

ARMANDO LAZZARI

Dinner with
The
Mafia



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Dinner with the Mafia:

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Аннотация

A comedy about a thirty year-old New Yorker who is in the dark about his family's mafiosa activities and finds himself involved in a vendetta between families and on the hunt for an elusive treasure.

“Brilliant and dynamic, you will be thrown into an exhilarating adventure for the hunt of a hidden treasure in a captivating New York; in a world where the word 'Mafia' will make you smile. Riddles, pursuits and a comedy of errors surround the characters in a vortex of gags, unaware that they are the center of attention of the 'Family' that wants to protect them; of the ruthless rival mob that threatens them for the loot; and the interest of two confused cops who stalk them in an attempt to figure out what's going on.”

“Take a slice of 'The Big Apple' and add two good kids: Ben and Susan. Now blend that with a strong and determined mafia 'Family' that blackmails them, and mix in the frenetic pursuit of a hidden treasure. Spice it up with fervent cops hot on their heels and above all, don't forget to garnish everything with yet another New York rival 'Family', whose Boss is the uncle of the young Ben, that has always protected him. The secret ingredient: Ben must never know about

his uncles' true 'business' and must continue to believe that they are honest workers, due to a promise made at the time of his father's death. Serve this in a brilliant and dynamic setting, accompanied with a fresh liveliness...of puzzling riddles, misunderstandings and never-ending pursuits.”

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Translated by

DENA MARZULLO

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Author | Armando Lazzari

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AUTHOR'S NOTE:

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Dedicated to:

my children, **Alexander** and **Nicole**

my wife, **Alessandra** (the Red Farmhouse Detective)

my mom and dad, **Marisa** and **Augusto**

my sister, **Tatiana**

my in-laws, **Ines** and **Sandro**

and... to *all my friends and relatives* who remain in the telephone directory and *who will purchase at least one copy*. For the rest, you are consigned to a good and fair God who will strike you down with lightning until you burn to a crisp.

“Imagination is a quality that was given to man to compensate for what he is not, and a sense of humour is provided to console him from what he is.”

Oscar Wilde

Prologue

Toxic white smoke rings slowly surfaced upward, joining the dense cloud of smoke that had already enveloped the room. The pungent odor of cigar filled the study, clinging to every object. The walls of the room were so saturated by the fumes, they seemed to be the very cause of the stale and emanating smell.

The man sitting at the head of the table was the cause of this miasma, mechanically blowing smoke from his mouth while meditating intently on a memory. A fresh memory that hurt deep down and would scar him forever, leaving dark circles under his eyes. His name is Joe Santini, and he had just witnessed the murder of his brother, Angelo, whose death was an image that no man could erase from memory.

Of the other three men in the room, only Carmine D'Abbate sat with him at the table in silence, pouring himself a glass of red wine and staring at Joe with bulging, haggard eyes.

Frank “Drummer” Colombo stood leaning against the windowsill watching the rain pour down, drumming his fingers in rhythm with the chomping and snapping of his chewing gum. Drummer's apparent calm had been proven an illusion many times, given his ability to kill a man with the same understated manner as perusing the morning edition of *The New York Times*.

The third man, Johnny Greco, chain smoked and paced restlessly back and forth like a pendulum. Only one single, lewd

word kept coming out of his mouth. “Fuck, fuck, fuck...”

Carmine spoke in his usual calm and reassuring way, “Here Joe, have another glass. It'll do you good. This is the good stuff, not that crap from the supermarket. This comes from Italy.”

Johnny, high-strung by nature, couldn't stand the apathy and resignation one second longer. “Knock it off with the fuckin' wine, already! You trying to get him drunk? He's still gotta tell us what the fuck happened!”

Carmine was from the old school and didn't like Johnny's foulmouth language. “All you know how to say is 'fuck'. Cut it out. Besides, can't you see he's still in shock? Damn, show a little respect! He just lost his brother, for crying out loud.”

“That's exactly my point. I respect him. And I've always respected Angelo. I've been standing around for two hours doing nothing and I'm sick and tired of wasting time. I want to know right this minute who did it so I can go tear his head off with my bare hands. Fuck!”

Carmine stood up fast, knocking the chair to the floor. Pointing his finger at Johnny, he said, “I swear to you, if you say that word one more time, I'll rip the tongue out of your mouth and feed it to the dogs!”

“What do you want, hah? I can't even talk now? What are you, my mother? If I want to say fuck, I'll say it as much as I want: fuck, fuck, fuck,” said Johnny with all the arrogance and insolence his youth could muster.

Carmine was as good as his word. “I warned you, you stupid

idiot! Now I'm gonna crack your dumb skull open so you can fill it with all the filthy language that you want!"

Johnny loved nothing more than a challenge. "Come on, fat-ass. You're full of shit. You think I'm afraid of you?" dared Johnny.

While they both attacked each other, wrestling like a couple of kids over a toy, Frank pulled his silver revolver out of its holster and shouted, "Knock it off for Christ's sake, you're grown men and you're acting like a couple of spoiled brats. If you don't stop it right now, I'll shoot you both in the knees. That'll give you something to cry about."

Heedless to Frank's threat, they kept brawling until Joe spoke in a faint voice, "Knock it off or this lunatic will shoot both of you."

Shocked by Joe's tone, they immediately stopped fighting. All three moved close to the table in reverent silence, waiting to hear what he had to say.

"It was supposed to be a two-man job because we didn't want to attract too much attention," said Joe. "At least that's what the Boss told us. We were supposed to wait on that damned hill about three hundred yards away for the armored van to pass, hit the tire with the sniper rifle, then wait for our accomplice to get out after he'd knocked out his partner, grab the briefcase with the diamonds and run to the hideout. Clean and easy, just like that. But I knew better. There is no such thing as an easy job where everything goes smooth as silk. Anyway, when Angelo took his

shot, both tires exploded and the van went off the road, rolled into a ditch and flipped over.

“We watched and waited, but nobody got out. Pretty soon, a gray Chrysler came speeding up, and two guys with rifles got out and opened the doors of the van and opened fire like crazy on those poor guys, shooting them like dogs. Angelo and I looked at each other and decided to do the only thing that we could think of. We fired a couple of shots into the air just to get their attention and try to figure out who they were. As it turned out, they were from the Lucchesi family and had organized the same heist as us. Since nobody knew which one of us had fired the first shot at the van, a heated argument started over territorial rights. We even had a map spread out on the hood of the car. We said the van belonged to us, since the loot came from a jewelry shop in our neighborhood at Bowry and Baynard Streets. But they insisted that the van was found outside of Manhattan in a neighborhood in their district. They ended up pointing their guns at us in hopes of scaring us... but they didn't realize who they were up against, and that's when Angelo lost control. A fight broke out and Angelo killed both of them. But just before one of them took his last breath, he told us that he was the nephew of Don Salvatore Lucchesi and that we could rest assured that his death would be vindicated.

“Then we saw a couple of cars coming toward us and we figured that their back-up had arrived, so we decided to split up and meet up at the hideout later. Angelo grabbed the briefcase

with the diamonds and we took off in separate cars.

“When Angelo got here, he had a hole in his gut and he started boasting about how he had told them to go to hell after they'd caught him. He knew he was as good as dead, but he made me make a promise.”

Joe stopped talking, threw back the last of the wine in his glass and turned to look at his dead brother laying in a pool of blood. The other three men looked down at Angelo “The Comedian” who always loved a good joke, sharing the pain of knowing that now he'd only be telling jokes on the other side.

“Joe, what did he make you promise him?” prompted Frank, hoping to bring him out of the trance that he had fallen into.

“He was worried about his son, Benito. No, not worried. He was terrified that his boy would end up like him. As he'd sworn to his wife on her deathbed, he made me swear that I would never, ever tell Benito about him and that he would never have anything to do with the 'family'. He told me that not knowing would protect him. So I made that promise.”

Finished with his monologue, Joe punched the table hard, making the three men jump. “And now I'm asking you to do the same! Swear on your cousin's corpse that you will respect his last wish. Swear it!” They hesitantly stood up, looked surreptitiously at the dead body of their cousin and one by one, swore themselves to secrecy.

It was Johnny who broke the silence, formulating the question that he, more than anyone, wanted to ask. “So now that we've all

sworn our honor, did he tell you where the loot is?”

The other two men shook their heads, appalled at Johnny's disrespect and materialism. Frank, especially offended, said, “You never change! How can you think of money at a time like this?”

Johnny didn't even try to justify himself. He just carried on accusing Frank of being a hypocrite. “What do you want from me? Don't tell me that you're not thinking the same thing?”

Joe held up his hand to stop the argument. “Let him ask, he has every right. Business is business. I only wanted you to swear on your honor, and you did.”

They all held their breath, waiting for what was to come.

Frank urged him on, “So? What did he say?”

Joe turned and stared at Carmine. “You know, Carmine, before he passed away, he mentioned you a few times and then he stammered his final, delirious words just before he died.”

Carmine was surprised that Angelo had thought of him at the moment of his death. “Joe, what words?”

“Words?” asked Joe, looking as dazed and confused as ever, paused as if trying to remember something. “He said, 'the diamonds... the key... the angel.'”

“And what the fuck is that supposed to mean?” asked an exasperated Carmine, with no thought at all to foul language.

A roll of thunder followed by a flash of lightning illuminated the tableau: the lifeless face of “The Comedian” went aglow for the last time, displaying a strange grimace that no one was likely

to ever forget.

Chapter 1

Thirty-three years later

There are times when you suddenly feel that inexplicable, magical, electric moment where you know that your life is about to radically change forever, for the better. Some have experienced this feeling upon hearing their newborn's first cry; for others, the sound of the clerk tearing off a thick strip of colorful winning lottery tickets; or at the altar, feeling that thrill when your bride pronounces “I do”, even if that prelude to your happiness will require confirmation later down the road.

Whatever it is and wherever it happens, the fact is, if you're able to hear that enchanting little voice, it doesn't always mean that you will be able to associate it to the actual circumstances. There is always a risk that your mind will alter and transform how the events truly played out.

Completely by surprise, on the day of his thirty-fifth birthday, that little voice boldly made itself heard in Ben's mind, whose given name was Benito (a great source of embarrassment to him). What he thought he was hearing, was in reality, what he wanted to hear; his big moment had finally come. According to Ben, this was the moment he would be launched to stardom.

He sat excitedly in front of the mirror of his squalid, third-rate dressing room, not bothered in the least by his dreary

surroundings. This was part of paying his dues, the price that all artists happily pay. At least that's what he was counting on.

“You're on, Ben. Concentrate and do your best. All the fame and success that you've always dreamt of are about to come true. The audience is waiting and they expect the best of the best. You gotta blow 'em away, but keep 'em on the edge of their seats. You want them begging for more, so they don't know if they should applaud you or just listen. Your father will be proud of you! Knock 'em dead. You can, you...”

The monologue was abruptly interrupted by two men entering the dressing room. One was Karl Grimm, the manager who had interviewed Ben for the job. The other guy, heavysset with a greasy beard, must have been the owner. Completely oblivious to his own rudeness, he pointed his finger at Ben and said, “Who the hell is he talking to? I told you he looked like a moron.”

Unsure if he should defend Ben or be seriously worried, Karl decided to intervene. “He's an artist. He was rehearsing, right?”

Frightened, Ben stuttered, “Y-ya... sure, I was... was rehearsing, sir.”

It was an awkward moment, the three of them staring at each other in silence with Ben's eyes darting between the two men, hoping for some kind of signal. The situation was uncomfortable and he didn't dare speak, while at the same time worried that he would appear incompetent.

The owner finally broke the silence. After readjusting his ridiculous toupee and lighting his smelly cigar, with an air of

provocation he said, "I don't see the showgirl. Where's the showgirl?"

"What showgirl?" asked Ben, taken aback.

"Whaddya mean, 'What showgirl'? The one with the big tits and her ass hanging out. What are ya, a queer? For fifteen years, I been payin' that dried up magician, Jeff McPride, who couldn't get a trick right if his life depended on it, only because he brought a floozy every night. Now I'm asking you, where's yours?"

The man stared hard at Ben, like a bulldog ready to attack. Luckily, Karl stepped in, in an attempt to subdue him. "Bill, relax. The kid is good, trust me. About the girl, you can't see her because..." Karl cleared his throat, stalling for time while trying to catch Ben's eye to let him know that he was on his side, "...here's why, he wants to bring her on as a surprise! Ya, it's a surprise. He wanted to make a good impression, a *great* impression, eh! Eh?" Making a vulgar hand gesture, he burst out in laughter, goading Bill with his elbow.

It took him a few seconds, but finally Bill snorted with laughter, too, ending with a phlegmy and hacking cough. For a minute, Ben thought his boss was going to collapse dead on the floor just before he was about to go on stage. Karl saved the day, pulling out a flask and making him drink until he stopped spluttering. Still out of breath, Bill carried out his warning, "All right, do your damned performance, but I hope for your sake that there'll be plenty of female flesh, otherwise I'll personally kick your ass out of every club in New York! Understood?"

While Ben listened with shock to what seemed like absurd ranting, he caught a glimpse of Karl's hands shooting up behind Bill's gigantic bulk, signaling him to be calm. So he didn't utter a word, only nodded his head repeatedly in affirmation to Bill's request.

The smelly and sloppy boss finally left, leaving him disheartened and at the mercy of Karl's false smile. "Would you explain what I'm supposed to do now? Where in the heck am I going to find a... an... assistant? What do I need an assistant for anyway?" he whispered worriedly.

"Don't worry about it. Relax. I've already got an idea how to save the cow and the cabbage."

"The cow? The *goat* and cabbage, not the cow!" said Ben.

"Who cares? Same thing, they're all animals. Anyway, listen, I want you in top form. Don't think of anything except the show. And above all, *relax*."

Karl's words seemed to have the desired effect. "You're right, all I have to do is stay focused and give them an unforgettable show. You'll see, I won't need any half nude woman on the stage," said Ben. So he straightened his jacket, licked his fingers and combed his eyebrows and took one last look in the mirror, feeling satisfied with his appearance and sure of himself.

The manager watched Ben and decided that he was going to be all right. Just as he was about to leave the dressing room, he asked him the question he was dying to know. "By the way, do you use a rabbit or a dove in your show?"

Ben's explosion was more visual than verbal; his big, green eyes turned into red spheres ready to pop out of his head. Enunciating through clenched teeth, he said, "I. Am. A. Stand. Up. Comedian. A *showman*. I don't use a rabbit, let alone a dove. Listen up, I'm not a damned magician! You got that?"

Karl realized that Ben's outburst had cleared the kid's head of any nervousness that had been building up till then. "All right already, you're not a magician. No need to lose your cool. You artists are all a bunch of weirdoes. Go figure..." He limped off, grumbling all the way.

The last hard jazz notes of the piano played away, mixing with the stale air in the club. The ventilator was probably broken again, but that didn't seem to bother anyone. The feeble applause coming from who knows where, accompanied the indignant musician off the stage with him not even bothering to look at the public.

From the dusty red slit in the curtain that had swallowed up the exiting musician, the smiling head of Karl Grimm appeared, followed by the rest of him, decked out like a circus ringleader.

He took off his flashy and inappropriate top hat and took a deep bow to the audience. "Ladies and gentlemen, a big round of applause to our great Albert Alba for his amazing piano exhibition."

The only response was a loud thud from a drunkard who had fallen unconscious off his chair. His white t-shirt slipped up, leaving his huge belly exposed as it swayed back and forth like

a mass of jelly, none of which appeared to disturb anyone in the club.

“I know you've all been waiting impatiently for our great Jeff McPride to amaze you with his magic, just like every Wednesday. Unfortunately, something a little unexpected came up, so this evening he won't be able...”

Karl was suddenly called backstage. He peeked through the curtains to speak with his assistant and then stepped back to his place on the stage wearing a concerned expression on his face. “Ah! I see... ladies and gentlemen, I've just been informed that the little 'something unexpected' has transformed into fulminating cirrhosis of the liver. God rest his soul. Now I would like all of you to join me in memory of this great artist, who gave us his last magic trick, disappearing from this world only to reappear on the other side. I would ask for five minutes of silence to commemorate him, but I know time is precious, so we'll just do five seconds. I know he would have done the same for all of you...” During the five seconds, a few knocked on wood, but most chose to avoid any bad luck by touching something else a little more explicit.

“All right. For one great man who has left this stage, let's make room for another artist, of whom I'm sure you will all grow very fond of. It is my honor to present Ben Santini!”

Ben made a shy appearance, encouraged by Karl's energetic applause that filled the embarrassingly lifeless silence of the club.

“One last thing before I leave him to it.” Karl leaned toward

the audience and held his hand next to his mouth, and whispered loudly, "He's a good kid, but whatever you do, don't call him a magician! He's a tiny bit sensitive."

Resigned to his fate, Ben tried to display his best smile. "Hey everyone! My name's Ben, Ben Santini. And as Karl, our Master of Ceremonies mentioned, I'm here tonight to give you a couple of laughs, even if Jeff McPride's unexpected passing has certainly upset you, as I can see. All right! Enough sadness now. If you're here tonight, then you're here to party, enjoy some good company, have a drink... even if Jeff had done his share of that, just like that guy over there laying on the floor. I guess he's gotten plastered one too many times. Either that or he's feelin' really down in the dumps. But don't worry about it, 'cause I'm pretty sure that tonight, he won't be driving. It's a blessing in disguise when they tow your car away the same day you decide to get smashed."

The spotlight suddenly moved to his right, leaving him in the dark. Ben looked up and tried to get the technician's attention to no avail, so he stepped over back under the light.

"No worries, here I am. That was the electric company getting revenge cause I was late paying the bill. And don't tell me you've never been late paying a bill... like you! Ben pointed to a guy wearing a muscle shirt with a bushy beard and tattooed forearms.

"Who, me?" he asked in a gruff voice.

"Ya, you. Have you ever forgotten something important?"

"Well, once I served three years cause I forgot to cover

myself.”

“You served three years in prison because you went out naked?” asked Ben.

“What, are you crazy? When I got into Sing Sing, I had my clothes on. It was those damned Japanese digital cameras that busted me cause I had a gun in my hand and no balaclava.”

Ben thought it better to change the subject, so he cut him off gently. “I know what you mean. Damned hi-tech, state-of-the-art, pain-in-the-ass Asian technology. And you?”

He pointed to a shriveled up woman in her forties, dressed like a sixteen-year-old with stiff, blond ringlets. The “young lady” took the gum out of her mouth and knocked back the last sip of her whiskey.

“Well, let's see... off the top of my head, the only thing that I can think of is the time I wanted a little outfit that cost a hundred bucks over on Seventh Avenue, but I forgot my ex-husband's credit card at home. So that pig of a sales guy wanted a little under-the-table job in exchange for the dress, like I was the last bimbo on the street.

Ben butt in, in an attempt to blurt out a moral to the story for those who heard an “under-the-table job”.

“So Miss, you forgot your credit card and had to pass up the dress...”

But the woman wanted to clarify for the record, “Like hell I did! I gave him a professional job. Too bad the owner walked in and caught us. The bastard fired the salesman's ass right there

on the spot and kicked me out of the store without the dress, hollering and threatening to call the guards.”

Some laughter broke out from the back of the room accompanied by a few obscene offers.

“Hey, if you like my wife's coat, we can make a deal!”

Ever the lady, she responded with her middle finger. “Make a deal with this, asshole!”

While disgusted by all the vulgarity, Ben tried to get a hold of the situation. “What I meant was, we are all subject to ill fate, but more often than not, it depends on our reactions. For example, when I was sixteen, I fell madly in love with gorgeous woman. She was a lingerie model for a well-known magazine. I thought about her all day long in my room, and not only...”

Ben suddenly stopped talking when he saw his manager frantically pointing to the cocktail waitress dressed up like a bunny, serving the tables. Then he remembered Bill's warning and figured he'd better find a way to use her in the show.

“...Hey! My model looked just like that waitress there holding the tray. Could you step up here on the stage for a minute, just to help me make my story a little more convincing?”

The girl smiled. It was obvious that she was embarrassed but flattered to be compared to a model. “Who, me? You want me to get on the stage?”

“Sure! I don't see any other beautiful waitresses in the room.”

She blushed at the compliment. As she made her way to the stage, someone from the audience yelled, “Yeah! It's about time

we get to see a little T & A!”

Ben did his best to calm the girl, who was a more than a little worried about those stoked and impatient men.

“No, our young lady won't be showing you her tits. I invited her up here with me only to help me out.”

“What about her ass, then?” asked someone, adding insult to injury.

“Nope. Sorry, not even her ass,” said Ben.

“Jeez, you could've told us it was gonna be a show for boy scouts!”

The menacing glare from the owner was a little more than frightening.

“All right, you beautiful creature, can you tell us your name?” asked Ben, doing his best to be as polite as possible.

“Oh... thank you... my name is Susan...”

After looking hesitatingly around, she wisely decided not to disclose any more personal information.

“Just Susan!” she said through clenched teeth, as if she were telling a joke.

“Ok, 'Just Susan'. Do you, by chance, work for a lawyer? If so, maybe *you* could interrogate all of *us*! All kidding aside, let's give a round of applause to Miss Just Susan!”

While she kept staring into the empty space, Ben decided to motivate the audience.

“And your long, shapely legs?” He kneeled in front of her with his fingers imitating the lens of a camera focusing on her legs

like a director and the small crowd broke into a pretty convincing applause.

“Ah, that's more like it. So, I was telling you about the day that I decided to get the courage to go meet my model. I knew my chances of getting into her studio were about the same as an eighty-year-old winning the New York marathon, but I decided to give it my best shot. I was convinced that I was going to meet her, and that she was the woman of my life, not just some adolescent fantasy. The next morning when I got up, I saw the horror of my face. A big, huge, gigantic abscess sat front and center on my forehead! There it was, standing out, staring at the world like a little Nazi.”

Ben gesticulated like a Latino while telling the story. “Panic hit me like the Titanic rapidly approaching the iceberg. I absolutely had to get rid of it, so I decided to pop it. In front of the mirror, I tried squeezing and pinching it with my fingers in the hopes that a fountain of yellow pus would break out.”

Disgust was displayed by most, except for one of the fat spectators, wearing a Texas cowboy hat, devouring a giant hamburger dripping with mayonnaise.

“After a few tries at destroying the little volcano, the only thing that exploded was the worst headache I've ever had in my life, adding to the fact that the boil was so red and irritated by my attempts at popping it, that my face looked like a tomato pizza pie. I decided to call a friend of mine who was a true expert in pimples; his nickname was Minefield. Anyway, he delivered...

good ol' Minefield.”

Squeezing his throat with his fingers, he imitated the crackling voice of an obnoxious teenager. “Boil some water and rock salt, then take some cotton and wet it with the mixture and rub it on the pimple. It'll dry it right up. Bye.”

Ben waited a second for some applause, or at least a few smiles. Only Bill's growling could be heard, growing in intensity, like a rhinoceros getting ready to charge.

“So I did exactly like Minefield said. Except I didn't have a saucepan, so I had to use a big pot. I filled the pot, boiled the water and then brought it to cool on the balcony. Unfortunately, while I was carrying the pot of boiling water to the balcony, I tripped and the whole pot spilled out onto the street. All I could hear was the screaming and cursing from someone below, while I hid...”

Bill spit the cigar smoke from his mouth and got up from his chair. With a red-hot, angry face on the verge of a violent eruption, he yelled, “You! You! You filthy piece of shit! It was you! You ruined my life. I'm gonna kill you, I'm gonna skin you alive. I'm, I'm... come here, dammit!”

Beautiful Susan hid behind Ben, using him as a shield as soon as she saw the owner pick up one of the tables with one hand.

“Get outta the way, you stupid idiot. I'm gonna break this bastard's head open!”

“Please, calm down, Mr. Jerkoff. I think there's...,” begged Ben.

“Jercov! The name's Jercov! My father was from Yugoslavia. That was *me* screaming in pain from the street! That creep there ruined my life! Look at what he did!”

He set the table back down and took off his toupee, showing everyone his head, almost completely without skin, like a roasted and peeled red bell pepper... or more precisely, a gigantic male genital.

The sight of Bill's head triggered a chorus of disgusted exclamations from the spectators. “Now do you get why I gotta kill him?”

Shouting like a maniac, he cleared the path to the stage's stairs, while Ben frantically looked for an escape through the curtains that led backstage. But a pair of huge, possessed madmen, dressed like Tweedledee and Tweedledum from Alice in Wonderland, suddenly stepped in front of him, blocking his departure.

Bill jumped onto the stage with surprising agility, given his size, and with a satanic sneer, stood in front of poor Ben who was so terrorized that he ran to hide behind the girl.

It was Susan who grabbed the microphone, using it as an arm to ward off the three men who were moving in closer and closer. “Don't move or you'll be sorry!”

At first, caution made them slow down, then it backfired, egging them happily along.

“Thanks for the advice, honey. We're gonna use that contraption on and *in* your little friend.”

“I’m warning you! Don’t make me…” Grabbing the mic like a baseball bat, she lassoed it by its cord, where it wrapped around one of the twins’ ankle, tripping him over. The other guy tumbled and fell on the stage, flying into one of the tables, knocking over three drunken sailors. Furious over their wasted beers, the inebriated sailors tried to stand, rocking back and forth on their feet.

Then the microphone started whistling with ear-piercing feedback and everyone covered their ears in a desperate attempt to muffle the loud screeching, trying to mute the noise as Bill had picked up the mic and started bashing it.

The tension in the club gained more and more momentum every minute until an inevitable no-holds-barred brawl broke out. In all the confusion, it became obvious that any object was a potential weapon: bottles, chairs, tables, people, coins, ashtrays. During the hurricane that followed, an enormous bearded man with a patch over his left eye started yelping and crying. Someone had stepped on his ingrown toenail. His reaction was like a bull in a rodeo, ramming the cowboy wearing the Stetson, launching him across the room. The unlucky cowboy was a failing dwarf actor who had spiraled into big screen anonymity, but was still famous enough to land a guest spot in an occasional TV series. Both were lifted from the ground and flung right onto the stage where they collided with Bill, who saw the little man’s landing just a second before the impact.

Ben saw a way out and decided to go for it. “Susan, we have

to throw ourselves off the stage!”

She looked uneasy at Ben's idea. “What? Are you crazy? It's too high, we'll break our necks!”

But Ben knew that they had to seize the moment, otherwise it would be too late. “This is our only chance. I've got an idea. Trust me!”

He grabbed her by the waist and leaped, leaving her no choice but to jump with him.

They both ended up right on top of the potbellied drunkard who had passed out and relocated to the floor before the show had started. Even though Ben and Susan's crash landing didn't seem to disturb the catatonic conditions of the man, at least it absorbed the shock of the fall.

Ben recovered first and turned to Susan. “Are you ok? Are you hurt?”

She groaned about the sudden and inconsiderate action, but when she looked at where she was sitting, she jumped up, startled. “Oh my god! We've killed him!”

But the unconscious man responded to Susan's fear with a loud fart. While attempting to wave away the foul odor, Ben calmed Susan down. “Nah, don't worry about him. He's alive and kicking, but we've gotta get outta here if we don't want to be Bill's lunch!”

He pointed to one of the twins who was still trying to disentangle the microphone from his ankle, grabbed her by the arm and both ran out of the nightclub. The last thing they saw

before they escaped outside into the commotion of humans, was their follower's risky imitation of their jump from the stage. The noise following their frenemies's leap sounded like bones cracking and loud screaming and cursing that confirmed that their pursuer had missed his mark.

Running and zig-zagging around several obstacles, this is how the fugitives were able to safely get away.

Chapter 2

731 Lexington Avenue: Bloomberg Tower

The backrest of the big, black, leather armchair was facing the entrance to the thirtieth-floor studio, offering a legendary and marvelous view. The highly technological glassed wall was remote controlled to allow the light to dim or shine as desired. Joe Santini's favorite pastime was to fiddle with this gadget while tossing one of his customary mints around in his mouth, especially while his mind was occupied with his nephew, Benito. Or Ben, as he preferred to be called.

"You have to admit, he managed a pretty good escape, grabbing the girl and taking off like a jackrabbit right out the front door."

The man speaking about Ben's adventure was called Valerio Esposito. From a recently immigrated Italian family, he was part of the group called the "Observers", who looked after the young man's physical well-being, unbeknownst to him. Esposito, like a doctor, was available when necessary to administer the proper "therapy".

"We need to take some cautionary act against that guy, just to make sure he won't be interfering again. What did you say his name was? Jerkoff?"

"Jerkov. Bill Jercov. And I've already taken the liberty to

prescribe a tranquilizer.”

Coincidentally, whenever Ben got involved in some kind of annoying trouble, Joe could feel a strange pain in his gut, a burning in his stomach like he was breathing embers of fire. He figured it was only frustration, attributing the cause to his addiction to the mints that he couldn't get enough of. From a wood box on his desk, he took a cigar and lit it up in hopes that it would calm the unpleasant feeling.

Colombia Presbyterian Medical Center

Dr. Newman was looking over the new patient's medical chart.

“Nasal septum, mouth, both legs and your right arm broken. Well, for a simple fall, you're sure a mess.”

The patient, in a state of confusion, partly due to the painkillers, was desperately attempting to open his mouth to show the empty spaces between his teeth.

“Ah, I see. Also missing an upper molar and an incisor. All right, we'll get you fixed up in no time, Mr... Jerkoff?!”

The doctor walked off with a smug smile on his face, followed by two gorgeous nurses while Bill whispered, “Je... rko... v!”

Clearly, Bill's feeble attempt at correcting his last name was useless. The patient's file had already been completed with the insulting wrong name.

Bloomberg Tower

Joe appeared satisfied, rotating his armchair back around, deeming to look his visitors straight in the eye.

“Well done, good job. Now, where is my nephew? Is he still with the girl?”

Esposito answered confidently, pleased with a job well done, “Yes. They’re together right now. Near 6th Avenue at that restaurant called The Italian Affair.”

The Italian Affair Restaurant

Ben and Susan were still a little rattled from their experience; they caught their breaths while sipping their wine at an elegantly set table. Between the two, Ben was the one most shaken up by the events of the evening.

“I still can’t believe what happened! It was absurd, incredible. I had a funny feeling about that job. I should have listened to my sixth sense...something wasn’t right about it. I should have turned around and run the other way as soon as I set foot in that place.”

Susan looked at him with a puzzled expression. “Well, I’ve got to say, it doesn’t take a genius to figure out what kind of club it is! I only took the job because if I don’t have the money by the end of the month, I won’t be able to pay my rent and I’ll be on the street. But you? Why the hell did you accept? You don’t look you fit in with those kind of people. Or like you’re hard up for

money, seeing as the way you're dressed."

Ben, embarrassed, looked down at his clothes, awkwardly trying to hide the Emporio Armani signature.

"Oh ya. I mean no! I'm not a loser or a convict or anything like that, but I'm not a millionaire either. My uncle got me a great deal for the suit from some relatives from Italy. But gee, now that you mention it, you're out of a job because of me."

"No, don't worry about it. It's *not* your fault. I don't think I could have stood it much longer there, anyway. Tonight was the perfect occasion to get away from those perverts who kept trying to feel me up."

Ben felt lucky to have always had a family who was there for him no matter what, helping him out in every way.

"But now how are you going to pay the rent? I mean, have you got someone to help you? Your mom or dad, a relative, a boyfriend...?"

He casually threw the question out there, just to ascertain her status, while he swigged his wine to hide the fact.

"I've never had a real family, and regarding men...ugh, forget it!"

Red flags were waving in Ben's mind, which made him curious to find out more. "In what way...do you mean you, and men...you don't like...?"

He had always thought of himself as open-minded to the idea of a lesbian friend, but in all honesty, if it were true, it would have shattered a few of his fantasies he'd already had about Susan.

“Are you asking me if I like women? Well, what would be wrong with that? *You* like women, don’t you?”

He blushed for even bringing up the subject. Pushing his chair back, he sat up straight and tried to wipe the look of a predator off his face.

“Ya, I’ve always wondered how women do it.”

Susan burst out laughing, and Ben realized that he was way off the mark.

“You fell...hook, line and sinker!” Even if she couldn’t stop laughing, she did her best to control herself.

“You mean to tell me that you were pulling my leg?” Although relieved that she wasn’t into women, he was pretty shocked at the idea of being made fun of by someone he barely knew.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist. Plus I wanted to break up some of the tension. Are you ok now?”

She tilted her head and nibbling at a piece of bread, kept looking mischievously at him. That gesture, apparently insignificant, was extremely seductive to Ben. It went straight to his heart and tied him to her forever.

“Ya, thanks. It’s usually me who has to contrive ways to make other people laugh.”

The waiter brought their steamy first courses. For Ben, bucatini ‘all’amatriciana’ and for Susan, homemade fettuccine with pancetta and asparagus. While Ben rubbed his hands together in front of his plate, Susan’s stared, open-mouthed at hers.

“Wow! Except for pizza and spaghetti, can you believe that this is the first time I’ve ever tasted real Italian food?”

“Really? I have a hard time *not* eating it; in the traditional Italian family, cuisine is very important. So, ‘buon appetito’. I hope you enjoy it.”

At first, Susan found it a little difficult to twist the fettuccine around her fork, but then got the hang of it and started emanating sounds of rapture with every bite. The people dining at the nearby tables thought it was rather funny, while the owner of the restaurant was delighted.

When Susan had cleaned her plate, Ben offered her a taste of his bucatini and she didn’t hesitate.

“This food is amazing! Now I understand your parents!”

A cloud of nostalgia passed through Ben’s thoughts. “Actually, my Uncle Carmine raised me, along with my other uncles. My mother died giving birth to me. And my father, well, I only have a few memories of him. He was out for a walk and found himself in the middle of a shootout and was hit by a random bullet when I was just two-years-old. The greatest thing that I inherited from him was my vocation. He was a comedian, a great comedian. I think he would have made it big, if only he’d had the time.”

“So, in a way, you’re trying to break into the business to honor him?”

“Well, in part, yes. But mostly it’s for me. I truly love this work and I know he would have understood and supported me. Unlike my uncles...”

Ben wanted to talk about himself, but was worried about boring Susan, so he tried prompting her with incomplete sentences to see if she was really interested.

“Your relatives aren’t happy with what you do? So, do they want you to do something else?” asked Susan.

“They’d like me to do something a little more traditional. Like Uncle Johnny, who’s the manager of a company that deals with insurance.”

Ward’s Island Bridge

Two hulking men on the bridge had their sleeves rolled up to their elbows. One of the men’s biceps were so flexed, that the material of his shirt was on the verge of ripping.

“Damn you! I told you I should have got one size bigger!”

“What are you talking about? You tried it on a month ago at the shop and it fit perfectly. It isn’t my fault if you work out so much at the gym.”

The two of them, having what would have been a normal conversation in different circumstances, were actually swinging a passed out man upside down by the ankles over the side of the bridge.

“If this creep ruins my shirt, I swear I’ll let him drop like a rock!”

Johnny Greco, sick and tired of listening to the two men argue, threw down his cigarette butt. “You guys wanna shut up? And

you don't drop anybody without my permission, otherwise you get a nice little hole in your forehead, understood? This fuckin' Chinese is worth his weight in gold, and I'd rather have the crisp banknotes than a useless cadaver!"

The man, intimidated, apologized immediately for his arrogant comment. "Sorry, Boss. I was just sayin'. Ten minutes now we been holding this fish who's fainted and won't wake up."

Johnny looked over the bridge to see for himself and realized they were right. "All right, I'll take care of this chickenshit."

He unzipped his pants and started pissing over the bridge right into the poor man's face, who instantly came to his senses, spluttering and gurgling.

"Well, well! Good morning! So what's your decision? You want our insurance policy, or not?"

The poor wretch realized where he was and terrorized, started screaming. "Yes! Yes! I want it! I want it!"

Johnny smiled pleasantly for a job well done, lighting another cigarette to celebrate and seal the deal.

"Did you hear that guys? We have a new client. Pull him up before he shits in his own face.

The Italian Affair Restaurant

Ben listed all of the respectable occupations of his uncles as he had been told by them.

"...and my Uncle Frank works in finance, in banking."

Somewhere in Manhattan: in a basement

Frank Colombo was silently and calmly examining the banknotes delivered by Bart Wilson, who was fauning for approval. “So, Boss? How does it look?”

Bart was more than satisfied with his work, but had to wait for the final word that only his boss could give. He had been working day and night for months; it was a question of principle more than anything.

“The paper is good quality, pleasing to the touch. The edges aren’t too soft, either and the color is pretty clear...”

The dark circles under Bart’s eyes lit up with pride while he tried to point out further details. “We also improved the loss of color on the seal.”

Frank picked up a piece of paper and held it under the banknote, then with his fingernail, he started scratching the seal. He then examined the paper and didn’t see any loss of color. He repeated the operation with a dull pencil and still didn’t see any loss of color. In one more attempt, he rubbed it harder to get a faint result. It looked like a job well-done...except for one tiny detail.

With the magnifying glass, he scrutinized the serial numbers. “We’re still not there yet.”

Bart’s world came crashing down on him. He started stuttering, “W-w-we...we’re...still not there yet?”

“The serial numbers, see? They’re still not perfectly aligned. The rest is passable, not perfect, but pretty good. Now get back to work. I want a final result by the end of the week.”

“Sure, Boss. Consider it done.”

Staggering away from sheer exhaustion, Bart headed back to the drawing board.

The Italian Affair Restaurant

“They’d even be happy if I went to work at Uncle Carmine’s restaurant.”

The waiter then brought the second course to their table. “Here you are. Beef braised in Barolo wine with porcini mushrooms for the *signorina*. And seared lamb cooked on embers for you, sir. The roasted potatoes are on the house.”

“Thank you so much and send our compliments to Mario. Everything is exquisite, as usual.”

The waiter didn’t leave without first winking at Ben in reference to Susan’s beauty and choice of food. If she noticed, she didn’t show it.

“On one hand though, you’re lucky. I mean, whatever happens, you’re always covered.”

Ben felt his chest swell a bit. “Yes, it really has its advantages. It means I can dedicate all my time to my passion. I should say, though, that I’ve been pretty lucky since childhood. I remember the time, when I was ten-years-old, an encyclopedia salesman

knocked on the door and gave me a beautiful new soccer ball, just to promote his books. It was the exact same ball that a neighborhood kid had stolen from me just a few hours before.

Twenty years ago

The doorbell echoed throughout the house.

“Ben! Someone’s at the door. Can you answer it?”

With eyes red and swollen from crying, little Ben did as his uncle asked and answered the door. Standing in front of him was a hunched over man with a beat-up face. He took off his hat and greeted the boy with a forced smile that was missing three or four teeth.

“Hello‘fere, young man. I’m a falefman for the Academic American Enfylopedia.”

Skeptical and unsure, Ben stared at the man.

“I waf paffing frough your neighborhood to prefont my bookf and to give a prefont to the good boyf. Are you a good boyf?”

Unsure of what the man in front of him was saying exactly, Ben understood perfectly the universal word “present”, and nodded his head.

“Well, then thif if for you!” The man, who was hiding his hand behind his back, presented Ben with a beautiful new soccer ball. Ben’s sad and desolate expression immediately transformed into joy and happiness.

“Wow! Is it really mine? It’s exactly like the ball that son-of-

a-bitch Jim stole from me!”

The man’s upper lip trembled slightly, but he managed not to fall completely apart.

“Yef, fon. It’s a present for you! I have to be on my way now. Please say hello to your uncle for me.”

In silence, the man left the way he arrived, leaving Ben happy, but puzzled by the man’s parting words.

“Look! Look what some strange man gave me!”

The Italian Affair Restaurant

“When I say it like that, it seems silly. But believe me, that’s just one example of many random incidents that sound like I’m making them up. Every time something bad happened, some kind of karma would intervene and turn the situation around in my favor.”

Susan listened to everything, but not in awe like most people would have. Ben appreciated this aspect of her personality; the way she accentuated her positive opinion of him as if he were someone special.

“Yeah! Like the scales of justice. C’mon, tell me more. Just one more story to satisfy my hope that there is a God.”

Ben smiled pleasantly and stalled for time wiping his mouth with his napkin, while trying to think of another interesting and original story.

“I remember when I was sixteen and had just got my drivers’

license. I had worked all summer in a fast-food joint to save up for my first car. With that money, I bought an olive green '77 Buick. It wasn't the hottest car, but that was all I could afford and the salesman guaranteed that it was good for several thousand more miles. I remember how excited I was to have something that was all mine, that I had earned with hard work. I felt like an adult. Then about an hour later, I felt like a complete idiot. While I was driving, the engine started smoking and then the car took its last breath...and broke down. I went home with my tail between my legs. I was so mad, especially at myself, for letting someone rip me off like that. I didn't sleep a wink that night."

"So I guess you went back to the salesman the next day."

"You bet! But the dealership told me that the salesman had quit and anyway, the title in my name was nontransferable to a different car."

"Outrageous! You were swindled," said Susan, shocked.

"Yep. And the worst part was that I couldn't do anything about it. The proof was in the paperwork."

"So what was the heaven sent lucky break?"

"A phone call," said Ben, holding out for suspense.

But Susan tried to answer before Ben, "Don't tell me that the salesman felt sorry for you and gave you back your money?"

"Nope. Even better than that. The same dealership contacted me to tell me that I had won a contest they had announced, of which I hadn't the slightest memory of entering. I guess among all the paperwork I had signed, there must have been

something about a contest. Anyway, the fact is, first prize was a car that I could have never afforded: a cherried-out, flaming red Mustang!”

“That’s amazing! I’ve never met anyone who’s ever won anything in a contest...unless they were related or the mistress of some manager.” Susan seemed really sincere, even though she appeared to be a chronic pessimist.

“Well,” said Ben “I don’t think that it’s just a question of pure luck. I mean, most people never win contests because they don’t participate. They either give up before trying or just don’t tempt fate.”

Susan felt hurt by his accusation of inertia. “What? I don’t agree at all! I would have signed up for hundreds, if not thousands of contests without having won even a consolation prize. You just got really lucky. That’s all, just luck, honey!”

Calling him “honey”, even if blatantly sarcastic, went straight to his head, giving him a smug sense of satisfaction.

“It’s not as rare as you think, you know. Lots of times in my family, we’ve won unexpected prizes from promotions from some brand of cereal or another.”

“We’re not talking about some little toy for kids. We’re talking about a car and...can I dip some of my bread in your sauce, too?”

“Ah, you want to try the ‘scarpetta’?”

“The what?” she asked.

“The ‘scarpetta’. It’s a typical Roman expression, it means ‘little shoe’, but it doesn’t refer to the shoe you wear on your

foot. It's an imitation of the gesture of the workers who cut and sculpted rock from the quarries. These guys were called 'scalpellini', or stonecutters. They shaved the slabs of Piperno stone before carving it, just like we're doing right here with our bread on our plates."

"Wow! That doesn't sound quite as tasty as bread and sauce, though. I was just hoping some of your good luck would rub off on me to help me find a new job." Susan's request wasn't presumptuous in the least.

"Of course! Why didn't I think of it sooner? If it's all right with you, I could ask my Uncle Carmine if he needs a waitress at his restaurant. At least nobody would lay a hand on you there."

"Really? That would be great! That's exactly the kind of job I'm looking for. Thank you so much!"

In a surge of excitement, she threw her arms around him, almost knocking over the bottle of water on the table. Ben was taken by surprise by the unexpected contact of her prominent bosom, as well as the loud kiss she planted on his cheek.

"You're welcome. If I had known that this was the reward, I would have asked you a lot sooner. So how about this, you can come with me tomorrow to the restaurant and I can introduce you in person to my uncle. When he sees how pretty you are, he'll hire you on the spot!"

"Tomorrow? Oh no, I have an appointment that I absolutely can't miss," said Susan.

"All right, no problem. I'll talk to my uncle first, then we can

make the introductions. How about day after tomorrow? Unless your appointment will take longer than a day?"

"No, the day after tomorrow is perfect. I have an exam at the university tomorrow."

"Really? You didn't tell me that you study. What are you specializing in exactly?" asked Ben.

"Law. My dream is to become an attorney one day."

"That's fantastic! Fighting crime on the front line. If you need a hand, just give me a call!"

The Italian Affair Restaurant: at the table next to Ben and Susan

The Observer, Guido "Baguette" Bernard, known for his tall, thin stature and his French-Italian origins, couldn't help but murmur his thoughts out loud. "Holy Mother of God! And now what am I gonna tell the Boss?"

Chapter 3

Ben sat in front of his Uncle Carmine, who was taking his time answering.

“So, Uncle Carmine? What do you think? Can you find a job for my friend at your restaurant?”

His hesitation in responding had little to do with not wanting to grant Ben his wish, but more to do with playing for time to come up with a counteroffer.

He was a businessman, after all, whether it meant dealing with a stranger, or his nephew. He lived by a rule over the years; every favor asked of him that he was able to grant, required an immediate payback by the person asking. And the payback had to be, if not greater than the favor, at least equal to it.

“I was just thinking how lucky your friend is. Do you remember Pablo Ruido, the Mexican waiter? Well, just yesterday, he was telling me how homesick he was and how he would love to retire and go back to Mexico. He worked his entire life, and I believe that a man should know when to call it quits and rest. Regarding your friend, this could be just what the doctor ordered.”

Ben jumped up from his chair, beaming with happiness at the opportunity that he could offer Susan, overjoyed at the prospect of keeping the half-promise he had made to her. He started rambling his thanks to his uncle, who, after being pleasantly

flattered, interrupted Ben with a hard stare.

“I knew I could count on my favorite uncle! That's what I always say to people: my Uncle Carmine is the most extraordinary and generous person on the face of the earth. If you ever have a problem, go see him, 'cause he can fix anything in a heartbeat!”

When Carmine was satisfied with enough compliments, he stopped Ben's babbling. “Are you finished with the rigamarole?”

Ben shut up and sat back down, like a schoolboy reprimanded by his teacher. “Yes, Uncle Carmine. Sorry.”

“I was just saying that it *could* be a stroke of luck, not that it *will be*.”

Ben's enthusiasm vanished into thin air. “But Uncle Carmine, I told you that she already has experience and she's a nice, honest girl!”

“The fact is, dear Benito...” When Carmine called Ben by his full name, it could only mean one thing: a forthcoming lecture. “...I had you in mind for that job. Hold on, don't interrupt me, let me finish what I want to say to you.”

Ben gazed into the air with a lost expression. He was imagining a way to fend off his uncle, allowing him to keep the promise he had made to himself; that no matter what, under any circumstance, nothing would keep him from following his dream. He was preparing to tell his uncle a flat out “no”.

“Obviously, I already know what your answer is,” said Carmine. “You've told me hundreds of times, so stop worrying.

That's not what I'm about to say. You've also made it very clear that you don't want any help from my friends or from your uncles to break into show business. I do, however, have something I would like to propose to you. I'll do a favor for you and hire your friend and you pay me back by coming to work at my place as a stand-up comedian.”

Carmine picked up the glass in front of him and knocked it back in one gulp. None of his friends would have ever guessed that the glass wasn't full of alcohol, and Ben, who was floored by his uncle's offer, would have liked nothing more than a drink right then.

“But aren't you the one who was embarrassed to have a nephew who made people... laugh?”

“What's that got to do with anything? Competition is high and the restaurant needs some new blood to bring people in,” said Carmine. “If you're half as good as you say you are, then I'll have doubled my money. I can fill the restaurant with people and you'll finally have a job. Think about it before you say no, 'cause whether or not you agree, I'm gonna put someone on that stage. If it's not you, it'll be someone else, and you'll have thrown away a big chance that won't present itself again.”

For the first time in his life, his uncle was making him an offer that honored his ideas. A once-in-a-lifetime offer that only a true artist gets and is too good to turn down. Not to mention that his restaurant was popular among high profile people that would increase his chances of getting noticed, maybe even by

someone important who could give him his big break... maybe even Hollywood!

“So? How much time are you gonna need to decide?” asked Carmine. He added a little more pressure to get the answer he wanted, “It would mean I'd have to turn down someone else's offer... but I'll admit, yours is a lot more interesting. As long as you agree to the pay, of course.”

“Hey! Don't try to buy low, sell high with me. There are people out there who'd accept the job for free. You can be sure that the salary I have in mind would be more than fair!” Ben knew right then that he was pushing his luck. “All right. I was just kidding. I accept!”

Carmine stood up from his chair, applauding in a slightly annoyed and resigned mood. “Look at you. You're acting like *you're* the one doing *me* a favor. Listen to me, dear little nephew! Let's get one thing clear: your show better be really exceptional. If it isn't, I swear on your father's grave that I will personally kick your ass out the door!”

Knowing his uncle, Ben could bet on his life that he was as good as his word and his unveiled threat brought his level of anxiety up a notch or two, causing him to keep his composure in check.

“You won't be sorry. On the contrary, you'll be one of the first to applaud,” said Ben.

“I hope so... for you! Tell your friend to show up at the restaurant day after tomorrow morning at eight. And you get busy

with a decent cabaret act. You have two weeks and not a day more. Now, get outta here. I've got work to do.”

Ben made his way abashedly to the door, leaving a grouchy Carmine to his paperwork. In that moment, he realized what had truly happened. “Uncle Carmine? One last thing. Thank you.”

For some reason, his nephew's “Thank you” touched his tough, old heart. Deep down, he loved his nephew, even if he would never let it show. “Ya, ya. Now get outta here.”

Ben was in seventh heaven. He ran to the nearest phone to call Susan with the happy announcement. She was already in a good mood for having aced her exam that morning. Ben's news sent her over the top, giving her a sense of optimism and hope that maybe some of Ben's good luck really was rubbing off on her.

The Observers, Valerio Esposito and Willy Whoosh had to endure the latest scolding from their Boss, while they cursed themselves for keeping Susan's aspirations of becoming a lawyer under wraps.

“Why did I have to find out from her at the interview? What the hell do I pay you for? Well, it's too late now. I've already promised Ben and I can't go back on my word. I want to know everything about her: where she hangs out, where she goes shopping, who she meets and what she eats. Start with her family and relatives and leave no stone unturned! And don't forget, keep an eye on her at all times! I don't want any surprises. One last thing, did Pablo Ruido give you any trouble?”

“He whined a little at first, until he saw his payout,” said Willy, a bit smugly. “If you want my opinion, you were too generous with that Mexican...”

Carmine stared hard into Willy's eyes with a look that would have scared a ferocious pit bull. “I don't pay you to hear your opinion, least of all to shoot your mouth off. That man was faithful to me for many years. I never forget loyalty. That's the only way to earn respect. Now go, and leave me alone with Esposito before I make note of my generosity when it's your turn to leave us.”

Willy turned white as a sheet and lowered his head in submission. He bit his lips in an attempt to hold back anymore useless words and left.

Even though they were alone, Esposito waited for a signal from his boss before speaking. They both lifted a finger as their “starter” cue.

“I already mentioned to Joe...,” began Esposito, then held up his hand to correct himself. For years, it was held in the highest consideration by the entire family that when one of them were alone with Joe Santini, they could call him Joe, but in the company of other people, he should be referred to by his title.

Esposito continued, “...to the Boss, that the girl has had a certain impact on your nephew. I believe that it would be a good idea to direct his attention toward other women before it becomes a more complicated problem.”

Carmine let out a big sigh. Why did life have to feel like he was

constantly putting out fires? As soon as he fixed one problem, another one popped up. “The girl... Susan, is very pretty. We would need to find another that measures up, that would catch his interest. Though I doubt he would be interested in anyone else as long as he's got it in his head that Susan's the one. Just like his father... God rest his soul.”

“In my opinion, two big tits and a nice ass work miracles on a man. I've got one chick in mind that could resurrect the dead. Her name is Lola. She's from the Meat Packing District. She is number one on Gansevoort Street!” said Esposito.

“A prostitute...” Carmine was reluctant. It wasn't a question of morals; he was first in line when he had the time and longing. But it was different for his nephew. Ben was young and handsome, and certainly didn't need a hooker.

The entire family agreed that Esposito's best quality was his ability to tune into the person to whom he was speaking, deducing even the smallest phrases and reading the slightest facial movements, already knowing what they were thinking and what they were going to say.

“With all due respect, sir, I doubt that a woman like Lola would be easy to win over, even for an attractive boy like your nephew. The fact that she is a professional would make everything easier for all of us. Give your nephew a few nights of passion with Lola, and Susan will be sweet history. This way, getting rid of her will be painless.”

Esposito's argument was pretty convincing.

“Let's give it a try. Make contact with this Lola and take her to a boutique and get her a nice wardrobe. I don't want her looking like a hooker. Explain the situation to her, then we'll invite her to dinner. We'll find a way to leave the two of them alone together.”

“It would be ideal if we invented a good story that Lola could act out during the evening. Something moving that touches the heart.”

Carmine decided to entrust the creative mind of Esposito. “Why not... any ideas?”

“Well, for starters, she could play the part of an elementary school teacher.”

Esposito recalled with pleasure one of their evenings. To satisfy one of his fantasies, he had her interpret the role of a school teacher: a blonde babe wearing glasses, a tiny low-cut white blouse and a short plaid skirt.

“She's from Ukrain, so we can give her a tormented past; she was a young orphan and had to go out in the street in the snow to sell matchsticks.”

“Matchsticks? Isn't that a children's fairy tale? Esposito, are you firing on all cylinders? No, here's what we're gonna do. An orphan is good, but she was adopted and her foster father was violent. He beat and abused her. When she turned eighteen, she ran away from home, finding odd jobs that allowed her to study at night school and became the woman she is today. What do you think?”

Esposito was almost crying. “I think that's the most touching

story that I've ever heard, Boss. My compliments. You have an incredible imagination.”

“What imagination? It's the story of a soap opera that my wife used to watch, may she rest in peace.”

“Anyway, we need to come up with an explanation for Ben as to why she'll be at dinner at our house,” said Carmine.

“Lola can just show up at dinnertime as a volunteer for some orphanage, asking for a donation that we had promised to give to charity for the poor orphans. Then she can pretend to have forgotten the right day. At that point, we can invite her to join us for dinner,” said Esposito.

The idea was full-proof and could work.

“You know something? You're a really good liar. I hope your wife is the only one who needs to be careful.”

Carmine grabbed the phone and got Joe Santini's number. “Joe? Hey, it's Carmine. I just want your opinion on a deal regarding Ben... no, don't worry, he's not in any trouble. Actually, I think we might have a solution for our problem...”

In other circumstances, he would have sent Esposito over to explain, but on this occasion, he wanted to tell him himself. Joe agreed with the plan and gave him carte blanche to go ahead.

In the dark about his uncles' behind-the-scenes plans to orchestrate his life, Ben was busy getting his material ready for the show, when an unexpected phone call filled him with joy.

“Susan! How nice to hear from you so soon?”

“I hope I'm not bothering you. I've just been given two tickets

for a concert this evening at the Webster Hall Nightclub and I wanted to ask if you wanted to come with me. I'd like to pay you back a little for all your kindness. It's the least I can do.”

He couldn't have been happier if she had offered ten gold bricks, so he immediately accepted before some other invitation could ruin his evening. “It will be a pleasure. Thank you. I can't think of anything better than some good music to help me unwind.”

After they worked out a time and place to meet, Ben hung up and realized that he had no knowledge of the music that would be playing. It wasn't important, after all. The only thing that mattered was that he was going to spend the evening with Susan, wherever they ended up was fine with him.

Chapter 4

Webster Hall at 125 East 11th Street

Judging by the long line of people waiting in front of the entrance, the event of the evening seemed to have attracted a lot of interest.

Susan gave off an almost tangibly exhilarated air, which contrasted with Ben's dark suspicion, as he kept looking around for something to reassure him. But the more he searched, the more his anxiety increased.

He figured that at least fifteen people, between those in front and those at the end of the line, could have very well spent the last two or three years behind bars. Not to mention their clothing, that appeared tenebrously sinister and bordered on something close to satanic. He found the courage to ask a question that might help him understand his surroundings a bit more.

“Susan, sorry but, what exactly are we going to see tonight?”

She looked at him like he had come from another planet. “What do you mean? Everybody knows Zoroaster from Atlanta!” Ignorance surrounded him, clearly revealed in his face.

“You really don't know who they are? I mean, don't you like Sludge Metal?”

He attempted a vague answer while clearing his voice, but

Susan saw right through his posturing.

“I get it. You don't know and you need me to explain, right?” Despite his embarrassment, Ben had to confess that he had no idea what she was talking about.

“Sludge Metal, or rather, Sludge Doom Metal is a sub-genre of Heavy Metal music that's usually considered a fusion of Doom Metal, Stoner Metal, Southern Rock and Hardcore Punk.” She waited for Ben to wrap his head around all of it, then decided to change her tactic. “Don't worry. Let's do this, we'll listen to a few songs and if you can't stand it, just tell me and we'll go somewhere else. Does that sound all right?”

The skies cleared, the sun came out and Ben immediately felt better. He happily accepted Susan's offer, even if he would have rather been standing in line to see Shakira.

Inside the club, the music was a detonation that filled every corner, embellished by various strobe lights rotating wildly, shooting in every direction.

Everyone was moshing to heavily distorted bass sounds and rivers of oppressive riffs which appeared to try its best to smother the writhing mass of Metalheads. Ben felt like he was at the center of a spinning universe that was breaking apart with every violent beat of the drums, jolted right and left while the sea of people slam danced and shouted guttural hardcore punk language. He struggled to understand what Susan was trying to yell in his ear.

“Oh my God! This is the Ancient Ones from the Matador

album.”

He nodded and gave a hint of a smile, hoping that this torture would soon be over. The only way he was able to stand the nightmare, was because it looked like Susan was having fun.

The worst came when the crowd slammed into him and he felt something soggy and slimy spread all over his forearm. He instinctively pulled his arm back, but was only partly able to, because another wave of pushing shoved him in total contact with the “thing”. His whole arm, including his hand, felt like it was covered in a mix of sweaty and oily gelatin that smelled like a toilet at a service station.

Totally revolted, he found the courage to turn around and actually look at the horror that he had come in contact with.

Pushing him from behind, was the belly, soft and deformed by alcohol, which belonged to a guy wearing a muscle shirt that was two sizes too small for his immense body, only covering his chest and part of his gigantic gut.

The man, heavily made-up with black eyeliner, wore a Marlon Brando cap, dozens of earrings and studded necklaces that served as an introduction to his collection of esoteric tattoos. From the shine of his skin, it was evident that he had slathered himself in some kind of oil.

Ben gagged and knew he had to get out of there, or he would vomit.

Trying to look casual, he surreptitiously cleaned his arm on the shirt of the unfortunate person standing next to him, then

grabbed Susan by the waist and quickly tried to escort her away from the herd. She interpreted his attempt at escape as trying to feel at home, so she decided to accommodate him by yelling a request in his ear.

“Can I climb up on your shoulders?”

Ben didn't hear a word, but out of kindness, answered with a smile that said yes. He only figured out what she meant after she had climbed on his back, digging her heels into his ribs. He did his best to keep his balance, counting on the crowd surrounding him to keep him from falling over.

Then suddenly Susan jerked around. A guy standing right behind her put his whole hand on one half of her ass, his eyes fixed on the stage while he sipped his beer with the other hand.

That's when Susan lost it. “Hey, you creepy pig! Get your filthy hand off me!” But he just stood there with his hand firmly in place, squeezing her butt and sipping his beer.

“Are you an idiot, or what? Take your hands off me!” Furious, she lashed out, but as soon as she came close to his hand, he moved it, then put it right back on her ass.

Worn out, she smacked Ben in the head to get his attention. “Aren't you going to say anything to this jerk?”

When Ben realized what was going on, he turned around to face the cause of trouble. “Hey buddy, go molest somebody else!” The guy let out a resounding and sour burp that hit Ben and everyone around him.

Susan, more than pissed off, gave a swift kick in the face to

the perpetrator. In his attempt to protect his head from the blow, he spilled most of his beer on the couple standing next to him. The beer-drenched guy wasn't particularly tall, but was ripped from hours lifting weights at the gym and he wasn't at all happy about being doused. He grabbed the culprit by the front of his t-shirt and started shaking him like a rag doll. "What the fuck! You ruined my clothes, you moron!"

Like some kind of crazed idiot, the ass-grabber started laughing uncontrollably, enraging the weightlifter with every chuckle. "If you don't shut up, I'm gonna break your face! Then we'll see if you're still laughing."

Behind him, a guy, dressed in yellow from head to toe, tried to intervene in defense of the idiot. "C'mon, leave him alone. Can't you see there's something wrong with him?"

The bully didn't appreciate Mr. Yellow's intrusion and decided to show him who was boss. "Who are *you*? Now get outta here, go back to the discotheque... *canary!*"

Some words have the destructive potential of a firebomb released in an atomic nuclear reactor, but the gratuitous insult that triggered the inevitable fight was, unexpectedly: "canary".

"Excuse me? What did you call me? A *canary*?" He blew a loud whistle that would have been lost in the music if it weren't combined with long arms reaching out to his friends. Four guys, all dressed similarly to the "canary" moved in threateningly close to the weightlifter. They looked like some kind of gang.

From Ben's shoulders, Susan watched the group closing in

and in a panic, started hitting and prodding him with her heels, spurring him on before catastrophe hit. “Oh my God! It's the Yellow Brothers! Hurry up, let's get out of here fast!”

Her frantic movements caused Ben to lose his already precarious balance, staggering until the inevitable and abrupt fall, generating a disastrous domino effect.

Susan yelled as she fell on top of the weightlifter, who, desperately trying to get a handhold, violently catapulted himself into the canary's chest, causing him to windmill blows onto the two guys standing on the sidelines while he fell backward, in turn, forcing them into a flailing kind of moonwalk, while landing more blows to the back of the heads of other spectators. In just a few seconds, a tsunami of total destruction broke out, like a saloon brawl from Hell's 7th circle.

Pushing and shoving their way through, Ben and Susan found themselves completely blocked in front of the stage. The musicians had stopped playing by then and just stood there looking around at the chaos of the nightclub, aware of the fact that the concert was ruined... or was possibly their best and most successful gig ever.

An announcement was made that the show was over and the emergency exits were now open, while security was doing their best to maintain a semblance of peace and order.

Miraculously, they surfed through the crush of people and, once outside, could hear police sirens, announcing the arrival of the authorities.

Shocked but safe, they started walking home, ruminating about the events of the evening.

“Why is it that our exits always have to end up in a bar fight?” asked Susan.

“As a matter of fact, it is pretty wild. It's almost as if you and I attract trouble. I'm sorry you didn't get to see the whole concert.”

She smiled at his kindness.

“I only wish I had told you what kind of concert we were going to see. I just assumed you would like them, too.”

He tried not to make her feel bad, telling her a little white lie. “No, don't worry about it. It was... fun. Too bad it ended the way it did. Actually, I was enjoying myself. The rhythm of the music was starting to get in my blood.” He added a little jig, but Susan wasn't falling for it and gave him a sideways look.

“Liar. I could tell from a mile away, that you couldn't wait to get out of there. But I appreciate your efforts. Let's do this: the next time we go to a movie or a concert, you get to choose.”

That meant that they had another chance to go out, which made Ben's face light up. “Fantastic! A new science fiction movie just came out...”

Susan threw up her hand, stopping him in his tracks. “No, no! Please, no science fiction.”

Back pedaling, Ben tried to change the description, “It's not exactly science fiction, it's more of a thriller-horror.” But she kept shaking her head, no.

“For heaven's sake, only a thriller or horror could be worse

than science fiction!”

So he started listing kinds of movies at random, “Musical? Comedy?”

“No and no,” she said.

He finally decided to give up and throw in the towel. “Sorry, but what's left?”

“I'd love a romantic comedy.”

He agreed, even if the concept of “you get to choose” eluded him.

By the time they reached Susan's house, there was a moment of embarrassed glimpses. In Ben's mind, he had hoped to be invited up to her place, and decided to put her on the spot.

“Even though tonight was a little lively, it was fun. Gosh, it isn't even very late. I think when I get home, I'll read for awhile till I fall asleep.”

She appeared amused and intrigued. “What a great idea. What are you reading?”

Ben wasn't really very interested in books, so he had to think fast on his feet to sound intellectual. So he mentioned a book that he had already read about twenty years ago. “A really compelling story... *Treasure Island*.”

“*Treasure Island*? Isn't that a children's book?”

“Yes, of course. But I like to go back and reread it sometimes to revisit my adolescence,” said Ben, trying not to sound pathetic. He made a gesture sliding his right hand over his left like a plane taking off into the wild blue yonder, and left it at that. Susan

didn't seem to grasp the concept of his gesture, but accepted his explanation.

“All right then, seeing as you already have plans for the evening, I won't invite you up for a drink.”

Ben almost fainted right there on the spot and had to force the lump in his throat not to explode into a hacking cough. “To tell you the truth, I wouldn't mind something to drink. As long as it wouldn't be any trouble.”

He tried to regroup and pull himself together with a mix of prayer and curses merging in his brain, while Susan blessed him with brilliant smile.

Bursting with energy, he felt like a toy bouncing up the stairs to her apartment.

Just before he was about to walk into her house, he heard a very familiar voice calling his name from faraway. “Ben! Hey Ben!”

He turned around and saw Esposito's big, red face, even more heated than usual from running.

“Esposito? What happened?”

He leaned on the railing, wheezing and gasping for air while trying not to fall on the ground. Ben carefully helped him sit down on one of the steps, waiting for him to catch his breath enough to speak.

When he was finally able to talk, Esposito had some worrisome news. “Your uncle ... is sick.”

“What happened? Which uncle?”

As strange as it seemed, the question was legitimate, given that he worked for Carmine D'Abbate, as well as Joe Santini.

Chapter 5

“Uncle Joe... a heart attack...” More or less what would have happened to Esposito if he had run another ten yards. Ben recalled all the times he had told him to eat better and smoke less, if not just give up the cigarettes entirely. And now he found himself distressed for his poor uncle.

“Where is he now? In the hospital?” asked Ben.

Gulping air, Esposito flapped his hands to reassure him. “He's out of danger. Luckily, Doctor Vick was a guest at dinner and gave him some medicine. But you know how your uncle is. He's lying on the bed and absolutely refuses to go to the hospital. Maybe you could convince him.”

“Stubborn old man!” Ben ran his hands through his hair, trying to figure a way out of the situation: with his uncle in bed, seriously ill on one hand and Susan more or less available on the other, he had no choice, given the severity of the situation. With a sorry look, he half-smiled at Susan, shrugged his shoulders and took his leave. “Susan, my Uncle Joe is like a father to me. I'm sorry...”

“Are you kidding? What are you waiting for? Let me know how he is.”

He thanked her, got Esposito on his feet and left her watching them go from her front steps.

Esposito's car wasn't far, just distant enough for him to give

him a good earful. “Where the hell were you? Do you ever look at your cell phone? I've been looking for you for hours and...”

Joe Santini's apartment: in the bedroom

“Valerio Esposito called. He found your nephew just in time and he's bringing him here now.”

Joe, standing in front of the window, tied his robe closed after he took the last puff off of his cigar. “Good. Spray some perfume around here and get me a damned mint. I didn't even have to hide out like this when I was fourteen years old!”

In the room with Joe was Doctor Vick, Carmine and the Vitiellos brothers, Joe's two trusted body guards.

“I'm sorry, Joe, but we're forced to go ahead with the plan ahead of time. It all happened so fast and this was the first idea that came to mind. We had to step in before Ben went upstairs to the girl's place and did irreparable damage.” Joe snorted at Carmine's excuses.

“Ya, ya, I just don't get why I have to play the part of the sick one. Why couldn't it have been that whacko, Johnny? He's the one who's gonna have a heart attack before me! All right, it's too late now to back out. Let's get on with the show. Did you find the hooker?”

“We called Platy's brothel. Says Lola's with an important client. Some senator, but she'll do her best to get her here on time.”

Grumbling like a grouchy bear, he climbed under the sheets, ready to play his part. “I hope so for her sake. Look what we have to do for family.”

When Ben precipitated into his uncle's room, Lola was already present, standing off by herself, simulating worry and distress.

“Uncle Joe, are you ok?” He delicately took Joe's hand and crouched down, touching heads with him.

Joe's reproachful look hovered over the other men in the room as if to say: “look how I'm made to pay for the love of this dear boy”.

He gave Ben a light pat on the back, an invitation to look at him. “I'm better now... a lot better, thank you.”

Ben searched for the right words. Words that would scold, but not be too harsh. “I hope that this terrible attack has taught you not to overindulge. You're not twenty years old anymore and you have to learn to respect your body. It's important to take care of yourself, mostly when...”

With a lost and resigned look on his face, Joe suddenly nodded, emphasizing his nephew's truth in silence, while he continued with an unending tirade.

Ben knew his uncle very well, especially his adversity to hospitals. His long preamble was only the introduction to this heavy topic. “...obviously, every precaution would prove to be unsubstantiated by experts in the field...”

He paused to evaluate his uncle's reaction, who seemed to either not understand what he was talking about, or that more

likely he wouldn't give in without a fight.

“...we think, and the doctor will confirm this, that you should have some tests done in a place that's a little more appropriate than this bedroom. If you want, tomorrow I can take you to the hospital for...”

The forbidden word had been spoken, confirmed by the reaction of everyone's fear. “Forget it! I've already told you a million times. I will never set foot in one of those slaughterhouses, even if it means I die today in this bed!”

“But Uncle Joe. Think about it. In the hospital they have everything available to treat you. You have to admit, nobody can do anything for you here. Why are you behaving like a child?”

Ben was crestfallen by his uncle's unwavering stubbornness. But more than stubborn, Joe had an instinctive fear that if a healthy man is able to, he should choose to avoid places of sufferance.

A female voice chimed in among the men, like the sun breaking through the clouds. “I, too, refused hospital care just like him; all that commotion and chaos! There *is* an alternative, you know. I have a doctor friend who has a private clinic. He would get all the attention he deserves, plus any extra services. Just like a home away from home.”

Lola stepped into the center of the room, startling everyone. Her beauty, striking in itself, was enhanced by the head-turning evening attire she was wearing: a fiery red dress decorated with sequins, highlighted by a generous cleavage – maybe not

a blessing from Mother Nature, but still quite hypnotizing. The vertiginous slit at the side of her dress offered a view of two very long and shapely legs, drawing attention to how the gown clung to her derriere. And last, but not least, they gazed contemplatively at the lovely features of her face.

Her sea-blue eyes, shaped like a feline's, were lit up like two sapphires and set off by the lens of her delicate glasses. Framing her glowing and almost unnaturally radiant face, was her long, wavy golden blonde hair.

Everyone gawked, each immersed in his own personal fantasy. Lola, perfectly aware of the reactions that she provoked, bestowed upon them with a dazzling smile.

The first to recover from the shock was Doctor Vick, who already had the pleasure of her acquaintance... and services. "Lola! As impossible as it seems, we had almost forgotten you were here."

Ben was trying to get the words out, pointing back and forth to Lola and his Uncle Joe, frightened by the idea that this woman was the cause of his uncle's sudden illness.

"Sorry it took me so long to arrive, but I couldn't get one of my annoying contact lens in, so I ended up wearing my glasses. How are you, Joe? Feeling better?"

She sat on the edge of the bed and slyly focused all of the attention on herself, sensuously crossing her legs. "Yes, dear, thank you. I'd like to introduce you to my nephew, Ben. He's the joy and despair of my life. Ben, this lovely lady is Lola."

Ben stood up respectfully and extended his hand while Joe continued to act his part. “Lola belongs to a committee that takes care of orphaned children. I've promised her that I would give a generous donation. I'm so sorry about what's happened, here.”

The explanation for the woman's presence calmed Ben's nerves considerably and filled him with pride for his uncle's philanthropy.

Lola started laying the flattery on thick, demonstrating her exceptional acting abilities. “Oh, Joe! How can you even think of anything besides your own health at a time like this? See what a generous man he is? Always thinking of others first. People like you are unique and rare! That's *exactly* why I absolutely have to take care of you. From what I can tell, your nephew is as special as you are. Please! Try to find a compromise between his wants and desires and yours.”

Then she stood and moved slowly toward Joe, looking lovingly into his eyes and taking his hand the way Ben had a few moments before. But this time, that same gesture had a different impact. “Joe, take my proposal into consideration. The clinic that I have in mind is truly exceptional! You'll see, and you won't regret it.”

Lola's persuasive voice, accompanied by a mischievous glint in her eye, was unmistakable. The old man understood what she was really referring to before she even had the chance to delicately scratch the palm of his hand with her finger. He had to force himself to control his sudden state of excitement.

“I think... I think that you all may be right. I let myself

get carried away in all the panic without thinking about the consequences. Just so long as it's clear that I won't be treated like a dying man. That means for the entire time I'm in the clinic, no one comes to visit me. No one. Ever!”

Esposito and Doctor Vick exchanged a fleeting look and had to turn around to stifle a guffaw. Only Ben in his blissful innocence, though a little concerned about his uncle's abrupt turnaround, felt relief that he would soon be safe under the doctors' watchful eyes.

Lola composed herself and adopted a sweet and innocent air of chastity that was quite in contrast with her vixen-like demeanor. “I'll take him personally to my friend's clinic and make sure that he gets all the attention he deserves,” she said.

Convincing Joe to comply with her kindness, Lola had certainly played her role well, drawing Ben's physical, as well as personal attention. So Joe decided it was the perfect time to set his trap for his nephew.

“Thank you, my dear. And I know exactly how I'm going to pay you back for everything. I'm only sorry that I won't be present at the dinner that I wanted to give in your honor. However, I'm sure that my cousin, Carmine and my nephew, Ben will be more than happy to take my place,” said Joe.

Carmine intervened resolutely before Ben had the chance to say anything, embracing him in a tight hug. “You can count on us! We'd be more than happy to host such an enchanting lady. Isn't that right, Ben?”

He nodded, even if he still wasn't clear on everything that happened.

Only after everyone except Esposito had left, could Joe take stock of the evening and enjoy his cigar, left to rest at the window ledge, in peace.

“In the end, I'd say it went really well and I have to admit that Lola was good. I have no doubt that she'll find a way to make that idiot of my nephew fall for her. You made a damned good choice there.”

Esposito never had a shadow of a doubt about that. “I'd say that you'll have a pleasant stay... in the clinic.”

“Damn right. I think I'll stay for a couple of weeks. It's been a long time since I've had a decent vacation. And I can see you there, dying to ask. So here's your answer: no, you can't come with me.”

Apartment on Broadway at the corner of 95th Street; across the street from the Peter Norton Symphony Space

Don Pasquale Lucchesi, who succeeded his father, Don Salvatore, in the management of the Family's affairs, stood sipping a seven year old brandy, staring out the window at the frenetic life out on the streets.

His attractive secretary, the young Agustina Kyra, besides being an excellent associate, impeccable and reliable, was in the possession of a special “attribute” that any man would define as

the finest buttocks to be admired by the human eye.

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