

NEVER  
A ROOFTOP  
AGAIN

WILLOWY WHISPER



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## NEVER A ROOFTOP AGAIN

*Strasbourg, France*

*September 1952*

I ALWAYS KNEW it would be like this. Told myself it wouldn't, though. Promised myself I'd never see you again, that the *Piangenti Diavoli* had finished you off, that not even you could come back from the dead.

But here you are, flesh and bone, cut sharper than I ever remember.

You don't see me.

Figures, though. You were always too engrossed in things around you, the small things, to see the big picture as it is. That's your fault, *mi tesoro*. Always has been.

With a cigarette in two fingers, you linger by a magazine rack outside of a dingy bookstore. You'd be the type to stop there. Treasures are your thing, but you don't want them for the same reasons I do. You'll take all kinds—literary, abstract, worthless even. Not me, though. You don't even know the kind of treasures I go for.

Maybe if I get out of this hack and walk by you won't glance over. I don't look the same as I did then, after all. Not the moon-eyed Italian girl with the long black braids and skinny legs. Fourteen long years and fleeing for my life makes all the difference, see. I've played so many parts, traveled so many countries, I don't know who I am.

Today, I guess I'm more American than anything. Short, styled hair. Shades. Grey blazer and pleated skirt.

Not the kind of dame you'd notice.

Or would you?

Every nerve begins to tingle as I pay the driver a franc and climb out of the taxicab. Rue du Dôme street is bouncing this time of day, with shoppers sashaying by, tourists chatting and laughing, automobiles squealing and clinking.

I tell myself I hope you don't see me. Can't live with that. Way too weak, too saturated in misery, too damaged from the past to plunge back in.

But even as I walk your way, I pull off the shades. I veer toward the red-painted bookstore and slide a glance toward the crooked, worn rack. You lift a wrinkled *Bernadette* magazine. Still can't see much of your face, not past the black fedora.

"You buy mittens, monsieur?" Just steps ahead, a man sidles toward you with his usherette tray and knitted mittens.

You turn and smile. Always smiling, you. How could I have forgotten that attribute?

"That blue one there...yes, that's it, ol' boy. How much?"

The conversion is a buzz, a mild mixture of your genteel British and his husky French. Then the man is gone.

And fate has me three feet away from you.

*Look at me.* Soft entreaty, but even in silence you must have heard, because your face turns my way.

For a second you don't see me. Your eyes skim the shops,

the street, the people—then they stop. Stop on me. Stop long enough and wide enough that I know there's no question in your mind.

You remember.

And you still don't know the truth.

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## FOURTEEN YEARS EARLIER...

*Gallicchio, Italy*

*June 1937*

IF THIS WAS THE BEST, there wasn't much good in my life. Low ceilings, dim lights, chipped mosaic floors and heavy cigar smoke.

But the music was tolerable. Jazzy and crazy, maybe—but catchy, and it soothed me. Made me forget about the family. The *Piangenti Diavoli*. The reason I couldn't go even here without the boss sending a man after me.

Ah, let the shadow follow me. I didn't care. He could stand over there in that dark corner all night if he wanted, for all the good it would do him. What did they think I was going to do, anyway?

I was born to this, raised in this structured mob of organized crime. Couldn't rat to the *polizia* if I wanted to. Too many people would get hurt.

My madre, for one.

She'd be the first they'd whack, even though her husband had been one of the members. Poor Padre. Took the code of silence to his death, the senseless man.

But I guess he'd been thinking of Madre too. Isn't that what made the family work? What kept the ties together, even when certain members longed to cut them loose?

Everyone had someone.

And no one wanted to see that someone dead.

From the arched doorway across the joint, the door eased open. A figure slipped in that I didn't recognize. Probably shouldn't have garnered my interest, because he was dressed just like all the other men I knew. The pinstripe Italian suit, the flashy red tie, the Homburg hat and spotless white shoes.

But still, there was something.

The face, maybe. That look of unstained conscience. Or maybe it was the way he ambled from the doorway to a table, the way he struck a match on the grainy wood, the way he glanced back and forth with a complex look of relaxation and awareness.

My shadow must have noticed him too, because he stood more erect in his unlit corner. Always cautious, this family. Everyone who entered our sphere was a threat, a suspicion, a new possible case of murder.

But this stranger was a nobody. Not the MI6 type. Just a fancy customer who had wandered into a rotten hole to hear jazz that was only half decent.

For an hour or so, I just watched him. He sat down but never ordered a drink. He slumped down into his chair, but never let his eyes stop wandering. Shame, this. That two people should sit at two separate tables when sharing one could alleviate both their boredom.

When the song ended and the musicians all dispersed for



a drink, I did something my shadow probably wouldn't approve of.

Oh well.

He could go back and tell the boss and everyone else, for all I cared. If I couldn't talk to a stranger at nineteen, what could I do? I ought to be good at something besides learning the ins and outs of extortion, fraud schemes, and smuggling paintings out of British museums.

I approached his table with confidence, held my chin erect. "*Salve, signore.*"

He glanced up, as if startled, and I realized for the first time he couldn't be much older than myself. If anything, he appeared more tender boy than hardened man. "Have you been listening to this long?"

I stared.

"The music, I mean." He leaned forward, as if I were a trustworthy acquaintance, and dropped his voice to a whisper, "Not very good, is it? Nothing like we swing to in Yorkshire, you know."

"No, I do not know."

"Don't you dance?"

"What?"

"Dance?"

"No." I almost turned and walked away, so straightforward and shocking was his manner. What was this guy, anyway?

"Look here, I suppose I've offended you." Before I had a chance to react, he stood and pulled out a chair. "Sit down and I shall do my best to make it up to you, hmm? I'm new to Basilicata—or rather, Italy in general—so I must be overlooked for rude behavior and that sort of thing. Would you care for something to eat?"

"No."

"Drink, perhaps?"

“No again, *signore*.”

“So you came entirely for the music—and here I have insulted it. Aren’t I a perfect clod?” He laughed. My, that was strange. Uncalled for really, as I didn’t see anything funny.

And yet, even stranger, I kind of liked the sound. Almost eased me, made me comfortable. How was that possible?

“See here, you can’t very well go on calling me *signore*, and I have nothing at all to call you. Shall we make introductions?”

“Might as well.” I hesitated, glanced at my shadow. Couldn’t tell if he glared or remained expressionless—so I spoke anyway, “Laurette. Laurette Pisano.”

“May I call you Laura or would that be presumptuous?”

“That all depends.”

“On what?”

“Who you are and what you are doing here.”

A flicker of amusement widened his smile. “Well, that’s fair enough, I suppose.” He outstretched his hand. Strong, warm grasp. “Rod Bishop—age twenty-two, Oxford graduate, excellent golfer, devoted son and brother, and generally likable fellow. Was that enough or shall I go on?”

“Go on.”

“Well, I’m a great fan of raspberry trifle, if that’s any help. Have you ever had any?”

“No.”

“What a shame. May I call you Laura now?”

“What are you doing in Gallicchio?”

This time he smirked. “I say, am I being questioned for something I did wrong—or do you investigate all strangers this way?”

“I do not know.” I flipped one braid behind my back. “I do not meet enough strangers to remember.”

As if to interrupt, the musicians took their platform again, and the loud and raucous music lifted once more.

The stranger didn't seem to mind. Instead, he rose from his chair and snagged my arm. "As they say, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do.'"

"What are you—"

"Oh, come now." He tugged me up, pulled me against him. "Put your hand around my shoulder—yes, that's it. And this other one stays in my grasp. You've got it." Then we were moving, swaying back and forth with steps I could hardly keep up with.

I didn't know why I was letting him do this to me. Had boss or one of his men ever tried it, I would have clawed their eyes out and dealt with the consequences later.

But they were different.

This was different.

"Tango." Soft voice in my ear, laden with a music that was foreign to me. "Ever tried it?"

"I already answered that."

"Did you?"

"Yes."

No more talking, just dancing. If there were ever occasion to laugh, now would be it—because even though I couldn't see my shadow's face, I could only imagine what he was thinking.

"She sit and talk with a *lo estraneo*, boss. And dance with him! She dance with him!" Ah, but I could hear it all now.

Then the questions.

Hundreds and hundreds of questions, as if I had threatened everything, as if one dance with a stranger was as dangerous as the clasp of an SIS agent.

But that was ridiculous.

No one knew the *Piangenti Diavoli* was linked to any

robbery in London. No one knew that our family had slipped into The National Gallery and slipped back out with the painting. No one knew the famous *Doge Leonardo Loredan* was wrapped in one of madre's laces and tucked away in her corner kitchen cupboard.

Especially not this stranger.

He was a nobody.

And for right now, I was rather enjoying him.

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"YOU CANNOT DO THAT, *signore*. I will not let you."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not need you."

"Hmm, I see." In the blue tints of nightfall, Rod Bishop eased the yellow-paneled door shut behind us. With one hand, he slid his hat in place. With the other, he grasped my elbow. "Well, I shall have you know that back in Yorkshire we wouldn't think of letting a dame walk home alone."

"This is not Yorkshire."

"But you, my darling, are still a dame."

"Who does not need your help?"

"Then my company at least?"

"No." I sidestepped him. "Not even that." Because any second, that door he'd just closed would swing open again. Jazz would leak back into the night, as my shadow would slip out and fall in step behind me.

No, it was best for the stranger to part ways here. Our fun was over. The dance over. The romantic little tryst over.

And it was better for all our sakes if it stayed that way.

"*Addio*, Sig. Bishop." With not so much as a smile nor a shake of hands, I swept away from him and hurried down the

wet, basalt pavement street. I listened for the thud of foot-falls, half expecting him to follow.

He never did though, and just as I had anticipated, my shadow soon slithered into place behind me like a ghost. I was half tempted to turn around and confront him. Tell him all the reasons I had a right to privacy. Threaten him with the derringer in my beaded handbag.

But what was the use?

Even if this one left me alone, there would always be another. Until the *Doge Leonardo Loredan* was imported to Logroño next month, where our Spanish buyer was waiting with the bread, not a one of us could rest easy—or trust each other.

Maybe if I was the boss, I would have myself dogged too.

When I turned onto Via Amara, a street where even the mud tried to slither away and escape, I found a light still on in one of the tiny windows of my house. In the dark it appeared haggard, broken, a pitiful shell of feigned poverty.

Within, though, there were treasures. Small ones. Rich ones. Hidden ones that Madre wouldn't notice and question and despair over. Even my home was just another lie.

But it was still home. Still the place where I had grown up barefoot and bounced on Padre's knee and watched Madre knead dough with her elegant fingers. Where had the simplicity of those days gone?

As I approached, I half expected a man or two to be flanking the doorway, as there had been for several nights in a row. Tonight, though, there seemed to be no one—and even my shadow hopped into a waiting automobile and drove away.

I was alone.

Madre was still up when I entered, sitting in her chair by the hearth, smiling with lips that were dry and wrinkled. Her eyes were worse, always worse. Sometimes I wondered if she

could see me at all, if I was anything more than a black blur—but then she'd always reach for my hand, and I knew there was precious sight still left.

I kissed her twice. One as a token of my love, the other as a token of my remorse. She'd never wanted Padre involved in the *Piagenti Diavoli*. If she ever found out what I had become, would she ever forgive me?

I couldn't think about that now, though. As soon as this last deal went through, I'd find a way to get us both out.

Alive, if possible.

"Goodnight, my sweet child, and have much rest," she murmured in Italian.

"Goodnight to you, Madre." Then, with a returning squeeze to her thin hands, I shredded my coat and made my way into my bedroom—the only place in the world where I didn't have to be on guard.

My bed swallowed me up. A safe cocoon, this. A ship that would transport me to a land of dreams, where there were no secrets and paintings and mafias...

A noise.

I was jolted from the ship by something faint and annoying, yet deliberate enough it might have been dangerous. The boss?

No, he wouldn't hesitate this long. If he wanted me, I'd already be dragged halfway out the window by now.

*Tap, tap.*

Where had I put my derringer?

*Tap, tap, tap.*

In one swift movement, I rolled out of bed and snatched up the purple-beaded bag I spotted on the floor. The gun came into my hand easily, maybe too easily. Didn't know if I could pull the trigger or not. Certainly came natural enough to everyone else in the family. Why not me?

“Laurette.” The name chilled the air into silence. “Laurette, it’s me.”

I raised the gun, stood. “Who?”

Only my own reflection stared back at me through the foggy pane. Then the voice loudened with an accent too definite to miss, “Rod Bishop, of course. Who else?”

I slung the derringer onto my bed, hurried forward, threw up the window. Cool night air bathed my face. “You fool.”

“Fool?”

“You heard me, *signore*. Now tell me what you are doing here.”

“Trying to see you, actually. Rather a clumsy attempt though, eh?”

“Do not make jokes.”

“I’m not.”

“Get out of my window.”

“So soon?”

“Sig. Bishop, I mean it—”

“Now, now, Miss Pisano.” One of his legs climbed in. Then the other. “If you insist on calling me by my last name, chivalry shall leave me no choice but to call you by yours.” A grin. “And I’d much rather call you Laurette. Or Laura, if you shall ever permit it.”

I should have been frightened, I suppose. A man in my room. A stranger.

But he was too much the playful little boy to rouse any fears, and in the end I only grinned back. “What do you think this is, anyway? A public park?”

“No, no.” He crossed his arms. “I didn’t think that. This is very unorthodox for me, you know. I don’t make a habit of breaking into dame’s rooms. You believe that, don’t you?”

“Why not?”

“Yes, well, you should. See, I was in this situation, and I

said to myself, 'Rod ol' boy, look what you just found lying on the street side.' Want to know what it was?"

I sank to the edge of my bed, shrugged.

"It was a scarf—and a pretty one at that. So I said to myself, 'Rod ol' boy, what did Mother always tell you about returning things that aren't yours? You can't just keep this lovely thing. It's your gentleman duty to find the rightful owner, at all costs.'" And thus, he whipped a flash of green from his overcoat. "I believe this is yours, my lady."

Despite myself, I smiled all over again. "I must have dropped it."

"Lucky for you we met then, isn't it?"

"I suppose so."

"But don't worry about repaying me. I wouldn't hear of it, darling." He crept back to the window, threw one leg out. "Of course, if you had your heart positively set on rewarding me, I might be persuaded to eat dinner with you tomorrow at the Il Rosa, five o'clock."

"But Sig. Bishop—"

"Oh, and wear your scarf." His feet must have hit the ground because the night swallowed his voice. I only heard him say, "It makes a lovely thing look even lovelier," before he eased the window back closed.

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THIS WAS INSANITY.

There was too much to risk to be playing games, to be dodging my shadow and chancing the boss's wrath—and all for what?

For a nobody boy who was too reckless and full of nonsense to understand the real world. The harsh world. The



two-faced world. Why was he bothering with me in the first place?

Surely there were dames back in Yorkshire.

Girls like him.

Not fakes like me who'd lived their whole life without anyone really knowing them. Who cheated and lied and racketeered for the sake of a murdering family. Who counted on stolen goods to pave the path of tomorrow.

Yes, it was insane—but when I reached Il Rosa, I slipped inside anyway.

The restaurant came alive with saucy smells, rich colors, quiet noises. Never ate places like this, probably because the *polizia* ate here too. The farther I stayed from them, the better.

“So you came.”

I startled, turned.

He stood behind me with pink-tinted, glowing cheeks. His eyes were rapt and glittering, almost as if the sight of me delighted him.

Maybe I was delighted myself. “*Salve*, Sig. Bishop.”

“Rod.”

“Rod, then.”

“Can I call you Laura?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

I only grinned. Hadn't we been through this before?

“Oh, never mind. Nothing worth getting is ever easy, as they say.” He took my arm. “Come on, let's get out of here, shall we?”

“But I thought we—”

“We are, darling. We are.” For the first time, I noticed a basket dangling in the crook of his left arm. He gave it a slight swing. “But what is dining in when one can dine out?”

HERE WE WERE, the two of us, sitting atop the roof of a small pensione. Wild, senseless idea. Never should have gone along with this.

But then again, I was always a sucker for crazy stunts. My downfall, I guess.

“More gnocchi?”

“Not a chance.” I deposited my plate back into the basket, dabbed the remains of sauce from my lips. “Why here, *signore?*”

“What?”

“Why here?”

“The rooftop, you mean.”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s easy, Miss Pisano. Why not?” With movements too quick to resist, his hand reached over. Grasped mine. Squeezed. “Take a look now. Not just a glance at something you’ve seen a hundred times over—but an actual look. See?”

“See what?”

“Everything.”

My gaze followed his finger, as it swept through the air in excited wonder. Endless, red-tiled rooftops. Colorful laundry swaying from drooping clotheslines. Chimneys here and there, lifting with faint scents of smoke, wispy and full of dance.

Had I seen it a hundred times? Oh, yes. More than that, even—but not from here.

No, from here everything seemed different. Too high to see the reality, the poverty, the bleak and grimy bricks of each pitiful house.

Maybe I should’ve climbed rooftops a long time ago.

Then the family couldn't have gotten to me. Madre would never have to face my sins. I wouldn't be trapped, always trapped.

"Thoughts?"

"You would not like them." I tried to loosen my hand, but his fingers only tightened. "Sig—"

"Call me that once more and I shall throw you off this roof." His face eased closer, eyes held mine. "You doubt me?"

"Yes."

"Then call me Sig. Bishop and see what happens."

Shouldn't have been thrilled by his warm breath on my face. Should never have noticed that he leaned closer still, that he'd captured my hand to his chest, that his smile made all the rooftop views of Italy dim in shocking comparison.

My lips twitched as I breathed, "Sig. Bishop."

With one loud laugh, he leaped to his feet, swung me into his arms, and lunged toward the edge.

I squealed, laughed, cried—clung to his neck as he dangled my legs over the roof.

Then he pulled me back. Settled me to my feet. Brushed the flyaway hair from my eyes. "See there, you've discovered me."

"Have I?"

"Yes." Closer. "I could no more throw you over that edge than I could fly away like a bird."

"Good." Despite all the warnings, I brushed my lips against his. "Because I do not want you to fly away...Rod."

---

WE WENT EVERYWHERE. Places I'd always been, all the familiar streets and markets of Gallicchio, and yet it was different. Everything was different. Today didn't mean what it

meant yesterday—because for the first time in my life, there was no pain or fear or wicked reality.

There was only elation.

Strange, brilliant, undoing elation—and I felt as if my world were now spinning on its axis. How could this happen? What was this anyway?

Rod Bishop.

I stared at him as we weaved around mud holes and side-stepped automobiles. I studied every smooth line of his face, every reckless gold-brown hair, every hint of mischief that came and passed from his expression.

When he looked over at me, I stopped breathing.

When he smiled, I think I died.

When he leaned over and kissed me, I left earth and never wanted to return.

“Now what?” He tugged me leftward and into the shadow of a local bakery. Fresh, yeasty scents wafted out and fragranced the air. “We’ve already made quite the day of it, haven’t we?”

I didn’t answer because I was too afraid of myself. Too afraid it would all have to end.

“But see here, why the sad face?” Too keen not to notice, this stranger. His lips tasted mine. “Better?”

“Yes.”

“Cheer up.”

“I am.”

“Can I call you Laura?”

I didn’t have time to answer.

Or move.

Or run.

Because just across the street, half hidden behind the limestone wall of a building, stood my shadow.

And his demon eyes were fastened on me.

GETTING AWAY WASN'T EASY. Especially from a Yorkshire gentleman who, as he put it, always felt robbed of his honor if he couldn't walk a lady home.

Better his honor suffer than his life.

Or mine.

It wasn't until I'd gotten out of sight, until I'd slipped into a *vicolo* leading toward Via Amara, that my shadow emerged from hiding. His pace quickened. Every hideous footfall matched the unsettled beat of my heart, then—

“Far enough, Pisano.”

I froze, swallowed. “Not here.”

He never answered, but cold fingers fell onto my neck, pushed me against a damp brick wall. “All day long I search for you, *disgraziata*.”

“So?”

“So maybe I slit your throat. Then I do not have to tell the boss, yes-a?”

“Get off of me—”

“Who was he?” Shouted. “Tell me! Who?”

“He is nobody.”

A slap.

“I swear, he is n-no one—”

A second slap, a third, then my head cracked into the brick.

My shadow's face slipped closer. Nose to nose. Near enough I could suffocate in the stench of his smell. “Tis mano had better be *no one*, Pisano. He just better be, because if we get pinched, I will fight for rights to clip you. Understand?”

“Y-yes.” The word exited in a sob as I wrenched free of him. “I understand perfectly.”

THE NEXT DAY, Rod Bishop was on my doorstep.

Everything inside of me swelled, burst, fluttered everywhere. No way I could let him in. No one must enter. Not here. Not with the *Doge Leonardo Loredan* in Madre's shawl, stored away in the cupboard, worth so much to all of us...

"Answer the door, my child," said Madre in sleepy Italian.

I glanced at her face.

She sat still, relaxed, eyes closed as she eased back and forth in a rickety rocker. Oh, to be so oblivious!

But as much as I wanted to ignore her, I obeyed. I slipped to the door and swung it open—and more than that, I asked him in.

We sat for a long time. I watched, dazed and enthralled, as the handsome English gentleman made my madre laugh. When was the last time I had heard such a sound?

Even Padre, in those last years, could not make her so gay.

But Rod. He was different, somehow. Different than anyone I'd met, in ways that made me half crazy to know him more. Goodness, was I going out of my mind?

Yes, I was. I knew I was. This was lunacy and it didn't even matter.

Hours passed. Smiling hours, laughing hours, dazzling hours. All through the ecstasy of his visit, I kept glancing to one of the windows, half expecting to see my shadow glowering through the smudged glass.

But the window was always empty.

The magic continued.

And it was not until eventide, when the window darkened in dusk, that Rod stood to leave. "A thousand pardons, but I fear if I do not make my exit, dear *Signora* Pisano might throw me out herself."

Another old, crackled chuckle. “Never, never, never,” in Italian. “You may come always if you wish.”

Rod grasped my hand. “Walk me out?”

“Of course.” We slipped outside, entwined together by our fingers, feeling more like one than two. “You are walking to your pensione?”

“Yes.”

We stopped along the road’s edge. Should have glanced around for my shadow, but it didn’t seem important. “Rod, I think that I—”

“Shhh.” His hand pressed into my lips. “I know what you’re going to say, darling.”

“Let me say it.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to say it.” His arms engulfed me, squeezed me, pulled me back again so I could see his face. “Love me, don’t you?”

“Like madness, *mi tesoro*.”

“Then don’t answer me when I ask you to marry me.”

“What?”

“I said don’t answer me, because I’m asking. I want you, love you...wild about you, darling, but please don’t answer.”

“Why not? Let me say yes.”

“Not yet.”

“When?”

“When I return. When everything is over.”

Something about the words made me still. I sought his eyes, but they didn’t comfort—only terrified.

“I wish I could have told you. I wish I could tell you even now.”

My breath hitched.

“Darling, there’s people in Gallicchio I must find. Do you understand me?”

Too well, but I couldn’t believe it.

“Already, I’ve got a bloke locked up, one we’re hoping will give us answers. Maybe that will fill in all the missing leads, bring the whole thing to an end, expose everyone.”

I wanted to melt, to die. Were it not for his arms—his cursed, blessed arms—I would have crumpled.

“Darling, I know you don’t understand any of this. Someday I’ll explain it. For now, though, I couldn’t possibly put you in harm’s way.” Closer to me, this stranger I trusted. Kissing my lips. Loving me. “We won’t see each other again. Not until everything is wrapped up, not until I’ve gone to London and come back again...hear me?”

I shuddered against a chest so warm and safe it made me ache.

“Then you can say yes.”

*No.*

“Then I may call you Laura.”

*Never.*

“Then we can live our lives on rooftops, if we please.”

The only time I’d ever climb another rooftop would be to hurdle myself over the edge, to end everything.

But he didn’t know my thoughts. He couldn’t read my terror. He didn’t even realize our last kiss was mingled with tears.

“So for now, my darling, goodbye.” He twisted the scarf from my neck, the green one, the one he’d invaded my bedroom to return. With a wink, a flash of a grin, he ripped away and left.

And all of my lifeblood went running to my feet.

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I WALKED, walked, walked everywhere. Didn't know where I was going and it didn't make a difference.

Knew all along, I guess. From the moment he walked into the jazz joint, sat down at a table, and looked around. He had none of the markings of an M16 agent.

But that was the biggest marking of all.

Now what?

He wouldn't stop until he knew everything. Until the painting was back in the National Gallery. Until every member of the *Piagenti Diavoli* was brought to justice.

Including me.

Then he would laugh at the mistake he'd almost made. He'd be glad he hadn't let me say yes. He'd be grateful, so grateful we never gave in to our madness and found a priest.

What a fool.

Not him.

Me.

The girl who should have known better, who should have foreseen the catastrophe, who should have listened to the only real family she had. Even if they were murderers.

When the night was too dark to see, I stumbled home. Via Amara mud splattered the back of my legs, but what did it matter?

Hopefully Madre hadn't waited up for me. Didn't know what I'd do if she had. Certainly couldn't face her, couldn't listen if she muttered praise for the man who'd made her laugh.

But when I crept through the door, the house was black. Good. Darkness I could handle, even relate to because—

“Welcome home, Brown Eyes.”

Every muscle froze. Couldn't see anything. Didn't have to. Only one man called me that.

The boss.

From the far left, close to Madre's rocker, a match struck. Her chair was empty.

"Where is she?" My voice—shrill, out of control, different than ever before. Where were my years of practice? I was going to mess it up, get myself killed. "Where is she?"

"At your feet."

At first I couldn't see. Then another match lit, faint and glowing, and the small light illuminated her frail body on the floor.

I buckled next to her. "No...no. Madre?" Groping for her shoulders, turning her over, chafing her cheeks. "Madre... Madre, answer me!"

I felt tears. Poor, sweet tears. How they chilled as they flowed past my shaking fingers.

"Madre, are you all right?"

I thought I heard a prayer, too weak to detect. Oh help me, but I couldn't bear it. *Madre, Madre, so sorry.*

Savage hands yanked me up. Too many to count. They slammed me backward, over furniture, into a wall that rattled with the weight of the impact.

Then the boss. He stood before me, smiling, the light of another match distorting his demented face. "Boys, step aside."

Shuffling noises, as five men scattered into darkness.

"Now." Deep, thick, syrupy. "Now, Brown Eyes, I've got a story."

Shaking, shaking so hard. Couldn't breathe.

"Only you know the ending."

"Please."

"Please nothing. Who is he?"

"Please—"

"Who is he? Because here's the story, Brown Eyes: your shadow's been picked up, baby. Yeah, that's right. Going to

the can and who knows if he'll talk. And know what he told us just before this calamity?" A finger jabbed into my chest. "Said he was following you—and a man."

"Irrelevant."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I-I do not know what you are t-talking about."

"I think you do. Boys?"

No answer, just more shuffling.

"I think the old *domna* does not like us in her house. Are we going to put up with such inhospitality?"

Bile eased up my throat. "No...no, do not touch her!"

Too late. I heard a thud, bones cracking, a moan so pitiful it made my vision spin. I lunged forward, screamed—

The boss's fist drove me back. First one blow, then another. My throat every time, until the air choked in and out, in and out, in and out. Fingers slipped into my hair. "Brown Eyes, how many times have I told you not to cross me?"

Still heard the smashes, the beating. No more moan, though. Dear heaven, why was there no moan?

"Make them stop." Blood in my mouth. "Make them stop...I will do a-anything."

"Anything? Interesting. Only seconds ago you knew nothing." Dragging me along the wall, banging my body into something hard, yanking me down to my knees.

Then I recognized it.

The cupboard.

"Pry open the doors, Brown Eyes."

Blind, sobbing, numb—but my fingers undid the latch, reached for the shawl, pulled out the painting. How the touch of it burned me. "Please...my madre..."

"Who is the man?"

"Rod...Rod Bishop."

“Agent?”

“Yes.”

“Staying?”

“At a pensione...the one on Via Beccaria...there right now.”

The boss eased the painting from my grasp. “Well done, my Brown Eyes. Your padre would have been proud.” He stood to his feet, a looming shadow, then his voice boomed throughout the room, “Boys, you know what to do. Via Beccaria.”

All the demons hurried away.

Ready to murder again.

Murder Rod.

“And as for you, Brown Eyes, I don’t suggest waiting for any dough from the family. We’ll be going on the lam after this. Hard to tell what your agent friend pried out of you.” His hooded, luminous eyes pierced through me. “And if I ever see you again, you’re a dead dame.”

Then he was gone.

*No, no.* With limbs that had no feeling, I crawled through the blackness. Bumped into Madre’s broken body. Pulled a limp head into my lap and pressed my cheek against hers. “Madre, listen to me.”

Her blood mingled with mine.

“I am so sorry. So sorry. Dear Madre, I am so sorry...”

But she wasn’t alive, so she couldn’t hear me. The longer I spoke, the colder grew her skin. And the longer I held her, the more every inch of me collapsed into oblivion.

*No, no, no.* On my lips, over and over again. I laid her back to the floor. I pushed back to my feet. I darted for the door and didn’t so much as look back.

*Sorry, so sorry.* I didn’t think about how I’d killed her. I didn’t think about Rod either. I didn’t wonder how long it

would be until he was dead or if he'd know I betrayed him or if he'd hate me with his last breath.

I only ran.

Far, far away.

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## PRESENT DAY...

*Strasbourg, France*

*September 1952*

EVERY EMOTION I ever expected plays across your face. I see Italy in your eyes—jazz music and green scarves and red-tiled rooftops. Funny, how one second can fling away all the years in between. Almost like they never were.

I know you don't know what to say. You always did before, so why shouldn't you now?

Only I don't either.

Don't know if we're strangers or two broken fragments of the same masterpiece. Don't know if I love you or hate you. Don't know if I want to keep on walking, or if I never want to move from this place.

Then you smile. First slowly, just at the corners, in a way that sort of trembles. Then fuller, with eyes that glitter and dance around my face. "Perfect season for mittens, hmm?"

I clench my fingers. Cold fingers—yes, very cold.

“I don’t suppose you’d want these now, would you?” You outstretch the knitted mittens, but I shake my head.

“No, no”—you stuff them back into your overcoat—“don’t suppose you would. Silly of me to ask. They’re not very becoming anyhow.”

Silence again.

Oh, why can’t I speak? Why can’t I tell you everything, let you see me as I am, let you know what I’ve done? But I can’t. Not ever. Shouldn’t be here, even now.

I start past you—

And you follow me. Stop me without a touch. Reach into your coat and swing out a flash of green. “See here, you must forgive me, but I’ve something of yours I never returned.”

Then it presses into my hands. Soft, silky, worn. My soul suffocates.

“Makes a lovely thing look lovelier.”

“You should not have kept it.”

“Well, I’m giving it back now, aren’t I?” You tug it toward my neck. “Here, let me help you on with it—”

I dart from your touch before it kills me. Only a fool would run, but I haven’t got a choice. Faster, faster, weaving through ladies and gentlemen and—

“Laura.” Your hand snatches my elbow, swings me against you. We’re standing in the middle of everything, but you don’t seem to notice and no one else seems to care. “Laura, darling, I can call you that, can’t I?”

I push against you. “Let me go—”

“I went back for you.”

“Please.”

“You weren’t there. I tried to find you. I waited years, but you never came back.”

I give up fighting. Quiver and die in your arms. Stare up at

you and let the demons of guilt have their way with me. “Sig. Bishop, you would not have wanted me to come back.”

“You don’t know what I want.”

“And you don’t know what I am.”

“Does it matter?” Your lips on mine, tasting just like they did fourteen years ago. “We can see the world, darling, from any rooftop you want. Remember how it was. Tell me you remember, darling...don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then say yes.”

“I cannot.”

“Darling, I’m begging.”

“We cannot.”

“Laura—”

“No.” With the last of my strength, I draw myself away from you. “If there was a Laura, Rod Bishop, she lived only in your imagination. You will not find her in Lauretta Pisano. You will not find her in me.”

Stunned, dazed, your eyes stay on mine. For the first time, I see glossy tears film your gaze, and the reality of your hurt makes me hollow.

Then I turn and walk away. I get lost in the people and noise of Rue du Dôme street. I clutch the scarf and move so fast that everything blurs.

Perhaps I could have said yes. Perhaps I should have. Perhaps the two of us—lonely, lost, insane creatures that we are—could have met with happiness for the first time in our lives.

But that would have meant telling you the truth.

And I’d rather say goodbye than do that.

As I reach the end of the street, I hail a taxicab and climb in next to a woman and her dog. The driver asks me where to, but I don’t know what to say so he starts driving anyway.

By and by, I roll down the window. I stare at all the rooftops and wonder what France would look like from their heights. But that's something I'll never know. Not ever.

With eyes that burn like fire, with a soul that leaks and bleeds, I ease my green scarf out the taxicab window.

It flutters, drifts, flies.

And the bitter wind carries it higher than any rooftop in my sight.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



WILLOWY WHISPER is a young Christian fiction author, graphic designer, and photographer. She lives in a beautiful place called West Virginia, nestled between mountain and field. She is the author of thirteen novels, eleven of which are published, and numerous short stories. She enjoys playing the piano, guitar, and ukulele. She is also a born-again believer in Jesus Christ, an incurable romantic, and a passionate dreamer. Find out more at: [hannahlinderbooks.com](http://hannahlinderbooks.com).

