

VALENTINO
GRASSETTI



THE DAWN OF SIN

NOVEL



Valentino Grassetti

The Dawn Of Sin

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Grassetti V.

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A psychological thriller where a girl falls in love with an invisible entity that she can only perceive thanks to her brother, a boy with paranoid schizophrenia. Daisy, sixteen, is determined to pursue her dream of becoming a singer. After an audition she is chosen to participate in a talent show. During the show the judges begin to dig into her past by asking her uncomfortable, often cruel, questions and all in the name of the share. While she confesses in tears that she had a childhood marked by her father's suicide, an accident occurs that causes the violent death of one of the judges. Adriano, Daisy's brother with schizophrenia, knows that this is no accident. Someone, or something, is creeping into the girl's life: an evil and murderous entity that only he can perceive. Meanwhile Guido, a young and shy journalist in love with Daisy, thanks to the accidental discovery of a seventeenth-century manuscript, begins to investigate the life of Pardo Melchiorri, a crippled painter convicted of heresy by the Holy Inquisition. The investigation will lead Guido inside the walls of a Benedictine monastery, where he will discover that Daisy's fate is linked to that of the painter who died four centuries earlier ...

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This novel is a fantasy work. The characters mentioned are inventions of the author and are intended to give truth to the story. Any analogy with facts and people, living or disappeared, is absolutely coincidental.

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THE DAWN OF SIN

*I violate the canvas with nervous, impulsive and powerful brush strokes.
Dirty with truth.*
(Pardo Melchiorri. Painter)

Nicole Dubuisson went out of her way to delight Paolo Magnoli with certain erotic games he loved to define *très rare*, where sex was often a note on the side-lines of their complicated lives.

In bed, Nicole needed neither love nor perversion. No handcuffs, ropes or whips to injure the flesh and relieve the scars of the soul. No feeling, pure or indecent it was, gave her pleasure. Nicole enjoyed only enjoying the taste of revenge.

She had sex with Paolo Magnoli because she had an outstanding account with her husband. A list of small and large misunderstandings, a long-lasting mourning list had led her to hate her spouse to the point of keeping him close, but only to be able to get rid of her own way. In fact, Nicole had decided to ruin his life without stamped papers. No goodbye jobs brought up by the immoral fees of certain lawyers. If Paolo Magnoli made sense of the miseries of his life by having Nicole put a twelve heel in the ass, for her to indulge the erotic fantasies of a depraved lover represented nothing more than one of the many moves of a chess game played against the very concept of marriage. Such a castrating institution was to be punished. This was his recurring thought every time he left the house wearing lace panties and winking smiles.

The two lovers lived in Castelmuso, a village of fifteen thousand souls, a geographical point suspended in time placed on a hill close to the Adriatic Sea.

A sign informed tourists that the country was counted among the most beautiful villages in Italy. It stood on the highest point of a pleasant hill, where the houses, the sumptuous and decadent buildings, the vaults thrown between the alleys, the dangling arches were an invitation to touch with hand those stones full of the energy of all their ghosts.

Sandra, Paolo Magnoli's wife, drove her husband out of the house when the psychologist told her that the children were ready to give up the presence of such a degenerate father. A week after being sent away from the family, they found Paolo's body near the farmhouse *I Cavalieri*. An elastic tie dangled from the branch of a robust olive tree: his last tie.

The inhabitants of Castelmuso said that he got crazy because of what they called the *perfect poker*: four aces made of coca, whiskey, debts and vaginas that sucks Mastercard. Daisy, Paolo Magnoli's daughter, was twelve when the tragedy happened. Adriano one less. The two children never forgave their father for leaving such a cowardly life.

But this was now part of the past.

1

DAISY

SIXTEEN YEARS

The first Thursday of the month was a particularly grey day. The low clouds had settled on the roofs, the drizzle beating insistently on the school windows. Despite the weather Daisy Magnoli had the sun in her pocket. The news that had been waiting so long had come and he could not hide his enthusiasm. He did not attend the psychology course until the break.

He entered the classroom with his umbrella turned by the wind, his coat dripping, a cake decorated with a curl of silver ribbon and a smile that would have made that moment perfect. She was ready to report the *news of the news*. But first she had to rely on a ritual, something that would not break the *balances*, as she liked to call them. The thing was in fact rather delicate, and the girls were certainly not saints in earth. Especially those of the last year, sailed snakes that made no discounts to anyone.

Those who attended the psychology course knew that a good harmony or, on the contrary, a complete disagreement was necessary among the students. Daisy knew how much the contrasts trained the temperament and formed the character, animating the discussions. But in classroom B of the Giacomo Leopardi high school there was neither one nor the other. The relationships between the girls could be considered rather vague and indefinite, enough to induce them to pretend they were all more or less friends with each other.

Daisy took off her coat, placed the box she had just picked up from *Le Romainson* the desk, the pastry shop in front of the high school. She blew a tuft of soft, smooth hair that covered her forehead. He wanted to scrutinize the row of desks, from which his companions peered. They all wanted to know but none of them dared to ask.

The dessert, however, was a clue.

Daisy untied the bow and unwrapped the cake. He took a pack of plastic plates out of his backpack, removed the nylon and sliced the puff pastry delicacy.

The girls already disagreed about the dessert. Those on a diet thanked and even avoided tasting it. The others, convinced that food restrictions wasted more time than excess pounds, tasted the cake considering it something similar to their idea of paradise.

«Come on, tell us how it went!» Lorena Rossi asked excitedly appreciating the soft fragrance of the flan parisien, with its delicate lemon aftertaste.

"Oh well ... where do I start? Let me think," Daisy began, her eyes sparkling to chase exciting memories. He wanted to tell everything. But the *balances* were *balances*, and she had to be careful. He took a breath, the feeling that everything he had to say, the words, the phrases to conjugate, the letters themselves of the alphabet were struggling to come out. At that moment he had a strange fantasy: he imagined the sloping roof shape of the A to stick on the sternum, the curves of the B push behind, as well as the half-curves of the C and the concave and convex lines of the whole alphabet.

The little speech she had prepared seemed not to want to come out of her mouth. The imagination persisted in not making her give the News of the News. "How did it go ... right, then: I arrived with my mother at the Hotel Granduca, the four-star hotel along the main road" she finally managed to say. "There were a lot of people outside. At first I had an exaggerated squeeze, then

I calmed down and thought "dirty misery, here we will be sleeping." Fortunately I discovered that many had appeared. Guys sent from production. In

short, a little scene for the backstage to be seen on television. There were about fifty who were there for the audition. "

"Shit. The bell. We have little time, "Lorena nibbled her lips, urging the girls to finish the cake.

"And then? Then what happened?» Asked her friend anxiously, who started to gather plates and cutlery scattered around the counters.

"Then I went into the conference room" Daisy continued.

"They had set up a kind of rehearsal room. Low lights. Spotlights on the face, sweat, blush dripping on the cheeks and all that stuff there. There were three guys sitting at the table with bored faces and dead-bitch expressions. The base has started. I sang for a minute, I think. Then they took the music off. I stood still, didn't breathe and waited for the verdict, but they kicked me out without even looking at my face. I say, not even a look that it is one! I thought they didn't catch me. Point. End of the story. For two weeks I sent the big cams to fuck, then, all of a sudden, when I started to stop thinking about it ... surprise! She has arrived! She ran agile and graceful on the telephone line, I on the other side to pick up the phone. You, the call, finally came. "

Daisy held her breath before the words began to flow smoothly and weightlessly.

«Girls, hold on tight. I will participate in the next edition of *Next Generation*. »

A murmur of wonder meandered between the pews. A lot of compliments followed, some sincere, many forced arose, others ringing like a death bell.

Some girls, especially the most talented of the course, could not stand that someone like Daisy Magnoli, with a good but certainly not terrific scholastic profit, could overshadow them with that lightning bolt that cleared their ego a lot. Daisy thought it was normal. Jealousy was part of the game. And then she was used to being considered bulky.

Daisy Magnoli attended third year of high school. Despite the adolescence marked by the death of his father, it seemed the publicity of life.

Long and shiny hair, a smile that shone precious, blue eyes wide on the world, the expression of the face volubly shrewd or innocent depending on the whim of the moment. And then the beauty of a body made to be desired ... all ingredients that created a particular charm from which no one was able to escape.

All good reasons to be hated.

She noticed that Milena Nassi and Susy Del Nero were the most envious. The two eighteen year olds, known as the blonde and the brunette of the fifth D, had their lips turned upwards pushed by an artificial smile, their cold eyes sparkling with perfidy that seemed to say: "Make yourself beautiful now, dear. Do it as long as it lasts ..."

Daisy knew that participating in the flagship program of *Channel 104* was out of the reach of all the high school girls and wondered what bad things they were thinking about. At that moment he heard a phrase half-mouthed by Lorraine.

"I mean, are you kidding?" The girl growled at Milena and Susy.

"Won't you really think so?"

The two did not respond, but looked at Lorena with an arrogant look, as if to say that she was right in pulling her claws out to defend her friend, but they were right.

"No. I'm serious. What does it have to do ... »

Daisy did not hear Lorena's sentence because of the sound of a backpack slammed on the counter. But the companion's lip did not escape her. Lorena's wet lips had moved nervously up and down opening a phrase that ruined the rest of the day.

'... *what does the father have to do with it?*'

In order not to bleed, the ego of the two girls had found a compromise: the belief that Daisy, the beautiful Daisy, the fragrant flower Daisy had been chosen because they love

strong stories on TV. And Daisy had a father who had hanged himself.
Soon, on the stage of Next Generation they would make the shadows of his past dance.

Secret file # 1

*The editorial team received the registered documentation.
To interview the witness is (omitted)*

THE REGISTRATION IS INTEGRAL

"Are we starting with the sermon?"

"What do you think?"

"All right. I was in a fucking abstinence, okay? I needed to dive me a dose. That's why I went down the coast. It's only a five-minute drive. "

«Alberto, holy Christ, you are under house arrest. Do you want to go back to jail? You know how much everyone spent on you. "

"I know I know. The community, the recovery, and all the rest. It is thanks to them if I did not die of an overdose. I still have a brain melted. I also have broken teeth, scars on my arms, the marks of the stab wounds behind the backs, my ass is deflowered. I'm a carrion, it's true. A lost soul. But I'm not a liar. "

"So that's true?"

«I never believed in Mazinger Zeta, or Slender Man or some shitty fucking superman. But that wasn't a normal one there. "

"Tell me again."

"But why are you recording this stuff? Then you give it to the police? "

«Alberto, we got you out of jail I don't know how many times. And you still don't trust me? Come on, tell me."

"Oh, fuck, again?"

" yes."

"Okay, okay. Back then: it was about three in the morning. In the Duomo district everything is dead at that hour. I was sitting on the church stairs, the snare to squeeze the arm and

the syringe to look for a decent vein. Before, at home, I had vomited, and with a lot of convulsions. I mean, I had to do it. Half an hour and I got the stuff. I didn't know where the fuck to inject it. The arms were swollen and bright, full of holes, all red, blue and green hematomas. The crescent was missing and I was like the flag of Azerbaijan. The legs were worse off than the rest. In the end I took off a shoe to skewer the sole of my foot. With heroin circulating I was good . Then I see that white van. It came down quietly. You know, the ones with the body behind that the bricklayers use. "

"I know. I knew Giovanni. "

«And who did not know Giovà? One day he gave me so many blows. I wanted to steal a lot of cement from the warehouse, just like that, just to sell it and make a few euros. He had his hands like two shovels. He said that he loved me and did not lead me to the sack, but to make me understand the value of things earned through sacrifice. He was an educator in his own way. "

«Don't ramble. Tell me what happened. "

«So, Giovanni take the road towards Porta Duomo, pass the traffic light that indicates the work in progress. The street is narrow, partly because it is closed between the buildings, partly because there is a pile of cobblestones huddled on the roadside. They were doing the sidewalk. Then comes that taxi in the wrong direction. He was going like crazy and ... pum! A terrifying front. The taxi rolls over on its side and catches fire. The taxi driver leaves, I don't know how. His shirt is covered of blood. He takes a few steps, falls to his knees, and then down with his face to the ground. I didn't understand if

he was dead or just unconscious. While the poor Giovanni was inside the van with his head protruding from the broken windows of the windshield. Blood dripped onto the hood and ... man, are you okay? You're white as a rag. "

«No, it's all right. Giovanni did not deserve to die like this. Go ahead. "

«Yes, poor Giovanni. But do you really give me thirty euros later? "

«They are not for you. But for your mother. That holy woman must go shopping. "

"Ok. Look, I'm not buying my stuff, don't worry. So: a moment later the taxi is enveloped in flames. A horrible scene. Inside was her. Trapped like a mouse. Then that guy came. "

"Can you describe it to me?"

"I don't know what he looked like. Smoke pulled towards me. I was blown away and couldn't get up. I thought I was going to be intoxicated. I was coughing and vomiting, partly because of the smoke and partly because the heroin was cut into a dog's cock. However I kept my eyes wide open, my head poisoned by drugs made me believe I was a brave hero who had to see his own death in the face. I just saw more. I peered at the guy in the smoke who approached the car. The car was a fireball. The guy's clothes flared up and he started to burn. I swear to God he was burning, but it was as if he didn't notice. The hair crackled, the skin of the nose melted sizzling on the ground like fried oil. In spite of everything, the man broke the window, opened the door from the inside and pulled it out. He held her in his arms, which were no longer arms but two black embers. He took her away from the stake and laid her on the ground. I laughed. It always happens when I overdose. If I really have to die I want to do it with a certain optimism. The last thing I remember was the girl: burned, her clothes all burned, her face disfigured, a half-pulpy thigh that showed a piece of femur. The muscles, the nerves, the tendons all outside ... the rest of the skin around the leg was a patch of loose fat that spread like dog piss on the road. "

"You know who was the girl? "

"No. I never knew. It was unrecognizable and ... but you're sick. "

"No, no ... don't worry ... "

"But you're really sick. Christ. Don't cry, come on. "

"It's nothing. We continue. Tell me about the man. What do you remember? "

«I remember he moved away. A burnt ember that walked with a calm step in the direction of the arch of Porta Duomo, while everything around it came alive. I remember the faces of those in the neighbourhood who went out into the street with buckets and fire extinguishers. Then the sirens, the flashing lights of the ambulance, some policeman. The burning guy was gone as he appeared, in silence. And then the dark. I ended up in an overdose coma. And ... are you better now? "

"It is gone. Thank you. "

"Ok"

"Let's get back to us. Alberto, are you sure you saw that man? Because nobody knows anything about it. He disappeared without a trace. "

"I know. Nobody saw it, and nobody believes me. Why should it? You know how they view me. I am scum for them. And the scum is irrelevant, lying, shrewd and treacherous. Who do you want to listen to Alberto the disgusting larva. But you believe in me. "

"What makes you think so?"

"Why wouldn't you be here asking me all these questions. We finished?"

"Done, yes. "

"Can you give me another ten euros? I swear to god they are for cigarettes. "

«You stole thirty from the alms box in the church, Alberto. Be content. "

«I prefer you when you cry. Asshole. "

End of registration.

2

Sandra's domestic rites began early in the morning. They were tedious and always the same, but she didn't consider them demeaning.

The fixed pattern included: washing and dressing Adriano, preparing breakfast, feeding Chicco, the ash-colored Siberian and carrion character, cleaning the litter box, emptying or filling the washing machine, getting dressed, putting on makeup, going to work. There were of course several variations and some unexpected events to liven up domestic customs.

That day it was his daughter who broke the pattern. Daisy and her brother were sitting in front of two cups of steaming coffee, when Sandra took the tablet to read *Cronache Cittadine*, the digital newspaper of Castelmuso.

There had been an accident. An old woman had driven a stretch of highway against the road and crashed into a truck. When an inhabitant of Castelmuso died in that way always

ended up on the front page. But not that day. The place that would have belonged to the deceased woman was occupied by a huge photo of Daisy. A seductive selfie borrowed from Facebook, where the soft curve of her breasts glimpsed under a tank top knotted maliciously above the navel. Daisy was the news of the day.

Sandra, after a moment of amazement, showed the photo to her daughter, who blushed with embarrassment.

"But *son of a bitch*... this Guido pays me" he said with a desperate note in his voice.

Guido Gobbi was his classmate. He was working as an aspiring publicist in *Cronache Cittadine*. He thought to impress her by dedicating the opening news to her. The article was not bad, but that photo ...

"But what did that fool think of? Oh my god, no. Pimples. I hadn't noticed the pimples. Why didn't you take them out with Photoshop? "

"But no, you came along well" Sandra reassured her, disapproving of her daughter's habit of portraying herself in sexy poses, certainly not in keeping with her young age. He did not scold her just for not scratching the fresh and evolving, and therefore fragile, self-esteem of the adolescent Daisy.

The girl tore the tablet from her mother's hands, and read: "Daisy Magnoli started singing and dancing at the age of six. She took part in numerous competitions, winning them: among all *the new Cantagiuro*, and the third edition of *Una voce per te*. She shot a video (directed and music by Adriano Magnoli), entitled *I'm Rose*. The song totaled more than four hundred thousand views. From there to being chosen to participate in a talent the step was short. Soon we will see our fellow citizen on *Canale 104*, and sorry if it is little! We just have to wish Daisy Magnoli a big good luck. "

"A profound article, no doubt about it" Daisy snorted.

"It's not that bad" Sandra assured her. "Guido was nice, especially when ..." Sandra paused, as if she had to say something that was particularly close to her heart.

"... especially when he mentioned your brother."

"So Adry, aren't you happy?" Asked the mother, showing the article to her son. "It doesn't happen every day to end up in the newspaper."

Adriano did not reply. He looked at the cup held in his hands, a trickle of milk that fell to the side of his trembling lips, the look that at times seemed dull at times he sought that of his mother. But at that moment the eyes were only full of shame. Sandra sighed patiently. He reached out under the table, resting it on the flap of his son's pants. They were wet with urine.

She had to change it once again. That too was part of his daily rituals. Daisy had noticed her brother's unease, but as always pretended nothing. "I go to school. Hi, big brother. Please, be good! »He exclaimed smacking a kiss on the cheek. When it happens to have a sick brother, stuffed with

drugs and stunned by a fate made only of bad luck, the best cure is to feed him with massive doses of love. Daisy had got it right, and was doing everything she could to put it into practice.

The girl slung her backpack and left the house. The bus was stopped on the road, right in front of the driveway of his house, a two-storey house with exposed beams, large and bright windows and a flower garden, a small undisputed kingdom of bees and colored butterflies in search of sweet scents and intense. The villa, together with a substantial account in the name of the children, were the only bearable things left by Paolo Magnoli before killing himself.

Daisy got on the bus, the door closed with a plunger behind her. On the way he reviewed the history lesson:

"Torquato Tasso was born in Sorrento on 11 March 1054. Son of Porzia de' Rossi and Bernardo, a court man and

scholar. Left orphan of his mother, he follows his father to Urbino, Venice, Padua ... and therefore, ... but who the hell does the rest remember it! "

The bus went up the narrow, winding road and entered the ring road. At eight in the morning, the inhabitants of Castelmuso and always queuing to occupy two roundabouts of that stretch of the provincial road, where a fat and bored policeman disposed of the traffic with laughable authority.

The Leopardi high school was at the end of the last roundabout, a three-storey red brick building with a flat roof serving as a terrace. It had been built in the eighties, when the town tended to expand the periphery on the east side, not too far from the industrial area.

Daisy got off the bus, crossed the gate and crossed the courtyard to reach the literature room. Some students greeted her by making witty jokes; someone whistled with his fingers in his mouth, others clapped his hands to tease her, a sign that the article had not gone unnoticed.

Lorena was waiting for her at the top of the stairs, one arm supporting the massive dictionary of Italian, the other swirling the air to tell her to hurry. Daisy quickened her pace to reach Lorena, when she saw Guido. The author of the article was a boy who, if not entirely introverted, was still a dark and silent teenager, with ruffled raven curls, a discolored sweatshirt, round, small and slippery glasses that he placed with a finger so as not to let them fall from the nose.

"H ... hello, Daisy" he said insecure, the words that got stuck because of a bad omen that was suggesting that he keep quiet. A middle ground emerged that made him stammer instead of being silent.

"Did you like the article?" He said putting his hands in the bottom of his pants pockets, focusing his eyes on her fresh and clean face.

Daisy did not reply and went straight, reserving those attentions that are given, rather than to an unwelcome person, to a particularly insignificant piece of furniture.

"Well? What's wrong with you now? "

"The photo, asshole!" Lorena scolded him. «You put a selfie posted on Facebook. Only friends could see it on social media. Everybody saw it on *Chronicles*. "

«But the photo is, how to say, intense. Yes. Intense is the right term. "

Lorena also agreed, and Daisy probably thought the same way. Lorena however knew the strange psychology of her friend.

She was not angry with Guido for the photo, but for something deeper and more complicated.

Daisy Magnoli had a crush on him. An attraction that he could not manage, or even forgive himself. In fact, Guido did not have any of those qualities he would have wanted in a boy. He didn't find him attractive or very nice. He was unsociable, closed and boring. The other boys, on the contrary, were eccentric, a little wild and reckless. While Guido was depressed and grey like a sky without lightning. Daisy couldn't have come up with someone like that.

In spite of everything, the curly boy was always at the centre of his thoughts. That's why he treated him badly. He wanted to force him to be detested, so maybe he would get it out of his head.

The students entered the classroom. Lorena placed the dictionary on the counter and sat down next to Daisy.

"The thing is, I can't stand having it always on my mind" she murmured to her friend. «But have you seen him? Today it is more curved than usual. But how much time do you spend in front of the computer?» He said, looking for an excuse that made him indigestible.

Guido entered the courtroom last. He shared the counter with Filippa Villa, a huge and arrogant girl, a middle finger

tattooed on the lower back that came out of a shirt that was too short. The lesson had started, but the professor was not yet seen.

The Italian teacher was the union representative of the school.

Someone had seen him arguing in the secretariat, where he had shouted something about some reimbursement of expenses for teachers' extra-curricular activities. Each union question to be solved took a long time, and Manuel Pianesi, the student who occupied the first desk, took the opportunity to turn on the computer on the desk.

Manuel downloaded the video of *I'm rose* from YouTube, which immediately appeared projected on the interactive whiteboard.

"Manu, get that stuff out!" Daisy complained.

"Have you seen? Nearly half a million views," Manuel noted, the dreadlocks coming down on two straight, sturdy shoulders. Manuel was a rowdy and amusing type, of those who felt the irrepressible need to show off.

"Has anyone by chance read the latest comments?" Laughed the boy, trying to draw attention to himself.

"What do you mean?" Daisy was alarmed and, fearing a joke, got up from the desk, reached the desk and snatched the mouse from Manuel's hands. He shrugged, she clicked on the comment bar.

Daisy Magnoli looks like a diva, but I can guarantee you that she is so shy that if you ask her, she will show it only on Instagram. Signed Manuel Pianesi, beloved high school classmate.

"Fool. You pay me this," Daisy got angry.

«Come on, it's just a constructive criticism. And then you didn't see what Leo wrote," Manuel reported pointing his thumb to indicate Leonardo Fratesi, a boy with an athletic physique, not very tall, with red hair straight as bristles.

Leo stood up from his seat and mocked Daisy with a bow.

Daisy Magnoli's always getting off on it. That means we'll wait till she's old and ugly, then she'll throw it at us. Signed Leo Fratesi, another beloved high school buddy.

Daisy read a plethora of funny comments, all signed by her "beloved high school friends".

Daisy Magnoli has tits so small that she wears beer caps instead of a bra.

Daisy Magnoli, tired of jamming the mower, has decided to stop shaving.

Daisy Magnoli vowed to be a virgin at the wedding. That's why she got married when she was 12.

Daisy, while reading, blushed more and more, her eyebrows curled to threaten storm.

Guido watched the dark and silent video. The film was a small masterpiece created by her brother. Adriano Magnoli had an extraordinary creative talent. A vein that the disease seemed somehow to have accentuated. *I'm Rose* was written in a single night. In the morning, the boy had sampled everything, and in the afternoon he was already in the cellar with his sister to film her singing the piece. Daisy danced in a room crammed with aluminium shelves and packing boxes sealed with scotch. Adriano made everything disappear thanks to digital effects. In the video Daisy appeared wrapped in coils of floating fog that seemed to dance with her.

Daisy's success on the web was the key to her participation in the Next Generation, for her brother, *I'm Rose*, it became the object of his mania. Adriano sat in front of the computer for hours watching his sister's film. Now, the democratic, free, peeping web had thrown her into the moods of

the people. She was criticized, celebrated and insulted by unknown people. She would never confess to it, but she found it exciting, as if someone were watching her naked through the keyhole.

"I mean, what have I done to deserve a bunch of assholes as schoolmates?" she laughed.

"Oh, boy, here he comes!" Lorraine became alarmed as the professor walked down the corridor.

Daisy was about to turn off her computer when a new commentary appeared on the video.

A short, mean sentence addressed to her brother.

Adriano, stop looking for me. Or you're going to end up dead.

Secret file #2

editorial office received the recorded documentation.

To interview the witness is (omissis)

THE REGISTRATION IS COMPLETE

"Is that recorder on? Is that really necessary?"

"Don't worry about the recorder. Just pretend it's not there."

"Then, as I said before, after my Luca's death I couldn't find peace. I missed him. I miss him so much. I spent whole days on his grave. I sat on a picnic stool, a folding one. I'd sit

there and talk to him. I talked about everything. School, mostly. I'd scold him for his grades. He could have given so much more, but he didn't want to study. Oh, how important school was to me, but not to him. And then I talked about the sport, the championship he couldn't see anymore. I told him about his AC Milan and the girls he really didn't care about, and what Pedra, our labrador who is like one of the family, did. When I'd finish chatting with him I'd close my chair and go home. I'd look at his photos, I'd see his films from when he was little... But that wasn't enough. Then I... I..."

(witness starts crying)

"Luca was his son."

(The witness nodded without responding. She has a seizure. I want to suspend for a minute. The witness decides to continue.)

"Sorry. It's ok now."

"I know it's painful. I understand. And tell me, was that when you decided to go to the medium?"

"Yes. I don't usually believe in such things, but I missed it so much. She was 20 years old, you know? Only 20 years old. I had to hear his voice, or rather, delude myself that I could hear him, see him, touch him. I know I would offend Holy Mother Church by acting like that. I know I have sinned."

(takes a glass of water)

"Don't worry about that. Let's get down to business."

"So... I'm going to the building across the street. On the fourth floor, the second door of the three, the ones facing the corridor. I enter the apartment. He takes me to a room that looks like a little chapel. The room smelled of incense. Above an altar were three lighted candlesticks and a monstrance. And the statue of the saint. A big, heavy statue, the kind you only see in churches. I was very impressed. I thought, "Where could he have gotten it?"

"Are you talking about the statue of the patron saint?"

"Yes. Very similar to the one they carry in the procession in winter."

"The procession on the 24th of November. I know it. Go on."

"The medium, Madame Geneve, as she called herself, closed the heavy velvet curtains. The room plunged into darkness. I sat with my hands resting on a dark wooden table. She was on the other side of the table. She began to call out my son's name. I felt stupid and petty at that point. How could I put my pain in that woman's hands? I knew she'd been in jail for fraud, but she lived in my neighbourhood,

she was a stone's throw from my house, and the death of a child doesn't make you lucid. Yes, I was confused..."

(pause. Start sobbing)

"Please, you don't have to justify yourself. I'm not here to judge you."

"Y... yes, of course. I wanted to leave, when suddenly I heard blows in the window. You know that noise that glass makes when it's hit by big hailstones?"

"Yes, I do. Only it wasn't hail, was it? Tell me, didn't you think of a trick?"

"I don't know what I thought. It just happened out of the blue. And then, no. It wasn't a trick. I know because when Madame Geneve moved the curtains, she screamed. She was frightened. I say, if it was a trick, what was the point of screaming in fear?"

(nodding)

"The ticking became louder, you could hear the noise even over the rooftops. The medium was at the window to check what was going on. The fog had lifted outside. But we still saw the coal hit the building."

"Coal? Coal falling from the sky?"

"That's right. Pieces of burning coal. It was banging on the tiles, on the wall. "Big and hard enough to dent the gutters."

"How did you react? Did you get scared?"

"Look, it's funny to say, but I was calm. An unusual calm. In fact, I was almost happy. I had deluded myself that it was a signal from my son. I was certain of it. But the psychic was terrified. I found myself calming her because Luca was there. He was there with me. And it was because of her. But she said it had nothing to do with what was happening. All she had to do was read me the papers, or something, she said.

Like all the other bums, she was shuffling holy with the layman. Then the window suddenly opened wide. Pieces of coal fell into the room and hit the medium. The poor thing fell to the floor and lost a slipper.

I don't know why the slipper stuck me. But it was all a blur at that point. Everything else, except the slipper that stuck to the carpet, is vague. I remember the table hit by the burning coal, the carpet that started to catch fire. It almost seemed as if that rain was hitting us as if to get us out of that place.

A sort of warning coming from the sky. I tried to escape but the door was closed and wouldn't open. I was hit by some kind of fire. I got scalded and bruised. The blows hurt. Well, I don't know if what I saw was real. I just know that I wasn't calm or happy anymore. At that moment, I felt a dark and evil presence. I was terrified. I screamed. I realized no, it couldn't be my son. The last thing I remember was the statue of the patron saint. It was made of marble, very heavy, at least that's what it looked like to me. Before I fainted, I saw the statue fall. Madame Geneve was on her knees, hit on her back by large pieces of coal, but unable to find her slipper. With all that was going on, she was thinking about that shoe. I understood that she was trying to escape from that malignant reality by diverting it to simple, banal thoughts. What would be the point of fixing on a stupid wool slipper? That's when the statue fell on her and hit her on the back of the head. The poor woman's eyes turned to stare at the ceiling, the white of the sclera glittering in the light of the

fire. A bloodstain came out of her head, spreading across the carpet. Then darkness. They found me an hour later at the bus stop. I don't know how I got there. I hoped I'd imagined it all. I thought the stress of losing my son, the medication I was taking to withstand pain that can't be explained, was causing the hallucinations. I held on unnecessarily to that hope. The night the police arrived in the neighbourhood. Madame Geneve had been found dead. Everyone thinks it was a murder. But I know what happened. It was something bad that killed her. The same thing that killed my son."

(witness begins crying again)

"Why didn't you go straight to the police?"

"Because I was afraid! I couldn't tell them what I saw. They'd think I was crazy. Above all, I didn't want to be accused of murder."

"You are aware that when the medium was found on the ground with a broken skull, there was an inscription on the wall marked with a piece of coal: 'Decus et Damnationis'. Beauty and Damnation. What do you think that means?"

"I... I don't know. I swear I don't know."

(Crying)

"Thank you for your testimony. I have no further questions."

"Just one last thing: the coal... the house was full of coal. Has anyone seen it?"

"No. They didn't find anything."

End of recording.

3

Professor Marzioli was a stiff and dusty guy, with his goggles hovering on the tip of his aquiline nose, with his jacket and a bow tie worn to give him the appearance of an intellectual.

Torquato Tasso had a Catholic upbringing. The influence of Petrarch's poetry can be recognized in the Rhymes of Love...'

As usual, Marzioli would explain the lesson with the enthusiasm of a gravedigger who was measuring a deceased. Guido noticed that Daisy was not taking notes. She was nervously drumming her pen on the counter, the air of those chasing distant thoughts.

When the badger lesson was over, a collective sigh of relief rose up. The professor had managed to make even the scholar's restless life surprisingly boring. Lorena said goodbye to Daisy and left in a hurry. Her father waited for her at the entrance in overalls, sitting in the van loaded with boiler tubes. He was supposed to take her to the Leopardians' high school team match. Lorraine didn't like football, but she had a crush on Christian Skendery, a full-back with solid shoulders and a fiery gaze.

Daisy greeted her friend and crossed the dark avenue in the face. Guido hurried to catch up with her.

"Daisy, can I talk to you?" he asked nervously, hoping she would not tell him to go to hell. She stopped. She looked at the boy arching her eyebrows, abandoning her thoughts and concentrating on his contrite face.

"I'm sorry about the picture" he exclaimed with a shrug of his shoulders, as if to say that the damage was done and could no longer be repaired.

"It's not that important" Daisy dismissed, noting how nervous the boy was. She, the grumpy air of those she hadn't completely forgiven, walked down the avenue, assuming he would follow her.

Guido took courage and hastened to catch up with her. They walked side by side through the row of plane trees that led to the exit. Autumn spread the first leaves on the pavement. Two boys would pass each other a joint sitting under a sycamore tree with an imposing bark, the sunlight slipping through the branches and breaking into many small, glistening rays. *'Apart from that, it's a very romantic picture'* Daisy thought. Guido tried to have a little conversation. She replied in monosyllable, single-syllable fashion, because she was thinking about the comment posted on You Tube again.

Adriano must stop looking for me. Or he'll come to a bad end.

She found it a horrible joke. All his friends knew he was sick. What was the point of hurting a disabled person?

"Daisy, are you all right? You've got a strange face" Guido worried.

"No, it's nothing. It's just that I'm lost behind certain thoughts" she replied by having her lower lip sticking out to blow on her bangs. Sandra waited for her in the car while a traffic policeman watched the four lighted arrows without patience.

Guido watched Daisy turn the corner. Although he didn't see him raise his hand to greet her, his gaze was captivated by her curves moving seductively under her grey coat. She walked with the certainty that her eyes were on her.

"Shit. Guido Gobbi... Shit" thought, but she could no longer deceive herself, or deny that her feelings could change just because she tried so hard to avoid it. She realized it was time to face reality. She turned to Guido with a careless

expression. "Ah... I forgot" she said. She hadn't really forgotten anything.

She had imagined an infinity of times.

"Ok. I'll have to pretend it's nothing. It has to give me an idea that it's not that important to me. It's nothing... Be brave and keep calm...".

Daisy told him at the drop of a hat.

Guido faded from surprise. He thought he didn't quite understand.

"S... Sorry, can you repeat that?" he asked.

She huffed and puffed. "But if you don't want to, I can't make you."

"Of course I want to. Saturday's perfect" he said, his ears lit up with a red steal.

Guido couldn't focus on the magnitude of it.

Daisy had invited him to go out with her.

"So I'll see you Saturday" said the girl with a pout, as if she had a hard time with fate, guilty of setting her on the path she had tried so hard to avoid.

He saw her get into her mother's Cherokee. She did not turn around to greet him.

Guido walked down the road without really knowing where he was going.

"I have an appointment" repeated". The grey patina of his life was as if it had been blown away suddenly, and now everything around him shone with colour. A rainbow of emotions that he could grasp without feeling it slipping through his fingers. He felt so happy and so in tune with the world that he wanted to embrace everyone he met on the way home: a mother pushing a stroller, a child enchanted by a balloon vendor, an old man sitting on a bench, a gentleman in a suit looking for a taxi, a tramp lying on the sidewalk resting between the folds of a cardboard box...

Yes, he would have wanted to embrace the whole world.

He and Daisy would have seen each other on the weekend.

He began counting the hours that separated him from her, the clock hands that suddenly became unbearably large, heavy, and slow.

The low pressure weighed down the sky with grey, threatening clouds. Leponex's tablet was on the medicine drawer, put there to remind Daisy's mother how tragic and complicated her life still was.

Adriano, with his face emaciated and tired, his black hair crushed on his forehead, his gaze wandering about without ever deciding where to settle, had not attended school since the age of twelve. The disease was cruel, the support teachers non-existent, beheaded by linear government cuts.

Adriano was followed by a teacher who constantly visited him once a week. Forty-five thousand euros spent in four years. The doctors said that his father's suicide had awakened an evil already written in his genes.

The first symptoms appeared when he was twelve, a surprisingly early age for the disease. Sandra began to suspect that something was wrong when Adriano, who was round and rosy, suddenly began to lose weight. She washed lightly, refused to study, slept on the carpet, and when she went to the bathroom she got dirty everywhere.

One day he started lowering the shutters on all the windows in the house.

He said he was being spied on by someone. Evidence of a dark evil that had begun to seriously worry his mother. The psychologist deduced that Adriano had failed to process the trauma of the suicide. The tragedy occupied all his thoughts and left no room for anything else. As for feeling spied on, it could be interpreted as an indication of a persecution mania.

Then the hallucinations began: Adriano watched the inhabitants of Castelmuso die one by one. He gave names and surnames, even writing down the date of their death.

One day he took a can of gasoline from the garage and dragged it to the entrance of the cathedral. He was stopped firmly by the chaplain.

Adriano insisted that he had seen a face all black beyond the iron grille of the confessional. He thought it was a demon, which is why he wanted to purify the cathedral with fire. That same afternoon, Sandra accompanied him to the Umberto II hygiene and mental health centre, where the boy was kept under observation for seventeen days. That was the first of four hospitalizations.

It had been three years since he was diagnosed with severe paranoid schizophrenia. Since then, Sandra Magnoli had visited the office of Professor Roberto Salieri, the psychiatrist who followed Adriano, every week.

Sandra parked on the white lines reserved for a modest restaurant, a few steps from the study.

Adriano got out of the car with the slowness of an old man. The active ingredient of clozapine prevented hallucinations, but the side effects caused him drowsiness, obesity, muscle spasms, speech and walking problems. Medication was a necessary evil. Without them, a dog could become a monster covered in scales. With medication, a dog remained a dog.

Sandra took her son under her arm. They turned the corner and were greeted by the waiter at the restaurant, who was hastening to put up the chairs and take the tables off the sidewalk because the sky was threatening to rain.

The study was on the second floor of an austere mansion, with the entrance door surmounted by an important travertine arch. The windows overlooked the boulevard that cut through the old town, just a stone's throw from the old water tower that still supplied the country today.

Sandra and Adriano slipped into the elevator, an elegant wrought-iron cage with wooden doors, purple-red interior and Art Nouveau mirror. Adriano, who suffered from claustrophobia, gasped until the elevator opened onto the second-floor corridor.

The name of the psychiatrist Roberto Salieri was clearly engraved on the front door. Greta, the doctor's assistant, had them sit in the waiting room, a room with high, frescoed ceilings, furnished with two large damask velvet sofas with smooth, worn-out pillows, as if they had succumbed over the years under the weight of patients' neurosis.

Although they scheduled the appointment for 10:00 a.m., one patient took longer than she should have, and Sandra took the opportunity to read a two-month-old supplement. The sky reflected a dark colour over the country. The rain began ticking on the windows. Adriano observed the drops set one by one on the window. First they appeared sparse, then they started pounding insistently, becoming a rough downpour of water. The roar of thunder made Sandra jerk.

The professor's assistant entered the waiting room, his hand pressed his chest, and the air was a little frightened by the roar.

"Come, Adriano. Dr. Salieri is waiting for you."

The doctor's office was furnished in an unusual and refined manner.

Some people thought it was a whim that underscored a certain megalomaniac in Salieri. In reality the psychiatrist simply wanted to respect the dignity of the patients by surrounding them with objects of good taste.

The desk was the last purchase of a certain value: a mahogany table with a magnificent mother-of-pearl inlay in the centre. Adriano noticed that the sofa filled with fluffy Chinese silk cushions had been moved to the wall, the silver service and the majolica vases removed from the old desk and resting on the Victorian-style septet. The ruby Persian rug was laid proudly in the centre of the room. The office, as always, was pervaded by the scent of orchids in tall, thin crystal vases.

The psychiatrist placed the mobile phone on the table, to use it as a tape recorder. The professor, with the consent of Adriano's mother, always recorded the sessions, and then attached the audio files to the boy's medical records.

"So, Adriano, how are you?" the doctor asked, looking at the notebook to review the notes taken during the last session.

Adriano did not answer. He reached the window. He wanted to see the rain, which now fell less insistent. The doctor, his forehead furrowed with thick horizontal wrinkles, lifted his deep, black eyes toward the window. The mist was turning the sloping roofs of the buildings grey.

"It's not raining anymore. But there is fog..." he said with a thickly voice.

Adriano moved the heavy velvet curtains away. The storm was moving north, thunder farther and thinner.

"It is like the mist of I'm Rose."

"How many times have you watched this video in the last month?"

Adriano muttered something the doctor didn't quite understand.

"Come on, Adriano, make an effort and be clear. Don't you have anything to tell me about the video?"

"There's fog... on the video... but I didn't put it there..." Adriano muttered.

"You're repeating yourself, boy."

Adriano replied with an anxious moan. As always, he was impatient with the idea of taking the session.

"Let's watch the film together, shall we?" proposed Salieri.

"I... no... I..."

"Are you always afraid of what's inside?"

Adriano nervously smoothed his pale hands. After a long silence, he painstakingly said, "He knows. He knows that I have seen him. The fog has put him there..."

"Go on" the psychiatrist encouraged him, focused on writing in his notebook.

"I get it. I understand that he's putting down roots..." said the boy, while outside the mist covered the whole course in grey. The tower of the old aqueduct disappeared from the horizon. Adriano stared at the fog as if he were watching an unbearable threat.

"He will rain down on the wicked burning coals. Fire and sulphur and fiery wind will be their portion" he said, reciting a passage from the Bible with anguished reluctance.

Salieri deduced that Adriano had become accustomed to Marxotal, an antipsychotropic that he had been taking for two months, and delirium was the first sign that the drug was ceasing its effect.

"So now read the Old Testament. You quoted Psalm number eleven, if I'm not mistaken. A psalm by David. I know it. I recited it during my bar mitzvah."

As the doctor pondered the drug to be discontinued, Adriano babbled in monosyllables, "I only hear his voice... in here... and I must pray."

Dr. Salieri continued to take notes regardless of Adriano's delirium. Schizophrenics often became obsessed with mysticism or religion in general. And Adriano's case could not even be considered among the most serious. In the past he had treated a hysterical nun who stabbed her palms with the irons she used to embroider.

Fortunately, the hallucinations did not induce the boy to behave dangerously. The only exception was at the onset of the disease, when Adriano wanted to set fire to the cathedral's confessional.

The boy began to walk around the studio, breaking his steps to avoid stepping on certain red lilies drawn on the carpet.

"He puts down roots. I can hear them in my head. The spikes are sinking in here" he said, tapping a finger on the forehead. "And they hurt. They hurt a lot."

"I can prescribe you something for your headache and... not now, Greta!" said annoyed Salieri as he turned to the

attendant who came to the door without knocking. Greta apologized. She took a folder and disappeared into her office.

The session went on for 48 minutes. Adriano's condition had clearly deteriorated in the last month. Roberto Salieri noted in his notebook the suspension of the Marxotal. It was time for a change of treatment. There weren't significant changes, his patient would have been at risk of being re-installed in a psychiatric clinic.

Adriano, accompanied by Greta, walked out the door without saying goodbye. Salieri lit a cigarette. He pressed the button on his mobile phone to listen to some parts of the conversation.

'The parasite clung to the inside of my head with its spider's paws, Doctor. A spider that will never weave random webs. He's weaving one with thick, neat weaves. A spider's web that will trap her, too.'

The psychiatrist scratched the back of his head. He couldn't remember that passage.

Above all, his voice didn't sound like Adriano's.

4

A heavy steam hood had set down on the gym locker room. The girls groomed their naked, slender bodies after volleyball time. Lorraine, her nipples numbed by the hot water running down her chest cavity, made a single braid of her thick hair and squeezed it tightly.

Daisy washed off the foam, which slid down her long, tapered legs, revealing her maliciously shaved tongue.

"Wow! The shaving on the precious little hole you gave me wouldn't have expected" Lorena laughed. "I bet you did it for Guido."

"But no. I'm rehearsing the dance for the show. The sweat sticks to the bloody pants and causes me a lot of irritation" Daisy excused herself.

"Cute as an excuse. I'll write it down."

"It's the truth. Guido has nothing to do with it at the moment" Daisy said as she came out of the shower.

"By the way, how did he react when you asked him out? Did he drop dead on the floor?"

Daisy looked at her with a veil of reproach.

"Do I ever ask you about your full-back muscles?"

"No. But you should. Then I'd tell you about his biggest muscle..."

"Lorena, come on. Is he really good between the legs?" Daisy giggled in a fluffy cream-colored bathrobe, which she closed with two laps around her waist.

"Seriously. Have you slept with him yet?"

"No, I haven't. Just kidding. You know we've only just met" Lorena specified, wrapping herself in a large towel that she knotted over her lower back. The girl reached the wardrobe with her breasts swaying, proud of their prosperity. Half the schoolgirls were still underneath the showers wrapped in clouds of steam, and the girls' bodies were flexuous, shiny with soap and water.

The more vain ones lingered to flaunt the splendour of their physiques. Daisy herself took off her bathrobe with a thread of exhibitionism, bowing forward to take her panties out of her purse, showing off her perfect round back.

While the girls who considered themselves less attractive washed quickly.

Only Filippa Villa walked around naked without any problem. Filippa was a tall, sturdy, completely clumsy girl, with a prominent belly, a wild skein of untrained combed black hair, dark, mobile and restless eyes. Filippa was a young civil rights activist, and Daisy sympathized with liberation struggles of all kinds.

The first barricades against the systems established by others had been erected in early childhood. The first to challenge were the dogmas of her parents.

As a child, they told her many fairy tales about princesses, and this often included the presence of a charming prince. The same one to marry once they grew up. It was the recurring nightmare of little Daisy, and of all the lesbians in the world. And Filippa was openly lesbian.

One day, hiding in the clouds of steam, she tried to kiss Daisy in the shower. Daisy, out of curiosity, accepted the kiss. She didn't find anything particularly scandalous about it, except that a moment later she found herself wearing Filippa's body, who seemed to have gone out of her mind with desire. She brutally put his hand between her thighs to touch her.

Daisy pushed her away. Filippa, panting, her hair clinging to her face, sketched out an excuse, and from that moment on stopped bothering her.

Daisy was helping Lorena to fasten her bra when Filippa said something, and then one of the girls started screaming.

The high school girl, a small, chubby blonde girl, was running naked with a cloud of foam stuck to her, shouting at all her mates to get dressed. Other girls started screaming, and they all ran out of the showers. One of them slipped on the wet floor and fell to the floor.

"Barbara, what's going on?" Daisy asked the girl, a shy, skinny teenager, bordering on hyanoresis.

Barbara replied that she had run away because she was frightened of the screams. Daisy realised that most of her friends didn't know what was really going on, but they all screamed anyway, influenced by the reactions of the more exaggerated.

Filippa Villa, who remained calm and lucid, looked out beyond the row of clothes hangers.

"Look up there!" she exclaimed, angrily pointing her finger at one of the air intakes.

"Do you see? There's something..."

"Pulitzer expression, Guido. Big stuff on the hands?"

"Come on, am I that predictable?" Guido replied as he passed Manuel along the east wing corridor of the high school.

"They all saw him. Not just you. It's a freak show. I took a few pictures if you need them."

"Who hasn't? Sorry, but I really have to run."

Guido had to write the piece fast. In front of the school, someone had crashed a pickup into a rusty-coloured Austin and rolled it over on its side. The driver of the car was stuck between the plates. He had been deliberately thrown off the road, and from what little was known, it was a passionate affair. There was a betrayed husband involved, full of anger, threats, insults, and tears of despair.

It was the kind of news that in Cronache Cittadine could have ten thousand views in a day, and for Guido it meant a bonus of thirty euros if he managed not to get the piece

burned. He ran to the literature classroom to get the computer from the cabinet.

Guido had been delegated by the headmaster to stay beyond the canonical time of the lessons. Cronache Cittadine was in fact the most trusted voice on high school performance.

The school headmaster had donated three thousand Euros to the newspaper, just to keep the cultural page alive. No sponsor was in fact interested in culture, but since the school bore an illustrious name, that of Giacomo Leopardi, it was almost a moral duty. And the funding was a breath of fresh air for the online newspaper.

Guido had to warn his mother that he was going to be late. He put his hand in his pocket to get his mobile phone, but all he could hear was the hard bottoms of the fabric. He tried to find it in his locker, even though he was sure he hadn't left it there. He opened the door, moved books and notebooks, went through the drawers. Nothing. It was the second phone he'd lost in a year. That's quite gratifying. The money he earned from it would have been used as a down payment on a new cell phone.

Dark in the face, closed the cabinet and went back to the computer.

He was ready to write about the incident when a link opened without him touching anything.

He started streaming what appeared to be a pornographic chat. On the screen appeared the soft shapes of a girl soaping her tongue, her small, white hand exploring her thighs, her face cut out of the frame.

Like all teenagers, Guido was particularly attracted to pornographic sites. But he was worried about the chat because it started automatically, as if it were the work of a hacker ready to infect his computer.

He was about to close the link, but that soapy girl had something familiar to him. He focused his gaze on that image: the foam covered the young woman's face, and she reclined her head back to rinse her face and hair in the shower.

"No. It can't be."

His heart began beating fast in the centre of her chest.

"No, it can be her."

The girl was exactly her.

It was Daisy Magnoli.

She watched her classmate wipe the sponge on her slender, perfect hips. She noticed that her pubic hair had been shaved, and that she had mischievously tattooed a butterfly on the left side of her tongue.

He saw the hidden slit, the one that disturbed his nights, glabrous and shiny with water. The bald version of Coulbert's world was right there in front of him.

Guido, excited and confused, had an erection. The situation was absurd, almost unreal. He tried to regain control by trying to stay calm. He wondered who might be the author of that film.

He adjusted his glasses on his nose and clicked the ESC button to reduce the screen. Graphics appeared around the video. He realized it wasn't a pirate link.

"Oh, shit!" he exclaimed, discolouring his face.

The video was broadcast live from a smartphone.

He recognized the number at the bottom of the screen.

It was his cell phone number.

In the locker room, the girls crowded to the far side of the air.

Filippa noticed a small, compact object behind the slits in the aluminium grille.

She would never have noticed it if the vapour condensation on the object hadn't started dripping onto the bench where she had put her things. Filippa never deviated from her habits. That's why he always put his suit, shorts, and volleyball shirt in the same place, folded the same way,

under one of the four air vents in the locker room. She was taking tampons out of her bag when the drip dampened the back of her hand.

She looked up and saw the phone behind the grille, the camera's pitiless eye on the showers.

Daisy grabbed the stool and placed it under the air intake, climbed on it and grabbed the edges of the grille, which came off effortlessly.

Someone had removed the four screws that secured it to the wall. She grabbed the cell phone, version 5 of the Galactic P6. She owned that same model. Her familiarity with the phone's functions helped Daisy to turn the camera off. "Who's the asshole who had fun filming us?" exclaimed Lorena, quickly tucking her blouse in.

"Surely a big bastard or a big son of a bitch" said Filippa who, along with the other girls, had gone behind Daisy's back to get a better look at the phone. The girls were all furious, and they were all consumed with that animosity that comes every time something happens that makes them feel ashamed and embarrassed through no fault of their own.

"Imagine if that bastard had retrieved the cell phone and put it on the net" Lorraine said, imagining disturbing scenarios like ending up in some porn chat room, or in high school kids' cell phones.

"Us walking around naked in the showers... can you believe it? "Tits and asses in the wind for everyone to see. Can you imagine that shit?"

Daisy sat on the bench, grimacing her phone with a grimace of contempt, as if just having it in her hands disgusts her. She looked at the footage with disgust and said, "This is no joke, I'm sure. It looks more like the work of some perverted maniac" she added, "I've got bad news: we were being filmed live.

The panic began to creep up on the girls, even though some of them, underneath it all, got excited at the idea of being

secretly watched. But the more demure ones, and they were the majority, were terrified that the video might go viral. None of them would have the courage to stick their noses out of the house. Daisy reassured them, "If you look closely, you haven't been filmed, so you don't have to worry.

Daisy discoloured her face when she saw who the only girl on film was naked. She hesitated and picked up her cell phone to show her companions the images that were scrolling across the screen.

"See? You're not in any frame. Only... only I'm being filmed. So the fuckin' shit's only on me."

The girls kept quiet. The news lifted them up and they stopped despairing. Their reputation was safe. Some of them kept pretending to care because, anyway, they thought it was right to show sympathy for Daisy. The girl went through the phone menu to find out who it belonged to, assuming it was impossible to trace it back to the owner. No one could be so clueless as to use their phone to perform such an action. Violating privacy was illegal, and in the worst cases, you could even go to jail. Daisy ran her thumb across the screen and read the alphabetically sorted apps: Apps, Calendar, Cinetrailer, Facebook, Games, Weather, Messages...

"Messages. There you go! Now let's see this bastard's texts."

The girls raised the bar.

"Can you tell whose it is?" exclaimed Lorena.

"Wait a second. Here we go. Yeah. I got it." Daisy said, noting that under "messages" there were dozens of texts. She read the most recent ones feverishly.

Hello beast! I'll expect you tonight at nine. I'll bring the beer, you bring the girls! Oh, sorry. I always forget you're a queer. That means I'll settle for beer. Don't be late!

Good morning, Mr. Director. I hope the article it's fine. Otherwise, I'll replace it with a piece of news.

Manuel, I have a review tomorrow. Could I borrow your French dictionary?

Daisy read more messages. With each line, she felt the tears in her eyes rise.

"Well? Did you find something?"

Daisy couldn't respond quickly enough.

"I don't think... I don't..." she slurred, each syllable a painful lament.

"Daisy, are you all right?" worried Lorraine, seeing her pale, her lips trembling, foreshadowing a broken cry.

"The phone, I can't... I can't figure out who's it is" she lied. "If you agree, I will hand it over to the principal" she proposed, the phrase broken by an inner hiccup.

The girls nodded with a distracted expression of who no longer thought it was their problem.

Daisy finished dressing. She greeted Lorena, who had an appointment with the boy, and headed for the locker room bathroom.

She looked in the mirror to brush her wet locks.

As she watched carefully, she became irritated with herself at the restlessness and suffering on her face.

Guido couldn't have been that important, especially now that he had turned out to be some kind of maniac. She didn't want to cry. That idiot did not deserve his tears. All he had to feel was a healthy pissing off with the bastard. Nothing more.

She put his gym bag over his shoulder and walked out in slow steps, his phone tightly in his hands, with an overwhelming desire to throw it to the ground.

She walked down the driveway that separated the locker rooms from the school with his head down.

He watched the yellowed leaves rustling on the porphyry tiles. She was lost behind her thoughts, but sometimes she came to her senses, as confused as someone who does not know exactly where she is and where she is going. From

time to time, she simply responded to the greetings of the boys she met.

"Hi Nico, yeah, that's good. Doesn't it look like it? I'm just worried... no, I'm not afraid to go on tv..."

"My hair? No, no gel, it's just wet..."

"Yes Rosy. See you at the course..."

So he went back to being a stranger. As he walked down the avenue, he went back to the things he said in the locker room.

"They'll take us for whores ... we would be disgraced for life."

"But no, you're more bitches than bitches" she said out loud, just to hear the concept ringing in his ears and be pleased with it. She had been irritated by the hypocrisy of her companions towards her, but at that moment she thought it was pointless to think of them. Now she had to focus on Guido.

She had promised to take the phone in the direction, but she was no longer so sure she wanted to.

"Come could she do something like that? Still, he doesn't look like a maniac. Which, however, is not at all reassuring. Usually it's the ones you think are shy and harmless that do these things" she thought.

He was coming out of the high school gate when he heard her voice.

"Oh, shit she said to himself as he ran towards her with a serious face, as if tormented by anxiety and uncertainty.

"Daisy, I need to talk to you... wait... let me catch my breath" he said, short of breath and bent in two, his hands on his thighs to catch his breath. He took off his fogged-up glasses to clean the lenses, and when he slipped them on again, he saw Daisy's delicate hand holding his phone almost with disgust. She stared at him haughtily, surprised to feel a thrill of satisfaction at seeing his face become earthy.

"Now you're going to tell me you had nothing to do with it."

"It wasn't me. I swear it wasn't. I swear to God. On my family. On everything I hold most dear."

He remarked the expression "On everything I hold most dear" staring at her with an intense expression, as if the oath included her.

It seemed sincere to Daisy, but that was not enough to make the disgust she felt for him at that moment fade away. The situation was serious and required a hard, nasty, grudging attitude.

"Who says you're not a dirty peeping tom?" she asked furiously.

"Because I'm not." he defended himself.

"I don't believe you. You guys are all pigs. And you're probably the king of pigs." she said, slamming his cell phone into his hand.

"Daisy, listen..."

"We have nothing to say to each other" she exclaimed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Don't you understand? Someone has stolen my phone."

"They stole it! Ah, that's a good one" she interrupted him, waving her hand to end the conversation.

"Wait. Let me finish. Yes, it was stolen. But that's not the point. The point is, there's something weird about it. Look, I want to show you something" Guido slid the backpack straps off his shoulders, put it on the driveway bench, sat down and pulled out the computer.

"I had to write an article when you appeared on the screen" he exclaimed, turning on the computer.

"I saw you in the shower. I was confused and surprised. I thought of a thousand things. Even that you..." he interrupted, unsure whether to be completely honest.

"What did you think?" she replied furiously, sensing what she was implying.

"Okay. I'll tell you. Of all the things, I thought she filmed you on purpose."

"Are you kidding?" she exclaimed with disgust.

"Listen. I'm sure you had nothing to do with it. But think about it. How was I to know which shower room you'd get into? After practice, one usually slips into a cubicle on a random basis. There could be people coming in and out, hot water not working, a few broken pipes... too many surprises. So I'm wondering, did your friend film you? I don't believe that either. I'm guessing someone hid my phone somewhere. But how would they know where to point it? There's too many weird things. And that's not all yet..."

She interrupted him in amazement.

"Are you suggesting that I stole the phone myself to put it in the girls' shower just so you could jerk off?"

"No. I'm... I'm not saying that" he replied uncertainly.

"That's exactly what you're saying! You're trying to defend yourself by blaming me. But I'm not you, man. You're perverted on the inside. It's in your DNA. DNA that's miles of shit when you unroll it. You know what? I'm going to the principal. I'll tell him all about it and get you kicked out of school."

Daisy deviated from the gate that led to the exit and walked a long way down the courtyard avenue. She had let off steam. She had been impulsive, furious, pretending not to have heard Guido's explanation, when in fact she had been paying attention to every single word. Her reasoning was unmistakable. No one could know which shower cubicle she was going to wash herself in. But for some strange reason she had preferred to insult him rather than agree with him.

Daisy measured the steps that separated her from the answering machine door without knowing what to do. Behind the glass in the lobby, she noticed the secretary's cotton-clad hair. She did not know whether or not to report the incident. She pointed her glossy lacquer nail at the doorbell, hesitating whether to press the button.

She felt Guido's breath running out behind her, but he didn't turn around, remaining completely on his own.

"You didn't let me finish" he said, staring over her shoulder.

Guido looked pensively at the small, compact computer held in his hands.

"I wanted to tell you that a message came along with the film. A strange comment."

Daisy crossed her arms waiting for him to say what he had to say; she gave him an annoyed look, as if she could barely tolerate his presence.

Guido turned the computer towards Daisy. She looked angrily for the two lines attached to the video, where she was seen sticking her hands between her thighs to wipe her tongue with foam.

Daisy read the commentary and discoloured her face.

Adriano must stop looking for me. Or he'll come to a bad end.

Again, someone was threatening her brother.

Secret file n.3

The editorial staff has received the recorded documentation.

To interview the witness is (omissis)

THE REGISTRATION IS COMPLETE

Noise is caused by the nurse coming in, the sensors on the medical equipment, and the comings and goings of staff outside the room.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Better. The good Lord watches over my martyrdom. Could you please press that button at the foot of the bed? It's for lifting the pillow."

"I don't know if I can do that. Wait, I'll call the nurse."

"Ah, there's Beatrice. Thank you. That's better. Only now I'm a bit sleepy. I don't know if I can tell you everything."

"If you want to rest, I can come back later."

"No. You're keeping me company after all. So, what about that day? It certainly wasn't me. I never thought I'd behave like this. My life is prayer. I pray a lot, you know? I pray all day and think about the church. I spend my life for it, and only for it: Holy Mother Church. And... wait. Before we go any further, I'd like to know one thing. What do the doctors say? Will I get well soon?"

"Of course you will, don't worry. In fact, I'm sure you'll be home in a few days."

"But they still have me tied up on the cot. The straps pull a bit at my wrists. But it's better that way. "If I get excited, my wounds will open up again."

(The interviewer does not actually have any wounds.)

"There was a lot of death, and we need to figure out what happened that night."

"I... I don't know. If I speak, I will condemn my apostolate forever. The truth will drive me from the cathedral."

"Rest assured. No one will send you away."

"Sure, and... morphine, you say? Do I really get morphine? But you're not hallucinating?"

"I don't know. I think she is."

(He's not on morphine, even though he thinks he is).

"Can you confirm what you said at the church?"

"When the rescuers found me, you say? Those angels were good, you know? I was in a pool of blood. But I was conscious, and I told them everything."

"Could you tell me again? Do you feel up to it?"

"I don't feel like it, but I feel like I have to testify, even if no one will believe me. I think God saw what is hatching under the ashes of our poor country. There is a dark plan, and he knows it. But he can't let men make it right. We need you to intervene. There is an urgent need for his mercy."

"Please tell us a few facts, possibly without trying to interpret them."

"But these are the facts. Then there are the details. And then, don't be so polite with me."

"Okay. We'll be on a first-name basis. Go on..."

"As you know, I live in the sacristy of the cathedral, which gives me a chance to, you know, live the church. Because I live and feel the church. I have an intense, I would say

physical, relationship with the cathedral. The vaults, the naves, the gilded coffered ceiling, Lotto's painting, because the Madonna and Child is by Lorenzo Lotto, the stuccoes and the frescoes, all things that make faith something material, to touch and venerate. Sometimes, when the church is closed, I pray in front of the altar. I have been suffering from insomnia for years, and that night, I believe around 3:00 a.m., I was on my knees, my hands reaching out to recite a Pater Noster, when I heard a crash coming from the street. Right in front of the church."

"Yes, I remember that terrible accident."

"A person died that night. But I didn't know until later. When I heard the crash, I ran to see what had happened, but I couldn't get out. I tried but... but... but... well, now it's getting hard to go on..."

"Make an effort and try to explain what happened."

"It isn't easy, boy. The horror of living it is a wound that never heals. However, the door that led from the church to the sacristy had suddenly closed. A squeak, and then a squeak, as if someone had slammed it. I thought it was a joke. Then the other doors closed. Then I was frightened. I was no longer thinking of a joke, but of thieves. If some crook comes into the church, there's stuff to steal, and it's all valuable stuff, you know? I thought it was Alberto, a drug addict who lives in the neighbourhood. He often comes in to steal alms. Anyway, all the doors were locked. The one under the aisles leading to the exit, the one to the crypt, where the saint's remains are. And right there, underground, something happened."

(pause, due to the nurse's entrance. I hide the recorder again. None of the staff in the psychiatry department know I'm here for an interview. The nurse leaves. (I'll resume with questions)

"What happened underground?"

"Something that made me think no more of a joke or Alberto the Larvone. I heard thudding. Deaf and gloomy thumps that froze me, while outside the church I heard the screams, the crackling of the fire, the stench of burning car smoke.

Outside, I could feel the terror of the people in the neighbourhood. But inside... inside the church I could hear those thumps coming from underneath. The pews were moving and jumping and crawling

on the marble floor. I thought it was the earthquake again, but it wasn't until later that I heard that there was no tremor.

I had the feeling that what was happening was, like, a license from earthly things. The manifestation of an invisible will. I don't know why, but I realized it must have been something evil. Something far from God. Is the recorder working? Are you always recording everything?"

"It's working, and I'm recording. So the doors were closed. And you could hear these shots."

"That's right. I got scared to death and started praying. As an old Christian I did it in Latin. Agnus Dei, qui toleris peccata mundi, miserere nobis. But recommending me to God seemed to do no good. It was then that an unusual anger arose in me. You see, boy, I presume to call myself a quiet man, a mild-mannered, shy man, that's why I'm ashamed to remember what I did afterwards..."

(There is a pause, it is clearly confusing. He resumes his speech as soon as he regains some clarity.)

"I mean, the point is, why wasn't I in my right mind? Why did I feel crazy? The merciful Lord knows that madness is the thing I pray for day and night. Insanity is a wound of God's will, a wound of thought, and far from the soul, that soul so dear to our God. Madness is not an expression of the evil one. Therefore, if I have to choose, I would like to be insane and nothing else. Do you know what I mean?"

(I nod without comment)

"All right. Let's pretend I'm not crazy. Then, I, the undersigned Simone Pietrangeli, sacristan, man who lives in the fear of God, that night felt obliged to do horrible things. I don't know how to explain it to you..."

"I know you hurt yourself."

"Yes. But the pain, however unbearable, was nothing. It was the humiliating actions I had done before I was scourged, the actions that offended God, that tore me apart."

"Can you go into details?"

"I... I... I can't."

"I'll help you get to the point. On the file, on page 12, and excuse my bluntness, you're talking about masturbation. We're all adults here. We know everyone does it. Men, women, old men, boys and, why not, even sacristan like you. There's nothing bad or so sinful about it."

"Nothing bad? You don't understand. I'm not just a sacristan. I'm a hasty priest. A former priest who masturbates in church, in front of the altar, and you don't see anything wrong with that? A Christian who pulls out his penis and enjoys soiling his sacred vestments with semen. I think that's evil. Outside the church people were dying, I could hear the screams, you know? What about me? What was I doing? I was enjoying it! Enjoying and laughing like crazy. I was the devil who was scarring the house of God. And then I did other things. Unspeakable things..."

(cries)

"Let's look at this from a secular perspective. We have the results of the blood tests. You had a blood alcohol level four times normal. A very high concentration of ethanol. You know what that means, don't you?"

"I beg you, don't put me in front of my responsibilities so brutally."

"Being an alcoholic is not a fault."

"I see where you're going with this. All right, I'll drink. I have a problem with alcohol, all right. But that night, I could

really feel the blows. It was coming from the crypt. They were getting louder and louder. It sounded like the marble floor was splintering.

I remember after I did those disgusting things, I dragged myself to the lectern and read some passages from the Bible."

"Do you remember which ones?"

"I recited a passage from the Apocalypse of the Apostle John. What it says: "And when those thousand years are fulfilled, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to seduce the

nations that are in the four corners of the earth. Then I think I have... God forgive me. I believe I have urinated on the Holy Scriptures. That's when I tried to rebel."

"You spoke of scourging."

"That's right. I used the silver crucifix. I took it from the altar before I started hitting myself. I stabbed myself over and over again. I wanted to get the evil, the sin out of my body. Blood was pouring out from under my torn clothes. I don't know how many times I stabbed my right kidney, turning the crucifix stick into it. The more I hurt myself, the louder the thumps in the crypt got louder. I could hear them getting darker and deafer. This is the last thing I remember."

(He is clearly proven at this moment. A nurse came and waved me out. I stop asking questions.)

"Thanks for everything, Simone. But I'll let you rest now. I'll come back to see you soon, I promise."

"Look, I care, boy. I have a lot of things to tell you. Oh... before you go, let me bring you some chamomile tea."

End of recording.

5

Sandra Magnoli only smoked six cigarettes a day and none at work, although her colleagues usually did.

She was a second level employee at the immigration office of the municipality of Castelmuso, and was involved in family reunions, seasonal work, and conversion of residence permits.

There was a lot of bureaucracy in her work, but there was also the opportunity to do something practical for a mass of desperate people pushing the gates of the rich West. On his desk was a series of files, through which she had to decide the fate of an unknown number of Afghan refugees, Korean dissidents exhausted by a communist regime outside of history, and the relocation of migrants arriving from Lampedusa. In her office the miseries ignored the colour of the skin.

When the Freecorporation Media, the company that organized the Next Generation, sent her the tickets for the trip, Sandra thought to refuse, but the director wanted to gratify her by giving her a week's back vacation. For Daisy, her daughter, that would have been her first trip to Milan.

The two women boarded at Falconara airport and landed at Malpensa airport. On that day, due to a transport strike, mother and daughter did not find particularly convenient connections. However, Daisy and Sandra had the Freecorporation Media car, a champagne-coloured sedan with the TV programme logo printed on the sides.

A taciturn cameraman with a corporate cap over his eyes and a sticky author wearing a boring grey split, were at Daisy's beck and call.

The two women stayed at the Cosmopolitan Hotel, a stone's throw from La Scala theatre. The temple of great music was there, keeping a strict watch over the golden dreams of a sixteen-year-old girl. Within two days, Daisy was instructed on how she should perform on stage at the Millennium Arena. This was a tensile structure to the west of the Lombard capital, a fascinating monster made of cables, ropes and fibreglass. It could hold about 8,000 people.

Seen from the outside, the arena showed curved, light and harmonious shapes, and it was a pity that it was dismantled after each edition of Next Generation. The municipality of Milan owned the area where the Millennium was located. The contract provided that the twenty thousand square meters rented were occupied for no more than three months a year, at a cost of three hundred thousand euros per month. The Millennium was elegant and evanescent, an Arab phoenix made of tubes, Teflon and polyester, as it was defined by a theatre critic.

Now, inside that arena, and in front of millions of people, the finalists of one of Italy's most popular talent were about to perform.

Adriano watched the silvery, glittering reflections of the moon as it lay on the dark waters of the sea.

The treatment prescribed by Dr Salieri was a powerful cocktail of nortrilene and flufenazine. His quality of life had definitely improved. He no longer stammered, the trembling of his hands had diminished and he walked without dawdling like a zombie.

Downstairs, the guests were waiting for the connection. The room was large and bright because of a huge window that took up the space of two walls. The modern, refined furnishings included a glass table, bar corner, cream-colored leather armchairs and sofas crammed with friends and family of the Magnoli family.

Chatter and laughter resounded from the stairwell. Adriano could hear the beers crackling, the clink of toasts, his aunt wheezing with honours, the baritone voice of Uncle Ambrogio urging his friends to eat hamburgers and salmon mousse canapés.

"Adry, it's about to start! Come on, get down, I can't understand a bat with Sky remote controls" shouted her cousin Annetta, looking out over the stairs.

Adriano came down into the living room appreciating the fact that he was moving, if not with ease, in any case with discreet confidence.

"Adriano, you're a phenomenon! Daisy is on television thanks to you, do you realize?" complimented Franco Leni called Franz, the bearded, light-skinned neighbour, beer-drinker's belly and German face.

Franz had brought his fat wife, his three children, and a considerable amount of barbecued sausages.

"If you hadn't written that piece, we wouldn't be here bothering you" exclaimed his uncle, a skinny, nervous guy who wore a grisaille for the occasion and was proud to wear it at a village party.

Everyone had noticed how much better Adriano was doing. The effect of the new medication would last for at least a couple of months. Then, because of the addiction, the hallucinations would begin again. At which point the psychiatrist would have to establish a new treatment.

The rotation of medicines was essential to allow the boy a dignified quality of life, but at the risk of dangerously poisoning certain organs.

The liver, of course, was the most at risk. But his young age, combined with a diet that did not include alcohol consumption, was a good antidote that would keep him safe from the side effects of medicines. And Adriano was feeling particularly well that night.

The program was about to begin. The uncles had sunk on the couch, alert and excited, and Annetta was shivering with tension. Franz was sitting next to his wife, but kept at arm's length from a row of beer bottles as the children came and went from the garden, noisy and involved in the festive atmosphere. Antonio Bruzzi, the other neighbour, was a retired marshal with a navy background. He had carefully sat in the armchair furthest from the television.

Since his wife's death, the retiree had been suffering from depression and found that at his age, everything made little sense.

He had accepted Sandra's invitation as a courtesy. But now that he was there, he had to admit to himself that he found the company of all those excited and cheerful people pleasant.

After a row of bombastic commercials sponsoring the event, the theme song for Next Generation began.

In the living room, there was a loud buzz. Daisy, their little Daisy, was about to make her talent show debut.

On stage, dazzled by powerful lasers, appeared the slender figure of a young woman.

"Here she is. It's her!" screamed Annetta as she leapt to her feet, her finger pointed at the screen like the barrel of a gun.

"That's the announcer. Don't make a mess and stay down" her husband told her, pulling her by a flap of his shirt and making her butt plunge back into the soft cushions of the sofa.

"But when do they frame her?" Franz's wife asked impatiently, holding her hands on her chest, her heart beating with a hammer.

"It's still early" explained Adriano's uncle, the only one who regularly watched all the episodes of the talent broadcast on Channel 104.

"The jury presents first. Actually, they are the stars of the show. At some point they will call the contestants one by

one. The guys will sing and dance for a minute. The good guys go on for a minute. The others go home."

Adriano observed the group gathered around the TV. He knew they were to be considered his bodyguards. His mother had invited them in order not to leave him alone. Sandra called from Milan to see if everything was all right. Her sister reassured her. A quick hello to her son, and everyone crossed their fingers.

Sandra stood backstage at the Millennium Arena, more stunned than excited. Lasers were cutting through the stage. The head-clacks at the foot of the bleachers sweated under the headphones

and waved to cheer the audience on, but there was no need for that as the screams, energy and frenzy were completely spontaneous.

Rows of screaming boys raised banners wearing t-shirts with photos of their friends ready to take to the stage to sing.

The presenter, sheathed in a sequined dress, announced the arrival of the Next Generation jurors.

The four of them walked down the bleachers through the bleachers in a forest of arms waving like reeds in the wind.

The chairman of the jury was Sebastian Monroe, the format's author, a coarse New Zealand producer called Gold Nose – a nickname for his unerring nose for finding talent, but one that also referred to his nasal septum, which had been tried for years on cocaine.

Sebastian, impatient with the rules of show business, where everything had to be politically correct, was a misguided, indisposed, often drunk guy; he had no trouble getting a whisky on the air, or arguing with someone in the audience. The only prohibition was smoking: if he showed himself in public with a cigarette in his mouth, the sponsors would abandon the program. However, a certain quarrelling and a few vices in the protected band were tolerated, if not even encouraged, since they usually produced record peaks in the audience.

That evening, Sebastian showed up with an unkempt beard, a t-shirt greyed under his armpits with haloes of sweat and a bad mood. The other jurors were three parvenu of show business. Jenny Lio was an African singer who had sold two million records thanks to a song that had been at the top of the charts in fifteen countries for three weeks. It was catchy, childish. No big deal. Jenny Lio's artistic biography was like a layer of honey. It's a pity that in her curriculum vitae was omitted an arrest made in her youth: getting caught in Tripoli with a brick of hashish hidden in her suitcase wasn't the best for those who, like her, sang cartoon theme songs.

The other star of the jury was Isabella Larini, famous not so much for her singing qualities as for being the interpreter of a recent summer catchphrase. It was a song to dance to with stale spanking, hands between her tits and winking touches between her thighs. On the beaches and campsites the animators had imposed Isabella's Dance. By the time the autumn arrived, everyone had already forgotten about her.

The last juror was Alessandro Boni, aka Circe. A Drag Queen with an imposing physique and excessive makeup. A brilliant conversationalist, but without any particular artistic talent. They had built a sadomasochistic reputation around her, just to add some substance to the character.

Circe had made the news for ruining the political career of a congressman who had fallen in love with her. Someone had filmed the congressman in a hotel room, completely naked, his ankles and wrists tied to the side of the bed. Circe was accused of kidnapping, harassment, and drug dealing. There was a trial, where the verdict finally spoke of "A sex games between consenting adults". The heads of the prosecution fell and Circe was acquitted in full. The result was one less congressman and one more TV personality.

Now, the four jurors, the souls scratched by human sins, were ready to judge the contestants in the race. The first artist was called Fernando Ramirez. He was a young

Mexican who entered the United States illegally before the Trump Administration allocated \$2 billion to raise the walls along the border.

Fernando, once past the curtain, was caught robbing a gas station in a remote Texas desert town. "I had to eat", he told the public.

Arrested and kicked out by the feds, penniless, he embarked on an adventurous journey that took him overseas. Now, for some years, he had been living in Rovigo, a guest of second generation uncles and cousins.

Fernando, with his olive skin and black, fiery eyes, after touching everyone with his story, began to sing. He had a rough and engaging voice, and the audience appreciated the performance by peeling their hands with a remote-controlled applause from the leader.

Three out of four judges found the performance convincing.

Sebastian Monroe voted against, explaining that in his opinion the boy was barely an amateur, a smartass who wanted to pity them with his sob story. The public booed outraged at that statement, and Sebastian responded with the middle finger. The web went wild. There was a hailstorm of insults on the socials, controversy raged and the share went up half a point.

Other competitors followed. Some were amazingly good, others were talentless, but eccentric enough to capture the public's attention. The authors of the program gave them a strategic location to raise the audience's attention.

They spent a few commercials inviting viewers to buy products that were voluptuous, but so seductive and captivating that they were indispensable.

After a flurry of dream cars, fine perfumes and designer clothes, the live broadcast could begin again.

The share was around eight per cent when Daisy Magnoli took the stage.

Her young, perfect, restless face, smiling, shrewd eyes, and short pastel-colour dress immediately attracted the jury's attention. "Here we are another creature who could lose his innocence behind the glittering world of show business, the judges thought, more or less, they knew they were looking at a potential character.

"Hey, everybody! Aren't you going to say anything? Isn't this little girl a beauty?" Sebastian Monroe exclaimed, addressing the audience who responded to his solicitation with a round of applause.

"Jenny, what do you think of this flower that suddenly blossomed on stage?" Sebastian insisted, repeating the lines on the monitor.

"A truly splendid lily, Sebastian. But I don't like your tone; it sounds like the hum of a bee hunting for pollen, if you know what I mean. And it's underage" Jenny remarked, scrolling through the lines written on the hunchback by the authors.

"Oh, come on, Jenny, you know you're the flower of my dreams" Sebastian replied with a resolution.

Circe didn't read any of the lines, preferring to go on the arm.

"Come on, dear Daisy. Why don't you tell us something about yourself?"

"Hello, everyone" smiled Daisy, who, in spite of her age and with some wonder, was not at all uncomfortable. Being the centre of attention always gave her a thrill of pleasure.

"My name is Daisy. Daisy Magnoli. I come from Castelmuso, a village of 15,000 inhabitants, not far from the Adriatic Sea..."

Daisy continued by reciting some other banality about her high school life, but without the liveliness demanded by the authors.

"Is that all?" Sebastian exclaimed, pretending to be disappointed. "I hope that shyness hides a great talent,

otherwise..." Sebastian spread his arms, as if to say: "What did you come to do? To disappoint all these people?"

Daisy knew that the program's set list included a few mandatory steps: the jury would start with compliments, so to boost the share they would provoke her into trouble. All she had to do was stand up to the jurors' assaults.

It was all planned.

Now all she had to do was sing *I'm Rose* and she would become a celebrity.

6

Guido felt a chill running down his shoulder blades. Daisy was about to perform in front of millions of Italians.

"That asshole Sebastian! Did you see how the hell he treated her? Who does he think he is?" Manuel Pianesi was so angry that he spilled the beer on the sofa cushions, making Guido swear.

Guido Gobbi had already regretted hosting his two friends at his home, an apartment on the outskirts of town in the populous San Lorenzo district. Five thousand quiet souls, divided between the buildings with high facades that followed the profile of the hill.

On the one hand Manuel screamed, making him miss the jurors' jokes, on the other, Leo Fratesi replied to the comments, with the vice of emphasizing several times the concept already expressed.

"Please, will you stop messing around?" Guido asked as he pressed the remote control button to turn up the volume.

A week had passed since Daisy and Guido had quarrelled. She thought Guido was a peeping Tom and wanted to report him to the principal. It seemed like the sad ending to a story that had never been told. Then, that phrase appeared on the computer.

Adriano has to stop looking for me. Or he'll come to a bad end.

After an exhausting explanation where Guido had tried to convince her that he had nothing to do with it, they finally made peace, even though the longed-for appointment had been postponed.

Daisy, in fact, had preferred to investigate who had sent the message, with Manuel's help. The dreadlocks high school boyfriend was a good geek, one of those who could trace the source code. Manuel had tried to find out who the author

was, but with every attempt, the computer inexplicably froze.

The seriousness of the attack ruled out the possibility that it was a prank on Daisy.

Guido said that Adriano probably did something he shouldn't have. Perhaps a virtual meeting gone wrong. Or, he stepped on the wrong people's toes, or something, and they were threatening him. Daisy had never seriously considered the possibility that they were really angry with her brother. She used to feel that she was the centre of attention, which led her to think that the message was addressed to her. It is likely that her disabled brother had really attracted someone's hatred, and now she wanted to find out why.

"So, Daisy, what do you want us to hear?" Sebastian Monroe asked, drinking a sip of scotch that made his lips slurp with pleasure.

"Well, I'd like to sing a song. A new song" she replied, grabbing the microphone stand, which she lifted to suit her height.

"Did you hear that?" exclaimed the juror, turning to the audience.

"We're dealing with a singer-songwriter" added Circe, puzzled, who searched the stands for someone who shared her scepticism. There were some whispers of approval.

"I didn't actually write it."

"Could you be a more verbose thread, or shall we move on to monosyllables?"

There was a giggle from the audience.

"It's a song written by Adriano Magnoli. My brother. The song is I'm Rose.

In Castelmuso, Adriano watched the program with his arms folded, his shoulder resting on the door jamb, and there was a lot of excitement around him.

"For God's sake, Adry, they're talking about you here!" Franz shouted out the foam from the beer bottle.

"Really, Adriano. It's great" Uncle Ambrogio remarked, raising his glass to another toast.

The compliments of the people gathered in the living room of the villa were sincere, insistent, and a bit annoying. In Adriano's ears they sounded a bit like "Nothing bad for a mental patient."

He couldn't blame them. After all, it was the truth.

"Now a little silence, please" Sebastian said, raising his hands to silence the audience, while the camera's ruthless eye was placed on Circe's finger on the stage.

"Daisy Magnoli. Your time has come!"

Daisy closed her eyes, seeking maximum inspiration.

The sweet sound of a piano rose up. Just a few notes chasing each other. The music, light and evocative, seemed to lead into a garden of fragrant roses. A melody that recalled soft colors, delicate flights of butterflies and clear skies full of harmony.

Adriano's music began as a calm journey into the soul.

Daisy, the feeling of riding a rainbow of emotions, began to sing.

My heart pierced by blinding suns

My hard crystal tears

It's beauty

The joy of love

But a shadow is hidden in the folds of my soul...

The words, whispered like a loud chant, did not provoke any reaction from the audience.

As expected, if the artist showed little, if any, talent during the performance, shouts and whistles were heard, but when the skill was undeniable, applause and shouts were heard. Nothing happened to Daisy. No one said a word. Everything was still, suspended in a vacuum.

Suddenly the sigh of the piano became a thunder rumble. A powerful, dark bass gave off a powerful energy. Melody and rhythm exploded into a gothic rock piece. Drums and guitar fused, in the background, a chorus of deep voices. It was an ancient Gregorian chant translated from Latin, the voices modulated on prophetic tones. A warning that spoke of beauty, love and damnation.

Love is the mirror of the dark.

The dark will be my husband.

The cloak of the black reaper will fall on my face, heavy as a shroud.

Beauty and damnation...

Then the choir silenced. A thick, grey smoke came down on stage.

Daisy's voice rose clear and vibrant.

Sin crept into the mists of my innocence.

The dark angel is joy and innocence.

The dark angel is joy and perversion.

I am the rose.

He is damnation...

The dance steps touched the stage with light and agile touches, a roll rose as the succession of threatening thunder, the choir to create an atmosphere of warning and omen.

At the end of the song the guitars interpreted an acrobatic solo, a perfect counterpoint to celebrate the dying sound of the drums.

Then, suddenly, the music dissolved.

The piece was finished.

Daisy stood motionless, her face turned to the sky, sweat running down her temples, strands of hair clinging to her reddened cheeks, her knee pointed to the ground and her arm outstretched to the sky in a beautiful, epic pose.

Daisy smiled at the jury, holding her anxieties, her heart beating fast in the center of her chest. It was time for the verdict.

All around, a heavy, unfathomable silence.

Daisy stared at Sebastian Monroe. She knew the verdict would pass through his eyes. The New Zealander, almost always arrogant and clear-headed in his judgements, had an indecisive look, and

all of his poise suggested an insecurity that no one recognized. The other judges were also nervous and uncertain.

Daisy, in anticipation of the response, felt that she could hear thudding from under the stage.

She heard a technician swearing heavily behind the scenes. The smoke grenades were not supposed to go off. Daisy, in fact, had been surprised. During rehearsals no one had mentioned that she had to dance in an annoying cold fog.

"I'm Rose" Sebastian finally said, "It's, like, you know... what I heard was something crazy."

"Immense is the word" echoed Circe, caged in a shiny black latex costume, the sweat coming down from under her wig.

The jury's verdict preceded the verdict of the audience, who rose and applauded. An unusual tribute, where everyone's enthusiasm was measured, but full and complete, as if the exhibition deserved admiration and respect as if it were a piece of work.

As people applauded, the thunder under the stage became darker and deeper.

Daisy took a bow. That was the most important moment of her life.

She was restless, smiling and thanking.

The thudding increased. "Ma no one hears them?" she thought, as the stage vibrated beneath her feet, the mike stick was jumping in front of her lips. He blamed the tension, and thought of his brother. Adriano had fallen ill due to severe stress. She was also under a lot of pressure now. Her imagination led her to believe that someone, or something, was buried somewhere. A presence trapped in a dark and

undefined place trying to free itself. Maybe she was sick, too?

She felt a painful cramp in her stomach and was afraid of vomiting. Despite everything, she struggled to smile.

"Daisy, I have no words. I'm simply astounded" Sebastian exclaimed, shaking his head, as if to shake off the emotions that I'm Rose has brought.

Isabella Larini agreed as she brushed her arm to caress the goose skin, her eyes flashing with admiration.

"Gentlemen, personally I am still in shock. We have witnessed the birth of a star. A star that will long shine in the firmament of the Next Generation" was Circe's comment.

"Now we want to know everything, just everything about you" Sebastian asked, smoothing his hard, stinging beard.

Daisy felt the blows stop. The mike player was no longer jumping and the stage stopped vibrating. She was convinced that she had only imagined them. She passed the back of her hand over her sweaty brow, her eyes spinning in the stands. In her dreams, her audience was always invisible, someone who applauded her but only she could see. Now the audience was real. There he was, in the flesh, standing before her, peeling his hands.

"I'm glad you liked the piece" she could say, almost moved.

Daisy's house had gone up in flames. Amelia, Franz's wealthy wife, laughed with a smiling face. Aunt Annetta took two tears of emotion from the back of her hand. The landline and cell phones were ringing off the hook. Each ring was a friend, a neighbour, an acquaintance who called to congratulate him. Franz and Uncle Ambrogio, half drunk, urged a toast by shaking beer mugs overflowing with foam in their hands.

At that moment in Castelmuso everyone could boast that they were fellow citizens of a celebrity.

Adriano was watching Daisy on the stage of Next Generation. He knew her like no other. She was tense and nervous, and the smile was not sincere.

The young man, just like Daisy, was overwhelmed with anxiety. "Adriano, you're great" his uncle told him, hugging him with an abrupt gesture and throwing his weight around to support himself.

"I said. I have always said it. I don't have two nephews. I have two phenomena."

Adriano departed from his relative to free himself from that cumbersome arm. He left the room and slipped into the hallway. He went up the stairs, cursed every step, cursed his migraine that had suddenly burst and cursed the drugs that were slowing him down.

He went into his room. He opened the desk drawer to take a painkiller. In his head, everything began to take on faded and confused forms.

He went through the drawer with his hand without remembering what he was looking for. He began wandering around the room in a disoriented and distraught air, before collapsing to the floor with his head in his hands. At that moment the hallucinations returned to him.

Adriano convinced himself that his head was a vase full of earth, where dense tangles of roots, impossible to eradicate, were taking root.

He took from the bookshop an old volume with a heavy and worn-out cover. His trembling hands turned the pages of the Bible with a frustrating and resigned slowness.

He stopped on a particularly crumpled page, aware that it would be of no use to read, or even to pray, as if at that moment religion had become distant and contrary to the truth.

Schizophrenia. It is called schizophrenia. My mind is sick. It's just that. It's the only thing I can think of that is repeating the Bible at the foot of my bed, the pages open on the floor like the wings of a dead bird.

No. It's not schizophrenia, Adriano. He's about to come on stage.

"Very well, Daisy Magnoli" Sebastian said. "I don't know if you realise, but your voice is amazing, you dance like a pro, and if I'm not mistaken you're only 16, right?"

"That's right. At least for the part about my age. Otherwise I trust your judgment."

Daisy's response was underlined by applause from the audience who seemed to like not only her artistic talent, but also her verve.

"Now tell us, darling" exclaimed Circe. "The piece was written by your brother, wasn't it? What did you say his name was?"

"Adriano. Adriano Magnoli."

"Would you like to talk a little about him? Such a good author deserves to be here, next to you."

"Well, my brother can't come. Because he, as it were, he... he... he... is..."

"He what? You look a little embarrassed" Sebastian frowned. "You don't want to talk about Adriano, do you?"

"Here is the moment of perfidy" Daisy thought. "Come, now I'm going to get blackmailed."

Daisy knew that judges could become particularly hateful, even cruel, in the name of ratings.

But she had no intention of falling into that trap, and she tried to concentrate to keep up with their assaults.

"So, where is your brother? You should let us meet him, love..."

Isabella Larini's mellifluous voice officially started the provocations.

"Maybe you didn't want him here because you're jealous of him?"

"Adrianoooo! Where are you? Adrianinoooooooo!" Circe suddenly shouted, putting his hand over his forehead to look away, provoking the spectators to laugh.

Sandra had been backstage the whole time. I'm Rose's performance had been perfect. She was proud of Daisy. She had rejoiced and cried with emotion.

The cameras had lingered on her tears, moving housewives and mothers in front of the TV.

The whole show was running on the right track. There was the girl with an uncommon talent, an emotional mother and a composer brother who, in her absence, was feeding the viewers' curiosity.

All oxygen to the ratings. And the ratings were turning into euro palates thanks to the profits from the advertising sales.

NCC's contracts were based on ratings. The higher the ratings, the more companies that advertised their products paid more to the sender. And each share point was worth something like two million euros.

For Sandra, however, the program was taking an unpleasant turn.

Why are they making fun of my son? she wondered. *The authors know he's not well. They talked to him a lot. They even prepared a video with a cross-section of our family. An interview where Daisy talked about her dreams, her affections, her mother, her father who's gone... The authors know about Paolo's suicide, Adry's problems. They were impressed and saddened. That's why they advised against mentioning it on TV. Daisy's only 16. She can't handle an interview where they talk about things bigger than her. Why are they acting like this now? That wasn't the fucking deal!*

The ratings were on the jury monitors. The average for the Next Generation was normally around nine percent. Jurors got excited when they read that the share was close to eleven.

The data was calculated in real time using a sophisticated system that cross-referenced information from a sample of 20,000 households across all regions. And eleven percent was great news, so the authors decided to go heavy with Daisy. She was the one who raised the ratings.

We had to create interest around the girl. A lot of interest. On the judges' monitors, a string of particularly cynical suggestions appeared in fiery characters.

Listening goes up. Hit the girl hard!

Go for it. Go through the shit. We need to get to thirteen!

The father killed himself. See if you can get it in there somewhere.

Crazy brother, suicidal father. This is strong stuff. We agreed not to do this, but to hell with it! Get it all out. But make sure it doesn't turn on us. We have to splash at thirteen.

Jenny Lio was staring at the monitor enthusiastically. She thought of the jury's bonus, also calculated on the share. If the ratings had been on 12, she could have collected a surplus of 50,000 euros. But to earn that amount, you would have to give your best. She stood up. Sarcastic hummed: "Adrianoooo! Adrianinoooo! Why are you playing hide and seek?"

Isabella Larini, too, when she did her math, started her wicked show. The juror pretended to be outraged and shouted, "Forget it, Jenny. Don't be a bitch. Adriano's not here because he has a problem. And we're talking about something serious. Aren't we, Daisy? As far as I know, Adriano, the author of your beautiful song, is... Do you want to say it? Do you want to talk about his problem?"

Daisy was unprepared for that question. That wasn't the arrangement. She was supposed to sing and have fun. And if, on top of that, she was really good, she'd have a chance to get into show business.

The judges weren't sticking to the chords or the set list now.

She hoped they wouldn't force her to talk about her family's misfortune.

After all, I'm Rose wasn't just a song.

It was her story.

"Come on, Daisy. You can tell us anything. What's wrong with your brother?" Sebastian asked, twiddling his thumbs under his chin, pretending to be careful and concerned. "My brother's not well" replied the girl, feeling like a lost bunny surrounded by ravenous wolves.

At that moment she would want her mother beside her, and throw herself into his arms to feel as safe and protected as when she was a child. She watched as the judges pressed on with more and more uncomfortable and indispositive questions. Her cheeks shed tears and cursed her stupidity. She had to be strong, she had to respond to those insidious questions at a stroke. Instead, all she could do was cry.

A flash of triumph crossed Jenny Lio's eyes... The display showed the share at thirteen and a half.

Daisy's crying was capturing the viewers. But, above all, it would have added another thirty thousand euros for her.

Jenny, Isabella and Sebastian exchanged a look full of satisfaction.

On the monitor came the tips of the authors, which gradually became more and more nasty.

Go ahead, take the snap. Let the little girl tell you what the fuck is wrong with her brother.

Come on, come on, come on! If we get to fifteen, it's a hundred thousand euros!

Come on Circe, get a move on. You're not doing anything to raise your voice. Hurt her. Hit her hard with a question of your own!

Sandra wanted to complain to someone, but she didn't know where to turn. The two cameramen who were filming her followed her backstage, until she came across one of the writers, a bald guy like an ostrich egg with two huge headphones on his ears and a clipboard in his hand.

"Mrs. Magnoli" he said peremptorily, "you cannot come here, you must stay in the area that has been assigned to your parents, and..."

"Get the fuck off me, you fucker!" Sandra screamed, pointing her hands at the thin boy's chest, pushing him away.

"Please calm down now" she begged the author in the face.

A sturdy and discreet orderly approached Sandra. The author waved his hand to make it clear that everything was under control.

"How can I calm down? My daughter's crying on the fucking stage!" Sandra raved, desperate.

"A lot of kids are crying during the show. It's normal for them to get excited" the young writer replied, angry at a cameraman who wanted to film the scene. The protest of a minor's parent on air could have raised a hornet's nest of controversy. And many consumer associations and security agencies would have been happy to bring down the program, considering the presence of people like Circe and Monroe unsuitable for a protected band.

"I warn you. Leave my son out of this" Sandra threatened to point the finger at the author.

The bald young man knew full well how legitimate the woman's anger was. He couldn't blame her, but there was a lot of money at stake.

If he listened to him again, he would have pocketed 20,000 euros. In fact, his name was the headline immediately after Sebastian Monroe's, and the young author had no intention of giving up such generous compensation. He warned the director to turn off the drone that was filming backstage, and had cameras six and seven, the ones on Sandra Magnoli, darkened. When he did so, he ordered the security man to escort the woman back to her family members' seats.

Sandra reluctantly accepted, but without any intention of letting her guard down. If anyone tried to rage against her children, she would run to the stage to drag Daisy off, after insulting the judges and denouncing the program's producers live.

"It's 14 and a half!!!!"

The inscription flashed followed by a triumphant row of exclamation points.

Daisy would have wanted to escape from the stage. But she was nailed there, unable to react. The jurors' questions became more and more precise, nasty and outrageous.

There was a 30-second commercial break. The share dropped physiologically by two points.

When the commercial ended, the ratings went up again.

Daisy's clean face furrowed with tears leapt to the top of Twitter's topic trends.

Sebastian looked at the display with a flash of euphoria.

They were at fourteen and eight, two more points and the bonus of one hundred thousand euros would be triggered. With that money he could have bought top quality cocaine, and a gold piercing studded with diamonds that he already imagined dangling from the rosy nipple of Christine, his underage lover. Sebastian had fallen in love with the little girl when she was fifteen, and he never ceased to be surprised by the naturalness she showed in certain complicated erotic games.

"Well. Here we are again in your company. We were talking about Adriano" Sebastian summed up, before adding, "Forgive me if I'm indelicate, but I was wondering how a mentally ill boy could compose such a fantastic song as *I'm Rose*."

"No, you're not indelicate, you're just a bastard, filthy dickhead" thought Daisy, who replied by trying to keep her anger in check.

"My brother is suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. It's a very serious illness. Besides, crazy or not crazy, I love my brother. I love him more than anything in the world. He is sensitive. He's sensitive. He's a good boy. And if I'm here, it's all because of him."

An emotional sigh rose from the audience.

Fourteen and nine.

The audience was getting up again. Daisy's response, with those brief words dictated from the heart, had struck deep into the viewers.

Jenny Lio and Isabella Larini took an enthusiastic look at Sebastian. On the monitor, the authors wrote more and more pressing messages.

We're about to hit the big time. Come on, come on, come on! Let's make it round, so tonight we'll toast with Moët & Chandon surrounded by fancy sluts and faggots!

Sebastian passed the palm of his hand over his sweaty brow. It was time to use the heavy artillery.

Daisy felt his evil look on his face. She was frightened by the next question, which turned out to be a masterpiece of wickedness.

"Did you love your father too, Daisy?"

The girl became earthy. How could they do this to her? How could they afford to name her father?

"Well, Daisy?"

She didn't say anything. She tried to chase away the memory of her parent, but she couldn't. She'd never got over the trauma of suicide despite years and years of therapy.

The show's judges, pressing her with no humanity at all, brought it all back, and Daisy relived the horror that stained her childhood. She saw her father again dangling from the tree with his eyes slit open staring into the void, his tongue dangling inert on the side of his lip, his neck stretched, his cervical vertebrae broken. He never really saw it, but he always imagined it that way.

"Well, Daisy?"

Daisy heard her mother screaming and calling someone a bastard. She distinctly heard Adiano's cry of pain, even though her brother wasn't there, and she thought she was going mad.

"So? Tell us about your father..."

"Enough! Enough!" she shouted as if she had been seized with hysterics.

"Enough! Enough! Enough!"

Suddenly, a deaf thud made the trellis that supported the stage lights vibrate. The steel mounts where the strobe lights were attached jumped off. Another thud was heard.

The spotlights exploded one after the other between flashes of white light.

The stage jolted, as if someone, or something, was pressing in from below.

A pylon suddenly tilted down, tearing the electrical wires. Sparks crackled from the bare wires. The bolts gave way. The pylon fell to the ground dragging cables and reflectors. Daisy screamed when the pylon hit the jury table.

Jenny Lio heard a thunderous blow. She had been grazed by the pylon. A cable waving like a snake, crackling with energy, struck her in the face. She fell to the ground unconscious. The 20,000-volt discharge burned her face, leaving a gash on her neck, while her right ear had shrivelled to a steaming black stump.

Isabella Larini was lying on the ground. She was screaming in pain because her right arm was trapped under a corner of the pylon. The unnatural position of the limb suggested that it was a horrible fracture.

Circe was sitting there, unharmed. Covered in blood, not hers.

Sebastian's sight made her scream with horror.

The head of the jury was lying on the table, his back crushed by the pylon. Blood was dripping on the lit screens. Her eyes

were still and staring wide open on the monitor, where the historic record of ratings was flashing.

Next Generation was interrupted at 10:35 a.m. on Thursday, November 19.

Death brought the share to forty-nine per cent.

7

Like every morning, Greta Salimbeni entered the studio wearing one of her severe grey suits.

Dr. Salieri's assistant was able to change the general impression people made of her. Greta could appear icy, winking, surly, or sensual, all without being aware of it, as if the virtues and flaws were only in the eye of the beholder.

When she started working in the studio she was a young married woman, but disappointed by marriage. One recurring thought was that she would soon become the lover of her boss. But Salieri was in love with his wife. And a good marriage was a necessary balancing act for someone in the psychiatric profession.

Those who treated men's psyches had to maintain a private life without conflict and tension, or else they would dump their frustrations on their patients.

Greta was in love with the doctor, but she didn't want to be a second choice. This is why Salieri remained a pure and simple erotic fantasy.

Greta opened the door to let the patient in.

Adriano Magnoli entered and renewed his gaze on the porcelain that embellished the study.

"Hi, Adriano" greeted Salieri, raising an eyebrow, the concentrated expression of those who study the patient down to the smallest detail.

"I'm sorry about what happened" said quickly the boy.

"Yes. It wasn't a good time" Salieri said, crossing his arms and pushing his shoulders to the back of the chair to relieve the body, which had been immobile behind his desk for too many hours.

"You will tell me everything calmly. Sit down."

Adriano sat resting his elbows on the inlaid table. He nervously rubbed his hands, his expression full of guilt. The psychiatrist noticed some red bruises on the boy.

"I'm so sorry. But I'm better now."

"Your marks are left" noted Salieri pointing the pen at Adriano's wrists.

"If that's why, they're on my ankles too" said Adriano, raising one knee to lift the flap of his trousers and lowering one sock. The skin underneath showed a purplish bruise.

"During a crisis, it happens to attack people" noted the doctor scribbling a note with a nervous handwriting.

"I shouldn't have bitten him. But I wasn't myself."

"How long did they keep you in bed?" Salieri asked, turning on the computer.

"Two days. The straps on the bed were leather, and I got so nervous. That's why I was left with the marks."

"Three weeks in the psychiatric ward. Must have been tough, boy."

"When the pylon collapsed on the stage, I thought Daisy was impressed, too, and that's when I went out of my mind."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Salieri asked, sliding his mouse lightly over the mat, his eyes on the screen following the arrow pointing to a folder to open.

"I would, but I remember almost nothing about that night" Adriano clarified. "They say, however, that I went downstairs into the living room. Everyone was shouting about what was happening on television. At that point I became aggressive, but that's what they believe."

"So, why did you rage against the guests who were watching your sister on TV?"

"Because I saw bits of coal raining down in the room. Yes, I remember that. I threw myself at them to protect them. I wanted to prevent someone from getting hit."

"You also pushed your aunt, who fell on the floor, right?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, yes. She hit her head, but I swear I didn't want to hurt her."

"I know she wasn't hurt, except for a bump, and I know she defended you to the very last moment so you wouldn't be committed. She said you were very upset about the incident on stage."

"I don't know. I... I just know that I didn't mean to hurt anyone."

"The bite on the nurse, remember?"

"Not much. Again, I wasn't well. They wanted to take me away, but I didn't want to, and that's when the whole mess happened."

"I've seen the medication packs, you haven't been taking them regularly, Adriano. That's why the hallucinations came back."

Adriano, clumsy, nodded with an air of guilt.

"Tell me about Daisy, rather. How is she?" Salieri asked, opening the file he was looking for. He began to look at it with particular attention, half-closing his eyes and nudging his nose closer to the desktop.

"Daisy got scared. But she's strong, and she stood up for me. That's why what happened... what we saw on that stage. But I... well... God, I'm sorry, Doctor, I'm a bit nervous..."

"It's okay. We're among friends. Express what you want to say calmly" the psychiatrist exclaimed distractedly while typing with two fingers on the keyboard.

Adriano emitted a restless sound.

"I mean that man, Sebastian Monroe, should not have provoked him."

As Adriano spoke, Salieri clicked on the file that contained the boy's medical history. The man noticed something unusual. He smoothed his chin. He took a look at Adriano. He looked at the screen again and frowned at his eyebrows.

"The incident on stage. Maybe it was this thing" said Adriano, reclining his head to grab it in his hands. "This

thing that's here, inside my head. Maybe it doesn't just take root here, maybe it can take root anywhere. Maybe it's already everywhere."

Adriano talked, ignoring that he was no longer the center of Dr. Salieri's attention. The psychiatrist had put an earpiece in his ear and was completely absorbed by the computer, his fingers drumming nervously on the desk.

"Doctor, are you listening to me?" Adriano asked him with a moan.

"Sorry. I got distracted." Salieri replied to the boy as he removed his earpiece, his chest rising relaxed in a sigh of worry.

"So, you were telling me about this mysterious being" said the psychiatrist with apparent calm.

"He, the parasite, is looking for her. He's been looking for Daisy all his life... and now he's found her, you see, Doctor? Do you understand what's going to happen? No, he doesn't, because we're just getting started. Sebastian Monroe shouldn't have provoked her. That's why he ended up like that."

Adriano finished his speech shrugging his shoulders, as if to get something annoying off his chest, and put it aside. This was followed by another twenty-three minutes of conversation, in which the boy managed to put together some coherent, sometimes confused reasoning. Salieri pulled up his shirt cuff to look at the watch, a steel Rolex that needed reloading. He squeezed his thumb and index finger on the spring winding bezel, turned it in small, rapid movements until the hands moved, and said, "All right, Adriano. We're done for today. The hospitalization was a bad thing. I just wanted to see you just to see if you were feeling better. Tell your mother she doesn't owe me anything. But promise me you'll always take the medication. Keep on the five hundred milligram pills. I'll see you next week. Same time."

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