARK EYES, THICK BROWS AND LONG PREDOMINATE NOSE WAS LIKE HE LOOKED INTO THE FACE OF A GHOST.

"IT WAS GIVEN TO ME." THE YOUNG MAN SAID AS HE WENT TO HIS KNEES AGAIN SO HIS EYES WERE LEVEL WITH THE DON'S. "I KNEW SOME DAY I WOULD BE ABLE TO USE IT TO EXACT REVENGE."

"I'VE DONE NOTHING AGAINST YOU!" THE DON SAID. HIS VOICE WAS SHARP, CRUEL AND HIS EYES CONVEYED HIS ANGER.

"I KNOW." THE YOUNG MAN SAID. HIS ARROGANT TONE HAD MELTED AWAY TO A SOFT COMPASSIONATE VOICE.

"THEN WHY ARE YOU HERE? WHY DO YOU BRING BACK THE PAST AND THE DEAD? A PAST THAT HAS CAUSED ME MUCH GRIEF?"

"BECAUSE, I KNOW WHO KILLED HIM!" THE YOUNG MAN SAID WITH CONTEMPT IN HIS VOICE.