

VENETIAN SHADOWS SERIE

THE FLAVOR OF SIN

V.J. RAVENS

THE FLAVOR OF SIN

pdf short excerpt

A THRILLER

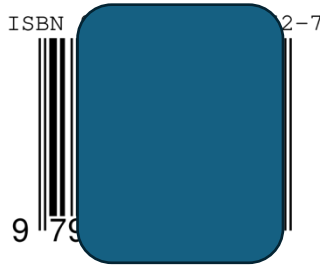
VENETIAN SHADOWS

SERIES

By VJ Ravens

Copyright © 2025 Stephan Schlunke
All rights reserved.

ISBN:  2-7



No parts of this book and free pdf may be reproduced without written permission from the publisher or copyright holder, except for a reviewer who may quote brief passages adequately; nor may any part of this book be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or other, without written permission from the publisher or copyright holder.

Published 24.12.2025 by
Dr. Stephan Schlunke
FMH Surgery, General Surgery and Traumatology
FMH Vascular Surgery FEBVS
Via Soldino 9, 6900 LUGANO
Switzerland

EDITOR: Katelynn W. of FirstEditing

ESSENTIAL CONTRIBUTOR: Michela Pagliuca & Jeanpierre Mini

COVER: Robert Jarocki







DEDICATION

To Ambra, Anna, Caroline, Dayla, Elisabeth, Frédéric, Giuseppe, Hans-Peter, Michela, Mwana, Paolo, Regina, Tea and Yannara.

“Getting lost is the only place worth going to.”

Tiziano Scarpa

CONTENTS

THE BEGINNING AND THE END	- 11 -
1. A STAIN ON THE CURTAIN	- 15 -
2. THE STUCKY LEGACY.....	
3. THE PRICE OF AMBITION	
4. THE COMPLETE PLANS	- 53 -
5. THE MAKING OF A PREDATOR	59
6. IL CIRCOLO DEGLI INTENDITORI ...	ERRORE. IL SEG 
DEFINITO.	
7. WHAT LIES BENEATH... ERRORE. IL SEGNALIBRO	
8. THE BIRTHDAY GIFT ERRORE. IL SEGNALIBRO	
9. NOWHERE TO RUN ERRORE. IL SEGNALIBRO	
APPENDIX	ERRORE. IL SEGNALIBRO NON È DEFINITO.

DISCLAIMER

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), events, or locales is entirely coincidental.



INTRODUCTION

The Beginning and the End

In the windowless vault beneath the restaurant *Il Tricolore di Venezia*, a pair of scarred knuckles hovered over a keyboard; the hands they belonged to trembled with anticipation.

The scent of salty sweat mingled with the aromas of savory sauces, freshly baked bread, and simmering stews coming from the kitchen. There was a mixture of tension and temptation in the air. Dimmable LED strips mounted overhead cast the room in a pale, clinical light. Little pearls of sweat glistened on the man's skin, causing his shirt to cling to his muscles. A subtle but powerful musk emanated from him as he struck the enter key to launch the encrypted malware, sending digital tentacles slithering through fiber optic cables to erase his digital footprint even as they signed another's death warrant. His pupils dilated under the monitor's blue glow like a predator's would before it tasted the blood of its kill. He leaned forward, savoring the moment before impact.

Three strikes of the San Lorenzo tower clock echoed through the empty canals and narrow alleys until they reached the basement of the restaurant.



A few hours later, on the other side of the globe, Emma's hands trembled as she read an email from Hotel Danieli.

"Thom," she gasped, "three free nights in Venice! Is this real?"

Thom pushed the dish full of mac and cheese into the oven and joined her at the computer. After a few calls to confirm the offer's legitimacy, they booked their vacation and planned to leave for the Easter break.

Venice had been their sanctuary last year. It was where Thom proposed beneath a blood orange sunset and Emma whispered *yes*

against his neck. It was where the silk sheets in that baroque hotel room tangled around their bodies like the pillared arches of the palazzo. Emma's nails drew blood from Thom's shoulders as they made love until dawn broke, their throats raw from crying out each other's names over and over.



The private water taxi gleamed beside the dock at Marco Polo Airport. It was not yellow like the public Alilaguna ferries laden with tourists, but obsidian and sleek, intimate—perfect for lovers. The driver's eyes never met theirs; his face remained obscured by his naval cap's visor as he examined their confirmation documents. His nod was curt, mechanical—like the snap of a guillotine—and his muscular arms shifted their luggage to the boat with apparent ease before getting them underway and leaving the busy airport behind.

Thom and Emma melted into each other's arms as Venice materialized through the mist like a mirage of spires and domes. Emma pressed her lips to Thom's throat, feeling his pulse, and clutched his arm as the boat's engine growled. The ocean gently sprayed their faces as the vessel accelerated across the lagoon. The soft click of locks engaging barely registered with them before the cabin sealed shut with a hermetic hiss; the gloved hand on a hidden valve went unnoticed.

In the rearview mirror, the driver's eyes didn't so much as blink as their loving embrace slackened, their heads lolling together. Their lungs filled with invisible poison while their gazes remained fixed on the approaching city: the last sight they would ever share. La Serenissima—Venice, their beginning and their end—watched unaffected as their bodies slid down in the leather seats, still entwined, making their last sensation the warmth of each other's skin.

As consciousness slipped away, perhaps they found comfort in dreaming of a gondola gliding beneath a silver moon, whispered vows echoing under stone bridges, and fingers intertwined atop ancient marble balustrades—tender ghosts dancing behind their dimming eyes.

The driver cut the mahogany boat's engine in the center of the laguna; it rocked gently in its own wake. Blood hammered in his ears as he wrenched open the cabin door to find the smell of death had already begun to seep into the polished wood. His gloved fingers violated every pocket and every seam of their luggage in search of any tech that might have served as a beacon or a tracker. He rolled the woman's body over to access her husband's phone, crushing her limp hand beneath her own weight.

Despite the task before him, handling her pliant body and her shapely legs sent a shiver of arousal down his spine. The scent of her perfume took him back in a wink to the skirts his mother wore on Sundays for church. He took a moment to savor the sight of the woman's elegant shoe dangling from her lifeless, sexy toes; a glimpse of red nail polish shone through her fine stockings.

After confirming the absence of any traceable items using a nonlinear junction detector, he returned to the helm and carefully navigated the water taxi into the canals. Minutes later, the boat slipped through the unmarked gate on Rio de San Lorenzo like a blade between ribs. The hull scraped stone—the sound muted like a coffin being lowered into its grave—as the boathouse's maw swallowed it whole. The three-minute diversion near Hotel Danieli to dispose of the couple's tech had been executed with the clinical efficiency of a professional killer: barely detectable, even by a trained eye.



Two weeks passed before the couple's frantic families filed missing persons reports. The police could only follow the digital ghost of Thom's phone; it had carved a perfect arc across Venice's surveillance grid from Marco Polo's bustling terminals to the elegant façade of Hotel Danieli, where the signal vanished like a candle, snuffed out by the lagoon's breath. Emails recovered from Emma's inbox led nowhere, and surveillance cameras in the city and airport placed the couple in a water taxi, but lost any sight of them soon afterward. The

driver's face was not recognizable, and the boat did not have any clear markings to distinguish it from all the others in Venice. When questioned, the hotel's bewildered concierge and management staff could only offer blank stares, as the prestigious establishment had never extended an invitation to the missing vegetarian couple.

1. A Stain on the Curtain

There was always blood in Venice: running through the palaces and churches and out the other end, down alleyways slick with mud, across bridges, past gondolas, out into the gray waters of the Adriatic Sea. The entire city floated on blood. It was red everywhere, bright and glittering, seeping through faded brocade patterns and reflected off tourists' phone screens. Blood even trickled into the cleaning woman's dreams, although she did not understand why until the day she found a long, red streak of it staining that curtain at work, already dried.

Angela knew she would hear her name shouted in fury before long, so she took the opportunity to whisper it softly to herself, hoping it would help her claim some small piece of the restaurant's hushed elegance as her own.

Her cloth swept across the polished surface of the bar with practiced precision, leaving behind streaks of lemon-scented cleaner that then evaporated into nothing. The name of the restaurant was Il Tricolore di Venezia; this was not only a nod to the Italian flag, but to a tense sort of truce between two extremes on the menu, namely vegan and meat specialties. The Venetians would know the structure as *the trinity*, composed of Venezia Verde, Venezia Rosso and the bar Il Faro Bianco joining both restaurants.

The emerald glow of Venezia Verde's ambient lighting cast her shadow along the wall: a hunched but diligent figure moving through the empty restaurant like a ghost that still remembered its living routine. The place was empty now, its chairs upturned on tables like sleeping insects.

Angela worked methodically from one end to the other, almost mathematical in her efficiency. She took pride in transforming the chaos of a busy dinner service into this pristine setting. During her irregular day or night shifts, she erased the smudged fingerprints on

titanium fixtures, the oily residue on glassware, and the crumbs that found seemingly impossible hiding places beneath tables.

The living plant wall that dominated one side of the restaurant required special attention. Angela misted it gently, removing stray leaves with a small pair of scissors she kept in her apron pocket. The wall represented everything the restaurant stood for: life, sustainability, and an expensive kind of morality that wealthy patrons wore as casually as they did their designer clothes. She sometimes wondered if the plants felt trapped there, like prisoners of aesthetics bound to live and die in service to human vanity.

When she was finished there, she moved through the connecting passage to Venezia Rosso, the restaurant's carnivorous twin. The transition always struck her as deliberate theatrics—from airy brightness to something more primal. The red velvet upholstery and dark wood paneling created an atmosphere of almost sinful indulgence. Here, meat was served on heated stones with blood pooling at the edges, and customers' faces lit up with carnal satisfaction as they cut into flesh.

Angela's cloth moved with the same efficiency across marble countertops and burnished copper fixtures. She polished wine glasses until they sang when she ran a dampened finger around their rims. The crystal chandeliers required an extendable duster that reached the ceiling, bringing down dust that danced in the shafts of artificial light. She had learned to clean in expanding circles, each more distant from the central hub of the kitchen, until the entire space gleamed in silent expectation for the next day's service.

Despite the chaos of meal rests scattered across the tables around her, the distant hum of the canal filtering through the window gave her a sense of peace. The soft glow of the lamps cast shadows on the walls. She thrived on turning disorder, imperfections, and unpredictability into polished excellence.

Il Faro Bianco, the bar connecting the two restaurants and serving as neutral territory where omnivores and strict herbivores could mingle, presented its own challenges. Its white and plexiglass surfaces showed

every speck of dirt, every fingerprint. She attacked these imperfections with chemicals that burned her nostrils, moving her cloth in tight circles that left behind nothing but clinical perfection.

The most unusual feature of Il Faro Bianco was the plexiglass enclosure that was visible from the entrance corridor. The two black panthers weren't present that night—they were probably in their more spacious quarters behind the enclosure, in the restricted area—but Angela still checked the glass for smudges. Chef Federico Dal Sotto was particular about cleanliness.

“The first impression,” he'd told her once as he watched her work with those unsettling eyes of his, “is the most important one. When they see those beautiful creatures, they must see perfection.”

The bell of the church of San Lorenzo had long since struck ten by the time Angela reached the back of the restaurant. The storage rooms and wine cellars formed a labyrinth beneath the ancient palazzo, the rooms connected by narrow corridors that seemed to bend back on themselves. Some of them had plexiglass ceilings on which patrons could walk and peer through to check out the wine cellar or watch some kitchen apprentice gather ingredients from storage. She avoided the areas marked as restricted; the staff had been explicitly forbidden from entering those spaces, and Angela was not one to question such rules. Her job was to clean, not to explore.

She liked the abundance of beauty and precision as well as the passion underneath it all. She instead had learned to be indifferent. After two years of working there, she was used to the restaurant's cold affluence and its even colder kitchen. The only warmth to be found was from the constant fury of the ovens. Not even the inevitable explosion from the chef could warm her. She just ignored his red face and kept her cool. But there was still that dark stain on the curtain.

It dangled in front of the entrance to the restricted section of the restaurant; it was as if it was unsure whether to conceal or reveal what lay beyond it. All she knew was that this room was reserved for special guests and private events.

She stared at the stain. Federico had not told her how he wanted her to clean blood from velvet. Maybe he had assumed she would know. Or maybe he had not meant for her to see this at all.

Angela reached for the special phone the kitchen second had given her during the introduction tour of the first day. He had then told her to use it in any moment she should need special supplies or detailed explanations of any kind. She almost called to ask for advice, for what kind of stubborn, rust-colored stain they needed taken care of, but stopped herself. In the restaurant, she spoke little. She knew better. The owners did not employ her because of her cleverness. Or maybe they did, and that was why they tried to keep her away from anything more involved than cleaning.

Angela crouched down, her knees protesting due to the hard floor, pulled a pair of latex gloves from her apron pocket, and slipped them on with practiced ease. She brushed her fingertips against the stain; it was dry, and slightly crusty. Her heart beat faster against her ribs. It was blood, but was it human blood?

The location of the stain made no sense. The stain was on the inside of the curtain, facing the forbidden area and not the main dining room; it couldn't have been the result of a kitchen accident. She leaned closer until her nose was inches from the fabric. There was no smell of food, no tannic hint of wine or sauce—just the metallic scent she recognized from her childhood in Portugal, where her grandfather butchered animals brought in from the farm.

She was still contemplating this when she felt him approach. It was a sixth sense she had developed after growing up with a father and a brother who made nothing but noise: the ability to notice when a man moved too quietly.

“Signora Vaz de Almeida,” he said just above a whisper. He pronounced it *Vash de Almeida*, his slight, but strange accent letting the last word glide almost without the L, then having the jingle of his large key ring do the rest of the work for him. “You seem puzzled.”

She composed herself, then met his eyes as best she could without staring too long. Their amber color was unsettling, not unlike the rest

of him. An intuition flashed up to her mind *The blood is starting to dry under his nails.*

“The curtain, chef,” she replied. “I found this stain here. But did I make a mistake? Should I not have cleaned so far back?”

“Show me.”

Angela pointed out the stain without touching it. Federico barely glanced at it before shrugging.

“It’s nothing to worry about, Angela.” His tone sounded deliberately casual, but was still as cold as a draft let in through an open door. “I was moving some meat deliveries earlier. Must have brushed against the curtain.”

The explanation made sense on the surface, but the stain was level with his knee: an odd place to make contact with while carrying packages. And Federico was meticulous about his appearance; his chef’s whites were always pristine, even after hours in the kitchen.

“Some areas of the restaurant are not your concern,” he added, his gaze pinning her in place. “Best to stay within your boundaries, as we agreed.”

The words were softly spoken, but landed with the weight of granite. This was not a suggestion, but a warning. Angela’s throat constricted, but she quickly collected herself.

“Of course. I only mentioned it because I’ll need different cleaning supplies for it.”

“I’ll take care of it.” He reached out suddenly and placed his hand on her shoulder in a friendly gesture that felt anything but. His fingers pressed slightly, finding the exact spot where tension had gathered at the base of her neck. “You’ve been working too hard. Finish up quickly tonight.”

His hand lingered a moment too long before falling away. Angela nodded, unable to speak, and watched Federico pull the curtain aside just enough to slip through, then disappear behind it. The fabric swayed in his wake, making the stain look like a wound tearing and repairing itself. Angela remained frozen as a door opened and closed somewhere in the forbidden area.

Only when silence returned did she exhale. She finished her shift with mechanical movements, her earlier ease replaced by hyperawareness of her surroundings. The restaurant suddenly seemed full of shadows, corners from which eyes might watch her, doorways that might open to reveal...what? Her imagination provided no answers, only formless dread.

The curtain became a stain on her thoughts, impossible to scrub away. Chef Federico's warning echoed in her mind, but the unspoken part followed her as she gathered her supplies.

Stay within your boundaries...or else.

She found herself imagining a life in which she'd never left Albufeira and had remained safe in her orderly routines. In another, she'd pushed past this cleaning job and broken into something that mattered. She pictured herself in a police uniform, but then immediately saw her father's disapproving face.

"Always reaching beyond yourself."

In Venice, she felt both invisible and conspicuous—a foreigner who could observe unnoticed, yet never truly belong. Some nights she dreamed of being in the police station, respected and certain; other nights, she imagined fleeing back to Portugal, admitting defeat. Both futures seemed equally impossible from where she stood, cloth in hand.

The next evening, Angela arrived at Il Tricolore di Venezia with a small bottle of hydrogen peroxide tucked in her bag. The liquid sloshed with each step, a chemical solution for a problem that had grown in her mind overnight. She spent hours replaying Federico's casual dismissal of the stain that didn't match the warning in his eyes. Professional pride demanded she treat the stain properly, regardless of boundaries, real or implied.

She began her shift with practiced motions, moving through the restaurants with a cart of supplies, nodding to the waitstaff preparing for the evening. Typically, there were more customers on Tuesdays than on Mondays, wealthy locals who preferred to avoid the lingering

weekend tourists. Angela quickly finished with the public areas before any diners arrived, saving the curtain for last.

Wheeling her cart to the threshold between Venezia Rosso's dining area and the back rooms, Angela felt a flutter of anticipation in her stomach. She pulled on her latex gloves with an echoing snap. The hydrogen peroxide bottle was cool against her palm as she removed it from her bag and crouched down, her eyes searching for the splotch that had plagued her dreams. The velvet shimmered under the restaurant's artistic lighting, the deep crimson folds cascading to the antique floorboards. Her gloved fingers probed the area where the stain had been, but she found nothing but unsullied fabric.

Angela blinked. She had to have misremembered the location. She examined the entire lower edge of the curtain, centimeter by centimeter. Nothing. The stain that had definitely, undeniably been there...had vanished.

She sat back on her heels, the bottle of hydrogen peroxide dangling from her fingers. Had she imagined it? No, the blood was real. She'd touched it, smelled it, seen it. But now it was gone, as if the curtain was professionally cleaned overnight as if by magic.

Angela found Federico in the Venezia Rosso kitchen, instructing a young sous chef on the proper technique for breaking down a rack of lamb. His hands moved with surgical precision, as if the knife was an extension of his fingers. He glanced up as she approached, and a flicker of something—annoyance, or perhaps it was concern—crossed his features before his professional mask returned.

“Chef, may I speak with you privately?” Angela said lowly, conscious of the other staff nearby.

Federico nodded to the sous chef to continue, then wiped his hands on a towel and stepped away.

“Yes?”

“The stain on the curtain—it's gone.” She clutched the hydrogen peroxide bottle like a weapon.

“Stain?” His eyebrows lifted slightly.

“The one I showed you yesterday. Someone's cleaned it.”

Federico shrugged his broad shoulders. “I ordered a waiter to take care of it”

His tone was light, dismissive, but his eyes held a calculating look.

Federico smiled, but the expression never reached his eyes. “I’ve been preoccupied with the new menu. Perhaps you misunderstood.”

The deliberate attempt to gaslight her sent a shiver down Angela’s spine. She knew what she’d seen, but now he was rewriting reality, and with the kind of ease that suggested he had practice.

“Of course. My mistake.”

She retreated with the unopened bottle of hydrogen peroxide—a useless weapon against this new, invisible threat—and was halfway to the freight elevator before she realized her hands were shaking.

Angela ducked into the staff bathroom, locked the door, and pushed her knuckles against the sink’s cool porcelain. The air reeked of citrus cleaning spray and the sharp, ammoniacal ghosts of a thousand previous shifts. She stared at her reflection in the silver glass; her hair was raked back in a tight ponytail and sweat on her brow despite the autumn chill. The familiar image steadied her somewhat, but there was a sour taste at the back of her throat. Maybe it was embarrassment that she’d allowed herself, even for a moment, to think the truth would matter here.

“This is how it goes,” she whispered so faintly that her voice blurred into the ventilation hum. “You see, you report, you’re erased. Factory reset.”

But beneath that, there was anger. It surprised her. Her mother would have said it was the family curse, this stubborn, looping resentment toward the unfair. She’d managed to keep her head down for years, cashing her paychecks, sending what she could home. Now, it had slipped its leash.

Throughout the rest of the day, Angela moved mechanically through her tasks—wiping counters, stacking plates—while her mind drifted across the Mediterranean. The scent of garlic in the pan became her mother’s bacalhau à bras steaming on their chipped table. When

the chef barked an order, she heard her father's voice cutting through their tiny kitchen.

“*Escola de Polícia? Com que dinheiro?*” His calloused finger would jab the air between them, and his mustache would twitch with each syllable. “The daughter of a fisherman does not wear a badge. Clean your blouse for the shop tomorrow, girl! You think you're too good for honest work? Dreams don't fill stomachs!”

But Angela continued daydreaming even though she despised herself for it, recalling the fishermen's festival on Praça dos Pescadores at the beginning of each September. It was at that festival that she first swore to herself she would escape, even as she danced and laughed and pretended to love the life that was suffocating her. Still, she wondered which recollection would serve her better now: her father's denial or her mother's whispered warning to trust her instincts.

Angela's usual methodical cleaning became rushed, her movements less precise. She knocked over a bottle of glass cleaner, the liquid pooling on the marble countertop. A wine glass slipped from her fingers as she polished it; the stem snapped against the edge of the sink.

By seven o'clock, dinner service was in full swing and Angela had finished enough of her duties to justify leaving early. She stored her supplies, changed out of her uniform, and slipped out the service entrance into the chilly evening.

The narrow *callé*—as they called the street passages in Venice—outside the restaurant glowed with the peculiar amber light of Venice at night. It was a mixture of ancient streetlamps and those spilling from apartment windows overhead. Angela pulled her coat tighter around her body and began walking to her apartment in the Castello district, beyond the touristy heart of the city.

Driven by an inner vibration, Angela stopped and turned to look back at the restaurant; the building proudly stood by the Rio de San Lorenzo in a deceptive embrace. Built in the sixteenth century, the red, dignified *façade* held deep memories. The walls spoke of a scandalous past. The building as a whole had a watchful air as a grand conspiracy of marble arches and balconies that captured the secrets escaping the

lips of passersby. Worn by salt and commerce, the entrance was wide and welcoming in a city that often kept its doors tightly shut for protection. Its shape echoed the bones of Venice with casual abundance; the structure rebelliously clung to its place in the insensitive urban landscape, but there was unease in its balance. The fish-scale tiles bore the weight of time and had defied restoration attempts. They once poured green paint in the sleeping canal and turned the water green with lichen that traced the slow pain of decay.

Three distinct hearts beat within this exiled body; homely elegance was their only unifying creed. They pulsed against the night and wrapped the calm waters in a pale light. Venezia Verde, luminous with green tendrils lapping at its modern windows like fingers that invited a distracted lover. Venezia Rosso, warm and sinful, was a rich palette of crimson curtains and unbridled ambition. At the center of this enigma stood Il Faro Bianco, its entrance dominating the largest atrium and its glass surfaces reflecting soft colors with the ease of an expert deception. Terraces and staircases crept up like the bones of a giant skeleton, separate yet whole. They reached toward one another with the spidery logic of scaffolding, seemingly independently suspended and infinitely complex. Still, they provided order in chaos, meticulously connecting the red, green, and white.

Angela interrupted her own daydream and pivoted on her heel. Her route took her through the Sotoportego dei Preti, a covered passageway where her footsteps echoed among stones that centuries of passing feet had worn smooth. Venice transformed after dark, shedding its carnival mask of tourist-friendly charm to reveal something older, more mysterious. Water slapped against foundations that had been slowly sinking for ages. Rats scurried along the edges of canals. Conversations in the Venetian dialect—which was harsher than the Italian that was taught in schools—floated to her ears from windows above her. The smell of stagnant water occasionally disturbed the peace as Angela crossed bridges where lovers exchanged promises and navigated passages that had shielded assassins with poisoned daggers centuries

ago. The city had absorbed these stories into its stones, its waters, its very air. Now it would absorb hers as well, whatever it might be.

A sound behind her—maybe footsteps—made her quicken her pace. She glanced back to see an empty cobblestone street stretching into darkness. Just her imagination, she told herself, although her heart disagreed. She turned down a wider street where a few tourists still wandered, feeling safer in their oblivious presence.

She hadn't always been this fretful. When she first arrived in Venice three years ago, the city had seemed magical, romantic—like a perfect setting for the love story she was certain would unfold when she followed Marco from Albufeira, leaving behind her parents and a stable job but certain that the sacrifice would be worth it. She never imagined finding herself alone, cleaning blood off of restaurant curtains and jumping at shadows.

The red heart of stone on the wall brought her back to the Venetian legend of the water spirit Melusina, who followed her lover Orio through impossible obstacles only to be betrayed. Angela heard that story during her first month in Venice, finding in it an uncomfortable parallel to her own journey. Marco had promised her one life and delivered another before disappearing altogether, leaving her with rent due and a tenuous grasp on Italian residency requirements.

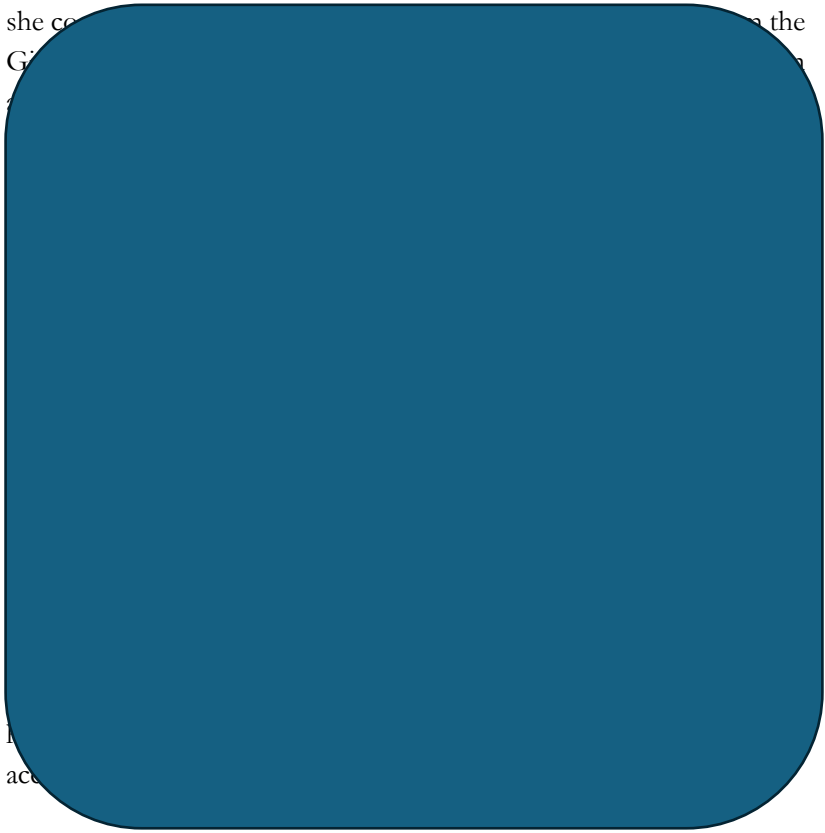
Now she followed another uncertain path; her instincts warned her away from Il Tricolore di Venezia even as financial necessity kept her there. Between the forbidden areas, the mysterious stain, and Federico's veiled threats, something was wrong. But without another job lined up, she had few options.

Angela crossed the last bridge before reaching her apartment building, the ancient steps of which were worn into shallow valleys by generations before her. She paused at the top of them, looking back across the dark canal. Venice was spread out around her, a labyrinth of secrets both ancient and new. Somewhere in that maze, answers awaited—if she dared to seek them out.

2. The Stucky Legacy

After working long hours at the restaurants, Angela often stayed home, curling up on her couch under a reading light with a hot cup of tea. Detective novels and crime stories brought her relief. That evening, she'd stumbled upon an interesting historical blog post about a crime committed in Venice more than a hundred years ago intertwined with the true story of the Stucky family.

The name of the victim was Giovanni Stucky. The surname immediately set her senses on alert. Knowing his descendant personally made it easy for her to vividly imagine the scene. Her tea grew cold as she considered the possibility that the crime she was reading about was the same as the one that had happened to her family.



1
acc

In her mind's eye, the Venice train station buzzed with early evening travelers. Pigeons were scattered across the steps as passengers streamed in and out. Their conversations creating a blanket of noise that Bruniera would have found soothing. More and more absorbed by the story, Angela could almost see him positioned behind a marble column near the entrance, waiting. The razor's handle was slick with sweat from his palm. At sixty-seven, Giovanni Stucky still cut an impressive figure, and his height made him easy to spot as he climbed the steps to the station, intent on catching the evening train to his villa on the mainland. The years had silvered his blond hair, but his commanding presence remained. Behind him, his son, Giancarlo, navigated the same steps, but was engaged in conversation with an associate.

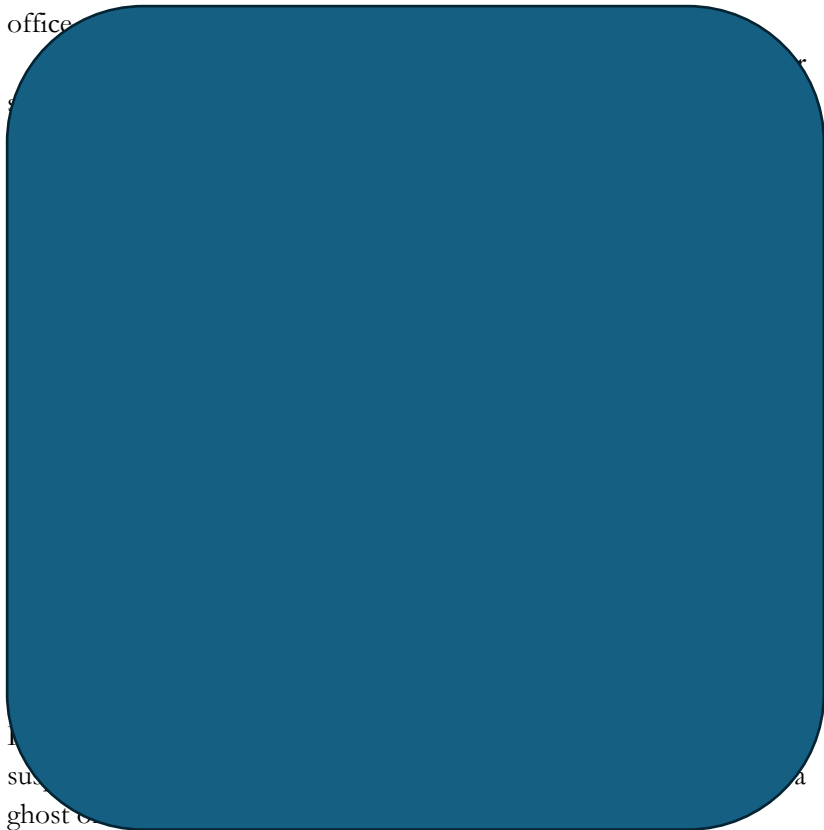
None of them noticed the unremarkable man emerge from the shadow of the column. The moment was terrible in its simplicity. With three quick strides, his razor already drawn, there was no hesitation, no warning cry from Bruniera—just the swift movement of blade against

He murdered my family, and I murdered him.”

Giovanni Stucky, an industrial visionary and Venice's wealthiest citizen, died on the train station steps. His blood mingled with the footprints of travelers rushing to catch their connections. The empire he had built suddenly faced a future without its architect. As twilight descended over Venice, the mill's electric lights came on, illuminating its imposing silhouette against the darkening sky. It was unaware that its creator would never return.



Angela was so fascinated by the description of the Stucky family history that she couldn't help imagining herself in that time and place, witnessing the events unfolding from a corner of the room in the mill's office.



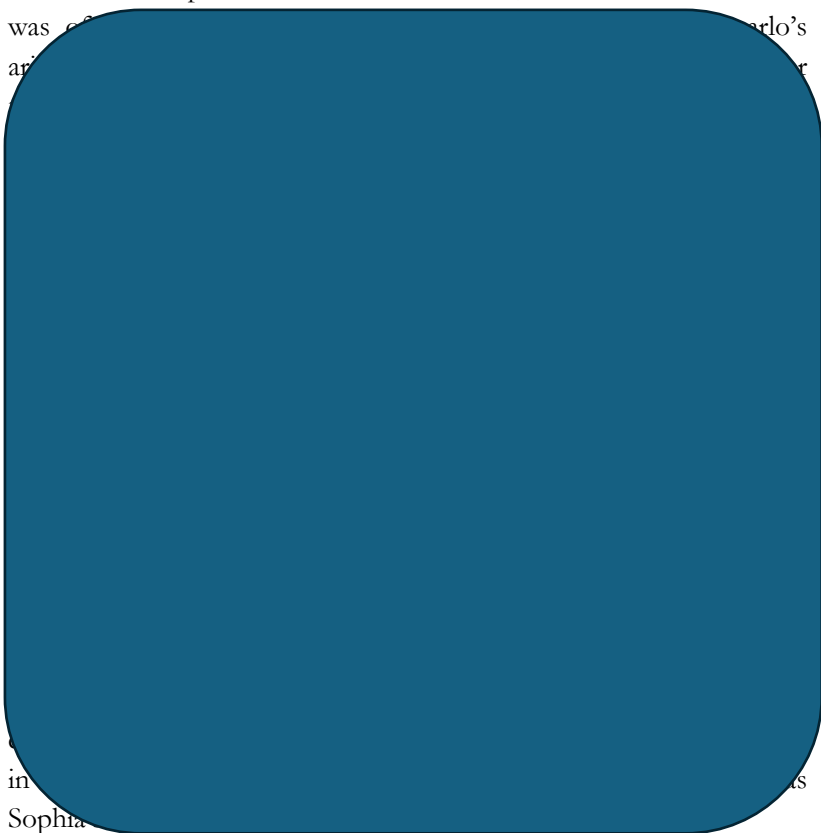
I

su

ghost o

a

The blog became more detailed, describing the particularities and personal history of the family: a soft knock on the door interrupted Giancarlo's grim assessment. It opened without his response, and only one person dared to be so familiar. Sophia entered the dusty office like a breath of springtime, her movements quiet yet full of vitality. Her dark curls were pinned beneath a modest hat, and she wore a coat that was of Giancarlo's and an



in Sophia

“What arrangements?” she asked, not yet reaching for the envelope.

“Financial ones.” He pressed it into her hands. “I've transferred ownership of certain properties into a trust. They're small buildings and unimportant parcels—things the creditors haven't noticed and that the fascists won't bother with. The documentation is all there, along with instructions.”

“*Amore*, what's happening?” she asked, alarm sharpening her voice.

His smile was fragile, built from the remains of his formerly boundless optimism. “We lost the mill. Tomorrow or the next day, they’ll officially take it. Mussolini’s man, Cini, has arranged everything.”

“But your family name—”

“Is worthless now,” he interjected bitterly. “This is all I can give our daughter. Keep it hidden until she’s of age.”

Sophia clutched the envelope, now understanding that its weight had nothing to do with what was inside. “She has your mind, you know. She sees patterns in things that others often miss.”

Pride flickered across his face. “Better that than my business sense.”

The tender moment was fractured by the sound of automobile engines and shouted orders in the courtyard below. Giancarlo rose and moved to the window. Sophia stepped aside quickly out of a habit formed from years of discretion. Six black cars had entered the compound and disgorged men in black shirts.

“You must go,” he said, “through the back stairs—quickly.”

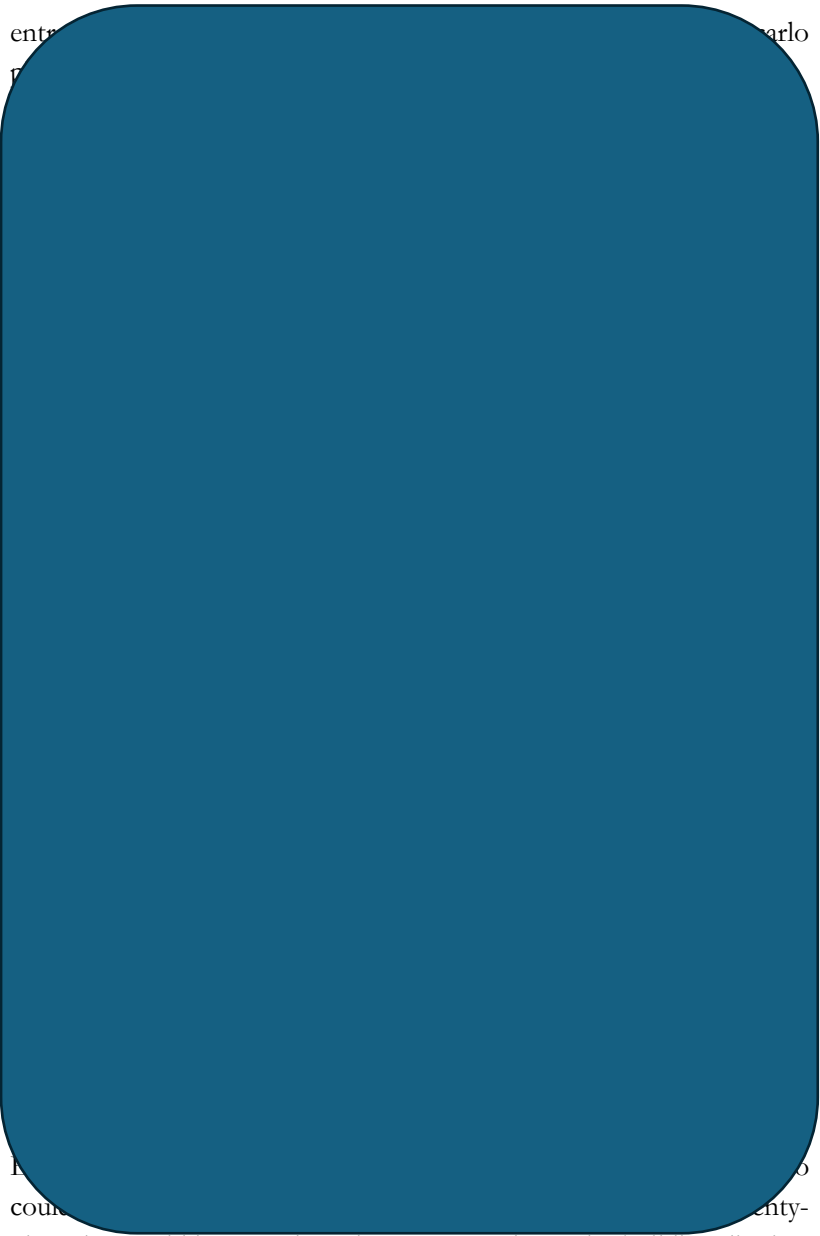
She hesitated, the envelope pressed to her chest. “And you?”

“I’ll receive them as a Stucky should.” He straightened his posture, trying to channel his father’s commanding presence. “With dignity, if nothing else.”



entr

carlo



coun

enty-

nine, she would have navigated postwar Venice and rebuilding districts like a cartographer mapping valuable territories. She might have worn her dark hair pulled back severely, emphasizing cheekbones that echoed

3. The Price of Ambition

The operating room gleamed under brutal fluorescent lights, rendering even blood a strange shade of red. Alessandro Stucky stood over the unconscious patient, his surgical mask concealing an expression of focused intensity. At forty-seven, he had already developed a solid reputation among the hospital staff and in town: brilliant but difficult, innovative to the point of recklessness.

His hands moved with balletic precision as he navigated the complex vascular structures surrounding the kidney to implement a transplant technique that existed in his research, but not in approved medical literature. The department head had explicitly rejected his proposal for this procedure two weeks earlier, but Alessandro had reclassified the operation in the hospital records through a creative interpretation of surgical categories to allow him to attempt this technique without obtaining formal approval.

“Suction,” he instructed a nurse with the quiet authority that had become his professional signature.

The staff responded with practiced efficiency before he’d finished speaking, having anticipated his needs before he voiced them. That was one benefit of his exacting standards and consistent routines. The patient, a sixty-year-old man with end-stage renal disease, had exhausted all conventional treatment options. Alessandro had handpicked him: terminal prognosis, minimal family connections, and a signed consent form for “experimental surgical intervention” that the man had likely not fully understood through his morphine haze. He was the perfect candidate for proving the validity of Alessandro’s approach to vascular reconnection during a transplant.

“I’m applying the modified Carrel patch technique,” Alessandro said for the benefit of two residents observing from the perimeter of the sterile field. “Note how this preserves collateral circulation while allowing for a more precise anastomosis.”

His fingers worked with hypnotic confidence, placing each stitch with microscopic precision. The technique, if successful, would advance kidney transplantation and secure Alessandro's reputation as an innovator rather than merely a skilled technician. More importantly, it would validate his conviction that medical progress required calculated risks, something his more conservative colleagues failed to embrace.

"Blood pressure dropping to ninety over sixty," announced the anesthesiologist, Dr. Vittorio Calabrese. His southern Italian accent became more pronounced with his elevated concern. "Heart rate increasing to compensate."

Alessandro didn't look up. "That's within the expected parameters for this stage."

"*Questo non è normale,*" Calabrese muttered, adjusting something on his equipment. Louder, he added, "The patient's oxygenation is also decreasing. Dr. Stucky, this is *not* expected."

"It will stabilize once I complete this anastomosis."

The back-and-forth continued as Alessandro proceeded through the critical phase of the operation. Calabrese's warnings became increasingly urgent, while Alessandro's responses grew more and more dismissive. The nurses exchanged glances, silent communications honed through years of witnessing similar conflicts between surgeons and anesthesiologists.

"BP now seventy-five over forty," Calabrese reported, eyes widened goggling above the rim of his face mask. "Pulse one-twenty and thready. We're seeing arrhythmias. We need to address these issues immediately."

Alessandro's hands remained steady, but a muscle in his jaw twitched beneath his mask. "Five more minutes to complete this connection: the patient can tolerate temporary hypoperfusion."

"The kidney, perhaps, but the heart is showing signs of ischemia!" Calabrese argued. "The ECG changes are significant."

For the first time, Alessandro glanced up at the monitors. The patient's vital signs created jagged patterns of distress across the

screens, but he had invested too much in this to retreat now. Success was just moments away; he could feel it with the certainty that had guided his entire career.

“Increase the dopamine drip,” he ordered, “and prepare to administer calcium chloride when I give the word.”

“This is beyond pharmacological intervention,” Calabrese insisted. “We need to clamp and close before—”

“I said five minutes.”

The steel in Alessandro’s voice silenced further objections even though Calabrese continued adjusting his equipment with increasingly frantic movements. The residents had stopped taking notes, their attention fixed on the escalating drama between the two physicians rather than the surgery itself. One leaned toward the other, whispering something that made her colleague shift uncomfortably. Alessandro blocked them all out, narrowing his world to the surgical field before him. Three more sutures would complete the connection. Muscle memory took over when conscious thought faltered. This would work; it had to work. His calculations were flawless.

“V-tach!” Calabrese shouted. “He’s going into ventricular tachycardia!”

The cardiac monitor wailed as the patient’s heart rate soared to a lethal rhythm. Alessandro’s hands froze momentarily before making the final suture.

“Defibrillator,” he commanded without looking up.

“We need to close now,” Calabrese said even as he prepared the emergency medications. “The procedure is triggering cardiac instability.”

“Almost complete,” Alessandro muttered, more to himself than to anyone else. “Just one more—”

The cardiac monitor issued a continuous tone that filled the room like an accusation. The flat line on the screen rendered all arguments moot.

“Asystole,” Calabrese announced unnecessarily. “Starting resuscitation protocol.”

For several frantic minutes, the operating team facilitated desperate revival attempts. Alessandro stepped back, allowing others to perform chest compressions while Calabrese administered epinephrine, among other resuscitative medications. His hands were numb, but he felt a warmth in his chest, an uncomfortable heat that he recognized as guilt—or perhaps just the adrenaline of crisis management.

After twenty minutes of futile efforts, Alessandro finally spoke the words that transformed the room's frantic energy to defeated stillness.

"Time of death: 15:42."

Instruments clattered as nurses began cleaning up, their voices hushed with suppressed emotion. The residents backed toward the door, eager to escape the atmosphere of failure that permeated the room.

Alessandro remained at the table, staring down at his incomplete work. He'd been so close to success, but now all his efforts were rendered meaningless by the patient's death. He'd already begun recalculating, however, processing new potential narratives and explanations. By the time he stepped away from the table, his expression had regained its usual professional composure.

"Dr. Calabrese," he said in a deliberately neutral tone. "We should discuss the anesthetic complications before filing our reports."

Calabrese's dark eyes flashed above his surgical mask. "The patient died because you refused to abort an unauthorized procedure despite clear warnings that it was not going as planned."

"The patient was terminal," Alessandro countered smoothly. "And the record will show he experienced cardiovascular collapse under anesthesia while undergoing an attempted salvaging procedure."

"That is not what happened," Calabrese hissed, stepping closer. "And you know it."

Alessandro removed his surgical gloves with care before dropping them into the biohazard container. "What I know is that anesthetic management was clearly inadequate for a patient in his condition. Perhaps the methods common in southern hospitals aren't suitable for more complex cases here in the north."

The regional reference—chosen to exploit Italy’s persistent north-south tensions—landed precisely as intended. Calabrese’s face flushed visibly around his mask, but before he could respond, Alessandro turned to the door.

“I’ll expect your notes for the M&M (Morbidity and Mortality conference),” he said over his shoulder. “We need to determine exactly how this unfortunate outcome occurred.”

As Alessandro left, his mind was already assembling the narrative that would protect his career and his reputation. The hospital administration trusted him; the Stucky name still carried weight, and his surgical success rate had been impeccable until today. One death—regrettable but inevitable with terminal patients—would not derail his ascent to become once head of the surgical department. By the time he reached the doctor’s lounge, Alessandro had convinced himself that the failed procedure had provided valuable data that would ultimately benefit future patients. Progress required sacrifice: a truth lesser physicians like Calabrese would never understand.



Angela Vaz de Almeida Martins had few indulgences left from her former life in Portugal, but the gym—Palestra Salute, wedged beside the garish yellow façade of Ponte Donà—was the last she refused to relinquish. Monday and Thursday evenings became rituals of endurance, etching stubborn order onto the chaos of her days. She arrived at the same hour, always with enough time to stretch before the after-work crowd invaded, and spent her minutes on treadmills, kettlebell routines, or the battered mats in the back room, depending on her mood.

It was during one of these sessions that Angela noticed the woman with sharp, close-cropped black hair and a perpetual air of concentration. The first thing she observed was the woman's sweater she would wear occasionally: black, with POLIZIA emblazoned across the shoulders in white capitals. The second was her discipline; the

woman never hesitated, never strolled or chatted, never wasted a second between sets. On heavy bag nights, the force of her kicks and punches almost drowned out the gym's anemic sound system. Angela recognized the temperament instantly: someone who believed she owed a debt to the world and was paying it off in increments of sweat.

For several weeks, their routines overlapped. There was no overt interaction—just the faintest flicker of mutual acknowledgement in the mirrors or a nod of the head as they passed in the narrow locker corridor, each wrapped in a loose cocoon of self-sufficiency. Still, subtlety accumulated, as it does between people with similar wounds. They began to nod. Then to smile. Then, one rainy Thursday, the policewoman voiced what had grown inevitable.

"You're very consistent," she said, toweling sweat from her brow. "I see you every week at exactly this time."

Angela hesitated, then replied: "I am a creature of habit. Order helps. Otherwise, nothing gets done."

A shared smile—awkward, but genuine. That night, as they both cooled down and stretched on neighboring mats, the woman extended a callused hand.

"Michela Saponaro," she said. "Pleased to meet you."

"Angela Vaz de Almeida. But Angela is fine," she responded, her Portuguese accent rounding the vowels as she reached out.

After that, their brief exchanges each session became micro-conversations, always practical, always truncated by the rush of daily life. They discussed gym equipment mishaps, the futility of protein powders, the latest idiocy from the city government. Eventually, with trust built through repetition, Angela found herself revealing small pieces of her story: the years in the shop of her family in Albufeira, the husband who had left her after promising a new life, the slow descent into debt that had driven her to cleaning at the restaurant in Venice. She mentioned, almost as an afterthought, her teenage dream of joining the police—a dream she had abandoned because of the obstinacy of her father, which lingered as a persistent ache.

Michela listened with the patience of someone who had heard many confessions before, offering no judgment. One evening, as they walked out together into the mildewed vapor of a Venetian night, she turned to Angela and said, "You know, the force isn't what you think it is. Most of it is paperwork and drinking bad coffee, and even the exciting parts are mostly bureaucracy with adrenaline. But you have the right eye for it."

Angela smiled, but said nothing. She was not sure what the right eyes for police work meant, but she took it as a compliment; it was the first time in years that someone had implied she was built for something more.

Their friendship, such as it was, deepened in the language of small gestures. On particularly hard days, Angela would bring Michela leftovers from the restaurant, or Michela would lend her a phone charger when the cleaning woman's died mid-shift.

Only once did the women visit a trattoria after a shared workout session; neither wanted to risk contaminating the fragile equilibrium they had found. Still, over time, Angela felt a flicker of hope, a sense that she could become more than the sum of her regrets.

And it was only later, much later, that Angela would realize how much she had revealed to the policewoman, and how much more Michela had concealed in return.



Close to the gym, on Fondamente Nuove, La Trattoria del Popolo, a restaurant near the hospital, cultivated a particular breed of dimness—not the romantic, low lighting of trattorias that catered to couples, but the merciful shadows concealing medical professionals drinking away cases gone wrong. Alessandro Stucky occupied a corner booth, his usual precision abandoned in favor of sloppily sloshing expensive scotch dangerously close to the glass's rim while staring at his nearly empty plate of vitello tonnato. His tie hung loosely around his neck like a patient's forgotten surgical drain, and three empty glasses formed a

constellation of poor decisions on the table before him. The television mounted above the bar had captured his attention entirely; a news anchor was solemnly delivering updates on the investigation into “alleged negligence by anesthesiology staff” at the prestigious hospital where, just four weeks prior, Alessandro’s experimental procedure had resulted in a patient’s death.

“—Dr. Vittorio Calabrese has been placed on administrative leave pending investigation,” the anchor announced with what appeared to be practiced gravity. “Hospital authorities cite inconsistencies in anesthesia documentation for multiple procedures—”

Alessandro’s lips curved into a grim smile. The hospital administration had accepted his version of events with minimal questioning, their relief almost palpable when he suggested reviewing Calabrese’s previous cases. The southern Italian physician had few allies in the northern medical establishment, making him the perfect scapegoat for this event.

“Celebrating or drowning sorrows?”

The voice slid into Alessandro’s consciousness as smoothly as the scotch he’d been consuming had gone down his throat. Federico Dal Sotto stood beside his booth, one eyebrow raised in inquiry. He had exchanged his chef’s whites for a charcoal suit that suggested money and taste, and his casual posture contrasted with Alessandro’s untidiness.

“Neither. Both.” Alessandro gestured vaguely at the empty seat across from him. “Professional contemplation.”

Federico signaled for a drink before sliding into the booth. They had met six months earlier when Alessandro first visited Federico’s restaurant outside Venice during a pilgrimage undertaken at his mother’s suggestion after she acquired property adjacent to the establishment. Several dinners had followed, as well as conversations that stretched late into the night after other patrons had departed. Alessandro had found in Federico a refreshing lack of medical deference; the chef treated surgery as simply another skilled craft that was no more mystical than his own culinary artistry.

“I saw the news.” Federico nodded toward the television. “Your hospital seems to have quite a scandal on its hands.”

“Not my scandal.” Alessandro attempted to straighten his tie, but abandoned the effort halfway through. “I’m merely adjacent to it.”

“Of course.” Federico accepted his drink from the server with a nod of thanks, then returned his attention to Alessandro. “Although, you seem rather invested in the coverage for someone who is merely adjacent.”

Alessandro studied the amber liquid in his glass, searching for clarity he knew he wouldn’t find. The Lagavulin had loosened something in him—not just his tie and his posture, but the careful barriers he maintained between his professional persona and his private thoughts.

“Do you ever wonder,” he began, his words more pronounced than his movements might have suggested they’d be, “if progress requires sacrifice?”

Federico’s expression remained neutral even though something behind his eyes sharpened. “Every chef knows some ingredients must be transformed, even destroyed, to create something superior.”

“Exactly.” Alessandro leaned on his elbows, finding validation in the analogy. “Medical advancement has always required...calculated risks.”

“The patient?” Federico asked lowly despite the empty tables around them.

Alessandro hesitated briefly before nodding. “Terminal case: renal failure, cardiovascular complications. Traditional approaches had already failed him.”

“So you tried something nontraditional,” Federico supplied, neither judgment nor surprise coloring his tone.

“A modified vascular technique.” Alessandro’s hands moved as if they could trace surgical pathways in the air. “It should have worked. The theory was sound.”

“But?”

“Complications arose. The anesthesiologist panicked and started demanding we abort,” he scoffed.

“When you’re breaking new ground, you can’t surrender at the first sign of trouble.” Federico sipped his drink, his eyes never leaving Alessandro’s face. “And when it ended badly?”

“The technique would have worked,” Alessandro insisted in a near-whisper. “But the timing was wrong, and someone had to take responsibility.” He glanced again at the television, which was now showing footage of the hospital’s exterior. “Not everyone understands the necessity of innovation.”

“So, the southern doctor becomes the sacrifice for progress,” Federico observed, his tone suggesting neither approval nor condemnation, but understanding.

Alessandro laughed humorlessly. “My family name still carries weight in certain circles. His doesn’t. It was simple professional physics.”

Federico studied him with an intensity that should have made him uncomfortable, but somehow wasn’t. “You carry that name like armor.”

“Sometimes armor, sometimes a burden.” Alessandro drained his glass. “The Stucky legacy demands excellence, not mediocrity. My grandfather revolutionized milling technology against all odds. My mother rebuilt our fortune through sheer force of will. I can’t be the generation that merely...maintains.”

“You push boundaries,” Federico concluded.

“Take necessary risks.”

“And accept necessary casualties.”

The alcohol had stripped away Alessandro’s usual caution, but something about Federico’s receptive silence invited him to make another confession.

“The technique would have worked. I’ve reviewed it repeatedly,” he said. “With the right patient, the right conditions—”

“You’ll try again,” Federico finished for him.

Alessandro nodded somewhat unsteadily. “But with better preparation. And perhaps a more cooperative anesthesiology team.”

Federico leaned back, something like satisfaction flickering across his features before it disappeared behind professional interest. “We are not so different, you and I. In my kitchen, I seek perfection through methods others might question.”

“Cooking and surgery,” Alessandro mused. “Both require precision, timing, and, occasionally, improvisation.”

“And both require discretion regarding our more...innovative techniques.” Federico raised his glass. “To secrets between friends.”

Something in his tone should have triggered Alessandro’s defenses, but the scotch had dulled his usually keen perception of risk. He clinked his glass against Federico’s, the sound sharp and definitive in the otherwise quiet restaurant.

“To secrets,” he echoed.

As they drank, the news segment ended, segueing to a weather report predicting clear skies. Neither man noticed, focused as they were on the unspoken understanding that had formed between them, a connection based on a shared moral flexibility that would eventually bind them together far more tightly than Alessandro could possibly have imagined in his inebriated state.

Federico signaled for another round, his movements relaxed but his eyes calculating as they assessed Alessandro’s state. “Tell me more about this technique of yours. The medical details will escape me, but the philosophy behind the pursuit of perfection regardless of convention is one I understand completely.”

Alessandro leaned forward eagerly, unaware that each word would further entangle him. Under the muted light, their conversation continued, laying the foundation for a partnership that would transform both their lives in ways neither would have comprehended.



Federico Dal Sotto’s office reflected its owner’s nature; each object had been placed with deliberate intention rather than casual convenience. The desk, made of ancient wooden railway sleepers and

covered by glass, was positioned to ensure that Federico would always be backlit during meetings, which enabled him to read others' expressions while keeping his own partially in shadow. Behind him, shelves displayed his professional accolades and culinary awards not in chronological order, but with the most prestigious centered and at eye level. The room smelled faintly of star anise and aged paper, a combination that suggested both culinary expertise and meticulous recordkeeping.

Alessandro Stucky, now sober and viciously aware of his indiscretions the previous week, sat rigidly in the visitor's chair, watching Federico's manicured hands arrange a series of folders with the same care he might use to plate food.

"I appreciate you coming on such short notice," Federico said. His accent carried a peculiar quality Alessandro had never quite placed—something that hinted at multiple geographical influences, as if his voice belonged to several places and therefore none. "I imagine your schedule is quite demanding."

"Your message suggested urgency," Alessandro replied.

The text had arrived at dawn. Apparently, a matter of mutual interest required immediate discussion in his office at ten o'clock in the morning. The cryptic formality had set off alarm bells in Alessandro's head.

"Indeed. I've been doing some research into your interesting confession."

Alessandro maintained his neutral expression thanks to years of professional training, but his pulse accelerated noticeably. "I don't recall making any confessions. Last week was...convivial. Perhaps you misunderstood?"

Federico's smile was cold. "You're an exceptional surgeon, Alessandro. Your technique in the operating theater is reported to be, by all accounts, remarkable." He opened the top folder, turning it toward Alessandro. "Your attempt at covering your tracks, however, lacks finesse."

Alessandro's breath caught as he took in medical records that should have been accessible only to hospital personnel, the mortality review summary, and surgical logs bearing his signature. But more damning were the photographs clipped to the top corner of the pages: images from the pathology department clearly illustrating the experimental technique he had employed even though he later denied doing so.

"These are confidential medical records," Alessandro said tightly. "Obtaining them illegally—"

"Is considerably less troubling than falsifying them in the first place." Federico's tone remained conversational as he opened a second folder. "These are Dr. Calabrese's original notes, which are quite different from the versions that were submitted to the review board." He tapped a third folder. "And these are statements from two nurses who were present during the procedure. They haven't given these officially, but they could be persuaded to do so."

Alessandro's mind raced through the possibilities. "What do you want?"

"Direct." Federico nodded. "I've always appreciated that about you." He leaned back slightly, his posture relaxed despite the tension he had created. "I'm expanding my culinary enterprise to Venice—a dual-concept restaurant that I would name *Il Tricolore di Venezia*. Perhaps you remember me mentioning it?"

Alessandro recalled Federico discussing his ambitions for a Venetian establishment, but had paid little attention to the details at the time.

"Vaguely."

"It's a significant undertaking: renovating a historic palazzo, creating two distinct restaurants with a connecting bar, securing the necessary permits," Federico explained. "The location is exceptional, but the investment will be substantial."

The objective of the conversation suddenly became clear.

"You want money."

Federico's lips formed a thin smile. "I want a partnership. Your family has the resources, and I have the vision. Of course, your secret will remain ours."

Alessandro's jaw tightened. "You've miscalculated. I could simply deny everything, claim the documents are fabricated—"

"You could," Federico agreed. "And perhaps that would work. But consider the consequences. Your surgical privileges would still be suspended during the investigation, your name would appear in newspapers alongside words like 'negligence' and 'falsification'. The Stucky name would be under public scrutiny." He paused, allowing that to sink in. "Is that worth risking when the alternative is investing in a profitable business venture with your name on partnership documents rather than splashed across headlines?"

Alessandro studied the man across from him, seeing him clearly for the first time. Behind the charismatic exterior and cultured conversation lurked something predatory. The realization that he had willingly confided in such a person sent a chill through him that had nothing to do with the room's temperature.

"My family doesn't invest impulsively," he said finally, attempting to regain some control of the situation.

"Of course not." Federico reached into a drawer and withdrew yet another folder, this one thicker than the others. "Here's the business proposal, complete with financial projections, architectural drafts and sketches, and marketing strategy. Your financial advisors will find it thoroughly researched and exceptionally promising." He slid it across the desk. "I'm merely suggesting you recommend it with particular enthusiasm."

Alessandro didn't reach for the folder. "And if I refuse?"

Federico's expression didn't change, but something in his eyes hardened. "Then I would be forced to share my concerns about patient safety with the appropriate authorities. I'd have an ethical obligation; you understand."

The irony of Federico invoking ethics wasn't lost on Alessandro. He stared at the incriminating documents before him, understanding with

perfect clarity that this moment was a fundamental crossroads. Refusing meant professional destruction and scandal; agreeing meant entering a partnership with someone who had already proven himself to be dangerous.

“How much?” he asked finally.

“Your contribution would be approximately forty-five percent of the total renovation and launch costs.” Federico quoted the costs to be around six million Euros, a figure that made Alessandro wince internally. “You will be a majority stakeholder alongside me. It’s a genuine investment, not a payment.”

Alessandro slowly reached for the business proposal. “I’ll review this with my family’s financial team.”

“Excellent.” Federico’s satisfaction was palpable as he gathered the incriminating documents and returned them to a drawer he then locked with a small key. “I anticipate an enthusiastic response. The venture truly is promising; your family’s return on investment will be substantial.”

Alessandro rose from his chair, the business proposal heavy in his hand, but paused at the door. “How did you get the photographs?”

Federico’s smile was enigmatic. “Over the years, I’ve cultivated relationships in various institutions. Many guests come to the restaurant. I overhear many discussions, including some stories like yours. I take note of all of them. You never know when information might prove valuable.”

Alessandro nodded, understanding the implicit message that Federico’s network extended further than he could imagine, and that his means for gathering leverage were considerable.

“I’ll be in touch,” Alessandro said, the phrase sounding hollow in his own ears.

“I’m certain you will.” Federico remained seated, perfectly at ease. “Give my regards to your mother. I’ve heard she has quite the eye for property investments.”

The reference to Elisabetta—a reminder that Federico had researched not just Alessandro, but his family—was the final twist of

the knife, but Alessandro exited without further comment, the business proposal clutched in his hand like the diagnosis of a terminal disease. In the corridor, he paused to steady himself as the implications of what had just transpired washed over him. He had entered a respected surgeon and the Stucky heir; he was leaving as Federico Dal Sotto's newest acquisition. The transition had taken less than thirty minutes.

He mechanically straightened his tie and schooled his features before walking through the restaurant's main dining room, nodding politely to the staff preparing for lunch service. None of them would guess from his expression that he had just mortgaged his family's reputation and resources to protect himself from the consequences of his own arrogance.

Outside, Venice's familiar sounds and smells suddenly seemed foreign, as if he had stepped into a parallel version of the city where everything appeared the same, but operated according to unfamiliar rules.



The Stucky family's private office wore its history like an expensive cologne: subtle but unmistakable. Original Fortuny fabrics draped the windows, while a Venetian glass chandelier cast prismatic shadows across leather-bound volumes that had survived two world wars and the collapse of family fortunes. Alessandro stood before the small group of advisors, Federico's business proposal spread across the antique rosewood table that had once displayed architectural plans for the mill.

His mother occupied the chair at the head of the table, her silver-streaked hair carefully arranged. The family lawyer, Franco Denti, the family accountant, Riccardo Patruno, and the private bank director, Cristiano Calvi, flanked her. They all wore expressions of polite interest; none of them suspected that this meeting represented not an opportunity, but a surrender to blackmail disguised as an investment opportunity.

“The location is exceptional.” Alessandro indicated photographs of the palazzo on the Rio de San Lorenzo. He had rehearsed this presentation meticulously, ensuring his voice carried nothing but professional enthusiasm. “Federico Dal Sotto has already secured the property, but requires investment partners for the renovation and launch.”

The lawyer who managed the family’s more public investments leaned forward to examine the financial projections. “Two restaurants and a bar in one location? Ambitious.”

“Innovative,” Alessandro corrected smoothly. “Venezia Verde will offer sophisticated vegetarian cuisine, while Venezia Rosso will specialize in meat dishes. The central bar—Il Faro Bianco—will connect them, and will feature an unusual attraction.” He slid a conceptual drawing of black panthers in a glass enclosure forward. “Federico’s background includes extensive animal training, courtesy of the circus. The panthers will be a signature element.”

“Theatrical,” Elisabetta remarked in a neutral, but not disapproving way. “Certainly memorable for guests coming from all around the world.”

“And the numbers?” inquired the family accountant.

Alessandro indicated the relevant section of the proposal. “Projected return on investment within three years, with substantial profitability by year five. Venice’s fine dining market remains underserved relative to tourist volume.”

As the bank director began his methodical examination of the figures, Alessandro introduced another key element in his strategy.

“The renovation will be handled by Michele Bernasconi, an emerging talent in architectural circles.”

From his briefcase, he withdrew Bernasconi’s preliminary concepts for transforming the historic palazzo into a contemporary dining destination while respecting its heritage. The young architect had made his name with similar renovations balancing innovation with preservation, which aligned with the Stucky family’s history of modernity within a traditional context.

“Swiss-Italian, I believe?” Elisabetta inquired, studying the architectural plans with greater interest than she had shown for the financial projections.

Her heritage made her particularly attentive to fellow Swiss-Italians attempting to gain recognition in northern Italy.

“From Ticino,” Alessandro confirmed. “His approach incorporates modern elements without overwhelming existing structures. The waterfront enhancements are particularly impressive.”

The discussion shifted to a detailed analysis of the proposal. Alessandro answered their questions, presenting Federico’s vision as if it were a discovery he had made independently, a promising investment opportunity rather than the price of his professional survival.

“The returns will be substantial,” Calvi concluded after another thirty minutes. “And the prestige of associating with Venice’s premier dining establishment will be valuable. The Stucky name should be connected to innovative ventures, not just passive investments.”

The accountant nodded. “The numbers are ambitious, but defensible. Dal Sotto’s other restaurant has demonstrated consistent profitability and critical acclaim.”

Elisabetta asked, “And your impression of Dal Sotto, Alessandro? You’ve dined at his establishment several times.”

His mother’s penetrating gaze suggested she sensed something beneath the polished proposal—not the specific truth, perhaps, but certainly that her son’s enthusiasm carried an unusual sort of intensity.

“He’s...exceptional in his field,” Alessandro replied carefully. “Innovative, meticulous. His attention to detail rivals that of a surgeon.”

“And as a potential business partner?” she pressed.

Alessandro felt sweat gathering at his collar. “Determined, ambitious: not someone who takes no for an answer.”

Elisabetta studied him for a moment longer before nodding. “Very well. I believe we can proceed.” She turned to the lawyer and the accountant. “Draw up the necessary documents with the standard oversight provisions.”

“We should meet this architect,” the banker suggested. “Bernasconi could be a good fit for other properties if his work here proves satisfactory.”

“I’ll arrange it,” Alessandro agreed, gathering the materials with hands that remained steady only due to years of surgical discipline.

The meeting concluded with the technicalities of structuring the investment, establishing a timeline for fund transfers, and considering public relations. Each point drove the point deeper; the family enthusiastically embraced the very scheme that represented Alessandro’s moral compromise. Their unwitting complicity tightened the knot of guilt in his chest. As they filed out of the study, discussing dinner plans and other matters, Elisabetta paused beside her son.

“This seems important to you,” she observed, her voice pitched for his ears alone. “More so than typical business interests would warrant.”

Alessandro met her gaze; in it was the same analytical sharpness that had rebuilt the family fortune from scattered assets.

“The connection has strategic value,” he managed, which was as close to the truth as he dared approach.

She considered this for a moment before patting his arm lightly. “Your grandfather would approve of diversification into hospitality. The mill made flour; restaurants transform it. There’s symmetry there.”

With that cryptic observation, she followed the others, leaving Alessandro alone in the study. Silence settled in the room, broken only by the subtle tick of the antique Comtoise clock that once timed Giovanni Stucky’s meetings.

Alessandro moved to the sidebar and poured himself two fingers of the same scotch that had loosened his tongue with Federico; he appreciated the bitter irony. His eyes drifted to the portrait of Giovanni Stucky that dominated one wall. The patriarch had been captured in oils at the height of his success, standing before the mill with the confident posture of a man who had built something through vision and determination. His eyes seemed to follow Alessandro across the room, assessing and judging him for his compromise.

“What have I become?” he whispered to the empty room.

The portrait offered no answer, only the confidence of a man who had faced opposition through direct confrontation rather than underhanded maneuvers. Alessandro wondered briefly what Giovanni would have done in his position: expose Federico's attempt at blackmail and weather the consequences, or make the same Faustian bargain to protect the family name. His hands were numb from tension, but he felt an uncomfortable warmth in his chest that he recognized as guilt, spreading with each heartbeat. The scotch did nothing to diminish it.

This partnership with Federico represented more than a business venture or even a response to blackmail; it marked a fundamental shift in Alessandro's understanding of himself. The line between his public persona and his private reality had blurred beyond recognition.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the study door opening; the accountant had returned.

"I forgot my notes... Excellent presentation by the way," Riccardo commented. "And Dal Sotto seems like exactly the sort of cutting-edge talent we should associate with. I'm looking forward to meeting him."

Alessandro forced a smile. "He's certainly one of a kind."

After Riccardo departed, Alessandro drained his glass and slid the proposal into his briefcase. The group's enthusiastic support had sealed his fate; there would be no backing out of a partnership with Federico now.

As he switched off the study lights, Giovanni's portrait momentarily caught the final illumination. The patriarch's expression seemed to shift from confidence to sorrow in the flickering transition to darkness. Alessandro paused in the doorway, taking in a last glance of the room in which he had chosen and sealed his fate.

Alessandro closed the study door behind him with a soft click that echoed with finality. The future was before him as he walked away from the portrait of his ancestor, his path set and the consequences still unseen, but inevitable.

4. The Complete Plans

The temporary office behind the Venezia Rosso construction site included a repurposed shipping container that was glassed over in the front and accessorized with a battered espresso machine as well as blueprints nailed to the faux wood paneling. On foggy September mornings, the makeshift building vibrated faintly with the thuds of pile drivers and the metallic groans of scaffolding settling against ancient stone. Gray slush was ground to a pulp by wheelbarrows and boots, mirroring the murky lagoon sky, and at ten o'clock, the mist parted only for Federico Dal Sotto, whose shadow walked the plywood path.

Inside, Michele Bernasconi stood behind a drafting table cluttered with mock-ups of window frames and a dozen printouts marked up in red. Dressed in black merino, his collar buttoned all the way up to his chin, the architect looked up as Federico entered; his hand flickered to his wrist as if to confirm by touch that his Swiss watch had not, since his last check, skipped forward or backward even a second.

In a voice tuned for courtroom acoustics and cutting through site noise, he said, "You're right on time."

Federico placed a leather briefcase on the worktable, dusted off his gloved hands, and took in the room like a man who could assess risks in about five seconds or less. "You Swiss: precision is your gospel."

"In matters of structure," Michele replied. "As I hope will be evident in the bid."

Federico flipped open the briefcase and extracted two identical black folders, their matte surfaces absorbing the anemic light from above, and placed the first down before tapping its label: *Complete Plans*.

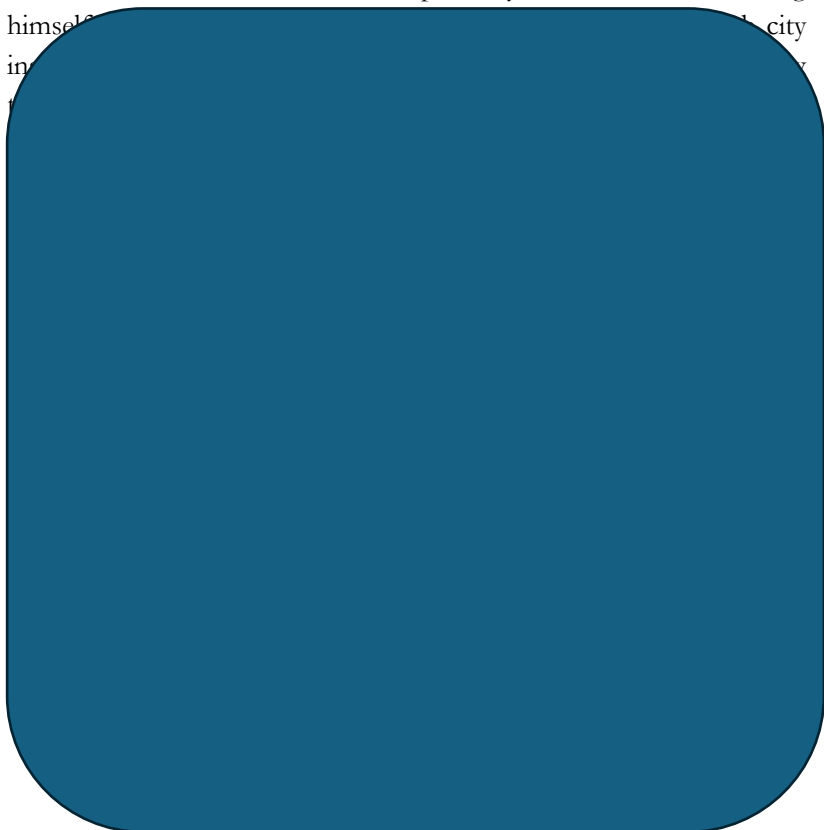
"You'll find every corridor, every cellar hatch, every canal access door exactly as you requested," Federico explained in a way that was not warm, but that lacked the barbed undertones that often made his staff uneasy.

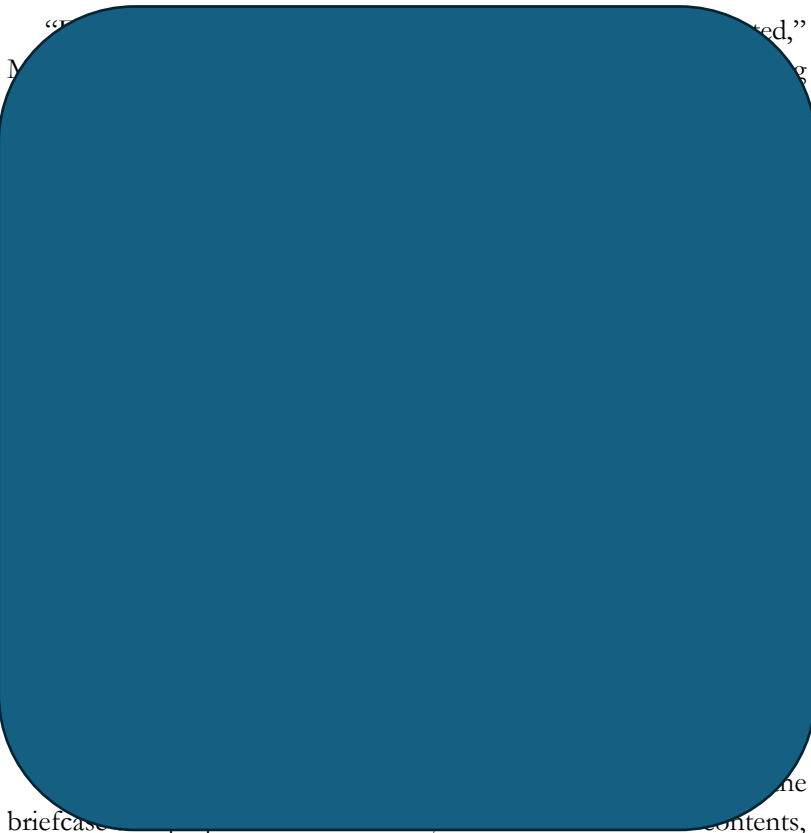
Michele slid the folder closer and flipped through the first dozen pages. The drawings were done by a dense, almost calligraphic hand, with arrows and brush strokes to indicate air movement, isometric projections of lifts and staircases, and service tunnels connecting underground rooms.

Federico reached into the briefcase again and produced a second folder which he placed next to the first. “Public plans for review by the city and anyone else with an official badge.”

Michele opened it, scanned its contents, and let out a breath through his nose. The difference was not in the craftsmanship, but in what was omitted; here, some passageways became solid walls. The central animal cage was the one constant between the two versions. There were no references to the omitted areas behind the private dining room, and no suggestion that the wine cellar had a water-level exit suitable for transferring crates—or bodies—by boat.

“Both sets are to be executed precisely,” Federico said, seating himself at the table. “The city in the city.”





briefcase. He pulled out the contents, count the bills quickly, and tuck the whole thing in an inner pocket of his coat.

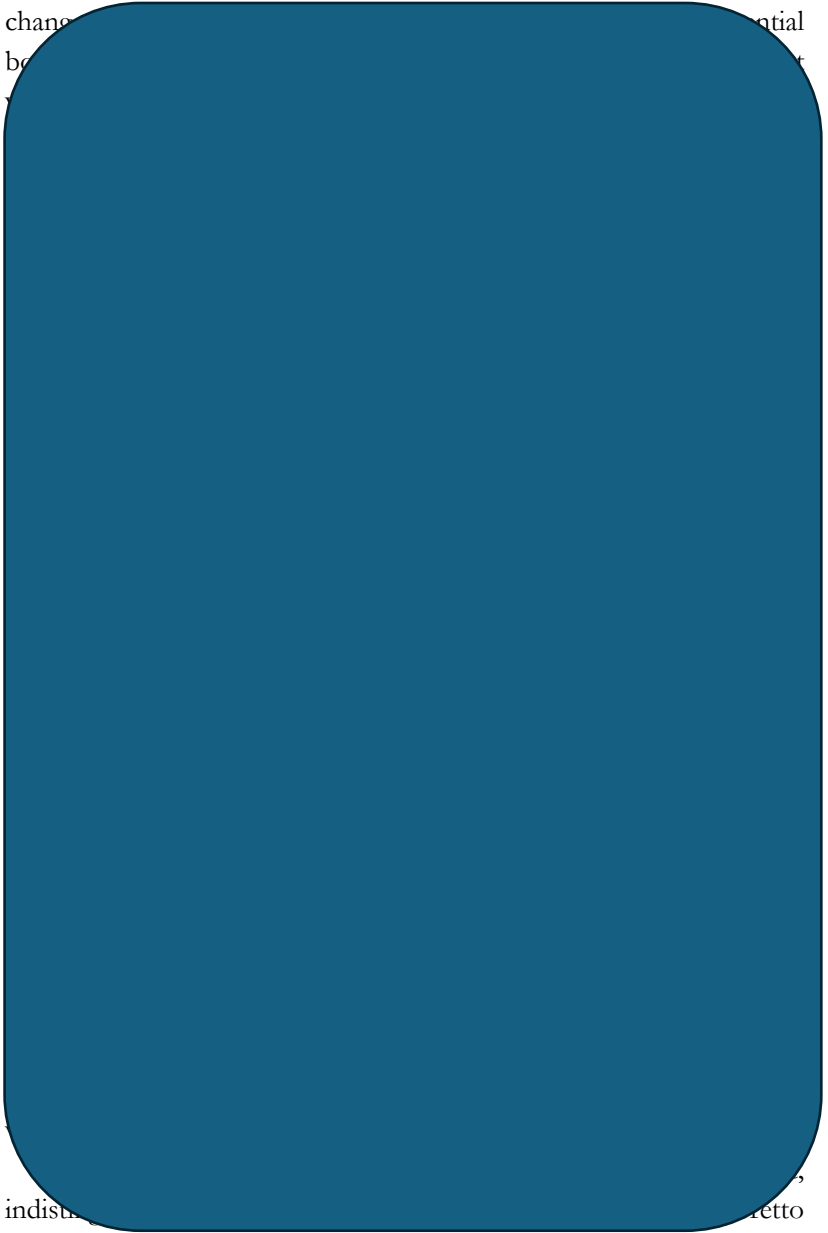
Federico paused at the door, one hand on the steel latch. “If you require additional incentive, let me know. Otherwise, I expect regular updates by encrypted email only.”

“Understood,” Michele agreed, already cross-referencing sheet numbers and scribbling in his notebook.

Federico disappeared into the fog as abruptly as he had arrived, his silhouette quickly reabsorbed by the partially built palazzo outside.

Michele finished his espresso, then retrieved a drafting pen and began annotating the complete plans in green, the color he reserved for elements that, if executed incorrectly, would bring the entire project down in a day. He worked with the frenetic calm of a man who

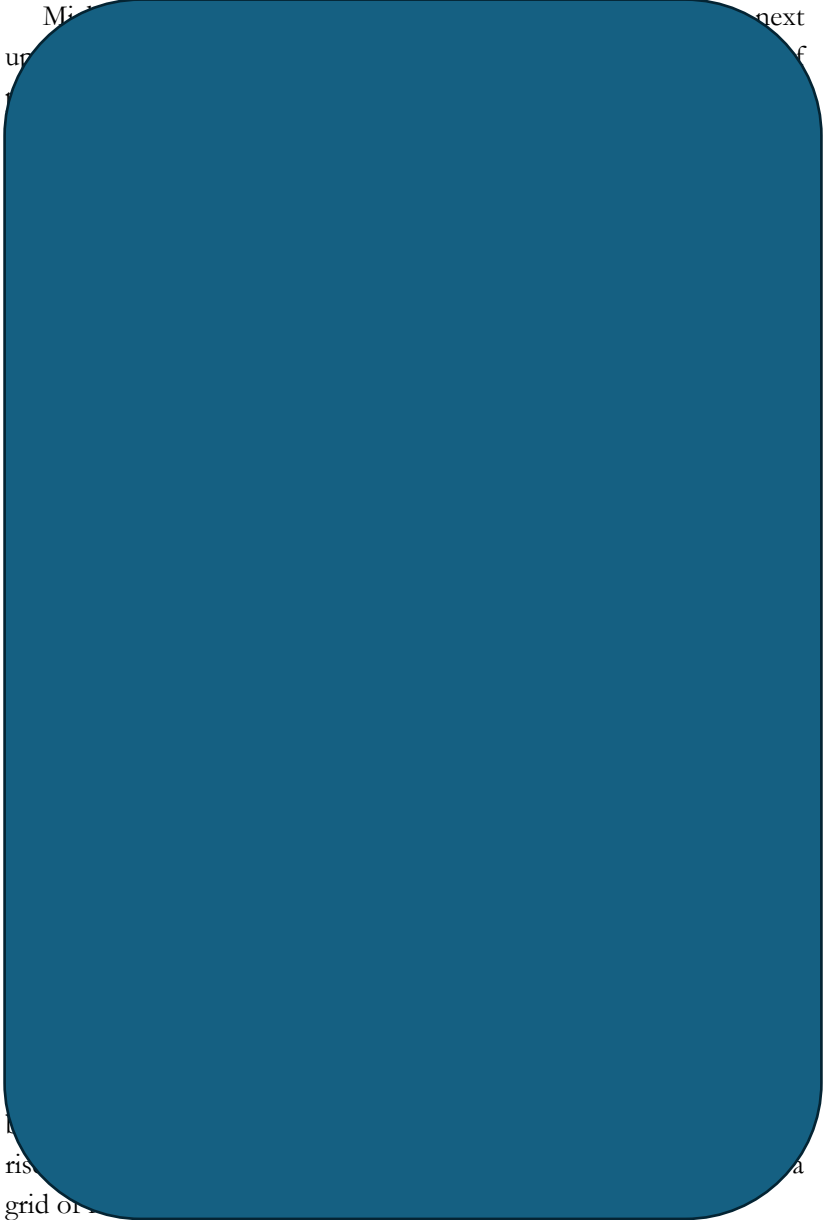
measured his every waking moment in deliverables and deadlines, stopping only to glance at his watch whenever the pile driver outside changed potential
be



indistinct...retto
at rush hour. But the folders in his hand and the calculations in his head

set him apart. This was a project unlike any other, one with potential consequences far beyond zoning disputes or cantonal courthouse fires.

Mid-19th century, the next
up
f



ris
grid of a

Michele arrived exactly at the appointed hour, according to his beloved Omega Speedmaster on his wrist, with a messenger bag slung across his shoulder and his phone illuminating the way. He moved with the brisk economy of someone who was already late for something: two strides on the gangway, a check of the companionway lock, a turn of the key, and a click as the bolt retracted. The interior lights stuttered on, bathing the cockpit in warm halogen.

The man in the black wetsuit counted to thirty, then pulled himself up and over the stern. His actions were silent and almost invisible; any dockside insomniac might have glimpsed only a shadow at the edge of the boat's frame.

Inside the cabin, Michele busied himself with the instrument panel before stripping off his jacket and folding it neatly on the starboard settee. The unseen passenger waited until the engine fired up, then ducked low and crossed the deck to the main hatch. He waited in the shadow until Michele came to the helm, then closed the gap between them with two long strides. He grabbed the collar of Michele's thermal pull-over, tugging it down over his head. Michele, who had

et...
sailboa... had

5. The Making of a Predator

The snow settled across Quebec City on a February morning in 1964 as Federico Dal Sotto entered the world. The hospital windows were frosted over while inside, his mother cradled her newborn son. His father, Stefano Dal Sotto, stood with perfect posture at the foot of the bed. Of northern Italian origin, he was the Italian ambassador in Canada. Federico's eyes, when they finally opened, revealed a peculiar alertness, as if he were already cataloging the details of the room, the faces, the borders of his new existence.

"He has your eyes," the nurse said to Stefano in French, although the child's eyes were neither his father's warm brown nor his mother's pale blue, but something in between: watchful and unreadable even then.

Years later, somebody would call them amber.

The Dal Sotto name carried a certain weight in diplomatic circles. Stefano's position with the Italian embassy ensured their home would always be temporary, their belongings always ready to be packed, their lives perpetually suspended between departure and arrival. Federico's mother, Elise, grew up in the rigid traditions of Quebec's Catholic upper class. She fell in love with the elegant, young Italian man she met at a party at the embassy, and they soon married. He was searching for a respectable woman to help bolster his future career; she wanted to escape her parents' strict control. His handsome aspect and the prospect of an adventurous life across the globe did the rest.

Federico learned to pack his life in suitcases before he learned to tie his shoes. By the age of six, he spoke three languages: his mother's native French-Canadian dialect, the Italian his father insisted on preserving, and the English required for international schools. Languages came to him as naturally as breathing, each new tongue a survival tool rather than an academic achievement. While other children formed lasting friendships, Federico developed the art of quick assessment, of finding his place in any social hierarchy with minimal to no friction.

"You adapt too easily," his mother once observed as they prepared to leave Brasília for their next posting.

Ten-year-old Federico packed his few possessions with no trace of attachment to the place they'd called home for three years. Her tone carried neither praise nor concern, merely clinical observation.

The posting to Armenia came when Federico turned fifteen: an awkward transplantation during the most volatile years of adolescence. Yerevan sprawled below their diplomatic residence, a city of pink tuff stone and Soviet architecture under the shadow of Mount Ararat. For the first time, Federico struggled to find his footing. The language barrier proved all but impenetrable, the cultural differences more pronounced than anywhere he'd lived before. At the international school, there were fewer Western children, and Federico's height—he had shot up early, like the men on his father's side—made him stand out among his peers.

He spent more time alone, wandering ancient streets with his frame hunched against the wind that swept down from the mountains. He photographed the stone churches with their distinctive conical domes and developed the 35 mm films in a makeshift darkroom he'd created in the bathroom in the basement of their residence. The images revealed an unusual eye for shadow and light, and an affinity for the places where darkness gathered.

It was at one such church—the Cathedral of Saint Gregory the Illuminator—where Federico first encountered Father Levon. The priest moved through the sacred space with a confidence that suggested ownership rather than stewardship. He noticed the teenager taking photographs from unusual angles, crouching low to capture the light playing across the ancient stones.

"You have an artist's eye," Father Levon said in careful English, his accent thick but his grammar precise. He was a tall man with a neatly trimmed beard and hands that moved when he spoke. "Most visitors only see the surface."

Federico lowered his camera. "I'm looking for what's hidden."

The priest nodded, as if this confirmed something he'd suspected. "Perhaps you would like to see the parts of the cathedral that are not open to tourists? There is a lot of history in the shadows."

Over the following weeks, Father Levon became a regular presence in Federico's life. The priest spoke fluent French, which provided Federico with a rare connection to the language of his childhood. Levon shared books

from his personal collection—volumes on photography, history, religion, and European philosophy—that Federico devoured with his characteristic intensity. The boy’s parents noted the friendship with approval; connections to local cultural leaders were valuable in diplomatic circles, and the priest’s influence might smooth over their integration into Armenian society.

“Father Levon has invited me to join a special study group,” Federico mentioned over dinner one evening. “It’s for students interested in religious history.”

His mother nodded without looking up from her plate. “That’s a good connection to maintain.”

“The sessions run late,” Federico continued. “Sometimes until ten.”

His father checked his calendar. “I can arrange for the driver to collect you.”

“That won’t be necessary,” the boy blurted out. “Father Levon has offered to drive me home.”

The study group consisted of only three students, then two, and then only Federico, so the sessions moved from the church’s common rooms to Father Levon’s private quarters next to the cathedral. The priest’s living space smelled of incense and old books, and heavy curtains blocked the windows. Icons hung on every wall, their painted eyes following Federico’s every move.

“You have a gift for understanding deeper mysteries,” Father Levon told him one evening as he poured him a glass of sweet Armenian wine despite the boy’s age. “Most people merely accept what they’re told. You question.”

Federico’s discomfort had grown to manifest itself in a tightness around his mouth, a tendency to sit with his arms wrapped around himself, a sudden loss of appetite that left his already lean frame looking gaunt. During lessons, the priest’s hand tended to linger too long on his shoulder. The study space grew smaller with each visit, the distance between chairs imperceptibly narrowing.

Six months after their initial meeting, Federico arrived home well after midnight, his clothing rumpled and his expression blank. He walked right past his mother, who waited in the living room with a book she wasn’t reading.

“You’re very late,” she observed. “Your father had to call the embassy security to be on standby.”

Federico stopped at the foot of the stairs. The light caught the side of his face, revealing redness around his collar where his skin had been rubbed raw.

“Father Levon had much to teach me tonight,” he said mechanically. “About sacrifice.”

His mother marked her place in the book with a thin finger. “I hope you expressed proper gratitude for his attention.”

Federico said nothing, but climbed the stairs with slow, deliberate steps, like someone crossing thin ice. In the upstairs bathroom, he stood under the shower with the water as hot as it would go, scrubbing his skin until it was an angry red. But the water didn’t wash away the priest’s cologne: a cloying scent that seemed to have embedded itself in his pores.

In the months that followed, Federico’s transformation became evident even to casual observers. The boy who had once moved through the world with attentive curiosity, now walked with his gaze fixed on the ground. His academic performance went from stellar to a mere passing grade. His body, once lean, grew even more angular, until his collarbones were visible from beneath his shirts. When he spoke, which was rare, his voice seemed distant, as if he were calling from the bottom of a well.

“He’s just adjusting to the culture,” his father explained to concerned teachers. “Armenia is difficult for a Canadian water rat used to surfing in Brazil.”

His mother attended Sunday services with increased regularity, making generous donations to the cathedral’s restoration fund. After mass, she engaged in lengthy conversations with Father Levon, nodding at whatever he said, her spine straight as a rod.

Federico developed a habit of visiting the zoo on the outskirts of Yerevan. He stood for hours watching the big cats pace their small enclosures, their muscles rolling with lethal intent beneath their fur. The zookeeper, having noted his regular presence, eventually allowed him behind the scenes to observe the cats being fed. Federico watched with unblinking attention as raw meat disappeared behind powerful jaws: life consumed to sustain life.

“You understand them,” the zookeeper said in broken English, apparently misinterpreting the boy’s fascination with empathy.

Federico didn't correct him. He understood more than anyone realized about predators, prey, and the brutal simplicity of consumption. Each time Father Levon touched him, each time his mother ignored the signs, each time his father buried himself in his work rather than seeing what was happening to his son, Federico retreated further behind a carefully constructed mask, where something new was taking shape.

His mother carried him to the market as she did her bags: always ready to set down. They spent more time together once school let out, just the two of them, pretending to shop. When his father returned, they spoke in code, measuring how long each purchase would last before they left again. He stayed within his mother's reach while she inspected another piece for her collection. The city had too many reminders of things she preferred not to think about; it was more cluttered with memories than even she liked. They moved in and out of the crowded stalls, dusting the past off surfaces, ignoring the deeper marks. She could never accept living there.

The bruises bloomed like strange flowers under Federico's collar. Purple faded to green and then yellow, a calendar of abuse marked by changing colors on his skin.

On a Tuesday morning in December, he stood in the kitchen while his mother prepared coffee. The early light caught the newest mark: a hickey partially hidden by his school uniform, but visible when he reached for the sugar bowl.

"Mother," Federico said, his voice low and measured. "I need to speak with you about Father Levon."

Elise stirred her coffee with three clockwise turns followed by a gentle tap of the spoon against the cup's edge. "He mentioned you were not focusing on your studies, that your questions have become inappropriate."

Federico's hand stilled. "He's hurting me."

The words hung in the kitchen air, settling like dust motes in the winter light. His mother continued stirring even though there was nothing left in her cup to dissolve.

"You shouldn't say such things," she replied, her voice as crisp as the morning frost on the windows. "Father Levon has dedicated his life to God and the church. These accusations are very serious."

"I can show you," Federico said, his fingers inching toward the top button of his shirt.

"Enough." The word cut through the air like a slap. "You're at a tough age. Sometimes young men misinterpret guidance as something inappropriate. Father Levon said you've been struggling with impure thoughts."

Federico's hand dropped to his side as something behind his eyes shifted, like a door closing. "You spoke to him about me."

"Of course. He's concerned about your spiritual development." She looked at him directly, assessing his appearance with clinical detachment. "Perhaps we should consider sending you to confession more regularly. These fantasies are unhealthy."

Federico left for school without breakfast that morning. He did not return home until late. When his father questioned his absence, Federico replied with perfect politeness that he had been at the cathedral, "confessing his sins". The sarcasm went unnoticed, or perhaps was deliberately ignored.

In the weeks that followed, Federico dismantled his connections to other human beings one by one. He stopped attending social gatherings at the international school. His few friends received polite but firm rejections to invitations out until they ceased extending them altogether. He spoke only when it was necessary to answer direct questions, but he did so with minimal responses, his voice devoid of inflection.

The zoo became his sanctuary. The winter months brought fewer visitors, and Federico often found himself alone with the animals and their keepers. He volunteered to help with basic tasks like cleaning enclosures, preparing food, and observing medical procedures. The head zookeeper, a short but athletic man named Hayk, accepted Federico's help with minimal questions, recognizing in the boy a particular affinity for the animals.

"The cats know," Hayk said one afternoon as they watched a Siberian tiger pace the length of its enclosure. "They can smell fear, weakness."

Federico stood at the edge of the safety barrier, which was still closer than regulations permitted. "What do they smell on me?"

Hayk studied the tall, now muscular teenager. "Something familiar."

By spring, Federico had secured an unofficial apprenticeship with the zoo's veterinary staff. He absorbed information about animal anatomy with unsettling efficiency, paying particular attention to the big cats. His hands, which were once awkward in adolescence, grew steady. He learned to prepare the precise dosage of sedative needed to subdue different animals, and he studied the effects of various drugs on their systems.

Federico's mother noticed the changes in her son with growing unease. His bedroom walls, once covered with photographs of architecture, now displayed anatomical diagrams of feline musculature. He spent hours on strength exercises, transforming his lanky frame into something more substantial. Most disturbing were his eyes; they were the same color they'd always been, but they'd been emptied of whatever had animated them before.

"I'm concerned about Federico," she said to her husband one evening. "He's become...strange."

Stefano glanced up from his briefings. "He's focusing on his interests. Veterinary work could lead to a solid career."

"It's unnatural, his obsession with those animals," she insisted. "And he's stopped attending church."

"After what happened with Father Levon, can you blame him?" Stefano asked with an edge of accusation.

Elise's spine stiffened. "Nothing happened with Father Levon. Federico made up those stories for attention."

Marco put down his papers. "The bishop transferred Levon to a monastery in the mountains. Even the church acknowledged something wasn't right."

"They were protecting him from defamation." Elise's knuckles went white as her grip on her teacup tightened. "Federico has always had an active imagination."

Unknown to his parents, Federico had secured a new opportunity. The Russian State Circus maintained a training facility in Yerevan, where animal trainers developed their acts before the touring season. There Federico met Nikolai, a veteran big cat trainer, through Hayk's connections.

"The boy has the quality," Nikolai told Hayk in Russian, unaware that Federico understood every word. "The animals respond to him."

Federico's apprenticeship began with basic safety protocols, but in a blink he advanced to direct interaction with the animals. The circus maintained stricter standards than the zoo, and had healthier specimens as well as more spacious facilities to work with. Federico observed how Nikolai established dominance not through fear or pain, but through mutual respect and clear boundaries.

"Never turn your back," Nikolai instructed, demonstrating how to exit a training cage. "Even the ones who seem to love you will remember they are predators if you show weakness."

Federico absorbed these lessons with the same intensity he had once applied to his academic studies. He learned to read the subtle signs in a tiger's posture, to recognize the difference between playful aggression and a genuine threat. His movements in the training ring mirrored the deliberate economy of the animals he worked with: no wasted energy or unnecessary gestures.

One day, Nikolai made note of Federico's particular interest in the female cats. "They are the more dangerous. The males are stronger, yes, but the females hunt with purpose. They do not kill for dominance or territory. They kill to feed their young and ensure their survival."

Federico nodded. "They're more efficient."

In his bedroom, Federico maintained a growing collection of newspaper clippings about violent crimes. He favored articles about female victims and studied the details of their deaths with the same clinical attention he gave to veterinary texts. The map of Yerevan on his wall featured red pins that marked the locations where women had reported being followed or harassed.

When his mother discovered this collection during a rare invasion of his privacy, she confronted him in the garden, away from the household staff.

"What is this?" she demanded, holding up a particularly graphic article about a woman found dismembered in Moscow.

Federico regarded her with detached interest. "Research."

"This is disgusting. Is this how you spend your time?" she asked. "Fantasizing about hurt women?"

Federico's expression didn't change. "You taught me that women lie about being hurt."

Her palm connected with his cheek hard enough to leave a mark, but Federico didn't flinch or raise a hand to the reddening skin. He simply watched her, his eyes recording her fear, her anger.

"I'll speak to your father about sending you to a boarding school in Switzerland," she said shakily. "This behavior cannot continue."

Federico nodded once, as if she had suggested something he found reasonable. "As you wish."

That night, Federico returned to the circus training facility after hours. Nikolai had trusted him with keys to the secondary storage areas, unaware that the boy had made copies of others, including those to the main animal enclosures.

Federico moved through the darkened facility with practiced ease, his footsteps silent on the concrete floors. The newest addition to the circus—a pair of black panthers recently acquired from a private collector in Russia—watched him approach. Unlike the other cats, who regarded humans with suspicion or indifference, the panthers tracked his movements with focused attention. He unlocked the outer security door and entered the buffer zone between the public area and the cage itself.

"You see me," Federico said softly to the panthers. "You know what I am."

The female moved closer to the bars, her muscles rolling beneath her glossy coat. Federico extended his hand; he was not close enough to touch, but closer than safety protocols allowed. The panther sniffed the air between them, her golden eyes fixed on his.

In that moment, something crystallized in Federico's fragmented psyche. The part of him that had once been a boy with a camera and an eye for hidden beauty was gone, consumed by a new entity that viewed the world through the cold lens of predator and prey. His mother's betrayal had severed his last connection to human empathy and replaced it with something more primal...something that hungered.

Three more years transformed Federico from boy to man. At nineteen, he stood six feet tall, and his adolescent awkwardness had been replaced by a deliberate grace cultivated through thousands of hours of working with predatory animals. The Russian State Circus had offered him an official position after graduation, impressed by his instinctive understanding of their most dangerous performers. His parents had relocated to a new posting in Italy, leaving Federico behind. He accepted their departure with the same impassive nod he offered in response to most human interactions; it was a gesture that acknowledged information, but revealed nothing in return.



The monastery of Saint Hovhannes clung to the mountainside forty kilometers outside of Yerevan, its stone walls weathered by centuries of harsh winters and unforgiving summers. Father Levon had been reassigned there following what church officials described as "administrative restructuring". The remote location and limited connections to the outside world made it an ideal place to sequester priests whose conduct raised questions, but whose offenses remained officially unacknowledged.

Federico first located the monastery through church records he accessed using his father's diplomatic credentials. A carefully worded email sent from an untraceable account led to confirmation of Father Levon's presence among the twelve monks who maintained the ancient building and its surrounding orchards. Federico began memorizing the monastery's routines through weekly visits disguised as a graduate student researching medieval Armenian architecture.

"The brothers follow strict schedules," explained the elderly monk serving as the guide for visitors. "Prayer, work, meals, study: each activity has its appointed time."

Federico photographed the monastery's exterior from multiple angles, noting the locations of doors, windows, and the steep path that was the only direct point of access to the main gate. He recorded when the monks gathered for prayer, when they worked in the orchards, when the supply truck made its weekly delivery. His notebook was filled with observations rendered in precise handwriting: water sources, electrical systems, the location of the small infirmary.

On his fourth visit, Father Levon emerged from the chapel as Federico was photographing a sixteenth-century khachkar in the courtyard. The priest had aged; his beard had grown longer and was streaked with gray, and his shoulders were hunched as if he carried a physical burden. He didn't notice Federico right away, which gave the younger man time to adjust his expression into one of scholarly interest.

"Father," Federico called, "perhaps you could help me understand the symbolism of this stone cross?"

Father Levon turned, squinting against the afternoon sun as recognition dawned on him slowly, spreading across his features like a stain. "Federico?"

Federico smiled, the expression technically perfect, but really just a mask. "You remember me. I'm flattered."

The priest glanced around the courtyard, but they were alone. The other monks were off performing their afternoon duties across the monastery grounds.

"What are you doing here?"

"Research," Federico replied, gesturing to his camera. "I've developed quite an interest in religious history since our...study sessions."

Father Levon's face paled beneath his slight tan. "You shouldn't be here."

"And yet here I am." Federico stepped closer, his movements smooth and unhurried. "I thought perhaps we might continue my education. There's so much I still need to understand about sacrifice."

The priest backed away, his sandals scraping against the ancient stones. "I have duties. The brothers expect me at vespers."

"Then we should meet later," Federico suggested, although it was clear that this was not a request. "Tonight, perhaps when the others are asleep."

"I can't—"

"You can," Federico interrupted, his voice dropping to a register that carried a hint of the growl he used when working with the big cats. "And you will. Unless you'd prefer I speak with the abbot about the nature of our previous relationship."

Father Levon's eyes darted to the chapel door, calculating the distance to his nearest escape route. "The east orchard, after compline. The brothers will be in their cells by then."

Federico nodded once. "I look forward to our reunion."

The night featured a thin moon that cast just enough light to navigate the rocky path to the monastery's eastern orchard. Federico moved with the silence he had perfected during nighttime feeding sessions with the circus animals, his dark clothing blending with the shadows between the apricot trees. A small bag hung from his shoulder; it contained items he had selected with care for this evening's work.

Father Levon waited at the edge of the orchard, a lantern at his feet casting his face in harsh relief. He had aged, but Federico recognized the predatory alertness that had once made the priest so dangerous to him. However, fear overshadowed that quality tonight.

"You should have stayed away," Father Levon said. "What happened in Yerevan—"

"Was educational," Federico finished for him. "You taught me valuable lessons about power, about predators and prey."

The priest's hand moved to the cross hanging at his chest. "I've repented. I've spent years in prayer, seeking forgiveness."

"From God?" Federico asked, his head tilted slightly in a gesture he'd borrowed from the panthers. "Did God answer?"

"He offers mercy to all who truly repent."

Federico smiled. "How convenient. But I'm not interested in God's forgiveness." He reached into his bag and removed a bottle of Armenian cognac called Ararat Nairi. "I thought we might share a drink for old times' sake."

Father Levon hesitated, then nodded. Federico poured two glasses, handing one to the priest. The older man drank his in one gulp, perhaps seeking courage from the amber liquid. Federico watched, measuring time in his head, waiting for the sedative he had mixed in with the cognac to take effect.

Seven minutes later, Father Levon's speech began to slur. At ten minutes, he struggled to maintain his balance. At twelve, his legs gave way and he slumped against the base of an apricot tree, his eyes wide with belated understanding.

"What have you done?" he managed around his thick tongue.

Federico knelt beside him. "I'm demonstrating what I've learned about anatomy and chemistry, about the vulnerability of the human body."

From his bag, he retrieved items that reflected years of training: a set of veterinary restraints, surgical gloves, specialized knives used for portioning meat for the big cats. He methodically secured the priest's limbs with the same attention to detail he applied to his duties at the circus.

"The panthers taught me efficiency," Federico explained conversationally as he repositioned the priest's pliant body. "No wasted movement or unnecessary suffering. The kill itself should be...precise."

The sedation prevented Father Levon from screaming when the knife first entered his body, although his eyes reflected his pain. Federico's anatomical knowledge guided his hand to the vital points that would ensure a swift end. He worked with the detached focus of a surgeon—or better yet, a butcher—and his expression remained unchanged even as blood coated his gloved hands and the plastic tarp he had opened to avoid leaving blood traces on the ground. He circled his prey with suspicion at first, then with grace and dignity, and finally with a prowling hunger. Unlike him, the big cats had seen it before—the blood, the bodies—but he learned quickly. The hesitation was gone almost immediately.

God, is this what it's like for them? The blood, the hunger?

When it was over, Federico sat back on his heels and clinically took in his work. The act itself had been neither satisfying nor disappointing—simply necessary, like lancing an infected wound. What interested him more was what came next.

Federico had processed the body using techniques he had learned from the circus veterinarians. He had separated the tissues methodically, identifying muscle groups, organs, the complex architecture of the human form in components. His attention focused then on the psoas major muscle—what butchers called the tenderloin—running along the spine from the lower back to the pelvis.

"The most tender cut," he murmured, separating this muscle with care. "Protected from overuse by its position near the spine, lean and with minimal connective tissue."

He did not premeditate the decision to taste. Federico had prepared for disposal, not consumption. And yet, as he held the piece of meat, something primitive stirred within him: curiosity and hunger that transcended an ordinary appetite.

The portable camping stove he had brought to destroy evidence then served a different purpose. The meat sizzled in the small pan, releasing a disturbingly appetizing aroma. Federico seasoned it with salt and pepper and fresh herbs from the convent's spice garden.

The first bite had him crossing a threshold from which there could be no return. Federico chewed slowly, analyzing, noting the texture, the flavor, the way it differed from other meats he had consumed. He felt no disgust, no moral revulsion—only a strange sense of completion, as if a circuit had been closed.

By dawn, Federico had processed Father Levon's remains according to his original plan. He sealed the major portions in containers. Later, the circus panthers would consume and digest those human remains, eliminating the evidence. He then burned the smaller pieces or dissolved them using chemicals from the veterinary supplies. Federico cleaned the ground where the priest had died, removing all traces of blood with the impermeable tarp, which he later burned along with the other remnants in a remote part of the mountains.

As Federico hiked back down the path, the rising sun illuminated his face, but revealed nothing of what had transpired during the night. Only the set of his shoulders suggested any change in him; he carried himself with the subtle satisfaction of a panther after a successful hunt.

In his pocket, wrapped in wax paper, a small piece of cooked meat remained. It was a talisman, a souvenir, a reminder of the night he had transformed from prey to predator. That was the night he discovered a new lust that would shape the rest of his life.



Federico spent the decade following Father Levon's disappearance refining his methodologies. His official record showed a logical progression from circus animal handler to culinary student, then to respected chef with specializations in both traditional meat preparation and vegetarian cuisine. What the record did not show were three disappearances that occurred in Armenia: three women, visitors from different countries, with no connecting thread evident among the authorities.

Federico left the circus three years after Father Levon's disappearance. His recommendation letters praised his meticulous nature, his understanding of nutrition, and his commitment to finishing projects. He took these skills to Paris, where he enrolled in a prestigious culinary academy under the guise of pursuing a childhood passion for cooking.

"Dal Sotto has an unusual perspective on meat preparation," his primary instructor noted in one semester evaluation. "His technical skills with a knife are extraordinary, but his emotional connection to food seems academic rather than passionate."

The culinary academy provided Federico with two critical assets: legitimate credentials and access to a social circle of future chefs, restaurant owners, and food critics. He cultivated these connections just as he had once gained the trust of the circus panthers. His classmates found him charming in small doses; his stories of the circus provided exotic conversation during late-night drinking sessions after service.

"The thing about feeding carnivores," he once explained to a group of fellow students at the Restaurant Le Chien qui Fume near Les Halles, "is understanding that different muscles serve different purposes. The best cuts come from the muscles that do the least work."

One student leaned closer, clearly intrigued. "Like tenderloin."

Federico's smile froze in place. "Exactly: the psoas major. It's protected by its position along the spine."

Three days later, nobody had reported the woman missing, and Federico had moved on to an externship in Lyon. His apartment had been cleared of all evidence, and his circus connections were ready to provide unquestioned alibis if he needed one.

This pattern repeated across Europe: six months in Lyon, eight in Barcelona, a year in Rome. In each location, Federico perfected his culinary techniques while refining his hunting methods. He developed a preference for vegetarians and vegans, noting subtle differences in flavor and texture that aligned with his personal tastes. He spaced out the disappearances precisely, never taking more than one from any location and always allowing enough time between them to minimize the risk of anyone recognizing a pattern. Choosing foreign women traveling alone meant that the investigators always arrived at least one step too late. Federico soon learned to get rid of all electronic gadgets that could be traced right away.

Processing them became a ritual he performed with the same exacting standards he applied to his work in the kitchen. Breaking down a human body differed little from doing so to a side of beef or lamb, but he took particular care with the disposal of evidence. The remaining portions, which he did not eat, were butchered beyond recognition and fed to street animals or disposed of through industrial waste systems.

Federico's epiphany came during his time in Rome, while he prepared a traditional dish of coda alla vaccinara for a visiting cardinal at the restaurant where he had secured a position as sous chef. The oxtail stew required long, low temperatures to transform tough meat into tender morsels. While instructing a junior cook on the proper technique, he experienced a moment of perfect clarity.

"The secret," he explained as he demonstrated the precise angle of the knife, "is to honor the sacrifice. Every part has a purpose. Waste nothing."

The cardinal, overhearing this exchange during his tour of the kitchen, nodded approvingly. "A theological approach to cuisine: breaking bread together is our oldest sacrament."

Federico inclined his head respectfully. "Communion through consumption."

That evening, Federico began researching exclusive dining clubs that had cropped up throughout history, such as the gastronomic societies of the Basque region, the private supper clubs in America during the Prohibition Era, and the invitation-only restaurants of Tokyo. He studied their structures, their exclusivity, their methods for maintaining secrecy while cultivating prestige. A plan began to take shape, one that would require a location with the right combination of tourism, wealth, history, and discretion.

Venice emerged as the ideal candidate, and being there would also bring him back to his family's roots, as his grandfather, whom he had never met, was originally from the region. The city's labyrinthine layout, seasonal flooding, and centuries of history layered with secrets all provided natural methods of concealment. Its steady stream of tourists offered an endless supply of potential ingredients, and their disappearances would be arduous to investigate. Wealthy residents and visitors could provide the financial backing and regular clientele necessary for his vision.

He spent months researching Venetian architecture, identifying buildings with the structural features his operation would require: canal access, multiple entrances, and, most critically, substantial basement space that could be modified without attracting attention.



Federico first met Dr. Alessandro Stucky in a small but prestigious restaurant fifteen kilometers outside Venice, where Alessandro dined several times with his mother's clients. One evening, Federico decided to prepare a special tasting menu featuring techniques he had developed for his own private consumption, although this one featured traditional animal proteins.

"This is exceptional," Alessandro commented after the third course, which happened to be a perfectly prepared dish of veal sweetbreads that Federico personally presented to the table. "There's something familiar yet entirely new in your preparation."

Federico inclined his head. "I believe all animals share certain fundamental qualities. The key is understanding their unique properties."

During subsequent visits, Federico cultivated a careful relationship with the surgeon. He noted Alessandro's precise way of cutting his food and the clinical interest he took in unusual preparations, all of which were subtle signs of a man with secrets of his own. Their conversations soon extended beyond food to anatomy and even ethics.

"In my field," Alessandro confided one late evening after other patrons had departed, "progress often requires pushing beyond conventional limitations. This might mean trying procedures that could seem...questionable to the uninitiated."

Federico nodded. "The same is true in cuisine. People celebrate innovation, but the experimentation needed to achieve it would disturb them."

Their shared understanding deepened over bottles of rare wines, each man recognizing in the other a kindred spirit operating behind a carefully maintained mask. When Alessandro mentioned his family's historical connection to Venice, Federico encouraged further disclosure.

"The Stucky name still opens certain doors in Venice," Alessandro explained. "But my connection to it is complicated."

"I've been considering a venture in Venice," Federico replied, "a restaurant concept that would require the right location and connections."

Federico went on to describe his vision for twin restaurants—one featuring traditional meat dishes, the other specializing in vegetarian cuisine—with a private dining area for exclusive clientele.

In the months that followed, Federico developed detailed plans for what would become *Il Tricolore di Venezia*. He even designed the architectural requirements he had in mind: hidden passages connecting the two restaurants, special storage facilities on the basement level, and a concealed dock. Every element served a dual purpose: legitimate restaurant operations above, private hunting grounds below.

The construction, however, would require substantial investment beyond Federico's resources. Alessandro's family's wealth could provide the capital. He only had to wait for the right occasion to ask for it.

Meanwhile, Federico ideated The Venezia Connoisseurs Club—or, *Il Circolo degli Intenditori*—to satisfy very specific appetites.

Federico explained during one of their meetings, "You can't find these experiences anywhere else."

Alessandro's expression revealed both apprehension and fascination. "What you're suggesting is—"

"A return to our most primal nature," Federico finished for him. "Communion through consumption, in its purest form."

The surgeon was silent for a long moment, his medical training clearly warring with darker impulses. "The risks would be extraordinary."

"As would the rewards." Federico gestured around them. "Venice has always been a city of masks, of hidden identities. What better place to explore our true natures?"

In the end, Alessandro's curiosity overcame his reservations. His social connections would help identify potential club members: wealthy individuals with specific tastes for the new and the discretion to indulge in them without endangering anyone else involved. Federico's plan was to invite select members on rare occasions to cook an Azerbaijan special. No one ever contemplated the true origin of the tenderloin. Only Federico knew.

On the eve of *Il Tricolore di Venezia*'s grand opening, Federico stood alone on the hidden dock beneath the restaurant complex. The water lapped against the ancient stones, the sound echoing in the chamber. Above him, workers made final preparations that would help establish his legitimate presence in Venice's culinary scene.

His expression had largely remained the same since that night in the Armenian mountains: attentive but unrevealing, that of a patient but hungry predator. The twin restaurants would provide the perfect cover, allowing him to operate in plain sight while serving the most exclusive dining experience in Venice, perhaps even the world.

The hunger that had awakened in him when he first tasted human flesh had never diminished. It had simply become more refined, more controlled. In Venice, Federico Dal Sotto would finally create a hunting ground worthy of his appetite.