

IL DIAVOLO

I laughed out loud as the heavy burden of my reality hit me. The gentle, distant lapping of the waves against the shore and the sweet smell of freshly baked Italian pastry and strong, black coffee felt infuriatingly out of place in my suffocating pool of thoughts. Finally comprehending the full extent of my morbid situation, a fit of uncontrollable, absurd laughter surged through me again, leaving traces of misery and cold, desperate rage.

Full of anger, I walked onto the balcony only to be welcomed by the peaceful serenity of the turquoise waters and voluminous clouds of wizard white drifting past and disappearing in the silver of the horizon. The fresh sea breeze felt soothing against my blazing skin, lightly ruffling my hair. I spared a short glance at the pastels scattered across the impressive rock towering over the Amalfi coast, surrounded by the woody scent of blossoming bougainvillea. At this moment, I hoped time would stop, allow me to melt into it – finally fall in love with life – but happiness was a different kind of country.

As though the briny air wasn't enough to warm my intoxicated soul, I lit a slender cigarette. Tightly holding the rough paper between my knuckles, I slowly brought it to my lips and inhaled the burning tobacco, the tarnished smoke infiltrating my lungs, permeating them with a warmth, and welcoming them in its snug embrace like an old friend. I watched the bluish smoke twirl skyward when I felt a cold hand against my shoulder. Suddenly, from this single touch, I felt imprisoned by the openness of the Amalfi air; the air that seconds ago brought me solace, was now yet another bar on my sordid cell. Hopelessness and confinement had long become embedded in me, while pretending was now my second nature. Pasting a limp smile on my lips, I turned around to face my intruder.

Alessandro Ricci. He was the future 'Godfather' of the Sicilian *Cosa Nostra*— although he was neither 'God' nor 'father'. Under the veil of conducting the mafia's work and being a *caporegime* – answering only to the Godfather, he was determined to rise up the ranks of the *Cosa Nostra*, regardless of how many people he had to tread on; his achievements were considered impressive for his young age – he was respected by those serving him, and praised by those ignorant. In most parts of Italy, he was known as the devil's 'faithful servant'. Some would even call him the devil himself. But I could see past his ambitious persona and his loyal service to the mafia. I could see the person underneath, and the amount of enjoyment it brought to him – personally – to observe his sickening 'masterpieces'; I could see the ghost of a merciless smile stretch across his emotionless face as lives of thousands would collapse right in front of him; I could see right through his stone-cold eyes, the sunken scar across his right brow serving as a permanent reminder of all the horrid crimes he ever committed. All because I knew it ... all too well.

December 25th, 1987. Things had finally started looking up for my family. It was our first Christmas in a place we could call home. Being just children, we were merely happy to be full and warm at last, the source of our happiness being beyond our concern or understanding. Weeks prior, Father's new business associates started showing up more and more often at our new house – faces that have now become all too familiar. We didn't make much of it, but as it turns out, Father made some wrong choices ... and wrong choices lead to even worse consequences. Before the dinner, moments of peace and joy coalesced into one, a state of harmony and freedom finally restored in our family. But that's when disaster struck. A dense, grey smoke started darkening my vision, sputtering flames consuming everything in sight, before the splintering windows, wailing sirens and cries for help all became one. All I could see was a faint outline of figures behind the flames and indistinct voices announcing, "*Missione completata. Rapporte Al Diavolo.*" Waves of blazing heat radiated from the explosion, the billowing smoke

engulfing the house. Moments before it all went black, Father's words echoed through my ears: "*Alessandro ... Alessandro è Il Diavolo*".

I was the sole survivor of the disastrous 'accident' of December 25th, 1987. A poor, orphaned child taken under the generous care of the virtuous Alessandro Ricci – one of Father's 'closest' business associates. As time went on, one thing led to another, and care eventually turned into something more ... or at least that's how it was for Alessandro. For me – five years have passed by, and yet it still feels like yesterday. I can still feel the scorching heat against my skin, the metallic smell of blood still thick in my nostrils – still persistent in my memory. Five years, all filled with continuous stages of hidden grief, guilt, anger and helplessness; ultimately, all you're left with is a black, infinite void, that no amount of emotion can ever fill. Sometimes I can't help but wonder whether dying in that fire would have been the better outcome – whether it would have ended my misery. But I'm a survivor: staying alive seems to be my specialty. And that's what I'm going to do.

"You woke up early, my love," he said in his broken Sicilian accent that made my blood boil.

"I wasn't very tired, I suppose," I remarked with a feeble smile. Oh no, I wasn't tired ... I was exhausted.

"I hope you haven't forgotten about our yacht cruise today?" he said, firmly drawing me closer. I tried to suppress my simmering anger and hide any signs of disgust on my face.

Today. Today has to be the day.

"Of course not, *amore*." The words felt like poison on my tongue. Today, I will end my torment, free myself – body and soul. "Wait for me on the yacht. I will join you in a moment."

When Alessandro made his way down the spiral marble staircase towards our private yacht parked in the isolated hook of the coastline, I swept across the room to his study. Rummaging through his shelves and drawers, I looked for Alessandro's most prized possession: The Smith and Wesson. Long-range, finely crafted, deadly accurate. Perfect for my purpose.

Making my way out onto the balcony, I lit another cigarette: I desperately needed a companion at this moment – a companion I didn't have all those years ago. The cigarette between my lips, I levelled the Wesson at Alessandro's chest from a distance as he was heading towards the yacht. For a split second, I felt a tremor run through my wrist.

No. This had to be done.

I readjusted my grip on the comfortable weight of the metal, suddenly feeling empowered for the first time in a long while. Level, aim, shoot. That's how Alessandro had always taught me to defend myself; little did he know it would have to be from him.

I drew a sharp, smoky breath, my finger quaking as the cold metal started to grow increasingly heavy in my hand with each passing second. Shutting one eye to focus on my target, I tried to ignore the steady, painful pulse of blood pounding through my head.

"Alessandro," the words forced him to turn around, his eyes staring in disbelief at the sight of the Wesson in my hand pointed at him in the garden. "You know, my father – he would have been proud of the woman I've become."

“Your father?” a look of confusion crossed his features, seconds before he uttered, “But how ...” as a ghastly whiteness spread over his face, stricken into silence by the realisation.

My quivering finger twitched on the trigger.

“*Ciao, Il Diavolo,*” the words escaped my lips the moment I pulled the trigger.

As the bullet left the barrel, so did a piece of my soul – the obscure, imprisoned piece, corrupted by Alessandro and the past. The tranquil air seemed to be disturbed by the black metal rushing through it – sullyng it – until it hit the centre of human evil and sin incarnate.

A small smile played across my lips as I watched the lifeless form of my dear husband sprawled in a pool of red blooming from his chest.

I glanced at the Amalfi coast one last time, submerged in the peaceful serenity of the turquoise waters and the distant, gentle lapping of the waves against the shore.