<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death, Rape/Non-Con</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>Gen, F/M, M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>The Borgias (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Minor or Background Relationship(s), Cesare Borgia/ Lucrezia Borgia, Rodrigo Borgia/Vanozza Borgia, Rodrigo Borgia/ Giulia Farnesse, Micheletto Corella/ Pascal, Lucrezia Borgia/ Alphonse Trastamara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Cesare Borgia, Lucrezia Borgia, Juan Borgia, Micheletto Corella, Caterina Sforza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Sibling Incest, Ghosts, Horror, Witches, No Porn, Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, No Smut, Sibling Love, Sibling Rivalry, One-Sided Attraction, Eventual Romance, Dark, Poltergeists, Tragedy, Angst, Family Feels, Family Drama, Ghost Sex, Gothic, Implied/Referenced Rape/Non-con, not explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2014-03-09 Updated: 2018-11-25 Chapters: 30/32 Words: 158188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**An Italian Horror Story**

by moonphase9

**Summary**

Rodrigo moves his family from Spain to Rome, hoping for a new start and a new way to reconnect with his wife Vanozza. However, something is wrong with the house. Eerie figures and a twisted history begin to affect the family. Dark desires come to the surface and the family begin to fall prey to temptations.

**Notes**

See the end of the work for notes
This story is inspired by Season 1 of American Horror Story. You don't need to have watched the show and this doesn't really have any spoilers for it if you were planning on watching it one day. As the title suggests this is a horror story with scary elements in it.

The main plot is about the Borgias family. This is in order.

The secondary stories are side stories of past occupants. This isn't in order, but it should be easy to follow.

There's no porn (sorry guys- I'm no good at writing it). All the pairings are canon, but there's implied feelings from Micheletto towards Cesare initially.

Cesare and Lucrezia will eventually get together, as they did in canon, but it takes a long time (same as canon, basically).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Rodrigo how could you?!”

Lucrezia winced as she heard something smashing on the ground. Obviously mama had flung something at papa, perhaps a vase or one of their china plates. She could hear papa crying out that it hadn’t meant anything and that she was over-reacting.

She was on her bed, hugging her pillow tightly. She hated hearing them fight, and since the birth of little Joffre it seemed to be happening more often. She knew what her mama knew; that papa was getting bored and so was beginning to stray.

However, this time had been too far, for any of them.

A disgusted tsk behind her interrupted her thoughts. She turned to look at her brothers. Juan, who had made the sound, had his arms crossed and his eyes burned. “We’re such a stereotype,” he complained, “the Spanish family fighting and throwing crockery and having wild sex wherever we can.”

“It is a little embarrassing,” muttered Cesare, who was sitting behind a computer apparently completely unperturbed by the situation between their parents. Lucrezia stared at him. Cesare had been the one who’d caught papa having sex with Giulia, their foster sister, in their parent’s bed. She didn’t understand how he could be so calm.

“Well,” Juan shuffled a little, not used to having Cesare agree with him on anything, “not all bad. The wild sex thing is pretty cool, other than the fact that she was the foster sister of course. That’s a bit weird.” He brushed his hand through his hair and sighed, “oh I don’t care, I’m getting out of here,” he opened up the window and swung his leg out, “call me when mama ends up forgiving him ok?” he leapt out with respectable agility and vanished into the night.
Lucrezia looked at a sleeping Joffre who was tucked into bed beside her. He was only seven years old. “Thank God he’s sleeping through this,” she muttered, “He’s been raised on angry voices and bitterness.”

“It’s father’s fault,” answered Cesare, his eyes narrowing, “I wish mama wouldn’t forgive him. I wish we could just leave with her, you, me and Joffre. We could go live by the sea-side, like mama always wanted. We could take on her second name and start all over again.”

“No Juan?”

He loves father more than he loves us,” he replied coldly.

Lucrezia said nothing, knowing that the sibling rivalry between her brothers was another wedge in their family. Instead she walked over to him and hugged him tightly from behind. He sighed and leaned back into her. She buried her face in his hair and for that moment revelled in how much she loved her brother.

The screaming had stopped now, replaced with sound of mama weeping piteously and papa trying to talk to her quietly. The siblings walked over to the bed and climbed in, joining Joffre. Hugging one another, they fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

This story isn't beta'd so please point out any errors in grammar, spelling, continuity etc.
Arriving at the new home

Chapter Notes

The Alfonse here is not the Alphonso who Lucrezia marries in the series. This Alfonse is the giggling Prince with the bowl haircut in series 1 who died horribly.

Likewise, Paolo Orsini is not the stable boy who Lucrezia dates. This Paolo is the tall blond guy from Cesare's Band Of Bastards.

Both the other Paolo and Alphonse will turn up later in the story though. I suppose names like Paolo and Alphonse were the equivalents of today's Jim and Steve.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

August 1930

Two men stood outside a large Victorian townhouse. It was a particularly hot summer, the humming of insects were noisy in the long dry grass. In the distance, fancy cars could be heard driving up the new road. The area was for the wealthy.

The smaller of the two men, sweating and anxious, pushed his glasses up the ridge of his nose. “Much better than your old place Nicci,” he said, “much better. More in standing with our station, don’t you think?”

Tall and willowy, the older of the men looked down at his younger brother, “nothing will ever get them to respect us as much as you want,” he said quietly, in case anyone could hear; Mussolini spies were everywhere.

Johannes shrugged, looking sulky, “well here we can both work on our mutual papers. The University of Rome is the most prestigious in the country; we get in good with them no one can deny our Nordic intelligence.”

Nicolai harrumphed, privately thinking all the Aryan race stuff which was so popular right now was a load of hogwash. “How did you afford this?” he asked, turning to his brother, “when you told me you had a house for us in Rome I assumed we’d be sharing with the Medici’s in that hovel they call a student house.”

“The last man who lived here,” Johannes shrugged, turning to get their bags out of the boot of their car, “he was unsavoury. French, you know, didn’t understand the ways of Rome. He’s gone now.”

“Of course,” muttered Nicolai, looking back at the house gravelly. “It does have an air of melancholy about it,” he said at last, “and despite being in a neighbourhood it seems peculiarly detached. That suits me quite well. Very well Johannes, let us try again.”

“Excellent,” cried Johannes, bouncing on the balls of his feet, “excellent!”

Present Day

One month after the infamous ‘Giulia’ fiasco, Rodrigo arrived outside his new home with his family in tow. Cesare and Juan had argued most of the way, but thankfully they now sat in silent
awe of the huge house that stood before them.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?” he crooned cheerfully. “I got it for a fraction of the standard housing price!” he chuckled, he loved the fact that he was one the best, no, the best, businessmen he knew.

The family all stepped out of the family car and looked about. It was a tall Victorian-style house, built in the late 1800s. “The people who lived here beforehand already renovated everything,” he said, not mentioning to his family the fate of the previous occupants. There was no need to tell anyone, he’d decided, it would only frighten them; the children were overly-excitable and Vanozza was in a strange state of mind, like a wild animal he knew she was ready to flee at any moment. He needed to keep her calm and happy, to earn her trust back.

There was a reasonable sized garden which stretched from the front of the house round to the back. It wasn’t pretty, there were no flowers, just limp grass and several untamed bushes. Along the brick wall were tall trees, whose canopies stretched over the garden, making it very dark and shadowed. In the back garden there was a pond that looked like little more than an overly large puddle. The drive was large and gravelled.

The family walked up onto the porch and Rodrigo pointed to the front door, grinning, “look,” he said, above the door was a stained glass picture, “a bull! Haha, like the Borgia Bull, our crest is already here! If that doesn’t prove we were destined to be here, I don’t know what is!”

He pushed open the door revealing the inside. The house was dark. There were wood panel all along the floor and walls and ceilings. A large, wide staircase led the way to the first and second floor. The teenagers sped up them immediately, all wanting to pick out their own rooms. Rodrigo chuckled warmly, happy to let them battle it out between themselves.

He followed Vanozza into the kitchen. It was at odds with the rest of the house, completely modern with marble counters and cool metal appliances.

“What do you think of the house my love?”

Her hand brushed against the sides. She turned and looked at him, her eyes the same chocolate brown as her locks, she reminded him so much of Cesare at times. “How did you get somewhere like this so cheap?” she said in a firm voice.

*Tell the truth*, said a voice in the back of his mind, *tell the truth!*

“I’m an excellent businessman!” he smiled, the lie leaving his mouth before he had even thought about it. He walked over to her and hugged her tightly before she could read the lie in his face. “I just want us to be happy here,” he whispered, allowing the sincerity to fill his tone, “I want us and the children to live here, a nice long boring life!”

He smiled warmly as he felt her hands cautiously run up his back, reciprocating the hug just a little. Rodrigo was praying she broke down the invisible walls soon. They hadn’t made love in a month, and he was determined to remain faithful. Therefore he was dying, his libido a wild animal beating against a metal cage. Trying his luck he kissed her hair and went to move down to her face, but she pushed him away.

He let out a grunt of frustration, but said nothing.

*October 2011*
“This is it Roberto, our new start!” Paolo Orsini brushed a hand through his thick blond hair and grinned down at a small brunet.

It was an autumn morning; the sky was a deep sapphire blue and a chill was heavy in the air. It was the sort of crisp, clear morning that always made Paolo feel renewed and energised. The trees were shades of gold and red; the richly coloured leaves falling from their mother branches and blanketing the weak, faded grass. The cold wind blew, lifting the golden leaves to dance around the two men.

The house they had bought looked impressive amid such stunning surroundings.

“It’s huge,” the smaller man said taking in the house with wide eyes, “Can we really afford a place like this? Paolo, I’m not sure…”

“Everything’s taken care of,” sighed Paolo, he hated it when Roberto hadn’t faith in him, “trust me,” he wrapped an arm around the brunet. Things had gotten difficult between them in the last house, what with Paolo’s lack of commitment and Roberto’s awful extended family, but that was all going to change now.

“Everything is going to work out,” continued Paolo, hugging his boyfriend, “Rome is a place of opportunity and equality. Our lives start anew right here!”

Present Day

Juan and Lucrezia ran hand in hand down the first floor corridor; the first and second corridors both containing a large bedroom, a bathroom and a smaller bedroom.

“This room would be perfect for you!” shouted Juan. In front of them was a room painted a pale blue, the same colour as Lucrezia’s eyes. It was a little old fashioned, the bed was made of pinewood and had a white canopy over it. She smiled, “it’s beautiful Juan, it’s a room for a princess.”

“Oh, a princess room, we’d better let Cesare stay here then!”

They laughed, Lucrezia hitting his arm lightly.

Meanwhile, on the second floor, Princess Cesare stood with Joffre in a little green room. It was a corner room, and so slightly smaller than the others. But it was cute.

“It’s not as nice as the room next door!” pouted Joffre, "why can't I have that room instead?"

Cesare smiled patiently, “yes but that room is the master bedroom, it belongs to whoever owns the house. So that would be mother and father. You want them to have the best don’t you?”

Joffre nodded, though the pout hadn’t dissipated.

“You’re the closest to mother and father,” Cesare continued, “so you get to always be the first in their room. You’d get to wake them up every day, and if you have a scary dream, you can go right next door and they’ll be there.”

“That’s not so bad,” shrugged the seven year old, prompting Cesare to rub the top of his head.

Leaving the little one to unpack his toys alone, Cesare walked into the hallway and saw the stairs leading to the attic. He climbed up and found another room. It must have belonged to a teenager before him. It was a little bare, but add some posters on the walls and a few of his own collections
it would become homely.

He sat on the bed. There was only one window, a round one above the bed. He looked out of it. He felt almost like he was on a ship. The view was of the back of the house. He could see the neighbourhood stretching out into the distance. At the front was his back garden. It was so bare.

He sat back on his bed. There was something melancholy about the house. Maybe his family could fix it with positive vibes but...he doubted it.

He remembered back to when mama had sat them down and told them that they all had to leave Spain. Lucrezia had cried because she was going to miss her old friends. The whole thing had been hard enough, the empty look in his mama’s eyes, the way she had forgiven father again, the fate of poor Giulia who everyone was trying to avoid talking about, the move which would surely be disruptive and not solve anything, but then Lucrezia’s tears all made it too much. He had cursed his father out and stormed away from the table. Since then he and his father hadn’t really spoken. There was a tension in the air, simmering between them.

“You should leave this house,” sneered a voice Cesare had never heard before. He sat up and looked towards the attic stairs. A boy with a stupid haircut was looking at him, his lip curled up slightly.

“Who the hell are you?” cried Cesare.

“I’m your neighbour,” said the boy, “the name’s Alfonse. Alfonse Sforza.”

“How did you get in?”

“You should leave the house you know,” Alfonse chimed in his strange sing-song voice, “it’s dangerous. Everyone who comes here ends up dying tragically, or horribly.”

Cesare stood up and walked towards the boy. The child was strange. He was around the same age as Cesare but it was hard to tell.

“What do you mean?”

The boy leaned in, a mad glint in his eye and whispered, “the last couple who lived here ended up dying. The one shot himself. The other drowned in the bath. My mother found them. She was friends with them. She came in and found their corpses. It’s always like that with this house.”

“What, it’s normal? What about the people before them? It could have just been that one couple.”

“I’m not Google” sneered Alfonse, “look it up if you care enough. I just like to give people fair warning.”

“Does your mom know you go around scaring people? Or trying to at least?”

“She’s downstairs with your parents. Come find out for yourself.”

“We weren’t expecting guests so soon,” Vanozza said whilst placing out a small china tea set from a cardboard box. “Rodrigo and I only just arrived with the children.”
“I like to make myself known as soon as possible,” smiled a handsome brunette. “I understand that you have quite a number of children, judging by the family wagon outside!”

“Yes,” said Rodrigo, torn between happiness and despair on discovering their neighbour was a beautiful woman, “three boys and a girl.”

“How wonderful, I have four children myself. Ah, here’s one!” She smiled at the two boys who appeared in the doorway, “This is my third-born, Alfonse.” She motioned towards the peculiar young man with the strange haircut.

“And this is our oldest Cesare,” said Vanozza as the two boys sat at the table.

“Hello Cesare,” the brunette grinned like a shark.

Cesare gulped, there was something very powerful, and weirdly sexy, about this woman. He looked up at his father and recognised the slightly bewildered and enchanted look. He hoped he didn’t look at stupid as his father.

Determined to look grown-up and dignified, Cesare held out his hand and shook hers, greeting her formally.

“My name is Mrs Sforza,” she said, “but as you are a young gentleman you may call me Catherina.”

Vanozza sat down and poured everyone a cup of tea. Cesare noticed she was resolutely not looking at Rodrigo, as if she was turning a blind eye to his obvious crushing on their neighbour. Cesare’s heart became a tad stonier as he realised his father had, somehow, managed to disappoint him again. They’d scarcely been in their new home for an hour before Rodrigo was sniffing out potential mistresses.

“Catherina, what a lovely name,” Vanozza said warmly, her words not matching her hardened face, “we Borgias are of Spanish stock, but we love Italian names. Catherina and Alfonse; they sound so pretty.”

Catherina smiled before sipping her tea. She glanced back at Cesare with a look so seductive that he almost whined in sexual desperation. Instead Cesare looked over at Alfonse who, to Cesare’s great annoyance, was smirking at Cesare as if he knew exactly what he was thinking.

“Would you ever have any more children?” asked Catherina after a moment.

“Oh no, I’m too old now!” laughed Vanozza, sitting down at the table as she had finished serving everyone and tucking a hair behind her ear to hide her discomfort. As soon as she thought of her age she immediately flashed back to her ex-foster-child Giulia, someone who was so young and so luscious. She had been a fool to trust Rodrigo around such a specimen...

“Nonsense!” Catherina interrupted her thoughts, “I believe we are about the same age. I would love to have more children. ‘Ten more sons’ I say! Nowadays it isn’t so difficult. But if the thought of child-birth worries you, how about adopting them, or fostering? I was thinking of doing one of those two things.”

A tension suddenly exploded over the kitchen. The Borgias stayed quiet, the Sforza’s watching them closely until Vanozza finally said, “well, we have fostered in the past,” she glanced at Rodrigo, “and truth be told being a mother is what I love most, so I would like to foster again. My children are all growing older, Joffre is the youngest but he’s seven. It seemed like only yesterday that Cesare here was the same age. Soon he and Juan will be old enough to leave for university.”
She looked back at Catherina and after what seemed like a moment’s contemplation added, “before we had fostered a teenage girl, but I think I would prefer a baby this time.”

“Oh definitely,” said Catherina, “it’s waste of time having any child over the age of five, they’re fair too broken by that point.”

The Borgias all shifted uncomfortably, and Cesare found himself frowning. “They’re not broken,” he said hotly, “that’s cruel of you to say, they need help.” He refused to look at his father but couldn’t help but bite out, “people in the system take advantage of them. They’re supposed to be protected by their foster parents but often that doesn’t happen. That’s not their fault.”

He stood up and stormed out of the kitchen, refusing to care how his parents would explain away his behaviour; they would certainly never tell Catherina the truth, that would be too embarrassing and his family were masters of denial.

Chapter End Notes

This story isn't beta'd so please point out any errors in grammar, spelling, continuity etc.
History

Chapter Notes

Early chapters skip quite a bit between the past and present. This will lessen as the story develops and we learn who everyone is and what their motivations are.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

November 2011

Paolo watched his boyfriend anxiously. He was sitting amongst historical papers, a laptop in front of him, learning all about the history of their house. Paolo had noticed his boyfriend’s slowly mounting obsession with the house, but now for the first time he was becoming seriously worried.

The bills were also piling up and he didn’t have the guts to tell Roberto.

“Come to bed,” he said tiredly.

“Did you know,” Roberto responded, “that a guy here threw a child into the basement? It was his own nephew. The fall killed the kid. What kind of monster does that?”

Paolo sighed, “Roberto, please, forget all this and come to bed. It’s late.”

“But this is why the house is haunted! Look at it’s past… there has to be a link…”

“The house is haunted? What are you on about?”

Roberto paused, like he’d said something he hadn’t meant to. Paolo felt his anger growing. “Do you seriously think it’s haunted? Are you seeing things? Oh my god…”

Roberto stood, “I’m not crazy! I just meant this house has a lot of atmosphere. I’m stuck here all day so this is the only thing that is worth doing. This and the redecorating.”

Paolo threw up his hands, “I’m going to bed, I’m sick of this. Join me if you want to.”

Roberto watched him leave. Was he going crazy? Since they moved in Roberto had seen a lot of strange and frightening things, but his boyfriend never noticed anything. Maybe if he could find evidence he could prove once and for all if he was going crazy, or that the house was haunted.

He took a flashlight and went out into the foyer. He made his way to the basement door and opened it slowly. He put on his flashlight and scanned the area. It looked like an ordinary basement.

He went inside.

The door shut behind him. He screamed. And screamed. And screamed.

And then stopped.

Present Day

Cesare had slowed in the hallway as he noticed a small door left open. He pulled it open and saw
stairs leading down into pure darkness. “It must lead to the basement,” he thought. If it was open than that meant someone must have gone down there. He walked down the steps slowly.

“Hey,” he called, “Lucrezia, Juan, Joffre? Who’s down here?” He heard a sound behind him, like feet running quickly, which made him leap up and turn around in one swift motion like a cat. “Who’s here?” he called, “Juan? Stop being a jerk!”

Cesare was standing in a spot of light beaming down from the hallway through the door. All around him was shadow. He could just about make out shelves with, what looked like, jars on them.

A ball rolled out of the darkness and hit one of his converse trainers.

He bent down and picked it up, now convinced that it was Juan being an arse. He looked back at the stairs. He could just leave and refuse to play this game, but then he didn’t want Juan calling him a coward. He could imagine them all sitting at dinner, Juan telling everyone how Cesare ran out of the basement in fear. Father would laugh no doubt, maybe even Lucrezia.

Cesare scowled, his decision made. He walked into the darkness following the direction the ball had come from.

December 1995

Sancia wept piteously. She was in agony; her private area was bleeding profusely as she crawled along the hallway of the first floor, the fire was so severe that her skin was already cracked and burning, sizzling up in to a burnt husk. Smoke was all around her, and it wasn’t like in the films were there is lots of light from the fire- no- rather the smoke was so thick and black that she couldn’t see anything. The flames were chucks of red and amber horror flickering between the billowing clouds.

“My baby!” she screamed, her throat tearing from the power of her scream and the dryness of the atmosphere, “where’s my baby?”

She broke down into sobs, her long black hair and pretty, white night dress catching fire. She was set alight.

Luckily, she choked to death before the flames could get to her.

Present Day

As tense, but polite, conversation was made below on the ground floor, little Joffre was happily playing with some of his toys. Despite having three siblings he was often left alone. He was the youngest and they were all teenagers. None of them played with him anymore. Lucrezia used to, but then she discovered make-up and boys and to him his brothers always seemed to be the same as grown-ups.

His favourite toy was a stuffed animal, a dove specifically. He made his dove fly around his room, pretending that the dove was his friend and whenever things became too difficult his winged friend would pick him up and fly him away to another world.

“What a lovely little boy you are.”

Joffre looked up to see his wardrobe was open. Inside it was young woman was watching him.

He hugged his dove tightly to his chest. “Who-who are you?”
“Don’t be scared,” she laughed. She stepped out of the wardrobe and he smiled. She was wearing a long white dress. Her hair was long and black and curled. She was beautiful.

“Are you an angel?” he whispered in awe.

“Yes,” she smiled, “I’m your guardian angel. Only you can see me, isn’t that fun!”

He nodded. “Do you have wings?”

“Yes, but I cannot show them to you. They are so bright they would hurt your eyes.”

Joffre accepted this easily. His parents had told him something similar about the sun. He looked a little bashful and said, “would you mind playing with me?”

She laughed again and lifted him up, “Oh sweet child, I would love to play with you!”

She enveloped them both in a bright white light, and like that, Joffre and the mysterious lady disappeared.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen there was an awkward silence before, “I’m sorry about Cesare,” said Vanozza.

Alphonse was biting the insides of his mouth desperately holding in a bout of manic laughter. This family, they had been in the house for a couple of hours and yet already they were unravelling! Though it was also possible that they were an emotional mess beforehand, as many of the house’s previous victims were...

Catherina contained far more self-control than her progeny and instead said with dignity, “it’s quite alright. Moving home is extremely stressful and I know what teenage boys are like; mine are often prone to acts of violence and fits of hysteria.”

Vanozza paused for a moment, and gave Catherina an odd look. “Really? Are...are they dangerous at all?” She glanced at Alphonse, who leered at her in response. She barely managed to stop her lip from curling; she did not like this little boy.

“Of course not!” Catherina laughed loudly, making Vanozza feel very stupid and paranoid suddenly. “No, I just mean that, like normal teenage boys, they can be quite dramatic and boisterous.”

Rodrigo growled in quiet annoyance, “Ours are the same. Juan isn’t so bad but Cesare can be very difficult.”

Vanozza scowled and hissed in a quiet voice, “Cesare is an angel compared to Juan!”

The atmosphere suddenly became taut again. Vanozza sipped her cooling tea and Rodrigo looked as if he wanted to run to the hills. Catherina smiled and soaked it all in, whereas most decent people would leave, she happily stayed just to continue the tension.

“You know,” she began after a few moments, “this house has a bit of a history. I’m sure you got it at a bargain, though I’m surprised you agreed to come here.”

Rodrigo shifted in his chair uncomfortably and Vanozza looked suspicious, “what do you mean?”
she inquired at once, “what history?”

“Oh I’m just a little superstitious,” Catherina laughed throatily, “pay no mind to me. But I was always taught that when someone died violently, they haunted the place of their death.” She sighed and looked around the kitchen, “those poor, poor men.” She glanced at Vanozza, “two gays. They died here. It wasn’t pretty, and I would know because unfortunately I found them.”

“How did they die?” Vanozza looked pale, but not with fear, with growing anger. Rodrigo glanced at the kitchen door wondering how pathetic it would look if he suddenly ran away.

“It was a murder-suicide,” she said plainly, before suddenly looking surprised and sitting up out of her seat to declare, “surely you knew? The agent would have been required to tell you!”

Vanozza pressed her lips so tightly together they turned as pale as the rest of her face. “I didn’t meet the woman who sold this house,” she ground out, “my husband dealt with the sale. Rodrigo, did she tell you about the previous occupants?”

Rodrigo flailed a little, as he was wont to do whenever he became flustered, “well...yes, but it hardly matters my love! I mean, as Ms Sforza rightly assumes, it’s not as if we’re superstitious.”

Vanozza looked away from him, the fury of having truths hidden from her (again) curling and boiling in her stomach, “Catherina, how did they die, if you don’t mind reliving the awful circumstances?”

Catherina sipped her tea delicately, no sign of distress on her face at all, “well I shall try,” she said lightly, “the one, the little one, shot his lover in the head. Then he drowned himself in the first floor bathroom. It was very sad. Very tragic. They were so in love at the start, but pressure built up and the relationship fell apart. I believe the one had an affair, or so the murderous one believed, at least.”

Vanozza sat on a kitchen chair, “how awful,” she muttered, “what were their names?”

“They were the Orsini’s. Roberto and Paolo. Nice boys, but they turned dark,” Catherina got up, at long last deciding to leave the couple in peace, at least for now, “they turned very dark. It was a shame.” She looked around the room one last time before finally making her excuses, and exiting with her son.

The couple sat in silence for a few minutes until Vanozza whirled towards Rodrigo, who instantly looked defensive.

“Well Rodrgio? Oh Great Manipulator! Oh Fantastic Businessman?!” She laughed mockingly, though no humour was in it, “I cannot believe you, taking us to a place like this!”

“What’s the issue here?” he cried, insulted by her scorn, “I don’t understand why you are upset? It’s a large house and we got a great deal on it. It’s fraction of the other houses on this street, in this neighbourhood even!”

She folded her arms and bit her lips, a habit she had developed whenever she was holding back on speaking her mind whenever he said anything she found particularly obnoxious. Rodrigo supposed that he should dislike it when she did that, but he didn’t. In fact, he always thought she looked quite sexy in that pose. He grinned, sensing her regaining her control and steadily backing down.

“Look, it’s not as if anything bad will happen to us.” He continued, “One bad thing happened in this house. It’s the same in any home. People die or there’s some other sort of tragedy. It doesn’t mean anything. We’re here now.” He had come close enough to cup her chin, lifting her up so that
her dark eyes would meet her own, “it’s not as if there are ghosts here!”

He chuckled at his own joke, but Vanozza was silent. She didn’t like what was happening. It seemed wrong, it all seemed wrong. Uncrossing her arms she left the kitchen, suddenly she felt the urge to find all her children to rally them together.

Meanwhile, down in the basement Cesare’s eyes had gotten used to the dark. He looked at the jars on the shelves. He wasn’t sure but it looked like there were actual parts of animals in them; things such as eyes and hunks of flesh. I one he swore he saw a baby’s foot, but that had made him throw himself backwards and he had been too frightened to check a second time. The basement was huge. It twisted and turned, almost like a labyrinth. He wondered if there was a Minotaur down there.

*Father would like that,* he thought bitterly, *a half man, half bull. He’d see it as more symbolism.*

His senses suddenly heightened again when he heard a soft scratching against a hard surface. He gulped and felt all the hair on his skin rising. He walked slowly in the darkness, keeping on hand on the wall next to him on his right-hand side. On his left side was the infinite darkness which hid the shelves within them, he didn’t want to go near them again. In front, all he could see was black. It was as if it were getting darker and his eyes could not adjust to it.

He stopped walking.

He could hear a raspy sort of breathing.

He mouthed Juan’s name, but he couldn’t bring himself to call it out. A deafening fear came over him, a kind he had never felt before, blocking out all his thoughts, making him focus on nothing but that breathing and the darkness.

Cesare squinted. Was there something in there? Some sort of shape...a face?

Yes, there was some sort of face. It was hollowed out by the darkness but he could just about make out pale flesh, a thin nose and shadowed eye sockets.

He frowned, was he just seeing things in the darkness or-

The thing suddenly flew towards him. Its mouth was open and a terrible, inhuman shriek filled the basement. Cesare let out a scream and felt himself being thrown backwards. He closed his eyes and felt himself clawing at the concrete floor.

This went on for a few seconds before he realised the screaming had stopped.

He opened his eyes and looked around. He was covered in sweat. The cold light of day was drifting in from a small window in the basement. The scratching noise was closer now.

He turned to his left quickly and saw Juan sitting with wide eyes scratching absent-mindedly on the floor. Cesare ran to his brother and shook him, “Juan, Juan! Snap out of it!”

The younger brother blinked, looking a little startled.

“Cesare? Where are we?”

“In the basement,” Cesare was ashamed to hear his voice trembling. He waited for Juan’s mockery,
but none came.

“Let’s get out of here,” Juan grabbed Cesare’s hand and together to boys ran out of the (seemingly much smaller) basement back into the ground floor hallway.

Chapter End Notes

This story isn't beta'd so please point out any errors in grammar, spelling, continuity etc.
Present Day

Upstairs, on the first floor, Cesare and Juan stood outside of Juan’s bedroom. The boys had run up the stairs at a rapid speed, only just stopping now to catch their breaths.

Cesare looked around the hall, it suddenly seemed dark and frightening. Gulping he glanced at Juan. It looked like he was shaking a little.

“What happened down there?” croaked Cesare after a moment.

Juan sighed and shrugged, “I dunno,” he whined slightly, “everything went weird. I don’t want to talk about it. This is my room. Now go away.”

He stormed into a room painted a Spanish red and slammed the door in Cesare’s face. Normally Cesare would open the door and kick Juan’s ass for being so ignorant, but after the weirdness in the basement, he decided to let it fly. In all honesty he didn’t want to talk about it either. He’d only mentioned it because he was worried he’d go insane if neither of them acknowledged what had happened.

Turning around, he heard music playing softly. It was a French song. Cesare smiled softly. He looked up at the bedroom door. It was painted white and had a little wooden sign on it which read ‘Lucrezia’s room.’ It was cute, little hearts and flowers decorated the words. Lucrezia had made it when she was ten but had treasured it, like all her childhood objects, with powerful sentimentality. He was so aware of how innocent she was.

He groaned quietly and leaned his head on the bedroom door. The singer, a woman, sung softly and delicately. It soothed his fears and he could put the fears from the basement in to the back of his mind. After preparing himself, Cesare knocked on the door and, after hearing a cheerful, ‘come in!’ obeyed his sister’s command and entered.

“Cesare!” she grinned. Her room was full of boxes, but she had most of them already emptied.

“You’ve wasted no time,” he smirked at her and she melted at the sight of it.

“I’m like mama, I like to just get on with things. I love this room, Juan picked it out for me and I’m glad he suggested it.”

“You’re far away from me. I’m in the attic.”

She pulled a face of childish discontent before crossing the room to embrace him. He lowered his head buried his face in her golden hair. She smelt of peaseblossom and happiness.

“You shall have to come down often. Just to see me. You can sleep in here if you like, we could share the bed. I wouldn’t mind. It’d be like we were children again.”

He pushed her away gently. “What’s playing?”

“It’s the new album by Couer De Pirate. She has an angelic voice. I wish I sounded like her.”
“You do have an angel’s voice.” Said Cesare matter-of-factly. “You look like one too. It’s why I worry so much about you going to this new school.”

“Well you shouldn’t, I’m capable of looking after myself.” She smiled at him and he felt his body screaming at him to never let her out the house, to never let any boy gaze at her visage. The world was too violent and she was too sweet.

“Are you alright?” she asked after a short silence, “you seem...” she struggled to find the right term, “well...out of sorts. What’s wrong? Has something happened?”

Cesare thought of the face in the darkness. He thought about the terrible screams and how he and Juan ran upstairs whilst holding hands, like two terrified children, all enmity between them forgotten in that moment of complete terror.

“No,” he forced a smile to his lips, “no, I’m ok.”

She looked unconvinced.

“I swear; I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“That’s true,” she kissed him on the cheek. Cesare excused himself, saying he still needed to unpack before hurrying out of the room and upstairs. He passed Joffre’s green room, not noticing that the boy was no longer in it and that toys lay abandoned on the floor, and rushed up into the attic room.

He sat down on his un-made bed. He felt bad. He’d never lied to Lucrezia before.

But the truth was too crazy, a voice in his head reasoned, it would only scare her. The lie was necessary to protect her.

December 1953

The Geffen family were celebrating a muted Hanukkah. Mattai had tried to convince his two children to play a game of Dreidel but they were more interested in watching television.

It had nearly been enough to send Mattai into one of his increasingly common fits of rage, but tonight he had managed to calm himself back down. It was an important part of the year for the Jewish people and Mattai was aware that he had been unlike himself recently and that he had alienated his own family; he did not want to continue the pattern, he wanted things to improve and get back to how they once were.

The Geffens had one black and white TV in their sitting room. In their old neighbourhood not many people had such a luxurious item and the family had been subjected to a lot of abuse. Since moving to Italy, specifically a swanky district outside of Rome, all the families had televisions and so they had not been abused for being richer than anyone else.

But that wasn’t to say they were not resented.

He knew his children did not want to play, or even light the candles on the Hanukkah, because they were ashamed of their own culture and identity. They were undoubtedly being abused for their Jewish heritage, and his own behaviour had not helped matters.

He went to his wife who was making Latkes in kitchen. He hugged her from behind, smelling her sweet hair. She was a beauty, buxom and healthily round, with long black hair that fell in long curls, tan skin that seemed resistant to age and large pale green eyes. He was lucky to have as a
wife, a woman who had stuck with him throughout their hardships, throughout the prejudice, throughout the recent lack of funds and with his bad temper.

“The children are unhappy,” she murmured as he kissed her cheek. “They say the children at school laugh at them. They want to celebrate Christmas, not Hanukah.”

“If there was a Jewish school I could send them to I would,” he answered, “but Burckhardt’s School for Excellence is the best school in the county. I doubt they would receive less bigotry in a local comprehensive.”

“Maybe,” she turned back to look at him, “maybe we could go somewhere else?”

“Move? Again? Sarah, you know we cannot afford this! All the money is in this house.”

“This house,” she looked around, “I swear it has been our undoing.”

“Our undoing has been the conflict in the Home Land.”

“America may be friendly to us.”

“Lies, they are not friendly. They dislike the Jew as much as anyone else, and with this so-called war they are all crazy now. It’s the same with Britain. No, southern Europe is the best. We are still close enough to the East to return home quickly should we ever need to.”

Sarah finished off her Latkes and put them on a plate. “I was talking to a neighbour today. She is the only one on the street who will speak to me. She said that a woman, an American, was killed by her husband in this house. That they were overcome with paranoia about the Russians and went crazy.” She looked at him. “I do not believe this. I think there is something wicked in this house. I think it killed the American woman.”

“Why would you think that?” He tried to scoff but found he couldn’t. Her words resonated within him. There was something off about the house. When they had first arrived they had felt so happy, so full of hope for a change in their circumstances but somehow things had gotten even more difficult.

“I feel uneasy here.” She answered slowly, knowing she could not fully explain how she knew the house was evil, “I am isolated. We are isolated. We have no friends. We have no allies. We are in danger. Even you...you are different sometimes. You talk in your sleep. You are always restless. There is a rage in you now, an anger. It is as if something is feeding it’s fury into you and then you release it. You scream at me and the children, you frighten us sometimes!”

She picked up the plate and left the kitchen in a hurry, her husband followed her into the foyer, took her arm and turned her so that she faced him again. They stood in front of the front door. The foyer was dimly lit, as the house often was, making Sarah’s hair appear such an inky black that it belonged in a renaissance painting more than real life.

“This is just because of where we have come from.” He said reasonably, “We are both having flashbacks and bad memories of our old lives but that will change. I’m probably suffering from the previous shock and horrors we endured. We were in danger before but now we are safe. I will get better. We just need to play the game. We need to act as these people. Get along with them, keep ourselves free from any reproach. They will soon come to respect us, even like us.”

“And how many years will that take?” she said in frustration, “prejudice never e-”

She never got to finish her sentence because at that moment something was thrown through the
glass above the door and hit her on the face.

Blood spattered instantly against the wall opposite.

She fell to the ground heavily, just as the children ran out of the living room. They both stared in horror. Dark red blood pooled around her head. The side of her face that had been hit, the only side showing as she was lying on her side, was disfigured and bloody.

Their daughter backed away and covered her mouth whilst their son ran to the door and ripped it open.

“Cowards!” he screamed in the streets, “bigoted cowards!” He ran out, screaming abuse. No one tried to stop him.

Mattai walked stiffly up to Sarah, and then bent to lifted her head. They had thrown a large brick, one with a piece of paper tied on to it. The word ‘KiKes’ scrawled on with a black felt tip pen. It was so juvenile and so petty. Tears welled in his eyes and fell on to his wife’s face. With a shaking hand he felt for a pulse. There was none.

His daughter Rebekah was already on the phone desperately calling the police. Her accent was still strong; they would know she was Jewish. That would mean that no officer was going to rush out to help them. They were on their own. No justice would be served.

Mattai bowed his head and wept. His wife was dead.

Present Day

Only moments after arriving back in his room, there was a knock on Cesare’s door. It was his mother.

He gave her a quick, perfunctory smile before returning to his un-packing.

“Will you come downstairs in a few minutes?” she asked, “I want the family to have lunch together.”

“Can’t I stay? I have unpacking to do. I’m not nearly done.”

“I want the family together,” Vanozza repeated in a tone that demanded her son not refuse her, “I really want us to spend more time together. We can have sandwiches. The neighbours are gone now, if that helps.”

Cesare put down the record he was holding and held his mother’s gaze, “I didn’t like that lady or her son.”

Vanozza gave him a knowing smirk, “did you not? I saw you ogling her. You’re as bad as your papa.”

Cesare blushed and looked away. “Don’t say that,” he whispered.

Vanozza’s smile slipped away and she suddenly felt bad. “I’m sorry.” A beat. “Your papa isn’t all bad. He’s trying.”

Not hard enough and he’ll soon slip up anyway, Cesare thought, but he kept silent because he didn’t want to upset mama.

Vanozza looked around the room, “is Joffre not here?”
“He’s in his room. The little green one. I thought he should be by you and father.”

“He isn’t in there, I checked. Perhaps he is with Juan. He wouldn’t open the door when I knocked.”

She began to walk down stairs and Cesare followed her. After a moment’s thought he said lightly,

“There was some issue in the basement.”

“What? Issue? What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” He was silent as they walked by Joffre’s room and down to the first floor. “I think

he got scared by something. Maybe there was a rodent.”

Vanozza turned to look at him, “Juan isn’t afraid of rodents.”

The bass of heavy music could be heard through Juan’s door. It sounded like Slipknot’s earlier

work. Vanozza banged on it with her lips pursed; she didn’t approve of metal. Cesare glanced

across the hall to his sister’s room. The door was left open and no music was playing. She wasn’t

in her room

“Is Lucrezia downstairs?”

“Yes, she’s making sandwiches as we speak.” She knocked harder, “Juan! Juan open the door!”

Finally, the door swung open. “What?!”

Vanozza crossed her arms with a single eyebrow raised and Juan had enough grace to bow his head

just slightly in shame.

“Come downstairs,” commanded Cesare from behind her, his arms crossed, unaware of how

pompous he looked and sounded. “We’re having lunch as a family.”

Juan rolled his eyes. Cesare watched him closely; Juan was sweating slightly, and his eyes looked

slightly blown...

Vanozza seemed not to notice. Instead she was peering into his room. He shut the door slightly

muttering, “what?” at her.

“Where is Joffre?” she asked, “is he not with you?”

“No. I wouldn’t have him in there with all that music on. I thought Cesare was watching him,” he

snarled at his brother. Now it was Cesare’s turn to roll his eyes.

“Well we need to find him!” barked Vanozza. “See, this is why I didn’t want a big house,” she

began to grumble as she walked down the hall, “it’s too easy to lose people. Joffre! Joffre where

are you?”

“I’ll check upstairs,” muttered Juan, but Cesare grabbed his sleeve.

“What if Joffre went into the basement?” he hissed, hearing and resenting the fear in his voice.

Juan pulled his arm away with unnecessary force, the whites showing all around his eyes “and-and

what if he is!” he stammered. “it’s- it’s only a basement.”

Cesare cocked his head slightly, “do you want to go back down there to look?”

Juan shook his head furtively. He then licked his lips and whispered, “he won’t have gone down

there. He’s scared of the dark.”
Cesare nodded, this was true. Slowly the two boys walked upstairs, neither wanting to be alone suddenly, and they went back into Joffre’s room.

“It’s cute in here,” Juan said, looking at the light green walls, “looks like this might have been a nursery once.”

“If mother and father get their way,” said Cesare looking under the bed as Juan looked out of the window, “then it will be again one day.”

“More and more Borgias...” muttered Juan frowning as he thought he saw someone hiding in the bushes outside the window. He stared but no longer saw anything. Perhaps his mind was playing tricks on him.

He turned away and opened the wardrobe. No, Joffre wasn’t in there either. He brushed a hand through his hair.

“Well he’s definitely not in here.”

“He isn’t in my room,” said Cesare, “and Lucrezia would say if he went with her. I left him playing in here, I swear.”

“How long ago?”

“I don’t know, an hour maybe? I went downstairs to see some neighbours, saw you then spoke to Lucrezia before going back to my room. The house is big, but are there that many places for him to go? Besides, it isn’t like him to run off or hide.”

“I don’t like this house.”

Cesare looked at Juan but said nothing. The wardrobe door creaked open slightly. Both boys looked. It opened a bit more before Joffre fell out as dead weight. Both boys ran to him crying out his name. The boy was unhurt. It looked like he was fast asleep.

“I looked in the wardrobe, he wasn’t in there!” whimpered Juan.

“You didn’t look properly you dolt,” muttered Cesare. He earned a swift punch on the side of his head from Juan in response.

“Stop making me out to be an idiot! He wasn’t in there!” Juan then ran out of the room, doubtless in Cesare’s mind so that he wouldn’t receive an ass-whooping.

He looked at Joffre before rousing him. “Mmmfh,” the boy muttered, “wanna sleep.”

“Alright.” He picked him up and almost placed him in his own bed, but then he looked at the wardrobe which had been left open. The wardrobe was small and hadn’t Joffre’s clothes in it yet. Being so shallow and painted white, there was no way Juan could’ve missed Joffre unless he was blind. Feeling foolish and paranoid, Cesare decided to move Joffre into his own bedroom upstairs. He tucked the boy in bed. It had no sheet but he threw a blanket over him. He pressed a kiss to his head and watched him anxiously for a few minutes before going back downstairs. As he travelled down the house he slammed Joffre’s wardrobe door and bedroom door shut.

December 1953

The Geffens had survived Israel, they had survived the journey to Italy, they had survived abuse and repeated assaults just so their wife and mother could die in an instance because of some
cowardly racist with a childish mind.

The anger that had haunted him since his arrival at the house now welled up inside Mattai. A madness descended over him in a haze of red fury as the anger burned through his veins. He stood up, blood on his hands and down his front where Sarah head had rested, and retrieved a rifle they had hidden and locked in their kitchen for protection.

He took it and checked that it was loaded. He then walked into the foyer. Rebekah was weeping over her mother. She was beautiful, she had her mother’s eyes but light curly hair like her father. She was too good for this world. What awful things would happen to her? Would they kill her too? Undoubtedly. They would probably rape her before hand as well, just to humiliate her. It was better for him to end it all on his own terms.

Rebekah looked up at him, green eyes full of tears, just before he shot her in the head. Her face exploded and what remained of her fell to the floor in the same heavy fashion as her mother.

Mattai then walked outside. He felt like he wasn’t himself. His mind was blank and nothing existed but the rage, the final cold pure anger that people can only feel when things have been taken too far, when the abuse they receive from outsiders snaps their sanity and all they want is to kill everyone, to punish the world for its crimes.

Elijah, fourteen, awkward and gangly, stood in the streets. It was raining. His hair, as black as his dead mother’s, was glistening from the heavy rain Mattai hadn’t noticed.

“Killers!” Elijah wept, though how he had immediately known his mother was dead was beyond Mattai, “you killers! You cowards!”

Mattai cocked the gun.

Elijah faced him. His dark eyes, full of inexplicable sorrow glanced at the gun. A hint of confusion clouded his large, dark eyes for a moment before Mattai shot him in the stomach, throwing the boy backwards from the force and killing him instantly.

After the echoes on the gun shot died away, the only sound was the heavy rain. Curtains twitched on every household. Lights were turned off as people pretended to not be home or that they were unconscious in bed.

It was appalling; the cowardice and the prejudice and the sad state of the whole thing.

“Are you happy now!” Cried out Mattai after a few minutes of weeping over his life and actions, “us ‘Kikes’ are all dead, just as you wanted. You hadn’t the strength to kill us face to face, so you murdered my wife and killed me in the process.” His voice broke as something of the real Mattai returned to him and the emotional pain shot through his soul, “Pray to your pagan god for forgiveness!”

He then turned the shotgun at an awkward angle, put it in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Present Day

In the kitchen a large tray of sandwiches lay in the middle of the table. Juan was eating voraciously whilst telling jokes to Lucrezia and Rodrigo, who were choking with laughter. It seemed all his earlier hysterics were forgotten, apart from when he glanced at Cesare when he arrived in the kitchen a hint of distaste coloured him gaze.

Cesare ignored them to help his mother fill the glasses with juice. “Did Juan tell you Joffre was
“Yes, he said he was asleep in the wardrobe,” she chuckled warmly, “silly boy. I suppose I over panicked. I looked all over and was actually beginning to scream his name until Juan came running down the hall. He nearly knocked me over. God knows how no one heard me screaming! It’s funny though,” she put the glasses on a tray, “Joffre was always afraid of in closed spaces at home. He never would have gone inside a wardrobe and fallen asleep.”

They walked over to the table and joined the other members.

“We should do this more often,” sighed Vanozza looking proudly at her family.

“We used to,” said Lucrezia, “we always had dinner together before...”

She trailed off and things became awkward. She was correct, the family had always eaten their evening meal together. But then Rodrigo began having affairs, first with women at his workplace, then later with his foster daughter. He began to miss meals and the children all lost interest because if papa had better things to do then so did they. For the last two years or so, evening meals were attended to by only Vanozza and little Joffre.

“Well, that is a tradition we’ll start again,” smiled Rodrigo. “They’ll be no late nights at the office for me because I’ll work from home. I’ll meet clients in that front room, on the right hand side in the foyer.”

“I thought that was the living room?”

“I thought we could use one of the backrooms for that,” he said to Vanozza, “the sales woman said that it was a drawing room. I’m not sure what that is but I’m certain no one’s actually needed a drawing room since Jane Austen’s time period.”

Vanozza nodded, “very well.”

“Is it true that we have to wear a uniform in our new school?” piped up Juan.

All three children whined when their parents answered the affirmative.

“It’s a good school,” griped their father, “we were lucky to get all three of you in at the last minute.”

“It’s going to be full of stuck up Italian snobs,” sighed Juan. “It’ll be like how it was before back in Spain. They’ll think we’re unrefined and we won’t be allowed to fit in with the rest of them.”

“Why can’t you just let us go to a state school?” sighed Cesare. “I hate how you keep trying to make us something we’re not.”

“Oh Cesare!” Rodrigo’s hackles were up. Lucrezia sighed under her breath and glanced at her mama, who was looking at the table as opposed to her warring family members. “For goodness sake! We’re trying to put you in the best positions possible. I want my children to do well in life, like I have. And what, exactly, are we not?”

Cesare sipped his juice quietly through his father’s anger, stifling his own rage before he answered quietly, “We aren’t, as Juan said, ‘snobbish rich Italians.’ Father, we’re working class Spaniards. I wish you would understand that and accept it.” Cesare began to get louder as his repressed anger bubbled up, “Also, you are not doing this for us, you are doing it for you. You just want to brag to your fake friends about how we’re in the best schools, the best universities, the best jobs! You just
want to use us to alleviate your social status.” He slammed his hand on the table, “God you make me angry!”

“And you make me angry!” countered Rodrigo, “how dare you judge me and think so little of this family! We deserve better and we will get what we deserve because we are smarter than all those ‘snobbish Italians.’”

“You do not care that it makes us miserable? That we are laughed at and bullied wherever we go because they see through us and all our over-compensating?”

“Nonsense,” Rodrigo shuffled in his chair and grabbed another sandwich, inspecting it as he spoke, “you have to beat them at their own game. It’s how you win. They won’t be laughing when you are their boss one day,” he bit into the sandwich, “and all of you will rule over them. In the meantime, you just have to play the game.” Cesare pushed back his chair to leave but Rodrigo stopped him, “no storming off now Cesare,” He pointed at Vanozza, “we are respecting your mother’s wishes.”

Cesare glanced at his mother guiltily and sat back down, moodily picking up his half-eaten sandwich and finishing it off. In turn Vanozza glared at Rodrigo, unhappy that he had used her against their son. The kitchen was quiet with a tense awkwardness that Rodrigo was refusing to acknowledge when a messy-haired sleep seven year old entered the kitchen.

“I’m tired but you woke me up with your shouting,” Joffre complained sulkily.

Juan grinned and lifted him up on to his lap. “It’s alright,” he said jovially, “Princess Cesare was just having another temper tantrum!”

Juan and Rodrigo chuckled as Cesare seethed.

Chapter End Notes

This story isn't beta'd so please point out any errors in grammar, spelling, continuity etc.
Present Day

That evening the family sat watching a family friendly film; Vanozza, unperturbed by the disastrous lunch, was still wanting to do family based activities and film night was to be yet another addition to the family timetable.

Juan was bored, his legs hanging over the chair. He wasn’t even watching the screen, instead he was staring out into the foyer. Just across the hall was the door which led down to the basement. His legs kicked rhythmically against the chair. His mind felt curiously blank. He had wanted to go upstairs to sit in his room, maybe engage in some sexting or listen to music, (Juan did not enjoy being around his family,) but he found that, after they had finished packing the last of their things away, that he was too afraid to be alone in the dark. He knew that the film would end soon and that they would all go to bed. Then he’d be alone. Alone in his room. In the dark.

Thump, thump, thump. His legs bumped softly against the armchair.

No thoughts crossed his mind. There were no feelings, not even fear; he just watched the darkness in the foyer.

Likewise Cesare Borgia was also not watching the film, though he was faking that he was. Instead he kept stealing glances at Lucrezia. The Drawing Room/Living Room lights were off, so the only light emitted was the pale blue of the TV screen. On Lucrezia’s pale features it lit her up, illuminating her golden hair and white skin and highlighting her blue eyes.

‘Too beautiful,’ he thought, his heart hurting because it beat so hard, ‘she’s much too beautiful. It isn’t fair.’

Joffre had fallen asleep, his head slumping on to his mother’s arm. She glanced down before looking back to Rodrigo and whispering, “he’s been very tired today. Do you think he is ill?”

“You worry too much,” growled Rodrigo, eyes not leaving the film he was strangely entranced by, “he’s had a long journey and a tiring day. Let him rest.”

Vanozza felt like arguing, just for the sake of being contrary, but she held her tongue. She had told Rodrigo that she had forgiven him, now she actually needed to, in her heart. She did not like that her children, specifically Cesare, were pulling away from their father. She wasn’t sure if he had even noticed, but she had and she did not want any of them growing up emotionally stunted because of their relationship with him. Therefore, it was down to her to see the best in Rodrigo, as she always had done, and to convince her children that he was a good and worthy man.

The credits began to roll and Rodrigo announced, “well time for bed I think.”

“It’s only 9:40,” complained Juan without feeling.

“It’s been a long day.” he repeated, “I want you all to finish whatever packing is left tomorrow and to help us begin decorating. You start school on Monday. We all need plenty of sleep because it is going to be a busy few days.”
Cesare rolled his eyes and stalked out. Lucrezia caught up with him and slid her arm into his. She leaned into him and he enjoyed the feeling of her body pressingly slightly against his own.

“Today has been tough,” she muttered, “how are you? Papa hasn’t made you too cross?”

“No,” he kissed her head. “Father frustrates me. But if he can make mama happy again then maybe I can forgive him someday.”

Lucrezia was silent as they ascended the stair, but as they reached her door she asked, “but is that really why you’re angry with him?”

“What do you mean?”

As soon as he asked Juan came passed, carrying Joffre in his arms. Cesare looked away from him, which made Juan roll his eyes, even as he spared a genuine smile to Lucrezia.

She returned it before pulling Cesare into her bedroom.

Lucrezia jumped onto her bed, but he opted to sit on her chair instead.

“I think you’re jealous of Juan.”

He laughed, “why would I be jealous of him? He’s an idiot.”

“Papa loves him.”

Cesare shifted uncomfortably but said nothing.

“You should know,” she said at last, “that he loves you too.”

Still Cesare said nothing. He was ashamed to feel a slight prickling in his eyes. Rodrigo did not love him. He loved Juan. And Juan was stupid and loud and obnoxious, but still father loved him more.

And if someone like Juan was more lovable to a parent, then what kind of creature was Cesare?

‘I’m all wrong,’ Cesare thought, ‘father knows I’m all wrong, on some level he knows how twisted I am, and that’s why he loves Juan and my sweet sister and Joffre not me.’ But he couldn’t tell her that, because it was too close to voicing all his secret thoughts and passions which he hadn’t yet been fully able to admit to himself.

Never realising how she made things harder, Lucrezia got up from her bed and walked over to him in an almost predatory manner, hinting at how in the future she would be quite a seductress, before sitting on his lap daintily. She put her arms around his neck and kissed his face a number of times before whispering, “he loves you. The same way I love you, so does papa. Please believe it. I don’t like you being angry with him and Juan. Believe me when I say papa loves you, he does.”

Cesare didn’t believe her, but being in her embrace was so sweet he decided to remain silent and still.

December 1952

Ursula was a good wife.

She always did as she was told, even when it hurt her or made her sad. She was this way because she understood that her husband was a kind, good and sensible man and far more intelligent than
her. He was a University lecturer; she was a housewife. He understood numbers and facts; she understood cooking and cleaning. He was a man; she was a woman.

But there were times when she was tempted. Now was one of those times. She was vacuuming the living room, but she wasn't paying attention to the floor. Instead her eyes were fixed on the television. It was brand new. Her husband had bought it to show off to his friends. Everyone who was someone owned a television set.

She had heard stories about television shows. How they showed things specifically with women in mind; advertisements and shows that starred women actors acting as normal women in real-life.

"Ursula what are you doing?"

She stood up right immediately, her pose like that of a soldier being addressed by their General. Her husband stood in the door-frame. He was mostly in shadow, but she could make out that he was wearing his favourite cardigan and smoking a pipe.

"I'm vacuuming dear," she stammered slightly. She turned off the vacuum, concerned that it was making too much noise.

"You had that silly look on your face," he said, "the silly look you always get when you're thinking. I've told you once I've told you a thousand times, spend less time thinking and more time doing something." He entered the room, the light shining on his hard features, "you know your kind are prone to hysteria once they start thinking too much."

"You are right darling," she said automatically, "I am very sorry."

"You were looking at that thing?" he gestured to the television.

She nodded, her eyes brimming with tears and her face flushing with shame.

"You know you cannot watch it don't you?" He said. She said nothing, feelings of resentment were rising up and Ursula was finding that as she got older, the harder it was to push these feelings down. She was so lost in her own mind that she did not notice he had approached her until he had grabbed her shoulders. She looked up at him, startled. "I do it for your own good, don't you see?" he said with something almost like passion, "do you know what they have on television? Stories, true stories, from all around the world. It's called the news. But it isn't all fun and dandelions as you believe the world to be. You see pictures of starving children, of dead animals, of war zones and battles and blood and gore!"

She pulled away, tears falling. She couldn't stand hearing about these things! How she wished he would stop!

"And you know who else uses the television?" he continued on, his voice becoming lower, "The Reds. They use television to hypnotise the foolish. You become their slave Ursula-"

She turned and looked at him, "I would never!" she cried before covering her mouth. He smiled at her fear.

"It's alright," he said, putting his arm around her shoulder in an odd display of affection, "whilst I don't appreciate your tone in talking to me I'm glad your patriotism is greater than even your love for me, which is how it should be. But I'm afraid I tell the truth." He sat down at the couch, motioning for her to join him. "If I had my way no child or woman would ever watch television, but I don't rule America."
"More's the pity" she said quickly, earning a smile from him and suddenly her world seemed a better place.

"But us men can watch television. We understand it. We can handle the dark things your pretty mind cannot. Don't worry Ursula, you're clever for a woman, why?" he smiled at her pleased grin, "because you listen to me!"

She nodded, feeling overjoyed. "Darling, what would you like to dinner tonight?"

"Nothing," he said, looking away from her and she felt the familiar coldness between them returning. "I'm leaving for the night. I have work at the office. It's the price we have to pay for living here."

He motioned at the house, with its wood panel and dark, handsome furnishings. She tried to smile but couldn't. Ursula felt that her marriage had become worse since arriving in the new house. Sure, the house was large and classy, but it was also old and creepy. Ursula felt stupid for thinking so but she was certain it was haunted. She couldn't stand the fact that she would have to be alone yet again.

However she said nothing when he left to get on his shoes and work satchel. She put his coat for him and collected his hat. He leant down and placed a careful kiss on her porcelain cheek.

"Remember my Dear, do not open the door to anyone."

"It could be a Red." She said automatically.

He nodded, and left. She locked the door after him. Her husband was always very strict on her not allowing anyone in the house when he was not there. She could not have family or friends with her without him watching over them with his oppressive presence. It was not surprising that since their marriage she had lost her friends and fallen out of touch with her family. Ursula convinced herself that it was alright. All she needed was her husband. Plus he had put the fear of god in her over the Reds. Even if her own mother knocked on the door now she'd be terrified that her own mother was a spy.

She walked slowly towards the kitchen, deciding to focus her mind with some cleaning, when the lights began to flicker.

"Oh no not again!" she whimpered, the lights flashing only happened when her husband was not around. She was becoming certain that either the ghosts of the house were only teasing her, or that she was going quite insane. She covered her ears and scrunched her eyes shut. She breathed heavily through her nose, as if trying to stave off a panic attack.

"Everything is fine," she told herself, "I'm a good wife. I'm going to go clean the kitchen. Everything is fine."

She slowly opened one eye, then the other. The house was back to normal, the lights hummed quietly to themselves. She looked up the stairs. There seemed to be a sort of blue tinted mist on the top of them, this mist drifting down the stairs towards the ground floor. She gulped and walked towards the kitchen. She passed the living room and as she did, she heard the voices of people.

Ursula's eyes widened. People?! Why were there people in her house? Were they Reds? What should she do? Heart racing she peeked into the living room. There were no people in there, but the television was on.

"How...?" she muttered, walking inside.
The screen was black and white and various shades of grey. A beautiful woman was having an intense conversation with a handsome man. Their speaking was fast paced and witty.

'But... You're a woman!' stammered the male character.

'Yes,' smiled the woman, 'my husband likes me that way.'

Ursula snorted with restrained laughter. Maybe television wasn't all bad? This was pretty funny...

Something beside her moved. Ursula looked to her right immediately but saw nothing. She sworn she had seen something in her peripheral vision.

She looked slowly back at the television. How had it turned on all by itself? No, she did not like this. Something strange was happening and this show was hypnotising her, making her doubt her husband. Nervously she leaned forward and touched the large button she assumed would turn it off. As luck would have it, she was actually right (she was certain her husband would be proud.)

Ursula turned around to return to the kitchen and let out a piercing shriek. In the doorway stood a woman covered in blood.

She was leaning forward slightly, a massive gash in her stomach causing her to stoop. There was an injury somewhere on her scalp as well, as blood poured from her raven-black hair onto her face and chest.

"Help me," she garbled, streams of blood pouring from her mouth.

Ursula shook her head slowly, stepping back. She was unable to process what she was seeing before it suddenly disappeared. The woman was gone; like switching off the television suddenly she ceased to be there.

Ursula stood shaking for quite some time. She wanted to run screaming from the house, but her legs had become useless. She glanced down and noticed that she had wet herself.

There was a knocking at the door. Ursula stared in the direction of the hallway for some time. The knocking became louder and more frantic.

She felt the bile rising into her throat. She slid down and crouched, not caring that she was still standing in her own urine, and whimpered piteously.

"Go away!" she thought, "Please go away!"

"It never goes away," whispered a voice right in front of Ursula. Without thinking she snapped her eyes open.

In front of her the Bleeding Girl was crouching down and staring at her. "It never goes away! She screamed suddenly, grabbing Ursula's neck and strangling her all whilst screaming incoherently. The maddened eyes of a vengeful ghost was the last thing poor Ursula would ever see alive.

The knocking on the front door continued banging until at last Ursula's husband was forced to kick the door in.

"Damn it you stupid woman!" he cried, "I know I say never open the door but it was me, I -"

He stopped dead in his tracks. He had entered the living room to find his wife lying on the floor, her limbs spread out like a doll that had been thrown down by an unkind child. Her eyes were
bulging and terrified. Her tongue protruded from her lips slightly. She had bitten it, and that had caused some blood to form on her lips.

He knelt beside her, feeling cold and nauseous. As he did, the television suddenly switched back on.

"What's the matter with you?" said the male character, seemingly gazing right at the recent widower, "are you crazy or something?"

He sat alone with his dead wife listening to the laughter of an invisible audience.

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**Present Day**

It was about midnight. Juan Borgias was sitting on his bed. His light was still on. His room was red. He felt like he was sitting in a room in hell.

Unwanted images haunted him. The shriek that had assaulted his and his brother’s ears echoed in his mind.

Shaking his head, he checked a small wooden case in which he kept his marijuana. There was hardly anything left. He had smoked enough for a week. Juan didn’t use a lot, just now and then for recreational purposes. He knew that Cesare had already guessed what he was up to, and didn’t approve, but considering his brother frequently salivated over their sister like a complete pervert, Juan didn’t think Cesare deserved to take any moral high ground over smoking a bit of pot.

He set up a hasty spliff, and inhaled the smoke deeply. God he needed to relax! If he could just get some sleep, that would be better than nothing.

Outside it began to rain heavily, the drops of water being hurled against his window. Thunder rumbled. Lightning flashed across the sky, casting the silhouette of the outside trees against Juan’s blood red walls.

His pupils dilated and his eyes reddened slightly as the drugs began to work through his body. He imagined he could see shapes in the shadows of the tree branches.

He gulped, suddenly remembering what it was like being a child and convinced the monsters were out to get you. ‘I need more than this,’ he thought desperately, beginning to sweat, the images of the afternoon still not abating.

Juan got up and opened his bedroom door. He peered out into the hallway. It was a mix of dark blue and black. He stepped out and began to walk down the narrow hallway. Why the bedrooms and hallways were so small compared to the overtly grandiose foyer, downstairs staircase and ground floor rooms was beyond him.

There was another deep rumble from the sky, so deep it seemed to shake the house, and a flash of lightning accompanied it, lighting up the hallway for a moment. In that flash, Juan thought he saw someone at the end of the hall.

He paused and stared. Had he seen someone there? His hand searched the walls for a light switch, but he didn’t know where it was. He repressed the urge to call out if someone was there, he didn’t want to act like he was in a stupid horror film.

So instead he continued to move forwards. He must have imagined it, maybe the weed, or maybe
his paranoia from earlier.

However, even as he reached the stairs he could not move his eyes away from that particular spot. His felt his eyes straining. Then his heart leapt up into his throat when he realised he could see something moving slightly in the dark.

He backed away, one foot on the first stair.

The air became heavy and tense and Juan felt a dull ringing in his ears. There was a slight whining sound, like a frightened puppy, and it took a moment for him to realise it was him making the noise.

In the darkness something began to take form.

He stared.

Just barely he saw the outline of a shape. Of a body, a tall, thin body.

The lightning flashed again.

There was a person there. Someone with long black hair hanging wet and dirty, like rat tails. Juan’s pretty brown eyes met dead black ones.

The thing ran at him, its mouth open revealing black gums and few teeth.

Juan screamed loudly and high-pitched, losing his footing and falling down the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

This story isn't beta'd so please point out any errors in grammar, spelling, continuity etc.
The Secret Room

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The thing was coming down the stairs after him. He could see it. It was wearing a long white nightdress and floating down the stairs with disturbing swiftness. It was like a spider; unnatural speed and too light steps.

Juan screamed in pure terror, scrambling to get away but his injured body was unable to move him quickly enough.

Within a few seconds the thing was on top of him, “it never ends!” she hissed, black blood dribbling from her mouth and distorting her voice, “it never stops!”

Everyone, apart from Cesare and Joffre, heard Juan’s terrified shrieks and ran out of their respective room. (Joffre had heard Juan, but had fallen straight back to sleep. Cesare's room was simply too far away.)

The lights were switched on and Lucrezia was the first to find Juan lying at the foot of the grand stairs. His arm was bent at a strange angle, and there was some blood coming from his scalp.

Crying out his name she ran to him and cradled his head on her lap, “Oh Juan!” she wept, “Please tell me you’re alright!”

He opened his eyes and grasped her arm, “I don’t want to stay here,” he whispered, “I’m frightened! I’m frightened!”

“But of what?” she muttered, not understanding, as her parents fell to his side. They began to fuss, and he fell silent. Rodrigo flapped a little, but Vanozza kept her cool and eventually he calmed down, managing (quite admirably) to not only lift up Juan but carry him into the backseat of their family car. Vanozza took Joffre from his room, the boy complaining and rubbing his eyes, and rushed off to hospital. With all the drama, Cesare had been woken up, but he never even got to see Juan before the family had driven away to the closest A and E.

Lucrezia and Cesare decided to stay up after that, as it was almost dawn anyway. They wasted two hours by watching a Harry Potter film before retiring to the kitchen to make breakfast. It was all very domestic, and Cesare couldn’t help but enjoy the time being spent with just himself and his sister.

“I suppose we won’t spend the day redecorating like mom and father had hoped,” said Cesare grabbing a plate in the kitchen.

“It was frightening,” answered Lucrezia, “seeing Juan like that. He was scared; he looked like a wild animal. I doubt he’ll want to return to the house though I’m not sure what’s happened to him to make him like that.”

“He fell down the stairs,” Cesare sat opposite her with a plate of biscuits they were to share, a glass of milk between them, “and he fell down in the dark. That’s what scared him.”

She pursed her lips and shook her head, “no, it wasn’t like shock or anything. It was more than that. It was as if he’d seen a ghost.”
Cesare gave an odd, secretive little smirk that made her insides squirm slightly, “well...maybe he had.”

“Knock knock!” an obnoxious voice suddenly called out.

The siblings both looked at the kitchen doorway, startled to see Alphonse leaning against the frame with a soft smirk on his lips.

“It’s only been one night and someone’s been taken to hospital,” he drawled, “that’s record time. Most of the other families were here for at least a month before they started getting seriously injured.”

“Who are you?”

“This is Alphonse,” Cesare answered his sister, before Alphonse could introduce himself. “He and his mother came around yesterday. They were uninvited then also.”

“He’s very churlish, your brother,” Alphonse glowered at Cesare (who had his back to him) before smiling benevolently at Lucrezia, “you’re the only person I’ve seen him give a kind word to,” he strolled into the kitchen, appraising her, “not that I’m surprised, you are very beautiful. Boys are hot-blooded creatures.”

“She’s my sister,” barked Cesare in offense, finally turning around to face his neighbour.

“Oh,” Alphonse smiled strangely, leaned in close to Cesare’s right ear and added quietly, “would that be enough to stop you?”

Cesare punched him in the face.

On impact, Alphonse had been hurled into the floor. His nose broke and blood gushed from it. He touched the blood and looked at it, slightly amazed. The pain was pretty horrible. It reminded him of when he used to get bullied by Rufio and that other kid (whatever his name was- The Pretty One.) Still it wasn’t all bad, as this time as he lay bleeding and stupid on the ground, a beautiful young maiden was at his side asking him (rather idiotically really) if he was alright.

“What do you think Blondie?” he answered gruffly.

Lucrezia looked up at Cesare with an expression not dissimilar to the one Vanozza wore whenever Juan had really pissed her off.

Normally Cesare would have mocked someone like Alphonse, but now he felt a deep pool of shame in the pit of his stomach.

“I’m sorry!” he ground out without sincerity, “I didn’t mean to...” he looked at Lucrezia, at her innocent blue eyes and pale skin. “He said something about us...about me...and...” a blush began to appear and he found that he simply couldn’t say anymore. Instead he ran into the foyer, grabbed his black denim jacket and ran outside.

He walked down the road, not knowing the area at all, until he found himself looking at a large area of grass, a children’s park further in it. He saw a few people milling about, having picnics or playing ball or walking their dogs.

Cesare wandered into it, finding a shady quiet spot under a large oak tree. He began to take deep breaths, trying to control his temper. Cesare had found that as he got older, he seemed to be getting angrier and more out of control. He didn’t know if it was something to do with his growing desire
for his sister, or if there was some sort of hereditary disease that ran through all the males in his family which meant that as they grew up all of them became stupid, horny and violent.

He thought of Juan. ‘Oh god, please don’t say I’ll end up like him,’ he prayed fervently.

“Sinners!” a deep voice suddenly wailed. Cesare jumped slightly and looked around with wide eyes. Everyone in the park had stopped moving and all were staring up at a man who stood in the middle of the path. He had a sign around his neck with words written in red which Cesare could not see clearly. He was a tall, rotund man with a bald head and wearing what looked like second-hand clothes. He looked like a homeless person.

“Repent!!” the man bellowed, “repent for your sins! The End Of Days is already at our doorstep! Demonic evil haunt our every step! It is in every shadow, in every crevice. It is in your filthy minds! It encourages your sin and debauchery. You have failed your Lord and now there is hell to pay!”

People began moving again, all inching around the man shouting, not making eye contact with him. He continued anyway, pointing at them as they passed. It was almost funny if he wasn’t so clearly insane.

“Your sins are made clear to me! The angels come to me in my sleep and tell me the disgusting things you think about! How you touch yourselves and pleasure yourselves to these thoughts! Homosexuality, paedophilia, rape, bestiality,” he looked up at Cesare, “incest!”

A heavy blush burst on to Cesare’s face and for a moment his heart stopped beating. The man was staring right at him! How...did... did he know? Was there some truth in what he was saying?

Feeling frightened and disturbed, Cesare stood up and began to walk away, his breath heavy and strained.

“Oh the shame of it!” he could hear the man shouting behind him, “the shame of your thoughts! You will bring death and destruction upon us all! Sodom and Gomorrah, that is what Rome has become!”

The voice faded away until the words were unintelligible. Cesare leaned again the wall of the park, putting his hand to his heart and feeling it beat heavily.

Had the old preacher known about him or was it just bad luck and his own paranoia? The preacher had mentioned evil hiding in the darkness, and that made Cesare think back to the incident yesterday with Juan in the basement. Juan clearly was not coping with, whatever the hell they saw, but Cesare had always been more level headed of the brothers. Whilst he hadn’t understood it either, he wasn’t afraid of it. He had made the very simple decision to never go into the basement again however.

“But I’ve left Lucrezia home alone,” he realised, “she might go down in the basement, or whatever was in there may come out.” He started to run back to the house, “I suppose that neighbour is there, but I don’t trust him...there’s something off about that boy!”

“I’m sorry about Cesare,” Lucrezia patched up Alphonse nicely.
“Quite alright,” he drawled.

She brushed her hand through his hair, checking for any lumps or bumps where he had fallen. She didn’t feel any, but she notice something about his scalp.

“Your scalp,” she said to him, “have you a skin condition? It looks very sore. It almost looks like it’s been burnt.”

Alphinse lifted his hand to grip hers. “I’m fine,” he said firmly, “but I am not here for a social call. I tried to warn your brother yesterday. You need to be careful in this house.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s haunted.”

Lucrezia laughed until she saw Alphonse was being serious.

“I don’t mean to be rude,” she said, a smile still on her pretty pink lips, “but we don’t believe in stuff like that.”

“Well maybe you should do some research, check out the history of the house and what’s happened to its previous owners.” He got up to leave, “I don’t want your brother to see me when he returns, but I’ll come back later to see you. Tell me what you believe after you’ve done some investigating.”

He walked out of the kitchen and she chased after him, but when she stepped into the foyer, the front door was already closing and he was gone.

“Strange,” she thought, “he moved quickly.” She looked up the grand staircase and wandered if she should follow his advice. It seemed silly. She didn’t believe in ghosts but something about his conviction did disturb her a little. There was a sound, and a moment later a small tennis ball hit the side of her foot gently.

She picked it up. Where had that come from? She began to walk towards the stairs slowly, when she heard a long creaking sound.

Looking to the side she saw a small door opening by itself. She walked down to the end of the foyer and looked in it. There were steps leading down into the darkness.

A basement.

She closed the door. She didn’t want to go peeking around down there on her own, there might be rodents or something else frightening in the shadows.

She walked away, bouncing the ball on the floor idly.

Crrrrreeeeaakkk!

Lucrezia turned to see the door had opened again. She shrugged. If the door wanted to stay open fine. She marched upstairs, trying to ignore the feeling of unease.

She took her mobile out her jeans pocket and began to ring Cesare. The tune to his phone could be heard playing in the kitchen. Great, he’d obviously left it there and so now she had no way of contacting him. Rolling her eyes she tried her parents, but neither of them picked up either, which made sense as they were in hospital.
Then, her favourite song, ‘Commes des enfants’ began to play loudly. Someone was in her room! The music stopped as suddenly as it started, as if someone had accidentally turned it on.

Her heart in her throat, Lucrezia began to inch forwards towards her room. She thought of the strange man she’d thought she’d seen the day before in the garden. He’d seemed so aggressive and frightening, especially when he’d glanced up at her.

She pushed open her bedroom door and stepped inside carefully. Everything looked the same as she had left it that morning...except...she paled...except the bed.

The bed, which she had tidied that morning, was now a mess. The quilt was all lumped up, as if someone had been tossing and turning in their sleep, and now was deep inside the blanket, huddled up in a foetal position.

Lucrezia climbed up onto the bed, inspecting it closely. A long black hair was on the pillow, it stood out on the white pillow, and trailed off underneath the quilt. That certainly did not belong to her. She pulled the hair, expecting for it to slide up, but it didn’t. Instead she could feel that there was something heavy at the end of it. There was something under the quilt. Heart beating even harder, she slowly pulled the cover away.

There was a girl under the sheets, only her eyes were open and glassy and she was covered in blood.

Lucrezia screamed so hard it tore her throat, and threw herself backwards onto the bedroom floor.

The dark haired girl sat up. Her eyes were still vacant and glassy as she turned slowly to look at Lucrezia. Lucrezia pushed herself further back until she hit the wall. She wasn’t screaming now, but her jaws were clenched together and she was letting out a low, animalistic groaning sound.

The girl twisted out of bed, literally, her upper body twisting around in an unnatural manner. Blood soaked her clothes, particularly around her crotch and belly.

She slowly ambled up to Lucrezia, who felt like she was going quite insane. Slowly the girl reached down and took the ball that was still in Lucrezia’s hand.

Lucrezia felt the cold, sticky fingers of the dead girl. Long black hair brushed against her own pale skin. Lucrezia closed her eyes and breathed heavily. She did not open her eyes or move at all until she felt Cesare shaking her and calling her name.

“Don’t worry sis,” she heard him saying, “I have you. Lucrezia, I have you, it’s all right.”

Lucrezia opened her eyes slowly. Cesare was in front of her, his eyes wide and full of worry. “What happened?” he asked, “are you hurt?”

She shook her head. She wanted to say what she had seen, but her tongue felt swollen and her mouth was dry. Cesare helped lift her. Her entire body felt stiff and she realised with utter shame that she had a damp patch on her crotch; she had wet herself. Tears prickled at her eyes and she began to weep piteously.

Muttering that she would be fine, Cesare lifted her up into his arms and carried her slowly up into his room. He placed her in his bed and then pulled up a chair to sit beside her.

The tears were not falling anymore, but her eyes were red. He brushed his hand through her hair. “Just go to sleep Lu, just try to sleep. I won’t leave you, I promise.”
She nodded and closed her eyes. He gulped, feeling guilty for running out earlier. What a fool he had been! He also felt intolerably angry with Alphonse, who he blamed for the whole sequence of events. However, Alphonse had come with a warning…

Cesare turned and took his laptop from the desk. Placing on his lap he leaned back into his chair and switched it on. He thought for a moment, before typing into the search engine the address of the house. The first link was an aerial map and a link to the company who had sold it. However the link directly beneath it read, ‘The Murder House.’

He clicked onto it and saw that it was the title of one of the local newspapers.

‘1 January 2012

‘The Murder House

‘The sunny and idyll suburbs outside of Southern Rome have been shocked again in another terrible murder case from one infamous house; a house which is now the source of old urban myths and superstitions. It is known amongst most Roman children as The Murder House.

Early yesterday morning Paolo and Roberto Orsini were found dead in their home. Police had first believed it to be a homophobic hate crime, but now it has been confirmed that Roberto Orsini shot his partner before drowning himself. The reasons behind such violence have not been discovered and neighbours have not been willing to talk to the media.

These two young men are but two in a line of victims in this one, inconsequential town house. There have been a number of deaths since it was first built in 1894 by Count Trastamara, rich gentleman who hailed from Naples. The Count was an unscrupulous fellow who women avoided and it is said that he was a backstreet abortionist, though no evidence of this has ever been found. After his death in 1902 (in which he was found in shocking circumstances which raised all sorts of questions about his having a taste of extreme sado-masochism) the house was bought by another rich man from France. He too died in a painful and bizarre manner, after murdering one of his patients. And so this continued on until finally in 1995 all of Europe was horrified by the tragic deaths of the Sforza family. Four children were burned alive in a house set on fire by their very own uncle, the infamous Giovanni. Rumours of incest and rape were circulated but nothing verified.

Understandably after the house was burned to a skeleton of itself, there were no buyers to be found for many years. However, even without owners people were still dying within its walls. One of the more mysterious cases was the complete disappearance of two brothers, last seen entering the burned remains of the house.

After almost a decade the house was bought and renovated by a Housing Agency. The Orsini’s were the first people to buy the home and less than a year later, they have both died tragically.

Whilst a non-superstitious person in my everyday life, this journalist doubts that anyone will be brave, or foolhardy enough, to step into that house ever again.”

Cesare let out a small gasp and sat back. Had father known about this? He shook his head, no, Rodrigo could not have known. Their father was a self-centred man who often put his own immediate gratification above the actual needs of his family which meant that sometimes Rodrigo was a cruel parent. But no matter how angry he made Cesare the fact remained that he wasn’t wantonly spiteful or malicious; Rodrigo wouldn’t put his family, or himself, at risk on purpose. But then the question arose of why Rodrigo hadn’t researched the house before buying it.
‘I shall query it with father later,’ Cesare decided, gritting his teeth in quiet frustration.

He clicked back to Google, fully intending to find out more about the previous occupants, when the laptop suddenly switched off. The oldest Borgia tutted and tried to switch it back on. It was unresponsive. He then noticed how quiet the house was; the old familiar hum of constant electric now absent.

Frowning slightly, he stood up and switched the lamp on his desk. It didn’t light up.

“A power out?” he muttered. “Typical.”

He sat on the bed, beside his sister, a picked up a book from the floor. He would read quietly until his parents came home, and they could sort out the electric. He did not want to leave Lucrezia alone.

Cesare had grabbed the book without seeing what it was, and now looked to read the title. It was one of his favourites, a graphic novel called *Anya’s Ghost*.

He smirked a little at the irony. He opened the book and began to read. The story was about a slightly silly teenage girl (who often reminded him of Juan) who befriends a ghost. However, as the story goes on, it’s clear that it isn’t a good thing to be haunted by a spirit who never got to complete their life’s goals.

Cesare read through at a quick pace, sparing a few glances now and then for Lucrezia, who seemed heavily asleep. He touched her golden hair. “We’ll have to leave here,” he said out-loud.

“Why?” The voice of a grown adult male spoke out.

Cesare leapt up from the bed. The hair on his arms were on end and he felt a sudden chill. The voice had come out of nowhere, but it had been loud and clear. It had almost been like a voice over comment on a film; definitely there but totally disembodied.

He forced himself to calm down his breathing by holding his breath for a moment or two. He then focused himself and looked around the room slowly before focusing on the bedroom door.

“Who are you?” he asked at last, “are you a ghost here? I know there are things here. I saw something in the basement.”

Silence.

“I’m not afraid. I just want to know. Something has hurt my sister.”

The voice did not answer, but suddenly the laptop and the lamp on the desk flickered back to life. He ran over to his computer to see that the wi-fi wasn’t working still.

“You don’t want me to research?” he called out, “then fine, I won’t. Please, I don’t want my family being hurt though.”

On the right side of Cesare’s bedroom, the entire wall was covered by bookshelves. It was four specific bookcases, all slotted closely together, covering the original wall completely. Cesare had filled them all, mostly with books, being something of an avid reader. Now one of the books slowly slid forward and dropped to the floor. Then another did the same. It was like someone invisible was carefully and deliberately pulling out these books before allowing them to drop to the ground.
This phenomenon occurred four times, all as Cesare watched from his bed with wide eyes, before the entire section of the bookcase began to shake. With increasingly violence the book case began to rattle, so much that it even began to disturb its neighbours.

Lucrezia stirred in her sleep, causing Cesare to lean down and comfort her as he did not want her to wake up only to witness more supernatural shenanigans. He covered her ears and kissed her hair, just as the book case finally fell forwards, crashing onto the floor. She frowned in her sleep, disturbed, but soon her features smoothed out again as he murmured sweet nothings.

His sister stilled, Cesare got off the bed and walked over to the fallen bookcase. He could now see what the...house or spirit or voice or whatever...had been trying to show him. Behind the bookcase was a small white door. He opened it, and a waft of dusty cold air blew out.

Inside was another room. The floor and walls were plain and empty. Above the window was a lonely wind-chime made of feathers and bone. The air was eerily cold; frigid as if frozen in time. As if the room had been waiting for someone.

Cesare walked forward slowly, as if in a dream, and touched the wind-chime gently. It called out with light tinkles. It looked vaguely Native American, decorated with red and blue feathers. Above the chimes was a small dream catcher, as expertly woven as a spider’s web.

“Who are you waiting for?” he asked the room.

But nothing answered him.

Chapter End Notes

This story isn't beta'd so please point out any errors in grammar, spelling, continuity etc.
Present Day

Juan opened bleary brown eyes. His surroundings eventually focused to reveal he was lying in a white room. He could smell disinfectant.

He was in hospital. Moving a little in the bed, he turned to his side and found his father staring down at him.

“We’re out of the house?” Juan asked, even though he already knew this was the case, “please don’t go back. Let’s go back to our old house.”

“We can’t do that Juan. Our old house has already been sold. Besides there’s nothing wrong with where we live now.” He harrumphed a little and then moved his chair closer to Juan’s bed, leaning in conspiratorially, “the doctors found marijuana in your system. You were high, you fool.” He clipped Juan around the head, making the teen yelp like a chastised puppy, “you could have gotten yourself killed. And your mama is furious, of course.”

Juan sighed wearily and leaned back in the bed.

“How long have you been smoking then?” Rodrigo continued, “we may as well know all the gory details. I don’t want any more shocks.”

“It’s just a bit of weed…”

“Don’t you dare downplay this!” He looked around furtively, they were not in a private room but an open ward. “If the members of Burckhardt’s School of Excellence hear about this, as well as your poor academic record and high exclusion count from your last school, we’ll never get you in! We’d have to rely on Cesare to pull our family through the rigor of academic life.”

“So what? Let him. He’d get to lord it over me some more whilst I go to some shitty public school. I don’t care.”

“Well I do! And so does your mother. We want all our children to have the best education.”

Juan turned his head away from his father, tears prickling in his eyes. Cesare was cleverer than he was. So was Lucrezia. In time Joffre would be smarter as well. It wasn’t fair that his parents kept pushing him to excel in things he wasn’t even average in; often Juan felt as if his family set him up to fail. He didn’t want to go to some fancy school, just to have Cesare win. He didn’t want to go back to a scary house full of monsters where Cesare still managed to keep his cool (about the undead, no less!), but where he was falling down stairs and weeping in the dark.

“Alright,” he said quietly, the old Borgia knack of emotional manipulation running in Juan’s veins as it did his siblings, “alright I admit I’ve been using a few different drugs for a long time. About two years. I think I’m reliant on them.”

Rodrigo groaned and muttered an obscenity.

Juan looked at him, his eyes shining from unshed tears, immediately making Rodrigo’s heart melt.
“But if you send me to a rehab centre, I’ll get better.” He reached out and touched his father’s thin hands delicately, “please, don’t take me back home, take me someplace where I can get better. I’ll return to you as the son you want me to be.”

“There is a place I know,” answered Rodrigo after a few moments, “back in Spain. It’s meant to be a nice sort of retreat, but you will get the care there that you need.”

Juan let out a sigh of relief, “yes, please papa, let me go there. I’ll get better, but I’ll need time.”

“Your mama won’t agree to you going though. It’s too far away and she worries.”

“Then let’s just not tell her!” Juan sat up and grasped his father’s hands, “please papa, I really want to go.”

Rodrigo grunted slightly and glanced away, “I’d miss you.”

Juan smiled, inwardly melting a little bit, “I know you would but no one else will. It will do me good going away. Papa, I might die if I stay. The drugs will get worse and I’ll become worse. Please papa, please.”

“Very well,” Juan held back a laugh, knowing that his father would eventually cave to his requests, “but not a word to your mother. I will explain to her. She’ll understand.”

“She’ll understand what?” Vanozza stood in the doorway, her arms crossed and her face washed out and pale with worry for her child.

“She’ll understand what?” Vanozza stood in the doorway, her arms crossed and her face washed out and pale with worry for her child.

“I’ve been taking drugs” explained Juan quickly.

“I know,” she raised an eyebrow. “I’ve thought I’d smelt it on you a few times before.” She sighed and came into the room, sitting beside him and opposite Rodrigo, “that was very stupid Juan. You know drugs, even ones like marijuana can be very dangerous.”

He shrugged a little and she rolled her eyes. She glanced at Rodrigo, who was staring at her incredulously. “What?” she demanded.

“You knew he was smoking that stuff!” Rodrigo hissed, “and you never thought to tell me?”

“I wasn’t sure,” she argued, “besides we’ve done worse at his age. Not that I’m condoning it,” she added, sending her son a warning look. Juan just sneered; his parents didn’t have the right to preach to him about anything considering all the stuff they got up to, even now in their old age.

“All the same,” Rodrigo said, “you should have told me! This will not stand Vannoza! These are my children as well, and I want the best for them. I can’t believe you do not find him taking drugs, or even the possibility of drugs being in our home, isn’t something you would come to me about.”

“I can’t come to you about anything!” she argued back, her voice beginning to rise, “and for the last five years or more you’ve been far more interested in what’s in your own pants than the children! I feel like a single parent most of the time!”

“I’m trying damn it! And you can never say that I don’t care for my children!”

“You don’t care for them equally!”

“Neither do you!”

“Oh don’t you dare,” she hissed, now standing at the edge of the hospital bed, each parent squaring
off against one another. “Just because I don’t spoil your two favourites doesn’t mean that am unfair to them. I treat them all the same. You do not and they know it! We all know it!” She leaned back and sneered in a manner very similar to her son, “in fact the only time you do treat them the equally is when you’re distracted by some slut. Then suddenly we all vanish from your mind and all you think about is your whore and your dick.”

He shook his head slowly and sadly, “will you never forgive me for Giulia?”

“She was our disturbed seventeen year old foster daughter, so no. Neither will I forget about any of the others.”

They stood in silence then, hurt feelings laid bare.

“If you’re both done,” Juan’s voice suddenly said. Both parents turned to stare at him guiltily, they had completely forgotten about him being there. His face was void of any emotion, but he didn’t look at them as he spoke, “I would like you both leave now. I need to sleep.”

“Of course darling,” Vanozza went to kiss his head but he turned it away. She sighed sadly and left the room.

“I’ll make sure you get to the rehab centre alright,” said Rodrigo quietly, “you’ll have to come home when the doctors say so, but I’ll arrange for you to return to Spain as soon as possible.”

Juan nodded but said nothing as his father left.

Lucrezia opened her eyes slowly. The light from the sun outside hurt them a little, but as she became slowly more aware, she sat up painfully, the light coming away from her eyes. She was in a room she had never seen before; an attic bedroom that was mostly tidy apart from where bookshelves had been tipped on to the floor.

“Hm, you look like you feel better.”

She flinched and looked to her left. Beside the bed a man was sitting. He had been sitting crossed legged, his head resting on the palm of his hand, but now he looked up, brown eyes wide with surprise. He was tall and slim with very pale blue eyes.

“Who are you?” she gasped.

“A neighbour,” he said quickly, “your brother called for help when seeing you passed out in your bedroom.” He blinked a few times then added slowly, “well I better go.”

He got up out of the chair and began to head to the door.

“Wait,” Lucrezia called, “what’s your name? And where is Cesare?”

“Cesare is next door,” the man smiled and pointed at the wall. Lucrezia crawled forward on the bed and saw a small white door. “He’ll be out soon,” said the man, “I don’t advise you go in there yourself.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged, and then left. It was only after he’d quietly shut the door behind him that she realised
he still hadn’t told her his name. She considered chasing after him but shrugged instead. She felt exhausted. The thing that had been in her room suddenly flashed back into her consciousness. She hugged herself tightly after bringing her knees up to her chest. What had it been? Some sort of monster or a ghost?

The white door opened and a pale looking Cesare stepped out of it. He automatically turned to his bed and cried out his sister’s name when he saw her sitting there. They ran to each other (well, Lucrezia crawled across the bed) and embraced. She was shaking slightly, and he was breathing too fast.

“Oh Cesare,” she sighed, nuzzling his neck and noting how that made him blush. She kissed him there too, though she wasn’t sure why. He pulled away, the feelings he locked away suddenly becoming too intense. He sat on the edge of the bed awkwardly as she sat beside him, resting her head on his shoulder.

“How will I ever be able to sleep in that room again?” she whispered.

“What happened to you?”

“There was a girl in my bed. She had long black hair and was covered in blood. It was awful.”

Cesare placed a kiss on her head. “It must have been a nightmare. You’ve been under stress lately, we all have, with our parents passive-aggressively fighting yet pretending all is well.” He sighed, “you may have fallen asleep and had some intense dream.”

“Don’t patronise me,” she chided without venom, “I wasn’t dreaming.” She lifted her head from his shoulder and looked into his dark eyes, “I know what I saw. I’m not some hysterical child. I’m not one who believes in myths. But this was real, I saw it.”

They were quiet for a moment, Cesare uncertain on what to say. Should he tell her about the thing in the basement; that Juan’s fear may not have been unfounded nonsense? He felt uncomfortable lying to his sister, but he cared more about her loving him and being happy than he did any moral obligation to her. Lucrezia was an innocent and he wanted to keep her that way. If only he could count on someone other than himself to care for her. His father was too selfish; their mother too focused on Rodrigo; Juan was too stupid and self-obsessed; Joffre was too young. He was the only person he trusted to look out for Lucrezia, but he couldn’t be there all the time.

He sighed inwardly his feeling of loneliness crushing into him. Yes, he had a large family and yes he had a sister whom he adored, but Cesare had no friends and no confidante. Not even Lucrezia knew everything about him, about all his thoughts or the things he had done.

“Cesare,” Lucrezia murmured, pulling him out of his reverie, “who was that man? The neighbour you left with me?”

Cesare felt the blood drain from his face. “What?”

“The man who was sitting here with me; what was his name? He left before I got it.”

“You know I’m not sure,” Cesare plastered a fake smile on his face, “I’ll be sure to ask, the next time I meet him.”
Outside of the hospital, Vanozza lit a cigarette and with shaking hands lifted it to her mouth. The acrid burning in her throat soothed her nerves. She did not like fighting with Rodrigo and she hated her children being witness to any consternation between them.

“I thought you had given up smoking?” Rodrigo appeared beside her. Vanozza shrugged, too tired to argue. “We’ll have to make it up to Juan,” he muttered gruffly, “it wasn’t fair for him to see that.”

“He has seen worse,” she countered, even though she agreed with her husband. “They’ve seen us smashing cutlery and spitting swear words at each other. It’s a wonder they’ve turned out as well as they have.”

“Of course they’ve turned out well; we’ve made a few errors but we’re good parents.”

Vanozza sighed quietly. She wasn’t as confident in that statement as Rodrigo was. “We’ll search Juan’s bedroom tonight,” she said, “to clear out any drugs. And he’ll have to be grounded, so he can’t sneak off to buy some. If we get him and the others in school tomorrow, I think that will be best for getting some normality back into our lives.”

“We could get Cesare to keep an eye on him…”

“No! God Rodrigo that would make things worse!”

“Oh the boys are fine with one another,” Rodrigo bit back, “we can’t keep letting them stay apart. They’re brothers, they’re going to be in each other’s lives for as long as they both may live, so they may as well learn to get along. If Cesare keeps an eye on Juan we’ll know that he is safe.”

“Cesare will bully Juan and Juan will behave at his most obnoxious just to get a rise from his big brother. I won’t have it, they’re already at each other’s necks! It’s alright for you, you can escape to work, but I’m stuck with them!”

Rodrigo rolled his eyes. He couldn’t deal with Vanozza when she was like this. She had a habit of being a little hysterical at times and when she was he just could not get through to her. A couple of female nurses walked passed. They weren’t particularly attractive; their pale blue dresses reached down passed their knees, and they were covered with long white aprons. It wasn’t the sexy stuff of fantasies but yet Rodrigo still found himself smiling seductively at the youngest one, who looked away with wide embarrassed eyes and a soft blush on her cheeks.

He couldn’t help but feel a little smug; he was getting on in years but he still totally had it.

He blinked and looked back at Vanozza who, he was ashamed to realise, had been observing him the whole time. She cast her eyes to the heavens to show what she thought of him, appropriately deflating his ego, before dashing the cigarette to the floor and pressing her heeled boot on to it.

“We should go back in,” she said in Spanish, “the doctor said that he will be able to come home today, they just needed his heart race to return to normal. It was too fast, due to the excitement and drugs in his system.”

“He doesn’t want to return to the house,” Rodrigo, (who was a big believer in the saying ‘when in Rome do as the Romans do’), answered in Italian, “he’s frightened of it.”

“He is frightened of going to that school. But he will have to suck it up, if the others have to go there, he does as well. It’s not fair if he gets out of it but they don’t.”
Vanozza walked inside, and for a moment Rodrigo wondered if now would be the best time to tell her of his promise to Juan. He finally decided that she was too angry; he’d wait until she was calmer.

In the waiting area in the hospital young Joffre sat on a chair swinging his legs. He was horribly bored. It wasn’t fair that Cesare and Lucrezia got to stay at home but he was stuck here. Mom and dad were just arguing anyway. They were, what he called, Fighting Without Words, which meant that the atmosphere was tense and they kept giving each other filthy looks. He hated it. Cesare and Juan would Fight Without Words a lot as well. Joffre thought they were all very selfish. It made life uncomfortable and unhappy for everyone, so why didn’t they just stop? No one was even fighting for a good reason. He liked Lucrezia though, she was like him and didn’t fight with anyone. But then sometimes he felt quite jealous of her because everyone, especially daddy and Cesare, loved her very much. Joffre felt like he was often ignored.

'They are only like that because they’re all older than me,' he thought moodily, 'But at least I have my own friend now, she’s older and she likes me just the way I am.'

He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out two small bones they were wrapped with long, black, human hair. He smiled at it, feeling closer to the Angel with it in his hand. He wanted to go back home so that he could be with her.

The Angel had told him that she would take him away, that he could be forever young with her. He hoped that she would. He didn’t like being a Borgia and he didn’t like his family very much; they were too angry and too miserable and too greedy. Besides he didn’t want to go to some stuffy old school where everyone would laugh at his bad Italian and Spanish accent.

Finally Joffre slid off his chair and walked to where his brother was. The waiting area wasn’t too far away from Juan’s bed, though it still meant Joffre was wandering the hospital halls for a good five minutes or so on his own. As his parents were both arguing outside; no one was keeping an eye on him.

He walked into Juan’s room and found his brother brooding on the hospital bed. As soon as Juan saw Joffre he broke out into a genuine smile that lit up his face and revealed how handsome he was. Juan loved Joffre because Joffre was the only member of their family who treated he and Cesare exactly the same. Joffre had no preferences.

“Hey, what are you doing here on your own?”

“I wanna go home.”

“Where’s the other two?” Juan asked, reverencing their parents. Joffre just shrugged moodily before pulling himself onto Juan’s bed. His older brother looked at him carefully; Joffre had been acting strangely the last couple of days. “Are you still tired?”

Joffre nodded heavily, closing his eyes. Juan put his hand on Joffre’s forehead but could not detect a temperature. “Perhaps we should get a nurse to check you over before we leave…”

“Nooo,” the boy whined, lying down next to Juan and cuddling up next to him, “I just wanna go home an’ sleep an’ talk to the angel.”

“What? What’s the angel? Is it a new toy?”

Joffre shrugged again, his face hiding in Juan’s side.
Back at the house Lucrezia stood outside her bedroom. She had convinced Cesare at long last to leave her alone, so he was downstairs in the kitchen making her lunch. Lucrezia loved Cesare but she felt that sometimes he underestimated her. She wasn’t a little girl, she was a young woman, and quite a tough one at that, (or at least she always hoped she was, if given the chance to prove herself.)

So now here she stood, outside the bedroom, all alone. The door was white, her little sign on the door bearing her name. It was so unassuming.

Deciding to face her fear dead-on, she turned the door knob and pushed open the door slowly. Her bedroom was revealed to her. She poked in her head slightly, looking straight at the bed. The blankets were neatly tucked away. CD’s and articles of clothing were scattered on the floor, which was usual for her.

Carefully breathing deeply she inched into the room, her eyes wide. She barely dared to blink as she took in the room. Everything seemed normal.

“Hello,” she whispered hoarsely. “Are you here?”

She crossed over the threshold, still looking around. She stepped over her CD’s and opened up her bedroom window. Outside she saw a man standing by the bushes in their garden. She frowned at the strangeness of it. He had shoulder-length brown hair and a scowl on his face. He was smoking a cigarette and glaring at the house.

‘Who is he?’ she wondered.

The hairs on the back of her neck prickled and every horror film she had ever watched crashed into her mind and suddenly she could imagine the monster-girl standing behind her. She turned around quickly, but saw nothing. The room was the same.

She licked her lips nervously. “If you can hear me,” she whispered, feeling stupid and anxious at the same time, “I don’t want to be your enemy.”

She wondered if this ghost was like the ones on horror film such as The Ring where the ghosts were completely out of control, angry and unreasonable. She hoped not.

Lucrezia looked out of the window, just to see if the strange guy was still there. He was, only now he flung his cigarette into the bushes. Almost immediately they set on fire. She gasped as he began to make his way towards the house.

Her thoughts turned to her brother.

“Cesare!” she screamed his name, jumping away from the window and running out of her room and downstairs, “Cesare!”

What Lucrezia didn’t see was that when she cried out her brother’s name in fear, it cut through all the fog of his mind, and made the ghost of The Burning Man suddenly aware of her. Outside he stood, staring up at her bedroom window, a curious look on his face.

Chapter End Notes
This story isn't beta'd so please point out any errors in grammar, spelling, continuity etc.
Roberto Orsini, previous owner of the Murder House, was nothing special. He had never been particularly clever, he didn’t get the top marks, he wasn’t athletic, he didn’t have any powers, and he certainly didn’t have ‘the Shining.’

What Roberto did possess in his box of average skills, was a strong sense of clarity. He had known he was gay long before he had been taught the word (or the various slurs mocking it) and before the sexual revelations of puberty. He had known that Paolo was pulling away from him emotionally and physically because he was having an affair. And, as soon as Paolo and he had arrived at the house, whilst his fair-haired boyfriend had raved about a new start, Roberto had felt anxiety pooling inside his stomach; he had always known, deep down, that the house would be the end not the beginning.

The same happened within the house; whilst families such as the Geffens and the Borgias failed to notice anything too sinister, Roberto had picked up within the first month that things were terribly wrong. He realised within the first week that something was in the basement. In the second week he met Sancia. In the third week he had worked out his creepy neighbor and her weird children and vowed never to speak to her again. By the fourth week he found out that it was no use telling Paolo these things, because Paolo did not see nor hear evil. He said evil though. The strain on their relationship increased until all Roberto could do was embrace the insanity of the house and become a part of it; that was the only way he could keep his boyfriend safe (or so he had believed at the time.)

’Soo, it’s not surprising,’ he thought as he watched Cesare Borgia pottering about in his kitchen, ’that, unlike so many of the others here, I’m well aware that I’m dead.’

Cesare busied himself with making a sandwich for Lucrezia. He buttered the bread a little angrily, not understanding why she had sent him away.

“It’s dangerous up there on her own,” he thought furiously, “I still don’t really understand what we’re dealing with here.” He haphazardly slapped the various ingredients on the bread and tried to calm himself down. “I’ll talk to papa tonight. I’ll tell him that it’s too dangerous here. Juan is his favourite so I’ll use him. Maybe we can even agree on this together. With Juan and Lucrezia hurt, father will have to agree to move us somewhere else.”

“Cesare!” he heard her screaming and the sound of her speeding down the stairs, “Cesare!!”

He ran out of the kitchen just in time to see his sister leap down the last few steps, run across the foyer and ripping open the front door.

“There’s fire-” she stopped mid-stream. Outside everything looked perfectly ordinary.

Cesare walked up to her slowly, touching her shoulder gently, though the action still made her flinch. “What is it sis?”

“I thought I saw a man, and flames…” She stared at the garden, not realising that Evil was looking
right back at her. It saw her— it saw her.

They shut the door, and with his arm around her shoulders they walked into the kitchen.

“I’m not going crazy,” she muttered, “I swear…”

Cesare sat her down and looked at the sandwich. It had been rearranged neatly and cut into four, easy to eat pieces. He paled.

“I know you’re not,” he answered, his voice barely a whisper.

In the foyer The Burning Man, once known as Giovanni Sforza looked around, a dazed and stupid look on his face.

“How aware are you?” said a voice. Giovanni turned to see a short, brown-haired man looking at him. It was Roberto, but Giovanni didn't know that because he had died long before Roberto had arrived at the house as a living resident.

“You’re a bad man,” complained Roberto “of all the people to wake up, why’d it have to be you?”

Roberto looked up the stairway. He wondered how Sancia would take it. Would she even know that the spirit of her Uncle had entered the house, after all this time?

Giovanni did not know who this man was or what the hell he was talking about, so he ignored him and instead stared into the kitchen.

“You can’t go in there,” Roberto said, “it’s a safe spot in this house. I won’t let you go in. I know what you did to Sancia.”

Giovanni ignored the man and tried to step inside, but it was as if there was an invisible glass wall in the way. Giovanni snarled and walked away. He went the only path he remembered, upstairs to the first floor. He waited inside the red room, the one that had been his and that now belonged to Juan. He just needed to wait. To wait until the right time.

Roberto watched him leave before glancing back at the siblings. He was new to the ghost-gig and didn’t have much affection for this new family. He wasn’t sure what to do (if anything at all.) He sighed and wondered back into the kitchen. The girl looked as if she needed a hot drink, so without thinking, he switched on the kettle.

The siblings turned and stared at the exact same time the kettle began to boil and bubble. “Don’t worry,” said Cesare quickly, “I turned it on earlier. Do you want tea?”

Lucrezia nodded slightly, her eyes still wide. As Cesare sat the cup down in front of her she asked, “you are telling me the truth, aren’t you? Because I swear it only just turned on, and that it turned on by itself.”

Cesare smiled, “of course I am telling the truth. I put it on earlier, it’s only just boiled. Honestly.”

The rest of the Borgia family arrived at the house by early afternoon. Joffre bounded out of the car, displaying a level of energy no one had seen in him since their first arrival at the house, and ran up into his room without even greeting Cesare or Lucrezia.
The sun had just peeked out of the grey skies. Vanozza looked around the garden. It seemed, brighter somehow and less oppressive.

“It’s a nice garden, isn’t it?” she said to Rodrigo, who gave her an odd look before smiling.

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

“I thought it a bit bare and depressing before, but looking at it now, it’s quite nice. We should do something with it. Brighten it up.”

Rodrigo walked over to her and placed his arm around her shoulders. “Yes, maybe add some flowers, maybe even a little gazebo.”

She looked behind her and saw Juan was nervously looking up at the house. She felt pity for him. “We shouldn’t have fought earlier,” she continued quietly, “I’m sorry Rodrigo, I do want us to work out.”

He looked surprised at her honesty, “I want us too as well. I swear I’m trying. I’ll be at home far more often, so you can keep an eye on me.”

She smiled and pressed her lips to his cheek, before pulling away and walking to her middle son. “It’s only a house Juan,” she said to him, making him turn his light brown eyes to meet hers.

“I know...but I don’t like it. It’s creepy.” He bowed his head, feeling stupid and childish. He knew something was wrong with the house but he was also aware that to his mother it would just look like he was some frightened kid. Even Joffre, who was only seven, had bounded inside without a second thought whilst he stood outside shivering from fear.

Vanozza kissed his head. It was times of their weakness that she connected most strongly with her sons. She felt that she was good mother to Lucrezia, but for some reason she struggled with her sons. They were very strong, like their father, but they were also very distant and secretive. It was only during times of sadness or fear that they would return to her, open and in need of comfort.

Juan leaned into her and nodded, before slowly walking inside with her.

Lucrezia stood by the door smiling. She hugged both her mother and brother before stepping out to great their father.

On entering the foyer, Juan saw that Cesare was standing in the shadows, leaning against the wall with his arms folded like some villain from an anime series.

“We need to talk,” the dark-haired brother announced.

“Why?” sighed Juan, “we don’t like each other. I just got out of hospital, leave me alone.”

Cesare joined Juan’s side and the brothers began to climb the stairs together. “It’s something we both agree on, I want to get out of this house as well.”

“You do! Are you scared here as well?”

“No,” answered Cesare bluntly, making Juan feel stupid for admitting something so embarrassing, “But I am scared for Lucrezia and Joffre. Something strange happened earlier and Lucrezia was terrified.”

“Of course this is all about Lucrezia,” sneered Juan. They were on the first floor now, and they
slunk into Juan’s room, Juan leaping onto his bed and lying down on it. He stared at the ceiling, his face miserable.

“You almost sound jealous,” Cesare sat on the chair by Juan’s desk.

“Don’t be stupid,” muttered Juan, “of course I’m not jealous…”

“I think we should talk to papa later. I’ll go first, he won’t listen to me, but I’ll give a sound and logical argument. He still won’t listen, but that’s ok, because then, you go in, all tearful and sad. He’ll get attacked on both sides, and full of guilt and sensible reasoning, he will realise, by tomorrow morning at the latest, that we should leave this place.”

“Why should I go in as the emotional wreck?” Juan demanded, offended, “why do you get to give the ‘sound and logical argument’ while I go around weeping like some silly bitch on her period?”

“Because father responds to your emotions more than mine,” Cesare was gritting his teeth. He hated admitting in any way that father loved Juan more. It was obvious that father preferred the younger son over him, so he resented that Juan always found a way of making him spell it out.

“Right, because papa respects you more than me,” ground out Juan, “no need to rub it in my face that everyone knows you’re smarter than me!”

“That’s not what I was doing!” cried Cesare in exasperation, “look, forget all this stuff, will you help me or not?”

Juan seethed quietly before sneering, “no I won’t.”

“But that means you’re stuck here as well.”

Juan smirked and shrugged. He knew he was getting out anyway, but better keep that to himself.

“You’re impossible!” Cesare shouted, “you’re so petty it’s disgusting, will you not even do it for Lucrezia?”

Juan sat up, fury in his heart, “with you as her knight in shining armour we don’t have to worry about her ever being hurt! Get out of my room!” He stood up, “she’s downstairs right now, quick, go into her room and sniff her panties while you still can!”

Cesare punched his second victim that day.

Juan held his face, which was already swelling and laughed, “I’m pathetic? Look at you, you’re as bad as I am at keeping your temper. Great job, beating on your little brother who’s just come out of hospital.”

“Shut up,” muttered Cesare as he tried to squash down a little bit of guilt he felt.

“I look forward to the day you become a full-fledged sociopath,” spat Juan, his face hurting. God he needed to lie down and sleep.

“Yeah well, like you say, we’re as bad as one another.”

Juan smirked as much as his swollen face would allow and leaned back on to his bed. “Yeah,” he muttered, “I guess so…”
In the bedroom upstairs, Joffre could make out his brothers arguing. He sighed wearily.

“You do not like your family?”

He looked up at the dark haired angel. She smiled down at him.

“No I don’t,” he answered, “they’re mean to everyone else, so no one can make any friends, and then they’re mean to one another.”

“Well you are friends with me.”

He smiled and hugged her tightly. “I love you,” he said, looking up at her with big brown eyes, “Sancia, I love you. Really, really love you. Will you marry me?”

“Yes I will,” she laughed warmly, like honey, “I will be with you forever.” She looked over at the wardrobe. It was a big thing, too big for a young boy. It was made of oak but had been painted white, much like the furniture in her room had been.

“Come with me, let’s play a game.”

She lay him on the floor just in front of the wardrobe and told him to stay still. He obeyed. Then she stood by the wardrobe, and tipped it over.

Downstairs, the brothers both heard the wardrobe fall. However, Juan was seething in his room and refusing to some out for anything. All he could think of was how much he hated Cesare and resented Lucrezia. Cesare was torn between going back to his room and downstairs. He didn’t want to see anyone. He was too furious. He needed a calm head if he was going to plan a new way to manipulate father. In the end he ignored the thud and went downstairs. At least then he could be by Lucrezia, and she always made him feel better.

That is why it was a whole four hours later that Vanozza, tired of calling Joffre to come downstairs for dinner, until anyone found the youngest Borgia.

Chapter End Notes

This story isn't beta'd so please point out any errors in grammar, spelling, continuity etc.
Joffre

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty look, repeats his words,
Remembers me of his gracious parts,
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form.

~ William Shakespeare

The Borgia family sat at the dinner table in their dining room, a room next to the kitchen and opposite their living room. The table was full of delicious Mediterranean food as Vanozza was a stereotypical Spanish mother when it came to meals. They were bored. Juan was sulking over his leg and dreading the on-coming night. Lucrezia was worrying over the sullen mood of the men in the house as well as thinking over the mysterious and frightening events of the day; would Cesare allow her to spend the night with him? She wanted to ask right there, but had the feeling her brother and father would disapprove so would wait until after dinner when they were alone. Rodrigo was staring at the meal that was steadily going cold as his wife stood out in the foyer hollering up the stairs for Joffre to come down already. He was thinking that his life was always going to be this and the thought horrified him. Cesare ignored everyone and was playing on his phone, not caring that it drove his parents insane to have his phone at the dinner table, and all the while secretly worrying about the inevitable bullying that would face them all at school.

“Joffre!” bellowed Vanozza, “get down here!!”

“He’s probably asleep again,” sighed Juan.

“He has been sleeping a lot,” frowned his sister.

“He’s just tired from the move,” smiled Rodrigo, though the smile never reached his eyes.

“JOFFRE!”

Rodrigo sighed and swallowed his irritation with his wife, “just go up there,” he barked, “like Juan said, he’s probably asleep!”

Vanozza let out a shrill grunt before stomping up the stairs. The family momentarily relaxed in the relative silence. The tap-tapping of Cesare’s phone was incessant.

“Who are you even texting?” sneered Juan, “you don’t have any friends!”

Cesare sighed long-sufferingly and answered without looking up, “you don’t have any friends moron, though not for want of trying. I just don’t like people.”

Juan sat back and crossed his arms, a smug smile on his lips, “whatever. You just don’t make any friends. And F.Y.I, I do. People like me. Especially ‘cause I was Football Captain in our old school.”

“Only because dad paid the school to let you,” Cesare looked up from his phone to see his dad flapping his mouth open and shut like a fish and Juan gaping at him, “oh did you think I didn’t know?” Now was Cesare’s turn to look smug, “I actually did and, erm, “F.Y.I.” so did everyone else.”
Just as the others were about the cut in, there was a huge, throat tearing scream from upstairs.

It was a terrible scream, one that was so loud it echoed down the street and all the neighbours heard it. Most of them continued with their evening, it being common knowledge that screams of terror and misery were to norm in what they called The Murder House. Next door, Caterina Sforza allowed herself a nasty smirk and muttered, “one down, five to go…”

In the kitchen, the ghost of Roberto jumped a little when he heard her scream and the thing in the basement began to writhe and twist.

The family got to their feet and all of the pounded up the stairs (Juan at the rear as his leg was still heavily injured.) All hearts were beating fast and in the minds of the children were supernatural horrors; visions of their mother being attacked by a black-haired girl or something like the thing Juan saw in the basement. Bile was already rising in Lucrezia and Juan’s throats, but Cesare was already trying to think about how one might kill a ghost.

Rodrigo was the first to enter Joffre’s room, and the first to run back out crying out in horror. Then the siblings entered, all of them paling considerably. Juan was almost immediately sick and Lucrezia let out a wail like an injured animal before bursting into tears and sinking to the floor. Cesare just watched with wide eyes.

The heavy oak wardrobe was face down on the floor. It was surrounded by congealed blood. The little, white arm of Joffre was sticking out of one end. The sight was horrific, almost comedic in cartoon absurdity which made it worse.

Juan sank down next to his sister, like Rodrigo and Lucrezia his eyes were fixed to the floor. Only Cesare and Vanozza looked with wide eyes at the horror beneath them.

Shock caused Cesare’s emotions to shut down and all he could think was, ‘what was Joffre doing lying under the wardrobe, and how did it fall like that?’

Vanozza was holding the cold dead hand and weeping heavily.

Juan dragged himself across the floor and followed his father out of the room. Rodrigo was in the hallway, his head down. Juan felt in his pocket and pulled out his mobile with a shaking hand. For the second night in a row, an ambulance was called to the Borgia residence.

Cesare slowly sunk down on to one knee, reached out his hand and touched the cold fingers of his crushed brother. Tears sprung to his eyes but never fell. Cesare had loved Joffre and only in the moment of losing him did he realise how much.

Neighbours stood out in the road watching quietly as the remains of Joffre, wrapped from head to toe in a pale grey blanket, was carried out of the house on a stretcher. It had taken a long time for the hospital crew to piece Joffre together to put him on the stretcher. The fire-fighters had to be called to lift up the wardrobe. They had all insisted that none of the family be there for when it happened, especially as the parents had become increasingly hysterical. Joffre was barely recognisable. His face was smashed to a pulp and almost every bones in his body broken. His muscles had been torn and there was a lot of blood and tissue engrained on the wardrobe and carpet. The emergency staff were all professionals, but one ambulance staff member had wiped away a few tears and a number of them would be referred to a therapist after they returned to work.

Caterina Sforza, also standing outside with the rest of the neighbourhood, albeit slightly separate
from the rest of them, looked up to see Cesare Borgia standing on the threshold of his home. Their eyes met and she graced him with a small smile. He did not return it but instead with a blank look closed the front door. Her own shallow smile slipped off her face. She recognised that dead-eyed look. Towards the end, before he shot all the students in his class, she had seen the same look on her eldest son Benito.

But still, it seemed that the Sforza’s sanity had lasted a lot longer than the Borgias. She reckoned that this family wouldn’t even last as long as the gay couple had.

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They say that the death of a child is the worst thing a parent can go through, not just because of the devastation of losing a loved one, or that the death of a child always holds a degree of horror within it, but because a child dying before its parent is so unnatural. Neither Rodrigo nor Vanozza would ever really recover from the loss of Joffre, even though they would both try to replace him in their own ways. However out of the two parents it would be Vanozza who would suffer the worst, perhaps because she was secretly the most fond of Joffre, perhaps because he was the most like her, perhaps because she was the one who had found him and was with his remains the longest.

Vanozza was currently in the Drawing/Living Room on the settee surrounded by police officers and ambulance staff. She had a blanket wrapped around her and she was staring off into the distance, no expression on her face. There were a few whispers about ‘shock’ but she hadn’t registered hearing them.

Curled up on a small armchair in the same room was a sleeping Lucrezia. After the initial shock and misery wore off, she had become hysterical, screaming that the monster that had come after her had killed Joffre. When the ambulance arrived they’d been forced to sedate her. Even now in her sleep there were tear tracks on her cheeks and her eyes were puffy and red from tears. She frowned and whimpered, asleep but unable to rest.

In her mind, she was in the living room. It looked similar to how it did normally, but the wallpaper and carpet seemed new and fresh. There was a strong smell of lemon in the air. A woman in a pretty dress and pearls entered the room. She was crying softly, even as in her rubber-gloved hands she sprayed the coffee table and wiped it down. That’ where the lemon smell was coming from; the scent of her cleaner.

There was a slam of the front door and it startled the blonde woman. She skipped to the window and watched as a car pulled away.

She turned back and sighed in relief. She pulled off the gloves and walked towards the wall where the light switch was. She then knelt down and pulled at the wood panelling at the bottom of the wall. It came free easily and she pulled out a record that had been hidden in there. She smiled and blew off some of the dust before popping it on to a record player. It was then that Lucrezia realised what was so odd… the television was old fashioned, there was a record player and she was wearing some old-fashioned dress. This was from the past, like the 1950s or so.

The record began to play and a sad song rang out. Lucrezia shivered because it was so haunting. The woman began to cry softly again as she sat on the floor listening. Outside, the car pulled up again.

Lucrezia wanted to scream out to the woman, but she couldn’t do anything. It was as if she wasn’t even there.

Whoever was in the car must have been sneaky, because Lucrezia didn’t even hear the front door
before the man came in and stood at the doorway of the living room.

The blonde saw him and leapt to her feet.

“I’m sorry!” she cried, “I’m sorry!”

But the man was on her already, beating her viciously. He slapped her a few times before heaving her to her feet and punching her in the face. She fell backwards, smashing into the large mirror that was on the wall, before falling on to the record player.

He called her a clumsy bitch and kicked her once in her stomach. She lay on the ground sobbing as the scene went dark.

Lucrezia opened her eyes and saw that she was in the same living room, only it was older and full of policemen and a few emergency medical staff. She sat up, feeling the heavy tears still falling from her eyes, her body shaking from shock, and saw that across the way her mother was looking at her in exactly the same way. Without saying anything, Lucrezia knew that she and her mother had shared the same dream.

In the kitchen Rodrigo was on his seventh coffee in less than forty minutes. He paced up and down anxiously. Juan was sitting at the table watching him guiltily. He felt like shit. Cesare had told him to talk to father in order to get him to give up the house. But instead Juan had thought about himself and his own freedom and had been so keen to piss off Cesare that he hadn’t done anything; and now Joffre was dead. Juan loved Joffre, he loved him more than the others, but now he was gone and Juan would have to carry that burden of his own guilt for the rest of his (short) life.

Juan let out a heavy and rubbed his dry, arid eyes. He had been crying a lot, silent, angry tears, but now like his father he had run out of them. He was simply too exhausted to keep mourning.

Was there any point in saying anything now? He thought of his mother, of Lucrezia and even Cesare. He didn’t want any of them dead.

“Daddy,” he said quietly. Rodrigo jerked his head in Juan’s direction but didn’t look directly at him. “Daddy, I think…I think we should all leave the house,” Juan gulped, “maybe we could stay in a motel or something tonight, but then look for a new house tomorrow.”

Rodrigo tightened his jaw and turned away.

Juan stared before pushing on, “I mean, I fell and hurt myself last night and now today… dad we’ve only been here two days and look!”

But Rodrigo simply stormed out of the kitchen, leaving his slightly stunned son alone. Well, not completely alone, of course the ghost of Roberto was there.

‘Hm, reminds me of Paolo,’ thought the ghost, watching events with vague interest. ‘I suppose the dad is already in too deep.’ He felt a little bad for the family, but he was happy for Sancia, at least she wouldn’t be lonely now.

Darkness fell over the sad haunted house of the Borgia family.

The emergency staff were gone and all the neighbours had returned to their homes.

Vanozza sat on her and Rodrigo’s bed. Rodrigo was in their en-suite bathroom. He had said very
little to her all evening and she knew that he was avoiding her. Rodrigo was not good in these sorts of situations. The drugs the hospital staff had injected into her veins were still coursing through her system, but now she felt numb. Joffre’s room had been cordoned off. No one had said it but she knew what they all had been thinking; Joffre’s death was her fault. The wardrobe was large and heavy. It should have been shackled onto the wall, but in the hurry of the move, then Juan being rushed to hospital, they hadn’t time. Hell, most of the household items were still in boxes. They had only been in the house two days. But still, it made no difference, the wardrobe was a hazard and now her youngest baby was dead.

She wanted nothing more than to gather up the rest of her babies and have them sleep with her that night, but she knew that they would refuse. Cesare was too old and too independent and Lucrezia would rely on him for comfort, not her mother.

“Maybe Juan,” she thought, “even though he loves his father more than me.”

She got off the bed and wandered in to the hallway. Across from her room stood Joffre’s door. Police tape covered the front of it. There was a ghost of a child’s voice and a giggle. She frowned and walked over to the door putting her ear next to it. She swore she could just about hear her baby boy’s voice and he was talking to someone. Vanozza frowned, but that couldn’t be…could it?

“Mom?”

She jumped a little and looked up the stairs to see Cesare looking down at her. He looked calm.

“What are you doing mom?”

She shook her head, “nothing darling. Go to bed.”

A ghost of a smile was on Cesare’s lips, though she could see how superficial it was, there was no warmth in those sad dark eyes.

“You should go to bed as well mom.”

“I want to check on your brother and sister first.”

“Lu is in here. We’re sharing the bed…bedroom.”

Vanozza nodded distractedly. There was an awkward silence before Cesare bid his farewell and closed his bedroom door.

Darkness ruled the corridor once more. As she carefully walked down to the first floor she realised that it wasn’t at all surprising that Juan had tripped and fallen the other night. There were no light bulbs in the corridor lights yet. More stellar parenting from herself. She sighed, they should have checked the house over before moving in.

Suddenly she heard fast running footsteps and a childish giggle behind her. She whirled around, her breath caught in her throat but all she saw was darkness. She was tempted to call out ‘hello’ but that’s what idiots in scary films did. There was no young child up there; her boy was gone. It was just the drugs in her system, they were making her go a little loco, that was all.

Vanozza arrived on the first floor and pushed open Juan’s room. He hadn’t unpacked anything apart from his i-player, his large headphone and a few graphic novels.

She looked around the room. It was blood red and too dark for her tastes. The men who had lived in the house before had strange tastes; apart from the kitchen nearly every other room was either a
period piece or curiously blank. Though one of them had gone completely insane and killed the other, so it perhaps wasn’t so bizarre that the house reflected a certain amount of disharmony.

Juxtaposed to the warm colour, the room was very cold. She pulled back the curtains to see if the window had been left open but it was shut tight. She checked the radiator but it was on. It was as if all the warmth was being sucked out of it and replaced with cold.

Vanozza shivered and left the bedroom. Juan, of course, was not in the bedroom. She wandered downstairs, feeling strangely disconnected, and saw that the kitchen light was on.

Juan was sitting at the table. Heavy rings were under his eyes and his usually handsome, tanned face now looked pale and drawn.

“My poor baby,” she whispered, before gathering him up into a hug. He reciprocated half-heartedly. Vanozza didn’t mind, she accepted what affection she could from her sons. She nuzzled his hair with her nose, smelling him and taking him in. Her boy, injured but alive. He was her baby boy now.

The thought stung her and she held him more closely. He was so much more vulnerable than Cesare, perhaps even more than Lucrezia. Eventually he began to wriggle about.

“Mom, get off now.”

She released him. “You should be sleeping Juan.”

“I couldn’t,” he shrugged.

“You can sleep in my bed.”

Juan frowned and sneered, “I’m not a baby mom.”

“For my sake.”

“Did you ask Cesare?” He suddenly sounded angry, “No I didn’t think so. Everyone thinks I’m a big baby and he’s so brave.”

“That isn’t it,” Vanozza reached out and took his hands into her own. He pulled away, scowling. His jealousy of his brother was strong enough for him to rebuff her in her time of need, “I never asked Cesare because I knew he wouldn’t. Besides, he is sleeping with Lucrezia tonight. See, no one is alone. Come stay with me.”

“Of course he’s with Lucrezia,” Juan sneered and sipped a cold glass of water he’d poured himself earlier. “Those two are weird for each other mom.”

“You do not have to stay in the same bed as me,” she continued, “you can sleep on the floor. We’ll set it up.”

“This isn’t a sleep over. I’m fine down here mom. I prefer the kitchen. Feels safe here.”

“Fine,” she threw up her hands tiredly, “I don’t want to argue. I just…I love you Juan, so much. Staying in the kitchen is crazy to me, but if you really want to.”

Juan rolled his eyes and stood up, “come on mom, I’ll come to stay with you.”

“Are you sure?”
A small, genuine smile graced his lips; the truth was he hadn’t wanted to stay alone for the night and so despite his surliness he was actually pleased that Vanozza had pushed for him to stay the night in her room. “I’m sure mom.”

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‘Jeniferever’ played quietly in the background as Lucrezia lay on Cesare’s bed crying softly. Her body shook every now and then but mostly she was silent, her tears running down her pale, damp cheeks. She hadn’t spoken for many hours. Events had been too horrific and it was as if the pressure of the day had completely over-taken her. Secretly strong, even Lucrezia couldn’t deal with terror, nightmares and a death of a sibling in less than twenty-four hours.

She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. Her eyelids stung and, in the presence of the one she loved the most she finally spoke.

“I feel as if tomorrow will never come. Like this terrible night will go on forever.”

Cesare, who had been sitting on his bed headrest starring out the window, said nothing but looked at her with desperation in his eyes. He hated seeing her suffer, but this was a situation he couldn’t save her from; he couldn’t bring back Joffre.

Tearful blue eyes met dark brown ones, “Do you think maybe we are all dead and we are now in hell for our sins? Or maybe... maybe it is all just one nightmare? I wish I could wake up Cesare.”

He lowered himself on to the bed and hugged her tightly, breathing her in and holding her tightly, “I know, I don’t like it either. I will talk to father tomorrow, see if I can get him to take us away from here.”

She hugged him back tightly taking comfort in his scent, the feel of his black curls against her nose and she nuzzled into his neck. ‘Father will not take us away from here,’ her mind warned her, but she pushed the negative thought away. She knew their father loved them more than anything and now the house had proven to be a bad omen for them, that he would have them moved out in no time. Even if they had to spend time in a motel or a trailer, she didn’t care. She just wanted to be free of this house; just her and her parents and her three darling brothers.

Her mind suddenly conjured up an image of little Joffre sitting at the table playing with his toy bird and she realised her mental error. There wasn’t three darling brothers, but now only two.

A low whine came out of her mouth before she had time to censor it and again she wept, this time her tears seeping into Cesare’s shoulder.

She felt him kiss her head, shuffling so that he was sitting on the bed and she was in his lap. They stayed like that, him kissing her and she crying as ‘Jeniferever’ played until, eventually, she began to sleep.

This time there were no nightmares, but she did see Joffre. He was happy, because now he had a pair of wings of his own. He was holding hands with a young woman; one with long dark curls and beautiful tan skin. The girl was beaming down at Joffre and Lucrezia felt a little peace knowing that this woman was eternally Joffre’s guardian.
"Mom, I'm worried about Anton and Ben."

Sancia’s mother turned to look at her. Her eyes were dim and her movements slow. "What do you mean?" she asked at last, "your brother and cousin are fine, considering…"

Sancia observed her once glamorous mother who was now wearing a baggy jumper of a pair of filthy, unwashed jeans. She was sitting on her window-ledge staring out into the neighbourhood. Somewhere out there Ludovico was cowering away like the scum he was.

Sancia peered anxiously into the hallway, worried about eaves-droppers, before coming into the bedroom and closing the door.

"All they do is hide in the attic,” she began, “and they only really ever talk to one another. I swear Antonello is getting weirder and weirder as time goes by, and I think he's making Benito strange as well. Something needs to be done. They need to go into therapy or something."

"After all the terrible things that have happened to us since living here,” said Sancia’s mother, “is it any wonder he has become introverted and strange? And Benito is just taking care of him, that's all. The pair of them are just very good friends. I wish I was in a friendship that was as strong as that."

Sancia sighed and muttered a, 'I suppose,' with little feeling.

Present Day

All was silent within the house.

Outside the sky was suitably grey and wept quiet tears. Vanozza, mother of a dead child, sat in her bedroom. She was on the window ledge- the ledge being wide enough for one to sit on it. Normally the rain would beat against the window and lull her to sleep. But since the death of Joffre there was no sleep. Dark rings under her eyes were testament to that fact. The rain was too soft today to beat he window pane. Instead it slipped down in a million rivulets, like streams of tears.

Vanozza was pale and wore no make-up. Her clothes were muted. She had sat at the window that morning to watch her surviving children going to school. It had been two days since Joffre’s death. The children had all stayed home at first but the tension between the Borgias was too much. Juan was getting more antsy and unable to stay still. She even heard him arguing to Rodrigo about something to do with a promise. She paid no real attention, arguments between Juan and his father were rare, but Rodrigo failing on a promise to his children was not.

Cesare was distant and remote and Lucrezia had poured her attentions into him. The last couple of days had made Vanozza realise how little she knew her children; she had lost Lucrezia some time before her adolescence and her boys had never been hers. She only had Joffre and now he was gone.

“Maybe I never knew him either,” she thought, “I never knew he had died. He had been up here, under that cursed wardrobe for hours before we noticed.” Pain struck across her heart again like lightening and she bowed her head. She was a failure of a mother. An absolute failure. Her own children were strangers to her. Had she spent too much time fussing over her relationship with her
husband? She felt the dull thud of anger against him, but she did not blame him for the guilt she laid at her own door was too big and vast.

The children had gone to school late in the week, due to Joffre’s dying on Sunday. Cesare had been furious about going to school only two days after his brother’s death, but Lucrezia was compliant with father’s wishes and Juan just wanted to leave the house. He was the only person who looked more ill than Vanozza. Only yesterday she had gone downstairs early in the morning, unable to lie awake in bed any longer, and she had found him sleeping in the kitchen under the table. He hadn’t said anything to her on waking up, but she knew that he was now too afraid to sleep in his own room and too proud to sleep with anyone else. His skin was clammy and pale, his eyes bloodshot and pupils often blown. Reddish rings were around his eyes and he generally was beginning to look like a zombie. Yet she could not help him. She could not offer comfort or advice. She couldn’t even speak. Since Joffre’s death and her realisation of her own lack of use in her own home, Vanozza had becoming a recluse in her own house.

Catherina Sforza from next door had come to the house the day after Joffre’s death. Rodrigo invited her in and entertained her, but Vanozza had hidden upstairs. She thought briefly of Rodrigo having an affair with Catherina, and then realised that she no longer cared. She didn’t care about anything anymore.

August 1926

“Who will ever love a face like mine?” Charles sighed sadly, putting the hand mirror down and staring up at the ceiling. Monsieur Rovere had been good enough to find him this house to hide in, for hiding was all Charles was good for nowadays.

He had observed in horror how his face had twisted over the years, becoming increasingly grotesque. He had gone to doctors and healers but none of them seemed to understand what he was saying; they all thought he was exaggerating. It was so frustrating! Why wouldn’t they help him?

“Perhaps I am a terrible person,” he thought morosely, “perhaps this is a curse of some kind?”

He felt down his body, feeling the swell of his stomach. His only pleasure now was eating food as he no longer had any friends and no longer could leave his home. Food was the one bright spot that could drive away boredom and gave him something to look forward too. But, of course, it was making him fat.

“I am like the Beast in the Castle,” he thought, remembering his favourite fairy tale from his childhood, “but will a beauty come to save me?”

Present Day

Vanozza finally turned her head away from the dark, wet outdoors and looked at her room. The walls were a pale, inoffensive white, the carpet a dull uniform brown. Nearly all their belongings were still in boxes. The room was plain, like one from a motel. It did not feel like her own home at all.

She thought of the old home-owners, two young men starting out a life for themselves. It would have been hard enough, them both being gay, there was still a lot of prejudice in the world. They must have loved each other very much, and been brave men; to think that they died so sadly, all because one was having an affair.

She thought of the one who had gone crazy, shooting the lover and his boyfriend before hanging himself. How sad. She had felt like doing that herself sometimes. She would never admit it to
anyone, but in her darkest moments she had been tempted, almost as if she were being pushed by some malevolent force, to take a gun and to execute each and every member of the family, even her own children, before taking her own life. Of course she never did, and felt disgust at parents who committed such acts, but still, deep down, she sometimes felt that way.

Vanozza shook her head. She shouldn’t think so darkly, not now. It would not end well for anyone. She stepped off the window ledge, her legs aching. Glancing at the radio clock on the bedroom cabinet, she realised she’d been sitting on there for some hours now. It was nearly lunchtime, but she wasn’t hungry.

She glanced at her bedroom door, aware that when she opened it the first thing she would see would be Joffre’s bedroom. She left the door closed. She could stay in her room, maybe do some unpacking.

Kneeling down on the soft carpet, the one that would have been put down by one of the couple from before, she tore the heavy sellotape from one box and opened it up. Inside was filled with things wrapped in newspaper. She lifted one out and unwrapped it. It was an ornament bull. Rodrigo loved it because it had been a gift from his own grand-father, a kindly man who worked as a Priest.

She put it up on the bed and continued to rummage. The next thing she lifted was rectangular. She began to unwrap it and could see that it was going to be a framed photo. She paused and slowly allowed her arm to reach back into the box, letting it go. The only photos the family had were of one another. They photo would probably have Joffre in it, and she couldn’t…she just couldn’t…

Feeling herself breaking and crumpling into herself, Vanozza hugged herself tightly, before lying only the floor, curing up her knees into her stomach, unconsciously folding into the foetal position.

Vanozza hated feeling this way, but she didn’t want it to stop, or the moment this feeling did stop, that would mean she had forgotten her son, or had forgiven herself, and that could never be allowed to happen.

She let out a small quiet sob before putting her face against the floor. Everything was dark as she wept.

Vanozza felt her body cooling slightly, as if the air was getting colder. She didn’t notice the bedroom door opening softly on its own accord, and she was not aware that she was no longer the only being in the room.

As the tears began to dry she felt herself fading back into that strange place she often found herself since the night of Joffre’s death. She remembered the strange dream she had of the blonde woman who was beaten by her husband. She remembered the strange half-sleep, half awake moment where she seemed to be a spectator in other people’s lives. She felt herself going there again. Nothing felt real and it was as if she were merely a bystander in her own world.

“je suis si triste…” the words rose unbidden in her mind, “oh mon, je suis si triste, quand cette fin de la misère …” She muttered the words out loud as she lay on the floor, her eyes half closed and not seeing anything around them because they were too full of tears, “s’îl vous plaît, s’îl vous plaît laissez-le Dieu tout sera fini …” Her voice deepened and she realised on some level that it was not her speaking, but that she was merely a puppet, “qué ce soit sur …”

Suddenly, Vanozza felt much lighter, she hadn’t noticed how heavy she felt before until now. She raised herself off the floor and rubbed her eyes. It had been a little like when one is awake but the body holds them in the stillness of sleep.
She opened her eyes. It was brighter in the room for it had stopped raining. Outside the skies were returning to the usual Italian blue. She stood up and saw the radio clock. It had been two hours. She frowned slightly, and looked at the wall. A large mirror was hanging on it. She hadn’t put it there. She didn’t even recognise it. Where had it come from?

She walked towards it slowly, reaching out her hand and touching it. The mirror was cool to the touch. At its bottom she could see a small plaque on it, with a name carved into it: Machiavelli.

What did that mean? Was it the make of the mirror? The designer? The owner?

She stepped back and put her hand to her head. “Am I going crazy?” she muttered, “ce qui se passé?”

She blinked and looked up at herself in the mirror. Was she speaking French? Why? She never even had been taught French! The only languages she knew were Italian and her mother-tongue Spanish.

Vanozza sat on the bed and looked at the door. She could see that it was open, but moiré disconcerting than the fact that she didn’t remember opening it herself anymore than she remembered finding and putting up a mirror, was the fact that she could see Joffre’s room. The police tape was down now, but the door was open and she could see the room. The stain on the carpet was still there.

The stain.

The stain of her child’s blood.

Her head began to pound as her heart and breathing began to accelerate. She couldn’t handle it... she couldn’t handle it anymore!

She looked at the window and thought of leaping out of it...no, no! She could not!

Instead she got to her feet and ran out of the bedroom, her soul screaming in terror as she past Joffre’s room and for a split second swore that he was standing in there watching her...

She flew down the stairs, almost falling like Juan had, and ran into the foyer. In the kitchen, the spirit of Roberto watched with wide eyes as the woman, hysterical now, fumbled to open the front door.

The basement door creaked open loudly, making her whimper. Part of her was whispering for her to turn around, to look at the top of the stairs, that Joffre would be standing there, watching her.

Vanozza let out a long, whimpering whine and refused to look behind. Instead she finally managed to open the door and she ran out, slamming it shut behind her before speeding out of the garden and into the street.

Roberto watched calmly out of the kitchen window. He’d done that numerous times when he had been alive. It had never helped much; his boyfriend had always dragged him back.

“I’m sorry,” a voice other than his own whispered, “how many times do I have to say sorry?”

Roberto turned around but saw nothing. He frowned. “Leave me alone,” he said out-loud, “I mean it Paolo Orsini, leave me alone. Never bother me.”

Silence met his words and satisfied with that, Roberto continued to watch out the window, waiting...
for the surviving children to return.

“Can I have a sandwich?” a child’s voice turned him away from his vigil. He saw a young, brunet boy standing in the kitchen threshold.

“You are Joffre?” he asked, even though he already knew. He had seen Joffre when the boy had been alive after all.

The child nodded.

“You can’t eat anymore. It’s not what we do. How is your angel, Sancia?”

“I want my mommy.”

“Ah, got tired of playing did you?” Roberto lessened his defences, allowing the child to enter the kitchen. “I’m sorry Joffre,” he began not knowing how to say what he needed to say, “but your mommy cannot see you. Not really. I’m afraid you are like me now. No one can see us.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re dead.”

Joffre looked up at him with wide, sad eyes. Roberto ruffled his head, “I’m sorry little one. I really am. If it’s any consolation, lots of children died here. Maybe they will play with you.”

“I don’t want to play,” he insisted, tears welling, “I want my mommy.”

“Well…she’ll join you soon enough. They always do…” He looked at the boy, “you just have to be patient. There’s nothing else for it.”

The boy nodded sadly, a faded away. Roberto looked at the place the ghost child had stood for a long time. He had been dead for some time now, but it never got easier, never got happier and he still understood nothing.

December 1926

Charles sat alone. Rovere was away for Christmas, staying with family over in Florida. He had been gone for a week already, and there were another two to go.

Charles missed him; he always did when he went away. Rovere was the only one who could handle his unnatural features and for the past few years had been the only company Charles had. Most of the house was locked up; it was too big for him really. Rovere had bought a large house in keeping with Charles’ previous lifestyle in France, but there was no need. Charles used the kitchen, his bedroom and the sitting room. He could have happily lived in a small hut somewhere. Besides, he didn’t deserve nice things, monsters generally didn’t. The house was therefore quite dark, doors closed and windows boarded. It meant that it was reasonably warm in the winter though, and sitting beside the fire reading a book was quite snug.

He’d been trying to read *The Facisti Exposed* for some time, but was having trouble concentrating. He put the book down, giving up his attempts. Dark thoughts fluttered through his mind; He thought over all the things he got wrong in the past, all the embarrassing faus pas that eventually led him to retire from society, all his potential wasted. He had been a lawyer, once. He was brilliant, charismatic and hard working. But then his face had begun to change; to swell and distort until he couldn’t stand to have anyone look at him.
Now he sat, living his best years in bitter solitude. “But at least I am not completely useless,” he thought to himself. When he had been a lawyer in France, he felt he had been legitimately helping people. Ow, living in Rome during one of its darkest hours, he felt that helping the people whom he helped was, though a small thing, something significant enough that it gave his life some meaning.

Frantic knocking on the front door alerted him back into the present. He lifted himself up and opened the door.

A girl stood there, her eyes streaming mascara, her thin dress wet and clinging. Her hair was heavy and dark, and her legs and arms were thin, pale and knobbly. She looked like a film star.

He stared for a moment, too over-come to even bother worrying about how he looked.

“Please help me,” she said, her Italian fast and thick, “I need help!”

“C-come in,” he said, standing aside and waving her into the foyer. He closed the door and led her to the front room.

“Sit by the fire,” he said, “I’ll get you a towel.”

He bounded upstairs, grabbing a thick jumper out of his bedroom before barrelling into the bathroom and getting some thick towels from the cupboard. He then glanced at himself in the mirror. A swollen nose, bulging eyes, wild wiry hair. He brushed his hand through it anxiously, hoping to tame it a little. It was no good, he hadn’t the noble Nordic features that the Italians revered. The temptation to kick her out danced in the back of his mind, but he refused to entertain it; he couldn’t send her into a storm because of his own flaws.

Twenty minutes later they were sitting together, she small and delicate in his jumper, her black hair frizzing in the heat. He anxiously glancing at her now and then.

There was the crackling of the fire over the still heavy beats of the rain.

She put down the cup of coffee she’d been sipping, “thank you so much, Mr…?”

“Um, just Charles, please. And it’s do not concern yourself. It must have been quite a fright to have the door open and I reveal myself to you. I apologise. Now, you say you needed help, what help?”

She sighed shakily before beginning her tale, “I was driving into Tufello to visit family. But then someone, I do not know who, began to harass me on the road. I tried to let them pass, but they wouldn’t go, and when I sped up, they did also. Finally, just on the outskirts they…they,” she turned and took a deep gulp of her coffee. He resisted the urge to reach out and touch her in comfort, he didn’t want to be misconstrued. “They drove me off the road,” she said at last, “I was hurtled into the bushes down the side of a hill. I heard them park on the road above me. I snuck out of the car and began to run. I saw the lights of the city and so followed along the roadside, still hidden in the bushes and shrubbery, until I got to the city. I arrived at this suburb and have knocked on many doors, but you are the only one to have opened up your home to me.”

She looked at him with wide eyes, dark eyes that were dewy, like that of a deer. They were beautiful.

He felt his breath leave him.

“You’re welcome. We should call the police, as you must be in danger.”
“Very well, but I am so tired! I don’t know if I can handle all the questions tonight.”

He nodded. “Very well, I can pay for a nice hotel room for you to stay at…”

“Sir you are much too kind!”

He held up his hands, “Charles, please.”

She smiled coyly and leaned forwards, her jumper slipping to reveal a pale shoulder, “allow me to make it up to you,” she said, her lips thick and sensuous. “May I make you dinner?”

He gulped, his anxiety telling him that this was dangerous and strange; there was something suspect in a woman being alone and travelling independently. Even stranger was her story and her not wanting to go to the police. But, he was lonely. “You may,” he said, “But, what is your name?”

She smiled showing her teeth, unnaturally white and square, “Beatrice.”

A few hours later the pair sat in the dining room. Beatrice had made lasagne from scratch, including her own pasta, with Italian in season vegetables. For a man living off tinned food for the last month, it had been heavenly.

“I would love to go to France,” she was saying, “the women there are so free.”

“True,” he answered, putting his utensils on the now empty plate, “but there are whispers of a recession.”

“Ah, then I should stay here and do as Il Duce says, become a good housewife.” She picked up their plates and took them into the kitchen. He bit his thumbnail nervously before calling out, “I shall make up a bed for you in the spare bedroom.”

“Then I shall wash up,” she called back from the kitchen, “my thanks to you.”

He headed upstairs to the first floor. The first and second floors both had two bedrooms, one large and one small, and one bathroom. The second floor and the attic were usually locked up, but he used the first floor. He opened up the small bedroom, a guest room, and began to place fresh linens and bedsheets. He then nipped into his own room, rooting about for a large shirt that she could sleep in.

“Maybe I would go to France.”

The feminine voice made him turn suddenly. Beatrice stood in the doorway. She’d take the jumper off, and her slender body was visible. She was looking at him with an intense gaze.

Slowly, she prowled into his room like a Lioness.

“If all Frenchmen are like you, I’d want to meet them all.” She touched his face tenderly, making him gasp. It had been years since anyone had touched him. He shuddered, the sensation lighting a fire within him.

It was too much.

He closed his eyes and pulled her hand away, feeling her thin bones in her wrist.
“Please, Madam, do not tease me.”

“I do not tease,” she said with such sincerity he opened his eyes. Her face was in front of his, her eyes locked onto his own. She leaned forward, plush lips against his own.

And, to his surprise, he reciprocated.

The night stretched out into the darkness, the promise of a union, of a coupling of which he’d never known before. Something made of lust and sweat and heat and pulsing. Something with the hint… the taste of love.

Present Day

Vanozza, so much like her son though neither realised it, walked down almost exactly the same path Cesare had stormed down after his confrontation with Alphonso.

Soon enough, like Cesare had, she found herself in the local park. The park wasn’t one for children, there weren’t any swings or slides, but there was a large pond and beautiful lawns to sit on. She thought how Joffre would have loved to come here to feed the swans and ducks, or to run on the grass and climb up one of the trees. She held her fist to her heart, almost as if she wished she could rip it out. Vanozza was breathing hard due to her running most of the way, and so she slumped down under one of the large willow trees. She looked up at the long, mournful branches and felt a little at ease knowing that nature was weeping with her. That was the story behind willow trees wasn’t it? That they mourned the death of a beautiful young hero taken before his time?

The sun broke out from between two clouds and the world temporarily became a little lighter. She wondered about the afterlife. Vanozza had considered herself vaguely religious most of her life, and most accurately could probably be described as an absent-minded catholic. But now, with her baby dead, she found herself thinking seriously about the afterlife. She liked the idea of heaven and her son being there. It seemed far too cruel that he really was just gone, like a sketch that had been rubbed out, or a candle flame snubbed.

‘Can a person really just be gone one day?’ she thought, ‘Can a human being, with so much life and energy ad personality just vanish into nothingness like that?’

It seemed impossible- after all, the Universe recycled almost everything right? Energy would simply transform into something else and keep going on. Surely that was what the human soul was, the energy and life-force of a human. Surely something that potent couldn’t just be gone one day.

But then if heaven was real, then had god or whatever ruled that plane, really taken her son? That was also too cruel. Why take her baby? Why did useless or evil get to live while Joffre died?

‘Maybe it’s something you did?’ she wondered, ‘maybe I am being punished. It’s my fault he was under there so long, if I had noticed him missing sooner I might have been able to save him. I shouldn’t have let him out of my sight, especially after he went missing when we first moved in. I never should have let him out of my sight…’

Grey clouds covered over the pale yellow sun, plunging the earth back into a grey, washed out look.

“REPENT! REPENT!”

A preacher was shouting further down the park. Vanozza saw that he was carrying a body plaque which had bible verses from Revelations and The Book of Daniel on it. He was a rotund man with
a bald head and large staring eyes which were quite fierce. People were avoiding him, but he kept shouting anyway as he slowly made his way toward where she was sitting.

“The Lord will rejoice over you to destroy you, and to bring you to nought! Italy shall become desolate; for she hath rebelled against her God! They shall fall by the sword! Their infants shall be dashed in pieces, and their women with child shall be ripped up!” Vanozza felt her skin growing cold and getting goose-bumps the closer he got. What he said about the infants made her feel ill, and she instantly flashed back to Joffre, a crushed, bloodied pulp of a boy’s body underneath a large, coffin-like wardrobe. She gagged a little.

“Then because of the dire straits to which you will be reduced when your enemy besieges you, you will eat your own children, the flesh of your sons and daughters whom the Lord has given you!”

Realising how close he had come, she suddenly became very frightened and stumbled to her feet. Tis however, caught the Preacher’s attention. He stared at her, eyes hard before muttering seemingly to himself, “give me any plague, but the plague of the heart: and any wickedness, but the wickedness of a woman… WHORE!” He screamed after her as she almost fell into a run, “Babylon the Great, The Mother of the Harlots and Abominations of the Earth! Your bastards are abominations! ABOMINATIONS AND HARLOTS!”

Vanozza fed the park at full speed, hurtling down the streets before finally collapsing on her road. She slumped over to a bench and sat down. The rain started to pour once more. She felt the cold droplets washing over her tired face.

Her feet felt numb, cold and sore. When she looked down at them she saw that they were bare; she had been in such a hurry to leave the house she’d forgotten to put her shoes on.

She fell back and looked up at the sky. It was all so meaningless and empty. What did the afterlife even matter? Her baby was gone… he was gone…

“Vannoza? Vannoza Borgia right?”

She looked to the side and saw a pristine Catherina Sforza smiling down at her. She was wearing a tight designer raincoat that showed off how great her body was even though Vanozza was sure that Catherina was even older than she. She was carrying a large Versace bag and was holding a trendy black patterned umbrella. She sat on the bench next to Vanozza and arranged it so that the umbrella covered them both.

Vanozza was aware of how crazy she looked; dirty bare feet, wild hair, unwashed, dirty clothes…

“I’m sorry about your son,” she said after a moment of just listening to the rain pour, “the whole neighbourhood is stunned.”

Vanozza turned away, her eyes stinging. She didn’t care that her son’s death was the thing of idle, local gossip.

Catherina took in a deep breath and said, “for what it’s worth you are coping well” (Vanozza let out a cynical ‘hah!’) “much better than I did.”

Now Vanozza suddenly turned and looked at Catherina, who graced her with a small, sad smile. “I understand your loss. My son and daughter were killed. They died in a fire. I… I know that you feel this is all your fault. I know because I did. I took all the blame for their deaths into myself.”

“What did you do?” asked Vanozza, her voice croaky, “how did you move on?”
Catherina’s smile was now bitter, “I carried on as well as I could. I insisted on still being a mother to those I could, and I blamed the bastard who was responsible.”

“I am responsible,” said Vanozza lowly, “I didn’t call Joffre…I left him alone…”

Catherina grabbed her shoulders and forced Vanozza to look at her, “tell me, did you choose to live in that cursed house? Was it your fault you had to leave your old home? Are you a single parent—was no one else able to check on Joffre?”

Catherina shook her head at each question, a little surprised at Catherina’s ferocity. Catherina released her and sat back, a calculating look on her face.

“You told me you wanted to foster again,” she took out a cigarette and lit it, “I suggest my dear that you do so, you have too much love to give. Get a baby this time. One you can mould into a Borgia. Then, you make sure that you look after this baby, your sons and daughter and your husband let you down. They cannot be trusted to watch over a child. Pour your love into this new one, if nothing else, it will distract you from your pain, give you something to focus on.”

Vanozza wrung her hands in uncharacteristic indecisiveness, “I don’t know…”

“Come with me, sign up and we will go from there. You can always change your mind.”

“Ok, you’re right,” what have I got to lose? She added silently.

Catherina smiled, “but first, let’s get you home and dressed.”

\textbf{December 1926}

It was dark when he awoke, but not so dark that he missed the shadow standing at the foot of his bed. Charles raised himself up on one arm. Since moving into the house he had noticed a presence and soon realised the place was haunted. One of the few things he had in common with Mussolini was his atheism. However, like most socialists he was tolerant of religion and even was willing to concede to the possibility of a god or the supernatural- but only with evidence of course.

Well, the house had been providing him with evidence for the latter.

He’d seen the spirit twelve times for the six years he’d lived in the house; every October for Halloween and every Christmas. It usually was a shadow drifting eerily and without purpose. It always stayed at the bottom of his bed looking at him.

He’d grown used to it in a way. It had become just another quirk of the house; strange set up, tall, overly ornate to the point of trashy, oh, and its own ghost.

“Get up,” whispered a voice from the shadow, “she’s making a fool out of you.”

Charles looked down at his side and saw that Beatrice was nowhere to be seen. Looking back up, the shadow was now gone. He stood up and wrapped a nightgown about his person, the house being very cold. The rain outside was now replaced with snow and sleet.

He went out into the hallway. Normally he’d put on the lights, but he had a bad feeling about Beatrice and so decided stealth was the best mode of operandi.

“I hope the spirit was wrong,” he thought. He couldn’t bear the idea that the first woman he’d ever made love to was up to something sinister. But the idea that she was using him somehow would make more sense than her genuinely being attracted to him.
In the stairway he saw the light to his front room was on. He crept down in to the foyer and stood at the corner of the doorway looking in. She was standing with a serious look on her face, staring down at a book in her hands.

It was *The Facisti Exposed*.

“What do you think?” he asked, making her look up at him in surprise.

“I saw this earlier, before you went to get me towels and a jumper,” she said, then, raising the item, “this book is something Il Dulce would not approve of.” Her voice was hard and cold, not like before.

He shrugged, entering the room calmly, “I do not agree with what Monsieur Matteotti has to say.”

“Really? Because since seeing that earlier, I have taken the time tonight to look around this little room and there is quite a lot of paraphernalia devoted to the United Socialist Party as well as other enemies of the PNF.”

“Who are you?” he demanded, betrayal heavy in his chest and hurt crawling up his throat.

“And why do you have so many rooms?” she went on, “is it to harbour enemies of Rome’s peace and security?”

“They are locked up,” he raised his hands, “I am just another rich man who spends unwisely.”

“You are another Frenchman,” she sneered, “probably of Mediterranean or even African descent, looking at how dark you are. And the French are filthy whores.” She pulled back, as if trying to reign in her own animalistic side, “you will get a call from the Black Shirts tomorrow. Goodnight Monsieur.”

She marched passed him, ripping open the front door and stepping into the cold, wet outdoors.

“That’s it,” he thought, “I’ll be killed tomorrow, if not before.”

Suddenly a shadow flew past him. He blinked and found himself facing the vague form of a man. He had lank, brown hair and an evil look about him.

“Coward,” he whispered, and Charles immediately recognised the voice that belonged to the spirit, “I’ll show you how to deal with your enemies.”

It became shadow like again, flitting into the foyer and out of the house.

Charles stood still for a moment, his mouth open in shock. Never had the ghost been so real nor had it done so much before.

A scream smashed through his shock like a rock through a glass window.

He raced outside and saw Beatrice on the floor being dragged around the side of the house. He chased after them.

It was around two in the morning. No one else was awake. It seemed that Beatrice’s screams were not enough to arouse any neighbours. The snow and sleet fell insistently, wetting his hair and clothes.

He ran, ignoring the pain of cold on his feet, to the back of the garden. He’d mostly ignored the garden, and it had grown wild with his miscare.
In the back was a large body of water, a pond that had developed into a sort of marsh. She was being dragged down by some unknown force, still screeching.

He stood, unsure of what to do. Should he go after her? But she was going to get him killed! But then, she was the only woman who had been with him intimately, but then again she’d abused that trust.

Beatrice gripped the mud, trying to get a purchase on dry land as she was steadily pulled into the freezing pond. She was going slowly enough that she could reason her situation; something was pulling her but she couldn’t see anything doing it. It was like some sort of black magic, and she was convinced Charles was something to do with it.

“Get it to stop!” she screamed, seeing him standing there like an idiot, “I want it to end! I’m sorry, please, make it end already!”

She began to scream more desperately when the water reached her chest. The cold was seeping into her body. Her lips began to turn blue and she began to shake.

“I’m sorry,” she stuttered, “I’m sorry just…pl-please…”

Charles shook his head. He was capable of making brutal decisions, but this was too much. He couldn’t let her die. He rushed out, stepping into the thick mud and water.

“Stop spirit,” he cried, “there’s no need for all this!”

He grabbed her stretched out arms and began to pull for his life.

“Make it stop,” she muttered, her voice soft and weak.

“I cannot control it,” he said, grunting with effort.

She sunk deeper, it reaching her neck. Her eyes were wide with fear.

“HELP ME!” she began to scream, panic rising, “HELP! HELP!”

He pulled, but it was no good.

She sunk beneath the mud, her mouth covered, bubbles revealing that she was still screaming even under the filth.

At last, her arms were pulled under with such force that they slipped from his own iron grip. He fell backwards from the counter force, landing on his arse in the mud. He was breathing heavily, soaking wet and cold and terrified.

Getting to his knees he put his arms deep into the pond, feeling around for her body, but he couldn’t feel her anywhere. His self-preservation kicked in, and he went back into the house.

He stumbled through the front door, tracking mud and water into the house. He collapsed onto the ground, breathing heavily. He had never thought the spirit was dangerous, but…but that had been…

“Make it stop.”

Charles froze, hearing the voice behind him.

“Make it end. Make it end.”
He sat up and slowly turned around.

“Make it end…”

In the doorway was a figure of a thin woman. Her hair, long and black and dripping, was in front of her face. Her voice was croaky, as if sore from screaming.

“Make it end,” she began to walk into the house. Her gait was off, as if her bones couldn’t work properly.

“Beatrice,” he said, confused, “Beatrice, what?”

She looked up, her face showing. It was pale, deathly so, and her eyes were nothing but rage.

“Make it END!” With the anguished scream, Charles was flung backwards into the stairs. His head smacked heavily off the edge of one stair, killing him instantly.

His death was considered to be that of clumsiness, that he must have slipped and banged his head, when he was found two weeks later by Rovere.

It was almost seen as funny by the neighbours; the silly ugly Frenchman who couldn’t even walk down the stairs properly. Though, the spirit of Charles Valois had the last laugh when Fascist Italy and its leader fell. Watching the body of Mussolini being paraded down the street, spat upon by the Italians, the spirit of Charles had smiled softly to himself.
Burkhardt's School of Excellence

December 1996

Italy's specialist Police Unit, usually reserved for terrorist acts, now stood on the quiet, leafy suburbs of outer Rome. Specifically, they stood outside a dark, burnt out husk of a house.

Slowly, guns at the ready, they entered. They split up once inside, some going upstairs, some looking around the ground floor. It was extremely dangerous and the fire department was ready and waiting outside in case any part of the house collapsed.

It was the high-pitched laughter from the basement that gave the assailant's position away. Gesturing to one another, the SWAT team made their way cautiously downstairs.

In the basement, all over the floor were jars and jars of blood. Blood the killer had drained from the teens and teachers he'd shot that day.

"Hands up!" cried one officer as he spotted the boy grinning, sitting cross legged on the floor.

The boy, a handsome teen with dark brown hair and an affection for British Punk Music, shook his head and reached for his gun. He was promptly shot to death by the police within seconds.

Just another victim of the Murder House.

xxXXxx

“This feels all wrong,” Lucrezia said as she walked down the school corridor with her brothers either side of her. They were all in their navy-blue, well-fitted Burkhardt uniforms- but being new, tall and very attractive, all three Borgia children were already garnering stares from other students.

“We should have been allowed to stay home,” griped Juan, his eyes red and face pale, “I can’t believe mom and dad have made us come into school.”

“Perhaps they want us to continue as normal,” said Cesare quietly, looking around the school and sizing up the students. He privately agreed with Juan, but he’d never admit to that.

“I’m with Juan,” answered Lucrezia lightly, “they shouldn’t have insisted we come in. Mom is all alone at home. Father is no good to her.”

Juan, impressed with this rare situation where he was in favour, felt a surge of affection for his sister and so bent down to kiss her head gently.

“I have to go to class early on account of my leg,” he informed them. His leg had been in plaster since he had returned from hospital. He was still remarkably mobile, due to his general good health- but for the sake of Healthy and Safety the school were insisting he go and leave class slightly early to avoid getting stuck in crowds of students. “Shall I see you both at lunchtime? I’m assuming none of us will have made any new friends by then.”

Cesare and Lucrezia both nodded, the former waving goodbye and Juan left. Lucrezia shot a quick look at Cesare before saying:

“I wish you wouldn’t be so cold to him Cesare.”
“What do you mean?”

The siblings looked at one another. Lucrezia was peeved, “we only have each other,” she argued, being sure to keep her voice level and calm because she didn’t want Cesare to think she was attacking him, “don’t you understand that? We have lost out baby brother and before that we nearly lost Juan. I don’t want you and Juan fighting anymore, especially while we are trapped at that house!”

“Don’t worry about the house,” Cesare said quickly, taking a lock of Lucrezia’s hair and caressing it fondly (prompting a few odd glimpses from other students in the corridor),”I told you I would talk to father. Until then I’ll protect.”

Lucrezia took the lock from his hand and tucked it behind ear, “I love you Cesare,” she said slowly, as if thinking of her words carefully, “but you do not need to protect me. And honestly, you cannot protect me all the time.” Cesare grimaced and looked away, his mind flashing back to Lucrezia being terrified in her bedroom after he’d left her alone.

“Don’t pull away,” she continued, noticing his shame, “I am not a baby. I can survive alone. But what I do need is my family as united as possible. It’s too late to expect that from our parents, but please don’t you let me down Cesare. I want you and Juan to be friends.”

“I will try,” Cesare muttered, not looking at her. She smiled and kissed the side of his cheek before walking away to her first class.

The bell rung out loudly. “You guys are a close family, huh?”

Cesare turned to see a handsome young man with curly black hair looking at him wonderingly.

“We are Spanish,” Cesare said, accenting his voice a little and turning away to leave, “we are very open and loving.”

“My aunt is Spanish,” said the boy, falling into step with Cesare, “and I’ve been a few times. The Spanish girls are very lovely, much nicer than our snooty Italian women.”

“If you want to date my sister it’s out of the question.”

The boy laughed, “I have a girlfriend already, thank you very much.”

“A snooty Italian girl?”

“The snootiest,” the boy answered lightly and Cesare smiled in spite of himself. “My name is Gian Baglioni. But everyone calls me by my middle name, Carlo.”

“My name is Cesare Borgia,” they came to a halt in front of Cesare’s classroom, “are you in here with me?”

Carlo nodded. They entered the classroom and Carlo had Cesare sit in the back on the table next to his own.

“You are very friendly,” said Cesare as the class waited for the teacher to arrive, “in our old school, no one liked us because we were Spanish.” Cesare didn’t mention that Juan frequently taunted and fought the students there; that there was a complicated love circle that all revolved around Lucrezia; or that he bribed all the students who were taking illegal drugs and supplied the athletics team with illegal steroids.
“There is a fair amount of prejudice and racism here as well,” answered Carlo honestly, “but it’s more to do with who your family are and how rich you are. My mom and I are ok, but my mom is a mistress, so most of the kids here look down on me. If you move up in the world, you will forget me also.”

“Never,” smiled Cesare just as the teacher arrived.

xxXXxx

That lunchtime, Cesare scooted over to where Lucrezia and Juan were already sitting.

“I was thinking of sitting somewhere else,” he said quietly, not looking at either of them. “I’ve met this guy and he invited me over to sit with his friends. It’ll be for the good of the family, spreading out socially. Father would approve.”

“You just don’t want to sit by me,” spat out Juan angrily, “if it were just Lucrezia here-”

The girl in question put her hand on Juan’s thigh, quietening him. She smiled sweetly at Cesare, who’s stomach turned guiltily.

“No it’s fine. Cesare you are right, go sit with your friends.”

“I’ll see you at the end of the day,” he said hurriedly, ignoring Juan who was eating his pasta moodily. “Both of you. We’ll go home together. Maybe we should pick up something for mother on the way home- something nice.”

Lucrezia nodded and smiled the whole time, “sure, sure, now get on and go to your friends already.”

Cesare nodded and walked away, already a feeling of dread rising up within him. He didn’t like leaving Lucrezia. Truth was he didn’t care too much for other people. He didn’t even care too much for his family- he just cared about her.

The problem was that Cesare knew that was odd- it wasn’t normal to obsess over someone to the degree he did, and even worse that person was his sister. Somehow she had buried herself deep into his skin and whilst he wanted her to burrow all the way into his heart, he also wanted to scratch her out. As long as he loved Lucrezia with the passion he did, he couldn’t truly give himself to anyone else- romantically or otherwise.

‘I wish she understood,’ he thought as he smiled at Carlo and sat down beside him, ‘but how could I ever explain something that disgusting to her.’

He sat down, feeling sad, but pasted a smile on his face.

The other boy he was sitting with was called Vitellozzo Vitelli. The boy was slim and with cropped, blond hair.

“So are you into any sports Borgia?” he asked as he chomped on chicken salad.

“Not really,” answered Cesare, looking around the room and noting how they were pretty separate from everyone else. Was Vitelli an outcast like Carlo? Cesare didn’t mind being friends with outcasts, it was better than their old school where they were completely alone.

“We’re both in the Fencing team,” said Carlo, making Cesare look at him in surprise.
“Sword fighting? I was expecting football or basketball or something!”

The boys laughed, “it’s a posh school,” Vitelli explained, laughing but the bitterness seeped through, “it’s all croquet and horse riding and who can snort the most coke.”

“You do not like it here?”

“Of course not. This school is full of bullies and has a strong structure of who bullies who. We’re bottom of the rung- we’re nothing but bastards of two dirty old rich men. My mom was the secretary of my father. Carlo’s mother was the cleaner. These rich men pay off our mothers and they send us to these schools because they want us to be socially mobile.” Vitelli shook his head, “but it’s all bullshit. They hate us and we hate them.”

“What about us?” Cesare leaned forward and put his hands together, “my family are foreign and have no great name, but my father does well for himself. He’s a psychiatrist. What does that mean about our place here?”

Vitelli wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. “It means you’ll be ignored. The rich families here do not care about newcomers. You’re New Money. You won’t get the crap me and Carlo do, but you will never be able to make friends with them. Sorry.”

Cesare leaned back, “I don’t give a rat’s ass about being friends with them.”

The other two boys looked at each other before laughing. “You’re right Carlo, he is pretty cool.” Vitelli smiled at Cesare, a gleam of respect and slight awe in his pale blue eyes. Cesare preened a little, liking that look. “We’ll let you know everything you need to Borgia,” he continued, “we’ll all stick together.”

Suddenly the smile on Vitelli’s face faded away and his eyes went cold and his caught sight of something over Cesare’s shoulder. The Borgia looked around and saw a boy entering the cafeteria. He was surrounded with a few guffawing morons. He turned back to his new friends and asked who the boy was.

“Prospero Collona,” said Carlo darkly, “he used to be friends with us, but not anymore. His father married his mother and he became legitimate and has a fortune in his name. Suddenly the all the rich kids wanna be his friend and we got dumped.”

Cesare shrugged, “well that’s just life, isn’t it?”

“We wouldn’t mind,” Vitelli jumped in to defend he and Carlo’s ill feeling, “but it’s the fact that he is part of that group that bully us. Those guys are horrible. Look he’s coming this way, just keep your head down.”

Cesare didn’t do so, of course, but instead watched with mild interest as the little gang came to a stop in front of their table.

“So, you are the Spaniard?” one of the boys said.

“That’s right,” answered Cesare smoothly, before taking a sip of his drink.

“People are saying nasty things about you guy already,” another lad said, “that you and your brother were smooching your own sister this morning.” They began to laugh mockingly and overly-loudly, causing over students to turn around and watch, malicious grins on their faces.

Collona sat down at the table and said, “but we aren’t bad guys, no matter what these jealous
“Bastards have been telling you about us,” he and Cesare’s friends glared at one another. Cesare almost laughed—it was so stupid.

“We wanted to ask, what does your father, or your mother, do? We hear there is a rich Spaniard come to Rome who deals in speciality Olive Oils, is that your father?”

“My father is a self-employed psychiatrist,” answered Cesare, “and my mother is a housewife. No speciality Olive Oils.”

He could see the others now regarded him coolly, as if what little aspirations they had for him was now gone. Vitelli and Carlo looked nervous and jumpy.

“So you’re nothing but filthy immigrants?” sneered one of the boys, “as if Italy hasn’t enough of those already!”

“Oh I wouldn’t say filthy,” said a cool feminine voice. Everyone turned to see Lucrezia and Juan had come to the table as well.

Lucrezia looked radiant and was smiling brightly at Collona; Juan looked livid but seemed to be restraining himself.

“Well,” a sleazy smile found its way onto Collona’s lips, “maybe not everything from Spain is bad. Though,” he looked her up and down, “I bet you’re pretty filthy all the same.”

The boys chuckled staring at Lucrezia like she was a piece of meat. She just smiled back.

Simultaneously both brothers snapped— but where Cesare silently seethed (and wept over his sister being so cruel and obviously trying to upset him) Juan lunged forward and grabbed Collona by the scruff of his neck. The boys— there being about seven in all— easily pushed him back. Juan stumbled, his injured leg giving way and he crashed on to the floor. All the kids in the cafeteria laughed.

“What happened to your leg?” Collona asked Juan loudly and mockingly, “did you break it when jumping a border, or did a shark get it when you swam through the ocean?”

It seemed like the whole cafeteria laughed again but shut up when he spat out, “no, I hurt it after you fat bitch mother tried to jump my bones desperate for a real man’s cock in her pussy!”

That damned near started a fight, but the boys held back Collona.

“Well I like your friends Cesare,” said Lucrezia, still with that infernal smile on her face, “they are doing a great job of defending you.” She turned and helped the humiliated Juan back to his feet.

Vitelli and Carlo looked a little shame-faced but Cesare simply said, “I don’t need defending.”

He then stood and faced Collona, “I’m sorry about all of this, I don’t want to get on the wrong foot with you. Tell you what, come back to my house after school. My sister is very lovely and I’m not so bad. We’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

Collona didn’t want to go anywhere near the Borgias, but as he looked at the luscious Lucrezia, he knew it would only help his popularity even more if he had a beautiful girl on his arm. Maybe it would be worth putting up with her spineless brother?

“Sure,” he agreed, “make it up to me.”
Cesare smiled and the group of boys left, all eyeing up Lucrezia as they did.

“W-we aren’t cowards,” said Carlo, looking at her with wide-eyes, “honest, it’s just we don’t have a chance with those guys.”

Lucrezia opened her mouth to say something kind, already slightly regretting some of her behaviour, but Cesare spoke up instead.

“You aren’t cowards and she knows it. She was proving a point to me.” He looked at her, “I got it, ok. I’m going to make that bastard pay for what he did,” he looked past her and to his brother, “to you Juan.”

Juan looked up with surprised eyes.

“He was out of order, pushing you around like that, when you are clearly unable to fight back like you normally would. When he comes to our house tonight, I’ll take him to the basement, ok?”

Juan gulped and nodded, a surge of emotions conflicting inside him.

“The basement,” frowned Lucrezia, as she and Juan sat at the table with Carlo and Vitelli, “what’s so special about the basement?”

“It’s full of terrors,” grinned Cesare. They pushed him for more information, but neither he nor Juan would say anymore on the matter.

xxXXxx

The house stood at the edge of the street. It looked odd compared to the rest of the area- sure all the other houses were also mock Victorian, red-brick and tall- but there was something different about The Murder House. The other houses had friendly, modern looks about them- people had added in green houses and extensions, little accessories in the gardens and dream catchers in the doorways. The Murder House stood large and impersonal still- despite being the oldest house on the road. In the dark window one could spot the odd shadow of a person passing by it now and then. Really, the house didn’t have that many people in it; not that many living people in any case.

Even on Halloween everyone was too scared to knock on its door. Neighbours often spotted previous house tenants wandering the ground or staring mournfully out of its windows. Sometimes the front door would open and they would see a young blonde housewife waiting for her husband, or they would spot an anxious brown-haired man peering out of the kitchen window. Often children in the neighbourhood said they had seen children- usually young boys- in the garden asking them to come and play. Luckily all the local kids knew not to play in the garden of The Murder House.
Sancia watched Benito and Antonello from her bedroom window. They were on the front lawn, relaxing in the gently warm, Italian sun.

"They killed your father," said a boy behind her. She turned and smiled when she saw the spirits of Djem and Paolo sitting on her bed cross-legged.

"Hello," she said, before turning back to watching her brother and cousin, "yes I thought they had something to do with his disappearance. But what of Gian?"

"Your daddy killed Gian."

"Obviously, but what happened to his body?"

The boys glanced at each other and Djem chose to say, "just don't let them take you or any of your family into the basement."

"I knew there was something creepy down there!" she frowned, "What is it? Another ghost?"

"All the ghosts."

"What?" she turned back round to face them, but her room was now empty. She stifled a sigh- it was great having spirits on her side, but Djem and Paolo had both died violent, sudden deaths and were both very young, which meant that they were not the most aware ghosts.

By what Sancia had worked out there were different types of ghosts and this was sometimes affected by age; the younger ghosts tended to be more easily confused and unaware of their own deaths and the older ones seemed to know they were now ghosts and were more powerful, but often, much angrier. She had yet to see the very ancient ghosts of the house which going by its age there was most definitely bound to be some, but she hoped that they were not the equivalent of angry, dementia-ridden poltergeists.

It was then that she saw, on her bed, where the boys had been sitting, was a book.

Sancia picked it up. It was brown and leathery. Curious, she opened it and began to read.

Juan would never want to admit it in a million years but sometimes…oftentimes…his big brother Cesare absolutely terrified him. Juan could see it in him sometimes, that eerie darkness. He even theorised that the reason why Cesare resented him so much wasn’t because of any measly sibling competition over Rodrigo’s love, but the fact that Juan- for all his idiocy- wasn’t a dark person at all. He believed that really, Cesare was just very disappointed in him.

Today, when Collona knocked on the door with a superior, smug look on his face, and Cesare walked out of the basement like it was no big deal that it was a doorway to hell, Juan had just felt sorry for Collona and frightened to death of Cesare. Hs big brother brushed down his clothes (still in his school uniform) and had smiled at Collona.

“Hey Collona,” he said with a sweetness he did not possess, “come down to our Games Room. It’s
Earlier that afternoon

The Borgia children arrived home together.

“Mom, dad,” called out Juan. Emptiness greeted him, which in turn caused him to scowl and look at his siblings, “wasn’t one of the reasons we moved here was so that mom and dad would be around more often? This is just like the old house.”

Lucrezia put her hand on his shoulder to comfort him but Cesare brushed past them both. He was staring to where the door to the basement stood.

“Are you going to go down there?” whispered Juan fearfully, “seriously Cesare?”

Lucrezia frowned, “what is it? What’s down there?”

The boys looked at her before Cesare barked out, “never go down there Lucrezia. I mean it.”

She folded her arms, “I survived the creature that came into my bedroom…”

“Something was in your room?!” Juan shrieked.

Lucrezia nodded solemnly, “but it hasn’t come back since. I think it was a ghost. I know how crazy that sounds… but it looks like you guys have seen something too. Why didn’t you tell me?” she aimed her question mainly at Cesare here. He looked away, knowing he had lied to her about the house having nothing supernatural in it. As far as he was concerned, he had lied with good intentions; he hadn’t wanted to frighten her.

“Let me take you to your room,” said Juan, guiding her up the stairs. She sighed, hating how her brothers babied her, but did as she was told after sparing one last glare at Cesare.

Cesare watched them ascend the staircase before slowly making his way to the basement door. As he did, the door opened slowly and creakily. He paused for a moment before continuing. He wasn’t going to back out now. He opened the door fully and sat at the top step, looking down into the darkness below. He could just make out the shelves and the hard concrete floor.

Thump, thump, thump.

Cesare ground his teeth together and didn’t let the fear show as he heard something thudding up the hard, wooden stairs of the basement. Sure enough, out of the shadows bounced up a little rubber ball. He held out his hands and caught it.

It was red and had a faded smiley face on it. It looked a little chewed and pretty old and dusty. Someone had written on it, but he couldn’t make out the letters.

Cesare took in a deep breath and then began to walk down a few steps. He sat now in the middle of the stairway. Behind him the basement door closed. He was now in darkness. His eyes quickly began to work to see in the shadows, but at the moment he couldn’t see anything.

“Is this your ball?” he said, his own voice scaring him. His heart raced. “Why did you throw it me? Do you want to play? Are you a child?”

His only answer was the sound of scratching on the hard floor. It reminded him of how he had found a terrified and almost comatose Juan that weekend- sitting still and scratching on the
His eyes were adjusting now, and he was beginning to see various shades of black. He stood up and walked down the rest of the stairs, the ball still in his hand.

“I live in this house now,” he said, “we should be friends.”

He looked up and in the darkness could see two glittering circles between the jars on one of the shelves. He stared and soon realised that it was two glistening eyes. They were obsidian black and focused on him.

His heart rate became faster and it took a moment for him to speak again. When he did his voice was now a hoarse whisper.

“I won’t come down here if you don’t want me too,” he was a little ashamed of the waver in his voice. He stared at the thing, realising that it was very small. “But there is a person who I hate. He was bad to us. If we could be friends, would you mind if perhaps we give him a bit of a scare together? Just you and me?” he smiled and raised up the ball. The thing glanced at the ball then back at Cesare. He bounced it for a moment, “we could play catch together. It’ll be fun, having me as a friend. What do you say?”

He looked back up but the thing was gone. The smile came away from his face. Where was it?

Heavy breathing alerted him. It was to his left. With a gulp he turned and saw it. It was mostly in the shadows. It moved slowly and rocked side to side. He knew this thing could move quickly—maybe that was when it was powered by anger? He felt his knees ready to give way, so he covered by bending down, as if he only wanted to get a better look at the creature.

He forced a smile on his face again and then rolled the ball to it. The thing bent down and took the ball, coming closer to Cesare. After a moment, Cesare began to see it.

At one time it must have been a toddler, but not anymore…not anymore…

He held in a terrified scream and instead felt himself whine a little, almost like a scared dog. He prayed he hadn’t wet himself. The thing continued to watch him carefully.

“Poor boy,” Cesare found himself whimpering, “don’t worry. We’ll be friends now.” He sat down. He’d once read a psychology book about phobias. One way to rid yourself of phobias was through flooding. Flooding is when a psychologist or psychiatrist would put the participant into a room containing the thing they feared (such as spiders or birds) and after a wave of intense fear the person would calm down. This was because fear at its most intense could only be sustained for a short time, and if there was nowhere to run, the body and mind had no choice but to calm down.

Cesare used that method now. He was petrified on this creature, but he already knew that he had to get over it. So he sat on the floor and said, “pass me the ball… let’s play.”

The thing rolled the ball over, and he rolled it back…

And so that went on for half an hour or so until Cesare found himself easy enough with the creature and it, apparently, now thought of him as a friend.

The doorbell rang. Cesare looked at the creature. “It’s show-time,” he told it, “remember, this boy was quite wicked to me and my family. You’ll scare him for us, right? Good.”

He left the basement and saw Juan at the front door. Collona was standing there. He looked smug
and superior. Juan looked pale and frightened. Collona doubtless believed that it was he that had elicited such a response from Juan. But Cesare gave Juan a quick sardonic smile and knew within that second that it was he that Juan was frightened of. He brushed down his clothes nonchalantly before smiling sweetly at Collona, who entered the foyer.

“Hey Collona, come down to our Games Room. It’s awesome.”

Juan edged away from the boys. He saw Lucrezia at the top of the stairs. She had a curious look on her face, so he motioned for her to come down. She did quickly.

“Come into the kitchen with me,” he said, “we’ll wait in there.”

Lucrezia looked away, biting her lip.

“You don’t want to go into the basement,” he insisted. “Come on.”

They entered the kitchen, the most modern and ordinary room, and both relaxed a little—just before a scream ripped through the house.

The siblings stared at each other for a split second, terror racing like electric down their spines, before Lucrezia dove out of the kitchen and into the foyer.

Juan dove under the kitchen table, shaking profusely.

There was another scream and then Cesare came out of the basement and slammed the door behind him. The door began to bang—Prospero Collona was screaming on the other side. Cesare leaned against it. His face was void of emotion.

“Let him out!”

He jumped and saw Lucrezia. He looked guilty now. “I’m teaching him a lesson!” he hissed.

She ran at her brother and pushed him away from the door. The basement door swung open and Collona ran out. He was crying and fell to the floor. Lucrezia dropped to his side.

“Are you all right?” she asked. She saw the edges of his hair were turning white. “Oh my god…” she whispered. But Collona got up and ran out of the house.

She whipped around to see Cesare smiling. He was looking down into the basement. He gave a little wave and then slowly shut the door.

He saw her staring. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what Cesare?”

“Like I’m a monster.” He walked past her and into the living room. Lucrezia sighed, the house was turning her brothers crazy. Juan had refused to get dressed in his own room, and instead had gotten out of his school-clothes and into his own clothes in her room. When she asked why he just said that he was uncomfortable in there, but she knew that something was scaring him. And now here was Cesare being cruel—crueller than she’d ever known him to be.

March 1995

It was late at night and Sancia lay between her two dead lovers, Paolo and Djem. She brushed her
fingers through Djem’s curly hair and kissed Paolo on his forehead. The boys appeared to be asleep but it was hard to tell with ghosts. By what she could tell, ghosts often went through the motions of living, doing things such as eating or sleeping, but none of it was real. It was like when an appendage is cut off a human body, but the person swears they can still feel it- it was all in their heads.

Still, it was very apparent that Paolo and Djem were highly unusual ghosts. They were ridiculously pliant, obeying her every whim and command. She didn’t know a single other ghost that was as calm and submissive as they. She wasn’t sure why they were so dedicated to her, but they were.

There was a noise downstairs, so she got up and snuck out of her bedroom. Standing at the top of the stairs she saw a figure closing the front door and walking across the foyer. Whoever it was they were dragging something behind them.

She slipped down the stairs quickly and silently, before following the figure into the basement. She then tip toed down the basement stairs. Once Sancia had been terrified of the basement, but since educating herself and getting to know the boys, her fear had completely dissipated. If anything, she now wasn’t cautious enough of the basement. There was candlelight at the bottom. She followed the light through the tunnel of the basement until she reached the opened out, square space. It was the same place Ludovico had come to only a few months before.

“Antonello?”

He stood by a table which looked a lot like an alter. Something was bleeding on it, so he covered it with a white sheet before facing her.

“Why are you here Sancia?”

“I knew you were up to something. What are you doing creeping about in the basement at night?”

“I’m feeding it.”

“Feeding what? What have you been up to all these months? What have you and Benito been hiding down here?”

It was then that she saw it, hiding in the shadows, looking up at her with beady, greedy eyes.

Sancia put her hands over her mouth, “what? No…no!”

“Calm down,” Antonello smiled creepily, “it is Gian, we saved him.”

She looked at him incredulously, “saved…? Saved him? How have you done that? Look at him! That’s not Gian!”

“Its science,” he sighed, looking away from her dismissively, “I wouldn’t expect someone like you to understand.”

“What does he feed on? What is under that sheet?”

“Enough of your questions, go back to your whoring and leave us alone.”

Furious, Sancia pushed past him and tore the sheet off the corpse herself. She screamed and fell back, landing on her rear. Immediately tears fell from her eyes. She couldn’t believe that her cousin
could have done something so evil…

“Young blood is the best,” Antonello began to explain, his voice low and passionless, “it’s what he deserves. He can live off the blood of rodents, but the blood of young humans is so much better.”

On the table was the body of a curly-dark haired toddler with his throat cut. He was bleeding out, like a gutted pig.

In an instance Antonello grabbed her by her throat, “listen to me you slut. You tell anyone about this, I will cut off your tits and shove them in your mouth until you suffocate, understood?”

She nodded, struggling for air.

“Good,” he let her go and she flew up the stairs. Righteous anger and disgust flared in her chest. She would get the bastard for what he had done, and she had just the book to tell her how to do it.
Brothers

Present Day

Rodrigo sat in the coffee shop and brooded. It was still raining hard. He watched the rain hammering down from a slate grey sky and streaking against the window.

Everything was going wrong. He couldn’t have predicted how badly things were going to go. He’d believed that his disastrous affair with his foster daughter was his lowest time, but now, sitting in the café, he realised that this was a new level of hell and self-loathing.

On the evening of Joffre’s death, he’d been dreading the fact that his life was going to stay the same. That every day it would be the same thing, work from home, talk to his wife, deal with the kids, sex with the same woman, sleep and then the next day it would all happen again. He’d prayed, prayed, for something to happen; for something to shake up the status quo. It had been then that his wife had screamed out and they’d all found out Joffre had been killed in a bizarre accident. Perhaps God was punishing him. Rodrigo felt as if it were a cruel joke.

He skipped through the photographs on his phone. Most were of Vanozza or Juan. He had a number of Lucrezia as well, and often it was in those that Cesare lurked somewhere in the picture, looking at the camera with a cynical and weary expression. However, there were a few of Joffre, usually with him not realising the photo had been taken. Joffre had always been the least self-aware of Rodrigo’s children, and it was not just his age. There was a sort of quiet detachment in Joffre. Some would be fooled into thinking Cesare was the detached one, but that wasn’t true. That was just what Cesare wanted to believe. Rodrigo knew that Cesare was like himself- completely engrossed and fascinated by people and loyal (to a fault) to his family. No, the truly separate one had been Joffre. Rodrigo put his fingers on his phone and enlarged he could see Joffre’s face. The child seemed to be digging in the back garden. His eyes were dark and focused on his task.

“I should have gotten to know him better,” Rodrigo admonished himself, “Vanozza did and at least she can mourn, but I just feel empty.”

He thought of the house. How he was growing to resent it. The money the family made through his investments was draining fast- his investments were losing their value. Rodrigo was a betting man, and he betted wisely. He’d decided with his financial advisor that morning to pull a number of his investments, but he kept a few going just in case. He didn’t want to take out all the money just as the economy was recovering from the recession- undoubtedly soon their value would rise again.

He could see that the house, for the meantime, would be their best and most valuable investment, which meant that they would not be able to leave. He knew Vanozza and Juan hated it there, but they just couldn’t afford to sell it at a cheap price and leave. That would result in them having to rent some cheap home somewhere, or even worse, make them homeless. The Borgia extended family were all in Spain and had little to do with Rodrigo’s brood because they hadn’t liked Vanozza.

Rodrigo checked his email. A Health Clinic in Spain had a space opening soon and were willing to take in Juan once it was free. He sighed. It was yet more money- but he did not want material possessions to get in the way of getting his son better. If Juan needed to leave home and get clean, then so be it, no matter what the cost. Perhaps that would ease Vanozza’s mind as well.

xxxXxx
Juan snuck out of the kitchen as he heard his siblings arguing. It was rare for Cesare and Lucrezia to disagree on anything, however it didn’t cheer him up like he thought it would. Rather it just made it all the more clear to him that this house was unnatural and making them unnatural as well.

He slunk upstairs. Even the kitchen always felt like the safest room in the house, he hated being so close to the basement. He could almost sense the thing that lived down there. On the first day they’d moved in, he’d seen it. Even now he wasn’t able to fall asleep without seeing its pale, ghostly face coming out of the darkness.

Juan opened his bedroom door. It was too cold inside. Initially he’d liked his room, but since a couple of days ago he suddenly had begun to find it creepy. He privately knew the reason why- his bedroom was haunted. It wasn’t before but it was now. He just didn’t understand what had changed. He hadn’t seen a ghost either, but he was reasonably confident in his assumption. After all, he’d sense that thing out in the hallway before she’d scared the shit out of him and sent him flying downstairs, and he’d always sensed something moving about in that basement before being stupid enough to go down there.

He closed his bedroom door and walked further down the hall, past Lucrezia’s room, and up onto the second floor. Joffre’s room was closed off. Tentatively he pushed open the door and peeked inside. There was still a dark stain on the floor where Joffre’s had bled out under the weight of the wardrobe. The wardrobe wasn’t there now. The day after the tragedy Rodrigo had some Movers take it outside, and then he’d set it on fire. They all watched it burn, even mother, who watched from the living room window, refusing to set foot outside the house.

He paused as he heard a slight sniffling. It sounded like a child. He stepped inside the room and looked around. Everything seemed normal until… Juan jumped.

Directly behind the bedroom door was Joffre slumped on the floor. The boy looked up at him. “C-can you see me?”

Juan nodded, unable to say any words as his mind screamed in terror and confusion. Joffre smiled eerily and stood up. He was a ghastly pale and wearing the same clothes he’d died in. Noting how scared his brother looked Joffre said conversationally, “I’m still learning how to look alive. The Angel is teaching me.”

Juan got onto his knees and reached out for Joffre. He meant to grab the child’s shoulders, but when he touched his brother, he could feel the unnatural squishiness, as if Joffre was still a rotting corpse. He let go.

“Who is this angel?” he insisted instead, “is it the one who hurt you?”

“Me and the angel are friends,” stated the boy before looking past Juan and smiling.

Juan turned and saw a girl with tan skin and long, jet-black hair standing in a white dress. He felt himself paling.

“You…you were the one on the stairs!” he cried.

The girl frowned slightly, “I thought you were someone else,” she muttered.

“Did you take my brother?” he stood in front of Joffre protectively, “did you cause his death? You can’t have him, give him back to us!”

“The dead cannot go back into being alive,” she said, “don’t worry. Joffre is with us now. There’s
a lot of us. He has many friends.”

She walked up to him slowly and seductively. She stroked her hand down his face. He shuddered.

“If I wanted to steal someone, I’d steal you.” She leaned forward and Juan felt cold lips lightly press onto his own warm ones.

He shut his eyes until the sensation stopped. When he opened them again, he saw that there was no longer anyone there.

He stood there breathing heavily for quite a long time, before slowly slipping down on to the floor, in the same place Joffre had sat, put his head on his knees, hugged his legs, and wept bitterly.

Lucrezia sat in the living room listening to the calming voice of one of her favourite artists, Mirah. She could hear Cesare smashing and clanging about in the kitchen. She would talk to him, but she decided to let him cool down first. Like most of their family Cesare could be quite fiery when he wanted to be. She looked around the living room, remembering the strange dream she had after Joffre’s death.

It had all happened in this living room, only it looked like it was a long time ago. The woman had been an unhappy blonde-haired housewife.

Lucrezia looked over to the light switch. The woman in her dream had removed some panelling under the light switch and had bought out a record.

Biting her lip, Lucrezia skipped up on to her feet and made her way over to the light switch. She then knelt down and examined the side panelling. It had been painted with fresh, white paint, most likely by the old owners. She felt along the edges and could feel where the wood had been cut vertically in two places. She put her nails between the cracks and pulled. It took a little while (and she broke two nails in the process) but finally the wood gave way, a small rectangular piece pulled out from the wall. Sure enough there was a little space inside. She felt inside it until her fingers caught onto something thin and papery. She dragged it out and saw that it was the cover of a record.

It had a picture of a black lady on the front. She was looking sad and resigned. Something about her expression stirred something within Lucrezia, and it wasn’t a feeling of fear she’d expected.

“Strange Fruit,” she read aloud to herself, “by Billie Holiday.”

They didn’t have a record player in the living room, but she knew Juan had one in his bedroom; it was vintage and Dad had bought it him for Christmas. Cesare had been furious and deeply jealous— that same holiday father had bought him a new Bible (Cesare was an atheist) and a tie. It had been one of the worst Christmas’s ever with Cesare silently seething and Rodrigo getting increasingly exasperated.

“I’ll ask Juan to borrow it later,” she decided, wondering what the song was about and why, if her dream was actually a vision (which appeared to be the case) the housewife in her dream and been beaten for simply listening to a song.

The living room door opened and a bashful looking Cesare slipped inside. He glanced at her, “do you hate me?” he muttered.

She laughed a little and ran up to him, pulling him down into a tight hug. She soaked him in,
rubbing her face against his shoulder and breathing in his scent. She loved the way Cesare smelt—it reminded her of safety.

“I don’t hate you,” she muttered, “I just worry about the person you sometimes allow yourself to be.” She kissed his neck before leaning back to look at his face. “I know you can be passionate and loving. I want everyone else to see you that way as well. I don’t want you being a bully or a thug.”

“You are my ‘Jiminy Cricket,’” he smiled down at her, “with you here, I can’t see me ever turning into a wicked man.”

In the corner of the room, Ursula Bonadeo opened her eyes and took in her surroundings. Being a ghost meant she drifted between the worlds of Death and Life and it meant it was hard to keep a track of anything. But now clarity came to her. She looked around her living room and wondered why it was so old and faded. She needed to get on with cleaning or her good husband would be furious. She then noticed her favourite record. She smiled. Excellent. Now all she needed was a record player. Where had hers gotten to?

Cesare and Lucrezia sat on the settee. The plaintive sounds of Mirah were still calling out from the CD player. The pair were still hugging, Cesare kissing her hair, then her cheek, then her neck. He found himself breathing heavier and heavier as his heart beat began to speed up. The heat between them became hot and prickly, and Cesare became vaguely aware that his sister was starting to writhe and shift away from him.

“Cesare? Ces?”

“Hm?”

“Go check on Juan? Please,” she added as he pulled away and looked at her. His eyes were slightly glazed over. “He’s been gone for ages,” she added, “please make sure he’s ok.”

As if coming out of a trance or dream, Cesare, now blushing, got up and all but ran from the room. Lucrezia let out a shaky breath. Her body tingled where his lips had been. She tightened her legs close together and bit her lip.

Cesare bounded up the stairs two at a time. He’d nearly lost control then, damn it all! He ripped open the door to Juan’s room and saw it was cold and empty. Boxes were still left everywhere. It was as if Juan wasn’t staying in there. Everyone else was now fully unpacked. Even Juan’s bed looked like it hadn’t been slept in. What was that boy up to? Was he really that lazy?

“I swear I can hear you judging me,” said a low voice. Cesare turned to see his younger (now youngest) brother standing on the stairs leading to the second floor. Tear tracks were on Juan’s face. Cesare looked away. He didn’t respect Juan, but he did acknowledge that Juan loved his younger siblings dearly—Joffre’s death was of course affecting him greatly.

“Joffre was my favourite,” said Juan, as if reading Cesare’s thoughts. “I know you love Lucrezia, and I do as well…but Joffre was my star.”

Cesare looked at Juan. Never had he seen his brother so open and honest before.

“What happened to you?” asked Cesare after a moment’s beat. He walked towards his brother, who was now sitting on the stairs. After a short deliberation, Cesare sat beside him.

“You know that this house is haunted?” Juan began.

Cesare said nothing.
“Well,” Juan continued, “I’ve just seen Joffre. I’ve seen our brother. He was with a ghost girl. She was hot to be fair,” he snorted a sad laugh, “at least he got a sweet girlfriend… Oh don’t look at me like that Cesare. I’m not crazy. You’re crazy for going into the basement with that ghost.”

“It isn’t a ghost,” answered Cesare, “I’m pretty sure it isn’t anyway.”

Juan nodded as if Cesare had confirmed a theory he’d held as well.

“D-did Joffre say anything?”

“Not really, only that the ghost- which he calls an angel- is helping him learn how to, and I quote, ‘look alive’.”

“Look alive?”

“Yeah, he still looked dead when I saw him,” Juan gulped. “We should have taken better care of him. If there’s a monster in the basement and a female ghost haunting the house, we should have known to keep an eye on him. Especially as he was acting so strangely.”

“We need to leave; I still plan on convincing father of this. Will you be able to leave, knowing Joffre is here?”

Juan looked at Cesare, eyes wide. “I don’t know…”

Cesare grabbed him by the shoulders, “if we stay, we’ll end up dead as well. Joffre is dead now. Nothing can hurt him anymore. But we can be hurt. Understand?”

“Don’t patronise me,” Juan pulled away, “I understand.”

Vanozza arrived home after the long four hour drive from Forli. She bid a goodnight to Catherina, only realising when the other had left that Catherina had left her children alone all day as well, and she was sure that Catherina’s children were slightly younger than her own.

Shrugging and giving it no more thought, Vanozza made her way into the house, wondering how she would broach the subject of adoption to Rodrigo. She had loved little Giovanni, he was a beautiful, placid baby boy and she couldn’t believe that he’d had a hard time being adopted. She hadn’t met his older sibling, but she decided that she wouldn’t mind adopting two children if she really had to.

Entering the foyer she was surprised to find that Juan wasn’t hiding out in the kitchen, instead she found all three of her children sitting together watching television.

Had Joffre’s death been enough to stop her two boys from fighting?

They all sat on the settee, Lucrezia between them both, various snacks laid out on the coffee table.

“Where’s your father?”

They all looked up, noticing her for the first time.

“We haven’t seen him since this morning,” answered Cesare.

“How are you mom?” asked Lucrezia, “come, sit with us. Where have you been today? I’m glad you went outside.”

“I didn’t know you were alone.” Answered Vanozza testily, “your father should have been here.”
“I’m sure he has a good reason,” muttered Juan, “you weren’t here either…”

Cesare slapped Juan on the head causing a small scuffle between the boys before Vanozza sat beside them.

She looked at the snacks on the table, “do you all want a proper dinner?”

“No,” was the unified whine.

Normally Vanozza was very stern about family meals, but after the day she had all she wanted to do was enjoy their company.

After the show was finished, Lucrezia gave her brothers a kiss and her mother a hug, announcing that she was going to bed.

“It’s only nine-thirty,” said Cesare, looking like a lost puppy.

Lucrezia chuckled at the sight, “I’m tired, that’s all.”

She went to leave but Vanozza got up as well, “let me go with you?”

“Mom, I’ll be fine.”

“Please Lu.”

Lucrezia gave a small smile, “ok sure.”

After the women had left, Cesare hissed, “you shouldn’t have said that to mom earlier!”

“Said what?” complained Juan- Cesare was always on his back.

“Saying how mom wasn’t here either when she was asking where Father was. She has every right to question him, considering his nature. You should show more compassion.”

“But she was out as well. Dad is just as hurt as she is.” There was a pause, “just because he’s made mistakes doesn’t mean he should be punished even after…after everything.”

“But that’s the thing,” answered Cesare darkly, “it does. Father lost his rights a long time ago. It’s not like he cheated once- he’s cheated from the day I was born with different women. Last time she was our foster sister and barely older than Lucrezia! He’s probably having sex with some slut right now.”

“And you wonder why dad doesn’t like you as much as the rest of us. You’re too cynical and nasty. Dad lost his child as well. The only person who doesn’t seem bothered about Joffre is you.”

Cesare turned to glare at Juan, who grit his teeth and stood firm in response.

“How dare you say that to me!”

“It’s true!” cried Juan hurriedly, “that day, everyone cried and screamed but you just stood there, blank-faced like a damned mannequin. I bet you were thinking ‘as long as it wasn’t my beautiful Lucrezia.’ That’s all you care about, our sister! Everyone else is just expendable- you treat us with derision and like we’re in your way. I reckon you’d kill one of us if you thought Lucrezia’s happiness was even remotely challenged for a second.”

Cesare stood up, “no, I treat you with derision because you’re an idiot and I treat Father with
derision because he’s an asshole.”

Juan stood also, facing his dark-haired brother, “well you carry on. Because mom can’t support anyone and, like it or not Cesare, Lucrezia doesn’t love you the way you love her. One day, dad and I will be the only ones you’ll have.”

Cesare sneered, “yeah right,” and began to walk away.

“Keep burning bridges with the people who care about you,” he heard Juan yelling, “I’m sure that won’t bite you in the ass later in life!”
Possessed

Upstairs in her room Lucrezia got dressed as her mother sat on the brushing her hands against the pink cover. Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater* played quietly on Lucrezia’s i-player.

“I never knew you were interested in choral music,” stated Vanozza, “I thought you only liked Alternative songbirds, like your brother.”

“Cesare does have a strong influence on my taste in music,” responded Lucrezia, now fully dressed and sitting cross legged on the bed. Vanozza turned her so that her back faced her Mother. Then Vanozza took a brush from the bedside table and began to brush Lucrezia’s long hair. “But recently I’ve started branching out on my own a bit.”

“Good for you,” said Vanozza, “I worry sometimes that you rely too much on Cesare.”

“He’s my brother I-”

“Non, dire non plus, you should never rely completely on any man. Be he your husband, brother, Uncle, lover. Never do it. I did and I suffer for it.”

It was quiet between them for a while whilst Lucrezia thought upon her mother’s warning. Tentatively she then began, “do you think the woman from the Living Room relied too much on the man who beat her? I supposed he is her husband…”

Vanozza paused in brushing her hair, “what do you mean?”

“The night of the accident. We were both in the Living Room under sedation. We saw that woman. She was blonde and very pretty. She listened to some music on a record she’d hidden away and then a man came in and beat her for it. I thought it was just a vivid dream, but then I saw you and I realised you must have seen it as well.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. It must have been the drugs you were under.” She placed a kiss on the top of Lucrezia’s head before getting to her feet.

“Bonne nuit.”

“Bonne nuit mama. I love the French by the way. What has prompted you to start learning it?”

Vanozza frowned as if Lucrezia was being very stupid, “you are very strange tonight my dear. I’m not learning French.”

“But you’re speaking…”

The bedroom door closed shut. Lucrezia frowned at it for a little. Was her mother having some sort of break down? She had been speaking French, Lucrezia had started learning it at school as it was part of their curriculum. They all knew that their mother wasn’t very educated, she’d grown up in the rough part of Madrid. She’d never had the opportunity to learn all the things her children did and so knew no other languages other than Spanish and Italian. Even her Italian had only been learnt because father had paid for a private tutor.

Lucrezia also knew that the dream she’d had about the woman was true as well, and was positive Vanozza had dreamt the same thing. Getting off her bed, Lucrezia took the record out from her shelf. She brushed her hand over it. Then she opened up her closet and bought out the large record
player she’d asked Juan for earlier. He hadn’t cared much as he’d never even used it.

She set it all up before turning off her i-player and putting on the record. Billy Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit’ began to play mournfully. Lucrezia leaned back and listened. It was sad and dark, hitting her to her core.

Why had that man beaten his wife for listening to this?

xxXXxx

Rodrigo parked on the road outside the house and glared down the dark street. Before leaving Sicily he had some clients lined up here in Rome. However, after arriving each of these customers dropped out one by one.

In Sicily his business had thrived on word by mouth but here it seemed that the odds were against him. What had gone wrong?

He looked to the side, out where his house was, and saw that in the home next to theirs, Catherina was staring out the window. She was looking right at him, a dark and calculating expression on her face. She smiled lightly when she saw he was watching her. Rodrigo started the car and drove into his driveway without returning her smile; he could not start getting friendly with other women. Not after everything that had happened.

He got out the car and looked up at the dark, angry skies. It was raining lightly and he groaned internally. He knew it was September, but still, who thought the weather would be so miserable in Rome? They should have moved to Britain if this was the sort of weather they were going to have to get used to.

He hurried on to the front porch and glanced up at the painted glass on the front door. The painting of the red bull- The Borgia Bull. Only now it looked less like a Bull and more of a sort of Bull-Man- like a Minotaur. Rodrigo grunted to himself before taking out his keys and stepping into the foyer.

Almost immediately Juan stuck his head out of the front room, his mouth full of sandwich, and he smiled at his father. “Hi!” he greeted cheerfully, spraying bread onto the foyer floor. Rodrigo chuckled; Juan was adorable.

He walked into the living room and looked down on his middle-no, youngest- son and ruffled the curly brown locks. Juan moved his head away, grunting in disconcertion.

“What are you watching?”

“A football game, of course. It’s the world cup. Spain is kicking ass, as usual.” He looked up at his dad and grinned, “kicking Italian ass!”

“Well don’t forget we are Italian now. Remember when in Rome…”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, do as the Romans do, I get it dad.” A pause, “Mom’s upstairs, I think she’s upset.”

“Oh?”

“Princess Cesare is also in a sulk. But he’ll be ok, he’s probably sitting on Lu’s bed and braiding her hair.”
Rodrigo made his way slowly to the door, intending to find his wife, “now, now, it’s good they care about each other. I wish you were as close to them as they are to each other.”

Juan snorted, “Lu’s not my type.”

“Excuse me?” Rodrigo paused in the doorway.

Juan turned and saw him standing still. “Umm, nothing dad,” he smiled, looking at the back of his father’s head, “nothing, just a small joke, don’t worry about it.”

Rodrigo stood for a fraction of a second, before leaving the room. Juan let out a small breath, before returning to his game.

Have you ever been alone, perhaps in your home, and gotten that feeling? You know, the one with the strange, prickling sensation? The one when suddenly, the whole house seems to be a breathing living thing. The one when you suddenly feel hyper-aware and become convinced that you are not alone. That there is someone in your bathroom say. Right now. Just in there. You know it’s stupid, that it’s just paranoia. But still, you stare at the door into the hallway for a while before getting up to check. Just to check.

Well, as he watched the game, Juan suddenly had that sensation. It sat with him for a while, as at first he refused to acknowledge it. But with a small resigned sigh and a pit of dread settled in his stomach, Juan turned his head and saw a figure standing in the shadows.

The figure seemed to be looking straight ahead but as Juan turned to look at it, so it turned and looked at him.

xxxXxxx

Rodrigo walked up the stairs slowly. It seemed so grandiose, this massive staircase in an otherwise moderately small (albeit tall) house. Whoever designed it was clearly over-compensating. But why wasn’t the rest of the house as grand as the foyer? Perhaps the original owner had run out of money as well.

As he ascended he was greeted by the unusual sound of soft, melancholic jazz music. A woman’s sad but strong voice hummed out the lyrics.

“…Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees…”

He lingered at Lucrezia’s doorway for a while, listening to the song of Oppression. The light from Lucrezia’s room escaped through the bottom of the door and he was half tempted to knock on it; he rather have quaint conversation with his silly and adorable daughter than his broken and cold wife. But alas, he had promised to be a stronger man for the sake of his family. So he turned away from Billie Holiday and almost walked straight into a stranger.

He jumped back and stared. The hallway was dark (he hadn’t turned on the light) but he could make it her strong features. There, in front of him, was a woman, with pale skin and blonde hair. She was tall and willowy and had a confused look on her face.

“Have you seen my record?” she asked, “I hear it but cannot locate it?”

Rodrigo pulled himself together. He smiled charmingly, “I’m sorry but who are you? Are you a friend of Vannozza’s?”
He frowned even as he asked that question, as he knew Vannozza hadn’t been out of the house since Joffre’s death, and had difficulty making and maintaining friendships to begin with.

“…Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth…”

“What?” she frowned, “no, no my record, how I love it. Please. No one should be able to take it away now, but someone has.” She leaned forward and gripped his shirt. He could feel the cold radiating off her, “please, he cannot have it, it’s not fair. I ask for so little. Does it sound foolish that I relate to her? Me, a white, bourgeois, suburban woman! But I’m just as trapped, don’t you see?” The woman had tears in her eyes, “I’m just as trapped.”

“Scent of magnolias, swe-et and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.”

“I don’t understand,” said Rodrigo, wildly confused, “what do you mean?” The woman had a strange accent, it was hard to understand what she was saying, so he was sure she was not native Italian. He was also pretty certain that she was having some sort of breakdown in his hallway. He turned behind him and looked desperately at Lucrezia’s closed door, wanting to get his daughter to help him.

He looked back to the woman but found himself now looking at an empty corridor. He gaped. Where was she?

“Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wi-ind to suck,”

She must have gone upstairs as there was no way she walked past him. He raced up to the next landing as quickly as he could, but again saw nothing was there. His bedroom door was open and inside Vanozza sat alone on the bed.

“What is it Rodrigo?” she asked, “you look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“For the sun to rot, for the tree to dro-op…
Here is a strange… and bitter… cro-op.”

Lucrezia opened her eyes as the song stopped seemingly very suddenly. She lifted herself up from her bed ready to turn off the record when she suddenly saw a figure standing in the corner of her room. She shrieked breathily and turned around to look- but there was nothing there.

Nothing that she could see, in any case.

It was then, before she had even recovered from her fright, that she heard her two dearest brothers screaming downstairs.

xxXXxx

Juan’s heart was in his throat as he watched the figure. It was all shadow apart from a single glint on the head- a section of its eye.

It was watching him.

The television flickered, before turning to static and then switching off. The Living Room was now in complete silence. Juan sat frozen on the chair.
The room seemed to become small and claustrophobic. He could hear his blood pumping through his ears and his pulse beating, shaking his whole body. The temperature in the room dropped dramatically whilst simultaneously Juan felt the cold, undiluted rage the figure was throwing his way. He let out a shuddering sigh of fear, and could see the white puff of his breath around him. All the hairs on his body stood on end.

He felt his crotch becoming wet and warm; pressure began to build in his nose before it burst causing a stream of blood poured from one, then both, of his nostrils.

He began to shake profusely now, his teeth chattering from the cold. The figure rose up, becoming impossibly higher. The one eye, large and brown and full of psychotic malice stared down at him.

Juan could hear a high pitch whining, the sort of sound an injured animal would make, before realising it was him making the sound.

The figure began to glide towards him.

And then it happened. A tide of pure black covered Juan. He screamed out in pain- it was as if the blackness was literal anger and rage in some sort of physical form. It scolded his skin, burned him to the marrow of his bones. He writhed in agony, crying out, tears falling from his eyes and spit dripping out of his mouth. It was though he had no control of his body, but this pain was shaking him about, throwing him around like a child with a ragdoll.

Juan fell onto his back and arched upwards, feeling something pouring into his chest. He opened his eyes as wide as possible, desperate to see some light…just some light so he could hope that at some point this misery would end.

Down in the basement Cesare sauntered about in the darkness. A little bit of light shone through the narrow, rectangular basement window. He picked up one of the jars. Inside was a red liquid. He heard the Infantata shuffling up to him.

He looked down at it, looking into its beady eyes.

“What is this?” he asked, “is it something that means something to you?”

As always his only reply was the Infantata’s raspy breathing. He looked at its sharp teeth protruding out of its small mouth, like the canines of a White Shark or an Alligator. Blood glistened on them. Earlier, after his tiff with Juan, he’d come down and found it eating and lapping up the blood of a small rodent. Doubtless that is how the little Creature had survived.

Cesare shook the jar a little. The liquid was a deep red, like wine, but had a thicker, blood like texture.

“What may I take this?” he asked, “I want to find out what it is.”

The Infantata said nothing but through some sort of unspeakable bond between them, Cesare knew he had been given permission.

“Thank you Gian,” he placed the jar into the front pocket of his black hoody, just as he heard a muffled cry from upstairs.

“Damn it,” he muttered, stomping up the stairs, “what in God’s name is happening now? Is it too much to ask for one day without melodrama?”

He opened the basement door and was immediately met with the freezing cold atmosphere. His
breath was now visible as a white mist. Across the foyer floor and walls was the faint glistening of encroaching frost. The lights were off, though he could hear the faint sounds of music and life upstairs. Apparently they were unaware of whatever was going on down here.

His instincts were on high alert as he stepped out of the basement and into the foyer. A few feet ahead of him, by the front door, was Juan. His eyes were rolled back, showing only white. His mouth was open in a silent scream. His hands were splayed out on his sides, rigid and taut. But what really got Cesare’s attention was the fact that Juan’s feet were not touching the floor; rather he was hovering in mid-air.

Cesare watched for a moment with wide eyes, before slowly taking a few steps towards the boy. He gulped and felt himself shaking slightly.

“I can handle this,” he told himself, “I just need to keep calm and my reason.”

Even though Juan had no pupils, he seemed to be staring right at Cesare. Despite the gaping ‘o’ of a mouth, Cesare had the idea that whatever was controlling his brother was laughing at him.

He clenched his fists, “let my brother go,” he said, his voice low and (to his shame) quavering.

Juan’s head suddenly lolled forward, as if looking down at Cesare. The atmosphere became impossibly colder. He heard plates and cups beginning to smash in the kitchen due to the sudden climate change.

He held out his hand as if to calm the Being down. This was more than a ghost- this was a very angry poltergeist.

“Please,” he shivered, “let Juan go.” He jumped slightly when he felt warmth under his nose. He realised quickly that his nose was bleeding. He kept his eyes on his floating brother, not wanting to look away or even wipe away the blood.

Juan’s arms shuddered before long, talon like nails grew out of his fingers. The body tilted forwards, and it was then that Cesare knew the Being was going to attack him.

“No!” he cried just as it swooped down at him. He fell back and screamed as the pain of claws tearing at him shot across his face, neck and arms. A long shrieking sound perforated his ears, increasing the level of pain.

A bright, warm light burst from the top of stairs. Cesare opened his eyes and saw his little brother, Joffre, standing by his side. Cesare was bleeding all over but he saw Joffre, pale and clearly dead, shouting something at someone- what he was shouting Cesare did not know, for the loud whining sound was still drilling itself through his skull.

“Joffre?” he muttered, as darkness covered his vision, “Joffre…?”

Juan was standing in the foyer. Everything was the exact same with the exception that all his surroundings were white- as if someone had re-painted a brilliant white gloss over every surface of the foyer. He felt strange and light headed, and his fingers ached terribly.

“Hello?” he called, “anyone about?”

“You shouldn’t allow yourself to be so open.”
Juan whirled around to see the face of the deep, quiet voice. Behind him stood a man, tall and slim, wearing all black. His clothes- a suit- was old-fashioned, like something out of a black and white film.

“Who are you?”

The man allowed himself a small deprecating smirk, “the man who your school should be named after. I am Niccolai Machiavelli.” He walked towards Juan at a leisurely pace, gesturing slightly as he spoke, “I once lived here with my brother.”

Juan paled, “so you’re a ghost?”

“Yes. It took me some time to realise it, but I have come to accept it now.”

Juan looked around at the blank whiteness of their surroundings. “And am I to a ghost then?”

“Sort of. You’re in between worlds. She has a hold of you right now. Your mind is too open. I theorise it’s all the drug-taking. It isn’t good to open yourself up like you do. Anything can get inside.”

Juan folded his arms feeling defensive. “I need to use something to take the edge off. You have no idea what it’s like in this family; the pressure of being a Borgia is huge.”

Niccolai looked at him with strange, pale eyes, “I understand that it’s hard. It wasn’t much fun in my family either. But you wallow in your own weakness as opposed to mastering it. You should be more like your brother.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake! Seriously? Even in my own acid dream I get criticised.”

“I’m not saying you have to admire him,” said Machiavelli with a slight laugh in his voice, “but you have the habit of making men hate you. You isolate yourself. Your father is the same. You’d be better off getting them to love you…or to be scared of you. One or the other if not both. That is what Cesare is good at and why he finds life easier to cope with.”

“My family love me.”

“Your father loves you. And he shares your fault- he runs away from his problems and finds relief in hedonism. It won’t help you in the end.”

“What would you even know about it? Who are you? A figment of my imagination- like my own Jiminy Cricket or Clarence Odbody?”

“I’m a ghost. Pay attention. I told you this already.”

“I know! I just didn’t believe you. So, what you’ve been spying on us?”

“There isn’t much else to do but to watch you all. You are susceptible to possession. Ignore my earlier advice, it hardly matters at this stage. Instead, focus on leaving the house.”

Just as Juan gaped like a fish, trying to process everything that was happening, Sancia ran down the stairs and joined them. Her face was harried and stressed.

“She’s attacking your brother!” Sancia cried, “And Joffre went to battle her!”

Juan looked between the two alarmed faces. “W-what does that matter?” he stammered, “Joffre’s a ghost- how can they fight each other?”
“Psychologically,” answered Machiavelli, “and it is dangerous. We can’t die, but we do linger. Fighting one another in this realm can damage us, we can stop being who we are and become shadows of ourselves.”

“There are many ghosts like that in here,” continued Sancia, “they do not know what they are or who they are. It’s a sad, hopeless experience; the truest form of purgatory. Beatrice is a poltergeist and she is full of rage. She’ll tear your brother’s soul to pieces!” Her eyes filled with tears, “I cannot lose another baby Juan, I cannot!”

“He wasn’t yours in the first place!” he roared suddenly as the foyer began to turn black and red, “You never should have taken him!”

Before she or Machiavelli could say anything, they faded away.

Everyone ran downstairs.

Lucrezia let out a startled scream as she saw both Cesare and Juan lying on their backs on the ground. Rodrigo hurried past her, arriving at the foyer and falling to his knees looking in bewilderment at both boys. Vanozza appeared at the top of the stairs.

“What’s happening?” she cried.

“They seem to be having…some sort of fit…”

Juan was completely rigid and motionless. His mouth was open as if in a silent scream and his eyes stared upwards at nothing.

Cesare looked exactly the same, only his jaws were tightly clenched together and he was covered in scratches, as if he had been attacked by a cat.

“Cesare?” whispered Rodrigo, reaching out and touching Cesare lightly. The boy flinched in response, as if even that mildest touch had hurt him.

Vanozza and Lucrezia joined Rodrigo on the floor.

“What is happening?” muttered Vanozza, “what is this?”

Rodrigo shivered and looked around the foyer. The walls were glistening slightly, as if frost had begun to form. What was causing this?

“Cesare is trying to say something!” shouted Lucrezia, and it was true, Cesare’s lips were moving softly. Lucrezia put her ear to his mouth and frowned. “He’s saying ‘Joffre’…”

Vanozza pulled out her phone and dialled for the local hospital— at this point she knew their number off by heart.

“Wait!” called Rodrigo, touching her arm, “don’t call them.”

“Why not?”

“Think about how it would look…” Rodrigo looked uncomfortable, “first Juan, then Joffre, and now this. They’ll get Social Services involved.”

Vanozza visibly paled, “you’re right,” she whispered, casting a look at her two sons, “oh god what
“Lucrezia,” Rodrigo ordered, “go upstairs and get some blankets and pillows for the boys. The least we can do is get them comfortable. Vanozza, please go and check the thermostat and get the heating cranked up if you can.”

Vanozza, visibly shivering, nodded and ran into the kitchen. Lucrezia, not willing to leave Cesare, remained dutiful to her father and ran up the stairs nonetheless.

Rodrigo crouched down by his boys, holding the hands of each of them. Cesare flinched again, jerking his hand as if to throw Rodrigo off him, but Rodrigo wouldn’t let go and eventually Cesare settled.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered, “I’m here. Your father is always here.”

“Go help Joffre,” whispered Cesare. Rodrigo blinked and leaned in closer to his son.

“What? Cesare can you hear me?”

“They’re in the living room. Hurry.”

At that precise moment the living room door burst off its hinges, slamming into the staircase opposite it. A loud gust of a wind tinged with flecks of ice bellowed out of it and circled around the room. Rodrigo cried out in pain before stretching his body over his two, immobile sons. The flecks of ice cut into his skin and his body began to go in shock from the sudden cold.

Vanozza in the kitchen heard the noise and went to run out, only to find she couldn’t open the door. She began to bang on it, screaming for her family. The lights above her began to flicker.

She gaped at the light. What was going on?

Behind her stood the ghost of the last occupant of the house- Roberto Orsini. He stared at her. She was like Juan, open to manipulation. He could feel the spirits above the kitchen, circling around and becoming excited. Since this family had moved in, it seemed more and more of the ghosts were waking up.

Right now it was only he protecting her. He had locked the kitchen, making sure Beatrice couldn’t enter. However, he wasn’t strong enough to hold off more than one poltergeist. He was only a small ghost after all, he hadn’t the energy they did. So, he picked up a pan and, feeling a little guilty, whacked Vanozza on the back of her head. She slumped to the floor unconscious, her head bleeding.

There, now they wouldn’t be able to jump inside her. She was completely locked off.

Whilst all of this craziness was happening downstairs, Lucrezia had run into her bedroom. Had she been less panicked she would have noticed that Billie Holliday was playing again. She tore into her room and paused- a woman with long blonde hair was standing in the middle of it, holding the record in her hands. She turned and faced Lucrezia, a soft, sad smile gracing her lips.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice seeming strange and far away, as if she were talking from down a long corridor and not near to Lucrezia, “I think this has woke me up. I remember now. I remember everything.”

“Are you a ghost?” whispered Lucrezia, desperately trying to not feel afraid. The woman paused for a moment, then nodded. “My brothers are hurt,” continued Lucrezia “is it something
supernatural? Can you help them?"

“I will, just this once,” said the ghost, “but only for you. Not for the men.”

And with that she promptly vanished, the record she’d been holding falling softly to the ground.

xxXXxx

Once more the foyer became desperately cold. Juan shivered and hugged himself before jumping at the banging sound he could hear below him; something in the basement was making a lot of noise. He squeezed his eyes shut and whined low in his throat. Of all the houses they could have moved to, they had to come to the one that had a literal monster in the basement. It was all mom’s fault, if she wasn’t such a nag then dad wouldn’t have sought comfort in Bianca.

He opened his honey-brown eyes and began to walk slowly towards the basement doorway beside the stairs. If Cesare could sit down there making friends with it then so could he.

It was as he passed the front of the staircase heading down the side that he saw Cesare lying on his back on the floor. He ran towards him. Cesare was bleeding, covered in scratches. He was wet and shaking from the cold. All around him were grey, thick chains, tying him to the ground.

Wide, dark eyes looked at him. Juan paled; he had never seen his brother look so scared and helpless.


Juan obliged, tearing into the living and staring at the sight before him. A girl stood in the middle of the room. She was very wet, wearing a bloodied dress. The dress was in the Flapper style of the 1920s. Her black hair was ratty and sticking on her face. A great gash was on her stomach, bleeding out dark red blood. More blood ran from a wound on her head down one side of her face.

“I’m guessing that’s Beatrice,” thought Juan, feeling a bit shell shocked.

On the other side of the room was Joffre. He looked vaguely like a vampire or a zombie- he looked like the undead with pale skin and blue tinted lips. However, his eyes bright and alive and burning with concentration as he stared the woman down.

Beatrice let out an inhuman scream, throwing poor Joffre backwards. The boy cried out piteously, but quickly got back to his feet, maintaining his stance against her.

“He’s just a kid!” shouted Juan without thinking, catching their attention, “he’s seven years old! Leave him alone.”

Beatrice opened her mouth wide and a large white snake slithered out of it. Juan ran over to Joffre, staring at horror at the monstrous thing that dropped to the floor.

“You don’t have to do this,” he told his younger brother quickly.

“I’m already dead,” answered the child, “I don’t want her to keep hurting you.”

“IT NEVER GOES AWAY!” screamed Beatrice, flying towards them. Before either Borgia could let out a scream of fear, a woman appeared in front of them.

Beatrice halted, staring at the blonde. The Borgia boys stared as well. She was a tall thin woman,
wearing a long, flower-print dress. She looked like a stereotype housewife.

“No more Beatrice,” she said, her voice wavering slightly, “stop killing people. You cannot hurt anyone in the living room. It’s my domain now.”

Beatrice shook her head and screamed. Pictures of the wall fell down. Even the TV screen exploded dramatically.

However, Ursula stood firm. “No, get out! I am back and I am awake and I am stronger than you are! Leave now! Get out of the boy! Out! OUT!”

With a gasp, Juan suddenly woke up. He was lying on the foyer floor and the family were staring down in shock.
The Tigers come at night

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: Rape. Not graphic. But still troubling. Please avoid if this will cause severe upset/trauma.

April 1995

"She left me for the stable boy.

"What?" Catherina blinked in sleepy confusion.

It was four O'clock in the morning. She was standing in her long white night-gown at the front door of The Murder House. Outside, standing in the pouring rain and darkness, was her younger brother Giovanni.

"The fucking stable boy," he spat, "he looks about ten years old, has no money and is an illiterate, yet my fiancé left me for him." He bought up a bottle of whisky and took a deep gulp. It was then that the acrid stench of sweat, alcohol, cigarettes and bitterness hit Catherina full force, helping her to fully awaken.

"Come in," she muttered, already feeling weary of the impeding drama.

A few minutes later they were both sitting in the living room. The fireplace was on full blast, and Giovanni's socks, shoes and coat were drying on the clothes rack in the kitchen. He wriggled his toes in the thick carpet and stared the flames. Another shot of whisky was in his hand.

"So she left you," said Catherina after a moment's silence. "I always had the impression you didn't think much of her anyway. It was all a business arrangement after all, wasn't it?"

"Mmm, yes," he grumbled, "her father owned Holy Honey Industries. It seemed like a good idea to combine our two companies so that we could better compete on the market. But she was a silly little bitch. Typical dumb blonde and all that..."

Catherina nodded along, thinking of his fiancé. She hadn't seen much of her, but the woman in question had never struck Catherina as particularly stupid, though perhaps as a bit of a hussy.

"She was too young for you anyway," she said at length, "wasn't she still a teenager? You should get someone older, more sensible."

"She wanted love you know," he continued, evidently not having heard his sister. He snorted and took a sip of piercing whisky, "stupid fool... love? I ask you. She should have known what the deal was. All I wanted was her to be a good wife, be faithful, keep the house clean and be a good mother someday. I never asked for love or even affection. My God... what will I say to the others? I'll be a laughing stock! She at least could have run off with a man of means, which would have been less humiliating at least!"

Catherina yawned. She loved her brother and felt for him, but she was too tired to deal with the pity party. "You're welcome to stay here as long as you need to." She said, getting up slowly, "it will be
good for my boys to see their uncle, and to have a man around the house for a few days. I'll make up a bed for you."

"Thank you. I can always rely on you." He stood up and looked around the living room. The fire light warmed the heavy woodwork and rich colours of the furniture, "how you can afford this place is beyond me."

"I can't afford it," she smiled softly, her back against the light of the hallway and as always Giovanni was momentarily struck by her graceful beauty, "all of our money is tied up in this house."

"Your husband really screwed you over," he commented darkly, “good thing he ran off when he did, or I would’ve gotten my hands on him.”

She nodded, and went up to the second floor. He took one last longing look at the flames, before following her upstairs.

Present Day

“Mom?”

The thick grey haze around Vanozza began to dissipate as her daughter’s voice floated through her stunned brain.


Vanozza opened her dark brown eyes and saw her daughter’s relieved blue ones looking back at her. For a moment Vanozza was struck with how beautiful Lucrezia was. She had taken after her father, fair and bright, and she was as striking as he had been.

“What is it?” Vanozza said, her voice rough and sore, “what happened?” She touched the back of her head and could feel it was bleeding slightly.

“I don’t know,” rushed her daughter, “you must have fallen. Please Mom, come check on Cesare.”

Helping her mother up the women stumbled together into the foyer. It was still very cold, though the ice seemed to be melting now.

“Where is Juan?” cried Vanozza seeing only Cesare lying on the ground.

“Daddy took him upstairs, his awake but confused.”

They sat beside Cesare, who was also conscious, but sluggish.

“I can’t get him upstairs alone,” continued Lucrezia, “and I think dad will be too afraid to leave Juan on his own, so he won’t be coming down to help.”

Vanozza nodded, she understood, and she hoped that if Cesare had heard all that that he would understand as well.

Both lifted Cesare up, each putting on of his arms around their shoulders and together they began to slowly make their way upstairs. The living room door was wide open and smoke was drifting out of it.

“There was a fire,” explained Lucrezia. “Dad sorted it.”
There was the sound of a record being put on and then Billie Holiday began to play loudly.

Just before they reached the first floor, Lucrezia could have sworn that she saw the sweep of a 1950’s dress swaying to the music inside the living room.

Rodrigo sipped his brandy with a shaking hand. He was sitting beside Lucrezia’s bed, though the occupant of the bed was not his daughter but his youngest son Juan.

After Lucrezia had come downstairs with blankets and pillows they managed to warm the boys up, though Cesare’s scratches were still bleeding slightly. Lucrezia had been crying softly and just he had begin to wonder what on Earth was keeping his wife, there had been a loud explosion from the living room followed by the smell of a burning electrical item. Juan had woken then, gasping as if he had been immersed in cold water.

Lucrezia had held down Juan, keeping him calm (or at least trying to) whilst Rodrigo had run into the Living Room. There was a small fire inside the television, which was now smashed open and burning. He had called for Lucrezia to go get the electric fire hydrant from the kitchen. She’d obeyed, anxiously leaving a wide-eyed and confused Juan on the ground. The kitchen door, for some reason, was locked and Lucrezia found herself injuring her shoulder by throwing her body into the door to finally break the lock away from the door frame and allowing her access. Inside the kitchen then had found Vanozza on the ground. Having to leave yet another family member alone and vulnerable, she’d grabbed the hydrant and ran across the Foyer into the Living Room.

“Daddy,” she’d called, tossing him the hydrant, “mom’s unconscious and Juan is really confused and is acting weird.”

He sprayed the small fire, quashing it easily, “don’t worry, stay with your mother and then get Cesare upstairs. I’ll get Juan.”

Lucrezia faltered, “Is it really ok to leave Cesare alone?”

“Your brother is tough,” Rodrigo pushed past her, “he’ll be fine alone for a few minutes.”

Rodrigo took a moment to look at Juan before he lifted his shaking child with a strength he did not know he still possessed and had somehow managed to carry him up the stairs. As soon as Juan had seen his bedroom he began to thrash about in panic, “No, not in there!” he’d screamed, “he’s in there! He’s in there!!” So instead Rodrigo had placed him in Lucrezia’s room. For whatever reason Juan seemed at ease there and fell asleep almost as soon as his head had touched the pillow.

Rodrigo flinched reflexively when he heard the plaintive cries of Billie Holiday rising up from downstairs. Tonight had been too strange and frightening; some stranger had somehow broken into the house, his sons having a fit, Cesare seemingly being attacked by something. It was all too bizarre. At first he thought that maybe they could call the police, but then he decided against it for the same reason he decided against taking his sons to hospital; it would start to look suspicious if people kept seeing his children being hurt. Hey had only been at the house for around two weeks, and already the emergency services had been called out a number of times. No, instead he would check the entire house and lock down everything, even if it meant no sleep for him tonight. He didn’t want his family getting hurt. Normally Rodrigo would feel comfort in having Cesare in the house, as Cesare was unofficially the Borgia Household’s personal bodyguard, but with Cesare out cold there was really no one.

“Maybe we should get a dog,” he thought, “I’m not sure we can afford one, but maybe we can
make the stretch. It would be worth it, for the safety of my family.”

Hearing the heavy thumping of feet, he opened the door and saw his wife and daughter carrying up a semi-conscious Cesare.

“Bring him into here,” ordered Rodrigo. The women obeyed and Cesare was put into Lucrezia’s bed alongside Juan.

“I think it’s better if we keep them together.” He said, “Vanozza, could you keep watch on them? I want to make sure the house is secure. I need to double check that TV hasn’t re-lit itself as well.”

“Be careful,” she said, “please Rodrigo.”

He smiled, touched by her love for him, “I will. I have my mobile on me. If you get scared and cannot get through to me, then call the police.”

For a moment, Lucrezia wanted to stop him and ask him to take her with him, but she knew he wouldn’t so she held her tongue. After he’d gone she went out to the bathroom, got the first aid kit and wondered back into her bedroom. Taking out the bandages and medical wipes she began to clean and bandage her mother’s head wounds.

“You should go to hospital,” she muttered reproachfully.

“I will, but maybe only to a GP and only tomorrow. I feel alright Lucrezia, don’t worry.”

In all fairness the cut to Vanozza’s head was moderately small. She hadn’t hit her head too hard at least. After seeing to her mother Lucrezia walked over to the bed, drew back the covers and began to brush some fresh wipes over Cesare’s arms and face. The cuts were long and thin, as if someone with very long nails had just attacked him in a frenzy. It tugged her heart a little to think of him in pain like that. She focused for quite some time on a cut on his bottom lip, before moving up to brushing the long cuts that curved down the side of his eye from the forehead to his cheek. His skin was tan and unblemished. His eyelashes long and thick and very black. Lucrezia was well aware that her family were very beautiful; her baby brother had been angelic and Juan, when he genuinely smiled, was extraordinarily dashing. They were a family of Hollywood good looks. Yet with Cesare it was more than that. Something about him was almost other-worldly to Lucrezia. In her early years, Cesare was like a god to her. He was so smart and so strong he almost didn’t seem real. And for some reason he had always doted on her more than anyone else. She had noticed that Cesare had a certain…aloofness…about him that tended to ostracize him from others. Even when he was making friends at school (back in Spain where they had been the same race as everyone else) there was a still a sort of vacancy to it- as if none of it was real. But with her, the emotions of love and protection, they were real. It was almost too much for her sometimes, that intensity of love could be frightening. She often waved off his affections with light laughter but she was growing increasingly aware of how deep it was and how…unusual…it was.

She looked down at his lips again. How did she feel about him? She loved him, of course, as a sister. But was it more than that? Could it ever be more? The idea of her being with Juan in such a way seemed wrong and ludicrous, but for Cesare, not so much; it almost seemed like a viable option.

Her heart beat loudly in her chest as she found herself thinking these things. It was completely perverse of course. Even if, if, they decided to live as more than brother and sister, the consequences for incest were steep. The children born into such relationships could be born severely disabled and sick. There was a reason for why such affairs were taboo and even illegal. And Lucrezia didn’t want that. She wanted to meet a guy, maybe at school or in a job one day, fall
in love, get married, have lots of children and travel the world with her family. She didn’t want a relationship where they couldn’t have kids, or where they could never really tell people who they really were. Perhaps she could just find someone who was exactly the same as Cesare, and marry him instead? But even then, would anyone ever really be like Cesare? He was too unique. All of her family were; they were all very strong characters who couldn’t be replicated. So the only Cesare she would ever get would be her own brother, Cesare. Would the shame or the risk be worth it?

“But that’s the wrong way to think,” She decided, “and besides, he’s too much for me. His emotions are too strong and I find that frightening. Besides, I could never live up to the version of me he believes in: this paragon of goodness and innocence. That’s not the real me.”

She shook her head. She would not think such things. She should be completely ashamed of herself; what was wrong with her?

“Mama,” she said softly, waking Vanozza from a light doze, “I need to go to sleep, is it ok to leave now?”

“Of course, but where will you sleep?”

“I can go into Juan’s room.”

“Very well, but if you want to stay together tonight let me know.”

Lucrezia smiled, “it’s the boys we need to worry about, what with that fit they both had. I’m fine, don’t worry.” She kissed her mother and tip toed out of the room and across the hallway into Juan’s dark red bedroom.

She shivered from the cold she felt in there. No wonder Juan hated sleeping in here, it was freezing! She looked around the room, Juan hadn’t unpacked at all. His clothes were still in his suitcase and everything else was still in boxes. Even the bed looked like it hadn’t been slept in. She frowned slightly. How bizarre. Juan had always been a bit of an oddball, but this was strange even for him.

She would ask him about it tomorrow. For now she needed sleep.

Lucrezia pulled off her top and trousers. The room seemed to get a lot warmer and there was suddenly a kind of tension in the air. She suddenly felt exposed so she dove under the quilt cover. She kept her underwear and socks on (socks because it had been cold earlier, and it seemed that the thermostat was working). The bedroom light was still on and Lucrezia’s eyes darted around the room as she began to quickly tie her hair into a long braid. She usually had a long routine involving her hair before going to bed, which included a lot of brushing and patting down; it was necessary with hair as long and thick as hers, if she didn’t braid it (or put some sort of wrap on it), she would wake up the next day with a big fluffy blonde semi-afro.

Finally, with her hair braided and safe from a night of tossing and turning, she snuggled under the blankets. The light was still on but she didn’t mind. In all honesty she felt a little afraid in the room. It was almost as if someone was watching her closely. It was decidedly creepy. She could have gone to another room, but this was the only other bedroom on this floor. If she was feeling afraid here then she definitely did not want to be on her own upstairs.

With the light on, even though her eyes were closed, the light could shine through her eyelids. So when a shadow swept across, she noticed. Just as her eyes snapped open, the bedroom light turned off.
April 1995

Catherina put Giovanni in their guest room. It was painted a Spanish red, which she didn't like, she thought it was too strong a colour, she preferred subtle pale pastels, but she hadn't been able to change that room yet.

Giovanni lay stiffly. It was still raining outside but it seemed to be abating a little. He ground his teeth; he couldn't stop thinking about that bitch about how she had betrayed. It was the humiliation he couldn't stand, he didn't care if she wanted to leave, if she didn't love him, or like him, or even if she had found the sex unsatisfactory; he didn't care about any of this because he didn't care about her. But he didn't care about is reputation.

She had just annihilated it with her infidelity.

Everyone would think he was sexually inefficient, that he was so bad at pleasing a woman that his young, virile wife had preferred the arms of a boy with no money or status. It was more than he could bear.

"Bitch!" he muttered, "stupid bitch! Whore! Dog of a whore!"

This was no good. He was never going to sleep. He needed another drink.

He got up out of bed and wandered outside into the dimly lit hallway. He marched downstairs and helped himself to the brandy he found in the kitchen. He gulped it down.

By the time the sun began to rise, he was completely wasted.

Streaks of pink and white began to lighten the sky. But Giovanni did not recognise the beauty of it. He was still angry, angry and drunk.

He walked back up to the first floor and wandered into a room, thinking it was his own.

It was not.

Inside the floors were not red but a pretty off-white. Blue and black flowers were painted on the walls.

A large four poster bed lay in the middle.

There was groan, a soft, feminine sigh of a young girl.

'That bitch,' he thought, 'I'll show her. It'll be like those first few months, when I had to break her in.'

He pulled off his boxers and walked drunkenly to the bed. He was sober enough to harden, just long enough to teach her a lesson at least!

Sancia, a beautiful girl with long dark hair, the oldest child of Catherina Sforza let out a gasp of shock when she awoke to find her uncle leering over her.

But it was too late. He did not see her, he saw his wife. His young, pretty, fair wife.

He put a heavy hand over her mouth and told her, "shut up and take it, like the little slut you are."

Present Day
“Who’s there?” she felt stupid almost the minute she asked the question. She was such a cliché.

Slowly, Lucrezia sat up in the bed. It was getting too warm in the room, and the contrast against the previous cold was making her skin tingle and burn unpleasantly.

There was a feeling of anger in the air. “Are you a ghost?” she asked, her voice a whisper, “do I know you?”

Tears pricked her eyes. She was very frightened and desperately wanted someone like Ursula to appear. It seemed as if her bones were made out of lead, despite her fear, she could not leap out of the bed and run out of the room. She also had the distinct impression that whatever the thing watching her was, it was standing beside the door.

“Go away,” she whispered shakily, “go away or I’ll scream. I swear I’ll-”

Suddenly her throat was constricted as a large hand gripped it tightly. She began to flail, but the heavy weight of a full grown man lay down on her. The heat became intolerably hot, and behind her the window cracked before smashing open. The lights of the street and stars shone into the room and Lucrezia saw the face of Giovanni Sforza looming over her.

With his spare hand he rubbed large, dirty fingers over her lips whilst she gasped for air. He then leaned down and bit her bottom lip roughly before she felt the blanket being torn away from her by some invisible force and her being flipped onto her stomach. She began to cry, shouting for her mother.

“They can’t hear,” she heard him say; “no one can hear you now.”

Present Day

Rodrigo wandered about downstairs. All the lights were on and it seemed that all windows and doors leading outside were secure. He had gone into the Living Room first. The music was still playing on a record player he’d bought for Juan one year and Rodrigo found himself unwilling to turn it off. He chastised himself for being superstitious, but closed the door anyway. There was another room besides this that they could use as a living room instead. It was meant to be his study for seeing clients but as he hadn’t got any yet, it could do as a family room instead.

He found the thermostat in the kitchen which said that the heating was normal. Indeed, the house did seem to be warming up slowly but surely. He tapped on it and grunted softly to himself. The house was old, perhaps things didn’t always work as they should. He then got out a mop and began cleaning the small pool of blood Vanozza had left on the kitchen floor.

As he was doing so he noticed a pan on the side. It also had a bit of blood on it. He frowned, if Vanozza had slipped over and banged her head, then why was there blood on a pan on the side? He picked it up and touched the blood. It was fresh, and there were even some long dark curly hairs on it- clearly from Vanozza’s head. Rodrigo put it in the sink and began to wash it, unable to work out exactly what was going on.

Rodrigo then sauntered back into the foyer and looked at the stained glass painting of a Bull on their front door. It was destiny for them to be in this house- it had to be. Sure it had been a true disaster so far, but they had to make it work. Lord knows they had no more cash so moving was out of the question. He wondered about telling Vanozza the ugly truth of their finances, but with the death of her son (which she clearly was not coping with) and now with the boys having this mysterious double fit or seizure, it seemed cruel to add another woe onto her worries.
His mobile rang out to alert him of a new message. It was from the Rehab Centre in Spain. They wanted to let him know that there was a space for Juan, and that he needed to come to them as soon as possible or else his spot would be taken. Rodrigo read it and sighed. It was not easy being the head of a household and making tough decisions; this one would certainly help his son but it would be painful for his wife. No matter, the welfare of the children trumped that of the parents; that was one thing he and Vanozza had always silently agreed on.

As he turned off the lights and tip-toed upstairs, he could swear he heard the laughter of a television programme coming from the old Living Room. Deciding to ignore it, he continued up the stairs, past Juan’s bedroom and into Lucrezia’s room.

Vanozza was half asleep on an armchair Grandma had given Lucrezia. He shook Vanozza awake and the pair softly made their way upstairs to their own room after making sure the boys were both now sleeping peacefully.

The night was not so peaceful for Lucrezia who was screaming and weeping as Giovanni raped her with as little pity as he had his own niece years beforehand. When he finally came to completion, she huddled herself into a ball in the corner of the bed. He growled at her and went to grab her, ready to start all over again, when two shapes sprouted up behind him. Both grabbed him and threw him across the room. Lucrezia dived under the bed and covered her ears as there was an unearthly scuffle between three supernatural beings. The room was flung into disarray as boxes and clothes were thrown about as spirits fought one another. At last the bedroom door was flung open and though Lucrezia did not see it, Giovanni was thrown down the stairs. The bedroom door slammed shut again.

Lucrezia, hearing whispering voices, slowly crawled out from under the bed. The room temperature was back to normal. Tear tracks were down her face and her body ached from the cruelty inflicted upon it. A strong pair of arms took hold of her and helped her onto the bed.

“You’re going to be alright,” said one voice, the voice of a boy.

The bedroom light switched on and Lucrezia saw the young men before her, one middle-eastern boy with light eyes and curly hair, the other a white native Italian with brown eyes and hair.

“We’ve dealt with him before,” said the Italian boy, who was standing by the door and light switch, “we couldn’t stop him first time either.”

“We’re sorry,” said the middle-eastern boy who was kneeling beside the bed and evidently had been the one to get back onto it, “we were not aware. We weren’t awake before, but we are now, and we won’t let him near you again.”

“Who are you?” she stammered, her voice shaken and frightened.

“I am Paolo,” smiled the Italian boy, “and this is my brother, Djem.”

Djem took her hand, “we’ll protect you,” he said, “before we protected Sancia Sforza right until the end. We’ll do the same for you.”

Paolo joined her and Djem on the bed, “we’re your humble servants. He’ll never get near you again, alive or dead, we swear it.”

“How can you make sure of that?” she whispered.
They smiled at her, a cold glint in their eyes, “easy. By making you stronger.”
Catherina woke sharply. Someone was shaking her. A dark skinned boy with light brown eyes.

She shot up in her bed and stared at him in horror.

"Your daughter is in danger!" The boy said. "Quickly, go to her! He won't stop!"

Catherina dove out of bed and ran out of her room and down the stairs. It was early morning, perhaps around six O'clock. As she ran she saw a myriad of people all standing along the stairway and corridors. She had no idea who they were or why they were in her house, but in her fear and confusion, couldn't stop to find out.

She almost ran into a blonde haired woman who was wearing an outfit from the 1950's and who had appeared in the middle of hallway suddenly.

"She's in her bedroom," said the woman, "I'm so sorry!"

Catherina ripped open Sancia's room. She stared for a single moment before letting out an ear shattering scream.

The following morning, Giovanni Sforza awoke in the park. There was a fair amount of blood on his clothes and fists. He knew they'd be plenty on his privates.

"Shit," he spat onto the ground.

Catherina's oldest was a little whore, everyone knew that. Maybe he could say that she had seduced him? She probably would have tried to anyway, at some point, because that was the kind of girl she was. It definitely wasn't his fault over what had gone down the night before. He didn't even remember a lot of it.

Giovanni Sforza hadn't spoken to any family member in many months. He remembered with a grimace how his sister had reacted to the unfortunate incident between himself and his niece.

But now he sat outside the large Victorian terrace once more. Like future home owner Paolo Orsini would in 2011, Giovanni sat in the car smoking and staring at the home and its grounds. It was winter now. The snow fell silently out of a cruel white sky. A dead bird lay on the frozen white garden. Giovanni sucked at his cigarette, remembering the flashes of the aftermath with Sancia.

He remembered her lying on the bed, covered in red, lush and injured against the pure white quilt and sheets. It was a travesty really. He shouldn't have done it. On a deeper level, the small part of him that wasn't a complete coward, he knew that he had been wrong. He had hurt her. She had lain there, broken and still, just like the bird.

After his sister had lashed out at him like a tiger, scratching at his cheek as he tried to give his excuses, and scarring him permanently in the process, Giovanni did the only decent thing and swore to stay out of their lives forever. Only now, after five months, he was back.

It was a moral grey area for him. On the one hand he wanted to stay away. His sister had placed
three claw marks on his face, and it would take plastic surgery to remove them. He didn't want to see Sancia again, let alone her siblings. Giovanni had always found Catherina's kids kind of weird and creepy, especially since they had moved into the new house. He had always assumed it was the lack of a man in the house. Would they know what he had done? Had their mother told them? He didn't want to see their accusing stares or deal with any of their weird hostility.

But on the other hand he wanted to go in because he had a right to be there. He had heard that Sancia was pregnant. Giovanni had never been paternal and had never particularly wanted children (though he had always assumed that he would have them one day, as they could be people that would look after him in old age and take on his business after he was gone,) but since finding out he was a father (or soon would be) he decided that it was his and the child's right for him to be involved in Sancia and Catherina's lives once more. After all, they would no doubt be after child support (fucking women were all greedy whores) and if he was paying for the damned kid then he was sure as hell going to see him and have a large share in raising the boy.

A child had the right to see two parents. If Sancia and her mother didn't like it then they simply needed to get over it.

Steeling himself against his formidable sister (she really should have been born a man, she was wasted as a woman,) he stepped out of his car and began to walk to the house. The snow crunched under his feet like gravel.

He flung his cigarette to the side, not caring that he was littering the home of his sister and her children. He knocked on the door and began to feel a bit more positive. Being a father was probably the life change he needed. Life had been particularly tough for him over the last year and he deserved something nice in his life. A baby boy would be fantastic. A baby girl...well...

Giovanni grimaced. He wouldn't much fancy a girl, but it wouldn't be all bad. He'd leave the girl mostly with her mother. But if it were a boy he was definitely getting full (or at least half) custody of the child.

All along the street were the dull lights of Christmas. He couldn't help but notice that Christmas was always a subdued affair in this area. On the street he had seen a pile of flowers and one of those funny Jewish candles being piled up as a sort of memorial to someone. He guessed someone had died, perhaps been run over or something. Perhaps the street was subdued because ostentatious displays were somewhat insensitive in the wake of death.

He rolled his eyes and rung the doorbell again. He would like it if Christmas was always subdued. It was a stupid, expensive holiday and everyone (except small children) absolutely hated it but felt like they had to enjoy it. It was so forced Giovanni felt irritated by it. He was always a man who understood and felt comfortable in and with misery. Misery was real.

He was about to ring the bell again when someone finally answered the door. It was little Alfonso.

The boy stared up at him through his heavy fringe. Giovanni stared back; he'd always disliked Alfonso the most. Alfonso was a weirdo. The biggest weirdo he'd ever known.

"MOM!" The boy suddenly shrieked in his ridiculously, irritatingly high pitched voice, "THAT MAN IS HERE!"

The child ran away from the front door, Giovanni followed him into the foyer, and the boy ran down into a small doorway which, by what he remembered, led down to the basement. Why would a child willingly go into a basement for no reason?
Giovanni rolled his eyes. His son wasn't going to end up like that freak; he definitely was getting custody.

"You dare show your face in my home."

Giovanni looked up to the top of the stairs. Catherina stood there, the hall light on behind her, lighting her up. Her hair almost looked red, and her eyes were darker than normal. She looked a little demonic.

Slowly she walked down the stairs, her hand gripping the banister.

"I've heard Sancia," he begun, finding the name of his niece sticking in his throat slightly, "is pregnant. I have a right to be here, I'm the father."

Catherina arrived at the bottom of the stairs. Her eyes had heavy bags under them and her skin was pale. He'd never seen her looking so tired and washed out. Was it his fault?

"You're the father?" She repeated with soft incredulity, a cruel smile on her lips, "yet I distinctly remember you telling me, after you violated her, that she was a common tramp, a slut, and that she was whoring around with everyone. You said that you were simply her latest victim. So how could you know you're the father? It could be any number of men."

That was a good point. "Well we can have a DNA test after the child is born."

"Then until it is born you should leave."

"You might run off in that time, hide her away. I won't risk it. I need to be involved from now."

For a moment pure unadulterated rage appeared on Catherina's features. Every pore seethed vicious anger.

And then it was gone.

Her cool, calm mask returned with such speed that it disturbed Giovanni more than anything else. Was she completely mad?

"Very well," she said, before he could work up the courage to ask her. "You want to take the child away from the house when it's born no doubt?"

He nodded.

"Alright. Until it is born you may stay with us. But you leave her alone. And you go nowhere near my other daughters. In fact, stay away from my sons as well."

He bristled, "I'm not a paedophile!"

"Yes, yes you are. Now if you don't mind I am quite unwell, I must retire back to bed."

She walked slowly up stairs and for a moment she reminded him of Lady Macbeth, genius and madness and evil tangled into a ball of beauty.

He looked around after she disappeared from sight. What was he to do with his time?

Giovanni walked into the living room and sat down. The style had changed from the last time he had been here. Before the house had been under renovation, and Catherina liked white walls and smooth lines, so the house had looked quite modern. But now the living room was quite old
fashioned, almost as if reverting back in time. Even the fancy new television (complete with its own DVD player!) was gone and was replaced with an old fashioned box set. It was like a room full of antiques.

He looked at the at screen and felt around for a remote. In the black screen he could see a face, but it was not his own. Frowning, he stopped feeling around for a remote and stared forwards.

"What on Earth...?"

The face was a figure, a figure standing behind him. He turned around, expecting one of Catherina's creepy kids to be there, but there was no one.

What was going on? He looked back at the tv screen, the figure was still there. Only now the figure was rocking from side to side slightly. He got up from the chair and stared at the black screen. The figure was a woman with blonde hair. She was looking at him.

He felt the hairs on his arms rising, and sweat broke out over his body. He looked behind him again. Nothing was there.

'I'm being stupid,' he thought. 'There has to be an explanation for this. But for now...' he switched on the television. A black and white show was playing. Going by the laughter track it was one of those ditzy old fashioned comedies. Giovanni didn't like comedy in general, but he decided that he didn't care, and sat back down on the settee.

'But... You're a woman!' stammered the male character.

'Yes,' smiled the woman, 'my husband likes me that way.'

Giovanni shifted in his chair. The room suddenly felt cold. He glanced at the windows. They were closed. The light turned off. Giovanni tutted and got up, looking up at the bulb. He went to walk over to the light switch, when he saw two figures standing in front of it.

One had hair done up and a dress on. She was clearly a woman. The other had long hair, but its shape was not as clear.

"Catherina?" he called, "is that you?"

One of the figures, the smaller, less defined one of the two, lifted her arm and switched the light back on. It was a heavily pregnant Sancia standing alone.

"Where was the woman who was with you?" he asked.

She stared at him. Her eyes were very dark and huge dark shadows hung beneath them. She was a ghastly pale (where before she had been very tan, but to having a part-Indian father). She looked like a character from a Tim Burton film. She wore a long white gown. Her belly was huge. In fact it looked too big.

"How many months pregnant are you?" he asked suspiciously, suddenly doubting his parenthood.

"The house," she muttered, her voice distant and strange, "it's making me give birth earlier than it should."

"What are you on about? Has everyone gone completely off the rails?!"

"It's going to be twins," she said by way of an answer, "but being in this house, and conceived as
they were, I can't see them being normal. I blame you. I'm going to die in child birth, I already
know this. And then the children will be claimed by this house. This house claims us all."

With that she turned slowly and then drifted out of the living room, turning off lights as she went.

"What's the matter with you?" said a voice from the television, "are you crazy or something?"

He felt eyes upon him. He turned around quickly but saw no one was there. The show was coming
to a close, though the audience were still laughing hysterically.

There was a slight whispering in the corner, but he couldn't see anyone there. Deciding he'd had
enough he walked out of the living room. He went across the dark foyer and into the kitchen. There
he turned on the kettle.

'It's just anxiety about being a father,' he decided, 'it's making me nervous. The strange behaviour
of the family is just adding to it.'

He wanted a beer, but he knew there wouldn't be any, and he didn't relish a repeat of what
happened last time. A hot drink would help take out the chill from his bones.

Something tapped against his shoe. He looked down and saw a tennis ball. He picked it up and
looked at the kitchen door. The foyer light was off so all he saw was darkness.

"Alfonso!" He called, "are you out there?"

"No." The voice that answered him was too low and too old to be Alfonso. Benito slid out of the
shadows. He was wearing his usual Brit Punk inspired clothing.

"Benito," Giovanni relaxed a little. Benito, despite his tastes in music and bizarre dreams of being a
famous rockstar, was the most ordinary and likeable of Catherina's kids. "How are you?"

The brown haired boy slunk into the kitchen, holding the hand of a small curly haired toddler.

"Ah, little Ascanio, I haven't seen him in a while." Giovanni looked over the sullen faced baby.
"He's growing up fast. Doesn't seem as cheerful as he used to be."

"Mother says Ascanio is very mature." Benito sat down and pulled up the toddler onto his lap.
"She thinks that he has been in this world before. That he is now living his second, third or fourth
life."

"What, like that Buddhist belief?"

"Reincarnation, yeah. She thinks Ascanio is an old soul."

"Right," Giovanni resisted rolling his eyes. Their family had always been good Catholics and he
saw no reason why eastern airy fairy non-religions needed to be introduced to the family tree, "Are
you still into your music, still going to be famous one day?" He sniggered a little.

"I don't know," Benito looked up at him, "if I ever get out of this house, yes, maybe."

Giovanni made himself a hot chocolate (without bothering to ask Benito if he wanted one, or if he
should make one for his younger brother) and sat down opposite the boys. "Of course you'll get out
of the house one day," he took a sip of his hot chocolate, and relished the warmth.

"The house doesn't like people to leave."
Giovanni shrugged and said that he didn't know what Benito was talking about. The kitchen light flickered erratically for a few moments. "There's a real electricity problem in this house."

"The house likes darkness," Benito said in that strange inflectionless tone he had acquired.

Giovanni slammed down his cup, spilling a bit of his drink. "Enough of this!" he demanded, "what is this nonsense with you lot referencing the house as if it were alive? Are you trying to frighten me? Because childish tactics like this don't work on me. I'm sorry about Sancia, but she should learn to close her legs. I was drunk for crying out loud, it was hardly my fault!"

The tennis ball, seemingly from nowhere, suddenly fell onto the table and bounced up and down for a few times before landing in Giovanni's lap.

He frowned and baby Ascanio let out a bubbly baby laugh.

Giovanni snapped. He got up and stormed out into the foyer. He was leaving. He would return in the morning perhaps. He ripped open the front door and saw a boy standing there. He was pretty. An Asian child. A Muslim, Giovanni presumed. He looked in pain, and was soaking wet, as if he had been in a deluge.

"I need help!" he said.

Giovanni looked around the street, "from what?" he looked down but the boy was gone. There were no footprints on the snow. There was no sign the boy was ever there. He frowned in confusion. Had he imagined the boy standing there?

Crrreeeeaaaak!

Giovanni turned around. In the darkness he could just about see that the basement door had opened. Alfonso was probably coming out of it. Giovanni didn't wait around to see. He stepped outside, slammed the front door shut and began to walk to his car. As he did, the cigarette which he had carelessly thrown early began to spark up and smoke slightly once more.

He climbed into his car and began to drive out, when he saw that the garden gate was locked.

He got back out of the car and looked at the gate. A complex series of chains had been wrapped around it. There was no way he could unlock it.

"Who has done this!" he whispered angrily.

He looked back up at the house. He could see figures peering out of the windows. Many figures, more than just Catherina and her children.

Giovanni gulped, and wondered if he could perhaps climb over the gate. That was stupid, of course he couldn't, it was too high. He also did not like feeling like he was some sort of coward. He wasn't a coward. He wasn't a paedophile. He wasn't a rapist. He was just...unfortunate and hot tempered and misunderstood.

He shuddered in the cold. He had been in such a rush that he hadn't even thought to take his coat with him. In the sky above, two crows flew onto the house. He followed them and saw that an entire flock of crows were on the roof, all peering down at him.

The snow had stopped falling and the sky was a deep blue. It would soon be night time.

'I'm going to be stuck in this house,' he thought with genuine fear.
The house doesn't like people to leave, isn't that what his nephew said just now? Giovanni frowned. Was it some sort of trick, were the children playing some sort of cruel prank on him, in revenge for Sancia? He wouldn't put it past them.

"Well I won't fall for it!" he complained loudly. He stomped back towards the house. His cigarette, now glowing slightly, rolled across to where the remains of a winter ravaged bush stood. Together they began to burn lightly.

Giovanni made the second biggest mistake of his life, and began to walk back into the house.

**Present Day**

The next day Juan and Cesare woke up in the same bed together, their legs and arms tangled up together in a sort of bizarre hug and their faces were so close together that their noses touched. Both boys let out a ‘eugh!’ and fell out of bed at the same time.

Cesare recovered more quickly, standing up and wincing at the pain on his face and arms. Then he remembered the previous night.

He looked at Juan with wide eyes, “Juan?” he asked, “Is that you?”

“Of course it’s me, moron, who do you think it is, Lucrezia? The Gingerbread Man? Krampus? Idiot…”

Cesare rolled his eyes but felt too tired to rise to the bait.

“What happened to you?” asked Juan, suddenly looking his brother over, “oh my god, was it that thing in the basement? Did it hurt you?!”

“No…”

“I told you not to go down there!”

“It wasn’t-”

“We need to tell dad! We need to, like, tell him now! We need to convince him there’s an evil troll baby living in there. If it hurt you what could it do to the rest of us? Not that I’m saying you’re tougher than me but…oh crap… look we can’t have this Cesare!”

“Will you calm down! I wasn’t attacked by the thing in the basement.” Cesare sat on Lucrezia’s bed and brushed his hands against the quilts instinctively, “I was attacked by you. There was something inside you. What is the last thing you remember from last night?”

Juan paused for a moment. “I remember watching TV and then…there was something watching me. Something…I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well we have to.”

“No we don’t,” Juan headed to the door, “we don’t have to discuss anything.” He ripped open the door and saw Lucrezia standing outside with a tray of hot drinks on it.

“Oh, good morning, are those for us?”

“They are,” she said, sounding strangely flat. She brushed past Juan and entered the bedroom, “did you both sleep ok? Everyone was worried.”
“Fine,” answered Juan, glancing up at Cesare with a questioning look.

Cesare met his gaze and silently the boys agreed that something was off with their little sister.

“Where did you sleep last night?” Juan continued, looking out of the room and across to his own bedroom. The usual bad feeling he got from there was not present today; he wondered why.

“Never mind about that,” she said brusquely, “what happened to you two yesterday? Tell me the truth.”

“Juan doesn’t want to talk about it,” said Cesare watching Juan who took a drink and silently left the room, apparently losing all interest into what was bothering his little sister. Cesare looked down at her, taking a cup and allowing her a small, cautious smile. His eyes brushed over her. She was wearing a dark black polo-neck and dark blue jeans with black socks. Lucrezia was the type of girl who always wore white dresses and bright, very effeminate clothing. This was unlike her. She looked like mom, who was deep in mourning and depression.

“Did we hurt you last night?” he asked at last, “did we do something to you when we were unconscious?”

“No. I’m fine, just tired and worried. Please be honest with me Cesare. Last night you were saying Joffre’s name. You and Juan were on the ground, glassy eyed and shaking. Why?”

“Tell me the truth, what is wrong with you?”

“You first.”

He sighed, “I think we both took something we shouldn’t have. Ok? Now, what happened?”

Lucrezia looked at him for a long time, before glancing away, “I told you,” she said simply, “I’m just tired and worried. That’s all.” She took his hand, “come with me. Dad wants to see you and Juan.”

Juan entered the kitchen and saw his father, pale and worn out, sitting at the table. Juan sat next to him.

“I’m sorry about last night.” Juan hadn’t actually done anything wrong but he was so used to apologising he felt like he might as well this time as well.

“What happened?” asked Rodrigo.

“I don’t know, I don’t understand myself, one minute I was fine the next…”

“We took something.”

Both Juan and Rodrigo looked up to see Cesare and Lucrezia, hand in hand. “We took something,” repeated Cesare, “I don’t know what. But it affected us really badly. Dad I’m sorry I let you down.”

“Drugs?” Rodrigo said the word slowly, “are you sure? Even you, Cesare, you took drugs?”

Cesare shrugged and sat at the table, “I was curious. Like I say I’m very sorry, I won’t do it again.”

“You’re damned right you won’t do it again.” Cesare turned to see his mother standing in the entranceway, she looked distraught. “How could you do this to me? After everything that has happened, you and Juan thought it would be a good idea to take drugs, to satisfy your curiosity?
And you Juan, you would take drugs again after the last time?"

Both boys bowed their heads whilst Lucrezia watched with a cynical eye on the sidelines and Rodrigo shifted on his seat uncomfortably.

“Well, my love, I think,” he began, “that it would be a good idea if Juan got some help at this point. Cesare will be simply punished, as he isn’t addicted to drugs, and so has no excuse whatsoever for making such a foolish decision. However, Juan does have a legitimate problem and we need to address it.”

“What do you suggest?” asked Vanozza, carefully entering the kitchen and sitting at the table opposite her husband. Lucrezia sat at her side. Now Juan and Rodrigo, and Lucrezia and Vanozza were a perfect mirror-image of one another. Cesare stood awkwardly besides the table, ruining the imagery.

“There’s a Rehab centre, one of the best in the country. I want to send Juan there.”

“Alright,” she nodded, helping herself to a drink of orange juice, “where is it?”

“In Madrid…”

The silence was deafening. Cesare stared at Juan, who was avoiding his gaze. “He knew,” realised Cesare, “he knew he was going to be leaving this house soon. That’s why he didn’t care about the plan of convincing dad to leave. That son of a…”

Vanozza put down her glass. “You want to send my…my baby boy…off to another country?”

“Not to another country, just back home, to Spain. It’s a great Centre. It will do him some good.”

“No.”

“Vanozza.”

“NO!”

“He’s already got a place, those are hard to get I-”

“He already has a place!” she shrieked, getting to her feet, “so you planned this! You arranged this before even asking me.”

Rodrigo sighed loudly, “kids, I need you to leave me and your mother, we need to have a private conversation.”

The children rushed out of the kitchen quickly, very accustomed to this sort of thing. Juan immediately went upstairs. “Where are you going?” barked Cesare.

Juan paused and turned around. “I am going to pack. Mom always let’s dad win in the end. I want to leave.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going?” asked Cesare, surprised to find that he actually felt a little bit hurt. With everything that had happened, and so much of it just between him and Juan, he had felt closer to his brother these last couple of weeks then he ever had before.

Juan shrugged, “dad asked me not to,” pause, “I’ll be back. I just…I need to go for now. I can’t…I can’t stay here…”
Lucrezia smiled softly, “I understand Juan, just go pack, ok.” Juan smiled back and continued up the stairs as Cesare turned away in disgust. “He could have told me,” he thought to himself bitterly, “I wouldn’t have said anything.”

Lucrezia touched Cesare’s shoulder gently, “he’s just scared. He does need to leave. Think about it, he’s really suffered in the short time he’s been here. Cesare, what is it you want from him? You’ve always bullied and ignored him until now!”

Cesare stayed silent. How could he tell her the truth? That he liked that he and Juan had shared secrets, that for the first time in his life, Cesare had realised how badly he wanted a friend…a brother.

“It’s nothing,” he said, turning to her, “I just would have appreciated some transparency. I wish you would tell me what is wrong. I can help.”

Lucrezia looked away, “maybe someday. But for now, you just have to accept my decision. If you respect me then you will and you will stop badgering me.”

Cesare nodded and stepped away from her, already feeling guilty.

She informed him that she was going to her bedroom. He was left alone, listening to his parents screaming and shouting in the kitchen. He sat on the stairs and listened to them.

“How dare you make a decision like this without informing me! How can you undermine me like that? I’m their mother!”

“You have been under a lot of pressure recently, you couldn’t handle it!”

“You must have made this decision far before Joffre’s death! Don’t use my baby’s death against me!”

“I’m not- but everything I have done I have done for you and this family.”

“Juan stays!! I won’t lose another child!”

“No, he goes. This is final Vanozza. It’s for his own good. You know it’s the right thing to do.”

Cesare heard his mother sobbing uncontrollably then, “how long do I have with him?”

“He leaves today,” answered Rodrigo softly, “I’m so sorry…”

Cesare sighed and got up from the stairs. He opened the front door and stepped outside, pulling on his converse as he went.

He looked over the garden and spotted a familiar figure by the shrubs. It was that weirdo Alphonso Sforza, and it looked like he was getting pushed around by two slightly taller kids.

“Hey!” he shouted out, “leave him alone!”

He ran over to Alphonso and the two boys ran away, quickly disappearing. He went to go after them but Alphonso warned him not to.

“They’re long gone,” he said cheerfully, “you won’t find them.”

Cesare looked at him, “are you ok?”
“Do you care?”

Cesare shrugged. “Who were those kids? And why are you and they in my garden? This is private
property.”

“I doubt they care about that. When this place was empty, they used to vandalise it. They’re much
better now, one of them simply adores my mother for some reason.”

“Well, tell them that if I see them again on my property, I’ll kick their asses.”

“What if they are bullying me on the street or some other public place?”

“Then I’ll give them one beat down one time, to make up for that bloody nose I gave you a couple
of weeks ago.”

Alphonso smiled at Cesare a little crazily, “I heard about your brother getting squashed by a
wardrobe. I’m sorry for your lose.”

“Thank you, that sounds very sincere.”

“I mean it! But death isn’t really the end, is it?”

Cesare gave Alphonso a sly look, “what would you know about that?”

The kid laughed loudly, “oh I’ve had a few from my family die. My dad was killed. He was beaten
and then fed to some animal.”

“Seriously?”

Alphonso nodded, “my brother died as well. The police killed him.”

“Why?”

“He shot a bunch of kids at Burckhardt’s School of Excellence.”

Cesare stared at him, not sure if he was telling the truth or not. Alphonso continued on, however,
with the same stupid smirk on his face, “soooo…I know a lot about death. It isn’t the worst thing
that can happen to someone.”

Just then Catherina Sforza appeared leaning over the fence. “Hello boys, very early isn’t it? What
are you talking about?”

“Nothing mother!” rang out Alphonso irritatively.

Cesare smiled at her anxiously, his heart beating fast suddenly. God, what was it about her that
turned him into a bumbling idiot?

“Cesare,” she called, “tell your mother to come round to me as soon as possible, I need to have a
gossip with her.”

“Sure,” he smiled, sounding cooler than he felt, “she may need a friend.”

“Oh, why?”

“She and my dad…they’re having a bit of a bust up.”
“In that case, she definitely needs to be here within the hour or I will come hunting her down!”

“Sure, see you Miss Sforza.”

“Catherina.” She winked at him and left. He turned to talk to Alphonse, but to his surprise, Alphonse was nowhere to be seen.

December 1995

The smoke from Giovanni’s cigarette snaked up and around the base of one winter-ravished bush. The dull orange flame flickered, a spark of life spitting forwards and alighting the dry wooden base of the vegetation. The spark of orange flame grew and developed into a small, happy flame.

Giovanni knocked on the front door of the house, a scowl on his face. He resolutely did not look up at the building; he did not want to see all the mysterious figures looking down on him. His heart pounded in his chest. What was he to do? The situation was creepy and frightening. Things were beyond his control, and his lack of control was making him angry and frustrated. He’d never been in a situation like this before—a situation where he quite possibly had entered into the realms of the supernatural. Giovanni was a religious man (though not a moral one) and so the idea of the supernatural wasn’t enough to throw him into a fit of madness, however he was a modern man and something like a haunted house was enough to slowly begin breaking down all the natural barriers he had in his mind that kept him sane and calm.

The door opened slowly on its own. Giovanni could not help rolling his eyes. If this was a haunted house then it was a stereotype, and he did not appreciate that. He stepped inside the dark foyer and saw Alphonso peering out of the basement door at him. He wondered for a moment if Alphonso had opened the front door, but there was no way the boy could have run the distance between the basement and door and back again in that time.

“Do you wanna come down and play?” the boy asked, the lower half of his face hidden in the basement, but Giovanni could hear the smile. “Paolo is down here, Djem too,” Alphonso elaborated as if that was supposed to make sense to his uncle, “even the girl. Rebekah is Jewish, so we’re gonna celebrate Hannukah with her. Mommy says it is important to respect different religions.”

Giovanni stared at Alphonso.

Alphonso stared at Giovanni.

Very slowly, Giovanni backed into the kitchen, still watching the boy carefully. He then closed the kitchen door and sat down at the table. The kitchen seemed like the safest place to stay. He looked down at his hands and noticed that he was shaking slightly. He placed them under the table, ashamed of himself momentarily.

Outside a glimmer of vermillion flames could just be seen spreading across the bushes in the garden, but they were shrouded by the ever thickening smoke.

Giovanni, no doubt amusing the Universe, got out a cigarette and lit it. He leaned back in the chair and let out a puff of smoke, relaxing just a little. He would just wait in the kitchen. He’d wait then leave first thing in the morning. He would stay awake, and leave on the kitchen light. He’d be alright.

His mind wandered back to thoughts of his wife. It really had stung his ego when she left; even now there was a gaping wound. But the truth was, he felt as if she had humiliated him before even
that. He had been embarrassed by her throughout their short, unhappy marriage. Why was that? She was very beautiful, and, though he did not like to admit it, she had been quite clever academically speaking. It was because she was so young. Something about her big naïve eyes and cute way of speaking grated on him. Looking back, he realised that even on their wedding day he had decided that he hated her and the relationship would never work.

‘Perhaps that wasn’t the best way to go about it,’ he reflected, ‘after all she was quite nice to me, despite everything. She was nice to me and I wasn’t nice to her. I was never nice to her. Perhaps, if I had tried a little more, perhaps I would have liked her. We maybe could have been friends.’

Giovanni rarely regretted his actions, but when he did, he felt it keenly.

‘It all went wrong from there,’ he realised, ‘I was angry with her all throughout the marriage, and she went with someone else. Then I was angry afterwards, and so I…I had sex with Sancia. And now Sancia is hurt. And the family is hurt. Perhaps I haven’t been behaving very well.”

Something caught his eye. Startled out of his reverie, Giovanni looked about the room. Everything seemed normal aside … ah, aside from the person standing in the corner. The person, it looked like a girl, had her back to Giovanni.

The girl had long black hair, but it wasn’t Sancia. Her hair was different, more unkempt. Her dress looked like it came from the Roaring Twenties.

‘It’s a ghost,’ he realised, his hands closing reflexively and his jaw clenching.

The girl was wet. A puddle of water was at her feet. The air became extremely frigid, so much so that he could see his breath puffing out in balls of smoke in front of him.

Tears prickled at his eyes. For some reason an overwhelming feeling of misery and pain welled up inside him; all the sadness and hurt he had felt as a boy pushing forwards and forcing him to recognise them. He had never been a happy child and he grew into an unhappy man. What was worse was that he was so accustomed to the feeling that he went on to spread that wretchedness to everyone else; how many people had he hurt in his lifetime, without ever fully realising what he was doing?

The girl was so wet and he reasoned that she had drowned somehow. Should he apologise to her? But why? He hadn’t done anything! But what to Sancia? But she was a whore! But…but she hadn’t wanted it. She had not wanted him to have sex with her. Pain erupted in his stomach, making his gasp out and clutch it. With watery eyes Giovanni looked up at the back of the wet girl. “I’m sorry!” he tried to say, but he couldn’t.

Just as he began to wonder if she would move or do anything, a terrible scream ripped through the air and the lights turned off. Giovanni was plunged into darkness with only a ghost and screams of a girl as company.

He let out a cry and fell to the floor. His stomach stopped hurting, a suddenly as it had begun, but now he was just afraid. Outside none of the lights, from the heavenly bodies nor the Christmas decorations, were getting through due to the thick black smoke. The lights flicked back on, more dimly than before. The ghost girl was gone.

Giovanni opened the kitchen door and looked out into the foyer. The lights were off and everywhere was bathed in darkness. He didn’t want to leave the light of the kitchen.

“Catherina!” he called, “Catherina!!” He could hear the fear in his own quavering voice. He called
her a few more times, but there was no answer. In the darkness, things were moving.

His heart in his throat Giovanni moved back into the kitchen, closing the door behind him. Another scream, this one he was sure was Sancia, tore through the house again. It did not sound like normal birthing cries, but the frightened screams of a dying girl.

He began to breathe deeply, too deeply and frantically.

‘No, please don’t have a panic attack!’ he prayed to his own body.

A loud scream of agony ripped through the house, making him shout out in fearful response. He crouched on the floor, sweat pouring from every pore. The screams continued, intermittently.

‘The baby…she must be having the baby now! And it’s killing her, it’s killing her just as she said it would!’

Around him the walls began to push and vibrate; pulsating like a womb trying to expel its inhabitant. Giovanni hid under the table, whimpering lightly without meaning to, when what looked like thick, black, sweaty hair began to grow out of the kitchen floor. He yelped, feeling disgusted as it touched him. He stood and climbed on top of the table.

Sancia screamed out loudly again, and the wall which contained a window pulled in, causing the window to smash. The shards of glass blew in slowly- too slowly to be natural. He found himself watching in wonder, so that at first he didn’t even notice that outside the garden was in flames.

‘But how?’ his mind still fought for logic, ‘it makes no sense. There is snow outside. How is it burning so much?’

The screams of Sancia had stopped, as had the pulsating walls. Now everything seemed eerily quiet. The smoke of the flames was pouring into the house. He would be dead soon.

He wavered, not knowing what to do. Out in the foyer was the darkness, and if he leapt out of the window he would be stuck with the flames and smoke.

He shook his head, realising he was doomed.

“Help!” he began to scream, “help!”

Outside, he began to hear the screams of children. He paused his calls for help for the moment, opting to drop down the ground in the hopes of not inhaling too much smoke. On the floor he could see under the cabinets and under the sink. His spine arched slightly as he noticed someone hiding under one of the cabinets. The thing was watching him whilst wriggling about in a unnecessary and unnatural manner. A big grin appeared on its face when it saw it had Giovanni’s unnecessary and unnatural manner. A big grin appeared on its face when it saw it had Giovanni’s attention, making him bark out a scream. Gasping like a fish, he inched away from the squirming being and crawled towards the door. If the children were screaming, did this mean the fire was inside?

There were the sounds of flames above him, and he looked up to see that the ceiling was on fire. It would cave in at any moment.

He opened the door and looked out into the foyer, the lights were on but it was thick with smoke. Soon it would be impossible to see anything. He began to feel by the wall, inching around so that he would eventually reach the front door. On the stairway he saw a young person walking down coughing profusely. It looked like the person was carrying something in his arm.

“What have you done?” the person said, and he recognised it as Benito, “what have you done?
Where is Alphonso? Ascanio is not breathing!"

Giovanni ignored the pleas of the young man and continued trying to find the door. Soon the figure slumped and fell to the ground. Giovanni assumed he had been carrying baby Ascanio, and had just collapsed on top of the toddler.

‘Well the baby is as good as dead anyway,’ he thought, deciding not to help, ‘it can’t have survived this much smoke in the atmosphere.’

“What’s happening?” he heard a high pitch voice crying out. It was Alphonso. The child began to cough, “what’s happening? Ursula? Ursula what is happening?”

Giovanni ignored his little nephew, he had finally found the front door, and almost weeping with relief, pulled it open. There was a huge explosion as the oxygen from outside connected to the flames that were in the kitchen. Giovanni screamed, his whole body burning violently.

The entire foyer was now in flames and they were climbing the stairs rapidly, surely readying to murder any Sforza’s hiding up there.

Giovanni rolled around on the ground, trying to stop the flames. The pain was unbearable. He began to feel himself passing out and as darkness slowly came over to him, the pain began to mercifully leave.

That was until a face suddenly appeared in front of his. It was a young boy. He was pretty, with brown hair in an old fashioned hair cut, like something from the seventies. The boy scowled at him. “You are not welcome in the house!” he spat.

Giovanni then felt himself being dragged across the floor and flung outside.

He lay out in the snow, shuddering. His whole body going into shock. As the world began to fade into darkness, he swore he heard the sound of two babies crying.

With his dying thoughts he wondered if they were boys…or girls…?
A balm for a previous loss

December 1963

A young Muslim boy ran through the dark, wet streets. A trail of blood was smeared down the side of his face; his head had been heavily injured. Whoever had shot at him had grazed his temple. He gasped out, feeling nauseas and dizzy but knowing that if he stopped he would be killed.

He heard the tyres of a car screeching in the background along with the hoots of drunken miscreants. They were going to kill him. They were going to kill him in cold blood and no one would care and they’d never go to prison because he was a ‘coloured boy’ and therefore less than any of them.

He dove to his left, running through a narrow side street and heading to the suburbs. Surely someone would take pity on him?

Present Day

Vanozza showered her son with kisses and affection. Her eyes were red with shed tears and her face puffy and pale.

Juan felt a grim slither of guilt in his stomach, but as he looked up at the daunting house, grey in the pale light of the morning, he felt as if leaving the house was the right thing to do. He still remembered the feeling of having something dead and cold crawling inside of him, infecting his soul and taking it over. He remembered being pulled about like a rag doll before being thrown into a world that wasn’t quite here but wasn’t quite in the other place; He never wanted to go back there. Even the ghosts, or visions, or whatever they were, had advised he leave, and who was he to ignore their advice? He glanced over at Cesare, who was scowling, the still-fresh scratches on his face not being enough to detract from what a handsome boy he was.

“I did that,” thought Juan, “If I stay here, me and Cesare, one will end up killing the other, I know it.” He offered Cesare a weak smile, which seemed to catch the other boy off-guard a little. Cesare, once recovered, did not return the smile but did nod his head solemnly. Juan almost laughed- his brother was so old in spirit.

He gave one big hug to his darling sister, who, now that Joffrey had died, was the family member he loved the most.

“I made you this,” she said, handing him an mp3, “it’s got some really great tracks on there to remind you of us.”

He pressed his lips to her head, “thank you. I’ll get better and come back home soon.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” she whispered, sending a furtive look to the family who were standing further back; Cesare watching his siblings and his parent talking together quietly. “You just want to leave here,” she continued. She pressed a kiss to his cheek, “I don’t blame you,” she muttered.

He held her wrist a bit too tightly. His breath was now short, the panic he always felt but kept restrained now beginning to bubbles up slightly, “come with me,” he said in a hurry, “find a way to leave. Come to Milan, to where I am. We’ll be safe there.”
She stepped back, “and leave Cesare?”

He scoffed, “do you really think he cannot handle himself? He *likes* it here Lu!”

“Mother and father then,” she shrugged, not bothering to argue with him.

Juan grimaced and released her hand. He said nothing but they both knew the answer; the Bogias were heavily focused on family loyalty, but in truth, the siblings’ real dedication was to themselves and at best to one another. Their love for their parents, whilst true, did not extend as far as most normal children; there was too much resentment and not enough respect.

“They chose to be here,” he muttered so quietly she barely heard him. He held up the mp3 and said loudly, “thank you, I shall listen to it tonight.”

Juan and Rodrigo climbed into the car. “I’ll be back by tonight,” Rodrigo informed his family whilst leaning out the window, he then looked at Vanozza, “lock up the house this evening, make sure everything is completely secure.”

Vanozza nodded, hugging herself tightly, “of course. Goodbye, goodbye Juan.”

“Bye mom, I’ll give you a text as soon as I get there.”

The family car pulled out of the drive-way, Juan waving in the back looking almost surprised at how sad he felt leaving his family. Turning back, he watched them get smaller before the car turned the corner and they headed into the main road. Would they survive the house? He almost felt guilty leaving them behind, but it wasn’t as if he could tell them the truth.

Lucrezia waved half-heartedly, before glancing up at the house. She could see Djem and Paolo inside on her bedroom floor, looking down at her. She smirked and made her way into the house.

Not noticing her departure, Cesare stood beside his mother. Both of them were wearing black, both had their arms crossed, and both looked pensive and not a little angry.

Cesare’s dark eyes darted to his mother briefly. “How are you mother?”

“Furious.” She looked at him, “I am angry at you too. You lied. You would never take drugs. We can barely convince you to take the odd bit of penicillin, never mind something illegal. You and Juan didn’t even bother telling us what supposed substance you took; your lie was lazy.”

He shrugged, uncaring, before changing the topic, “the lady next door, Ms Sforza, she ‘demanded’ your presence today.”

“All my children are being taken away from me,” she muttered, apparently not listening to what he had said, “your father makes all the decisions, no matter how they affect me, or you.”

Cesare sighed in frustration, “then make your own damn decisions! No one is stopping you.” To soften the blow of such harsh language he kissed her roughly on the forehead before heading inside himself. “I have homework to do,” he called, “go be with your friend. Complain about dad and come back when you feel better.”

Vanozza stood still for a few seconds after Cesare had closed the front door before marching next door. She then marched straight next door. She would make her own decisions, everyone else be damned.

*December 1963*
Paolo clenched his hands together and gritted his teeth. He could hear his Pa beating on his Ma downstairs. He couldn’t stand it. Everything in his being was screaming at him to get his ass down there and defend her. But he couldn’t.

In the past Paolo had gotten involved, and every time it wielded the same results. His Pa would beat him into a paste, and his Ma would forgive Pa but she would, annoyingly, be angry with him for challenging his father. He had learned that constantly diving in to save her didn’t solve anything. He had begged her to go find help, to go to a women’s haven, but she refused, saying that father loved them both.

Once upon a time that had been true. But then they had moved into this house and it had all gone wrong. Something in his father turned evil; something changed.

Paolo slid off his bed and looked at an old family portrait. It was him, his Pa and Ma, all standing outside of their old farmhouse. He had always thought his parents were happy, Ma seemed content and Pa just got on with things. But then Pa won the lottery, and decided for a complete change of pace. One minute they were humble, contented farmers. The next they were in a bustling Italian city, living in a swanky house and Paolo was going to the best school in the county.

The whole thing had been horrible. Paolo was often bullied for being ‘stupid’ and uneducated, Ma didn’t fit in with the other housewives and even worse, they had lost all their money and now Pa was nearly always drunk and angry.

A smash from downstairs and a short terrified scream from his mother broke his resolve and he threw open his door and ran downstairs.

“Leave her alone Pa!” he shouted furiously, “just stop already!”

Paolo’s mother was in the kitchen, sitting on the floor, one arm shielding her face, whilst his father leaned over her. He turned slowly and looked at his son with arid eyes and a wild expression.

“Who do you think you are,” he whispered menacingly, “telling me what to do?”

Paolo tensed, getting ready for his Pa to give him a real ass-whooping, when there was a frenzied knocking on the door.

There was a short tense moment before Pa decided to actually answer the door. Paolo scampered after him, wondering who would be knocking this time of night and who would be foolish enough to knock on their door. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew how dangerous Pa was- the police had been called on him many times and now everyone in the street avoided them.

Paolo looked up at the stained glass painting above their door, it was of a bag of money with coins spilling out of it. His stomach twisted, he hated that picture, it was as if it was mocking them and their hopeless situation.

Pa opened the door and saw a brown skinned boy standing in the pouring rain. Paolo didn’t need to see Pa’s face to know he was sneering; Pa wasn’t the most enlightened of men.

“What do you want Arab?” he asked disdainfully.

The boy was out of breath and clearly frightened. “I have been shot,” he said, his slight accent showing, “p-please help me. My family are rich they-”

Pa flew into a full rage, “oh so you’re family are rich are they? I’m a native Italian, a man born and bred here and yet I have nothing, but you, you, a filthy immigrant, you have a rich family. No
doubt you got it from ripping off hard working people like me! From taking our benefits! From
stealing our jobs! Filthy, black bastard!!”

He grabbed the boy and threw him on the foyer floor.

“I should finish off what they've started!” he threatened lowly. Paolo leapt over the boy, “stop it
pa!” he cried, “This isn’t you! Please, he’s just a boy! He’s just a boy!”

Pa roared with rage and began to punch both boys about the head. For Djem, who was already
injured by the bullet and a previous beating, his death was quick. One punch and suddenly he was
standing outside of his body and looking down at the sad sight of a father beating his own son to
death.

Paolo took a little longer. His final moments had no revelations or white light or flashing images of
a long life. There was only fear and regret before he found himself standing beside Djem.

Paolo’s mother stumbled out of the kitchen and found her son, his face smashed into being
unrecognisable, under her husband, and let out a terrible wail. This wail seemed to snap Pa out of it
because suddenly he looked down and saw his own bloodied fists and two dead, broken boys
beneath him.

He cried out and moved away from them quickly. He looked up at his wife, eyes red with
drunkenness and tears and cried out, “why didn’t you take them away from me? Why didn’t you
take Paolo and run? What have you made me do?!”

The spirit of Paolo watched is parents screaming in terror and anger at his death impassionately
before he turned to see Djem.

“Are we dead?”

“I think so,” said Djem before adding bitterly, “my brother will be happy about that…”

Paolo smiled softly, feeling as if he somehow had known Djem for a long time. “Well,” he said,
“how about I’ll be your brother from now on?”

The boys smiled at each other and then vanished…

Present Day

Vanozza sat at Catherina’s small but comfortable kitchen table. She had a large drink in her hands
which she sipped appreciatively.

“My ex-husband was much like yours,” Catherina was saying as she swooped about the kitchen
clearing away dishes, somehow managing to still look very majestic and graceful.

“How did you get passed it?”

“Did you notice the ‘ex’ part?”

Vanozza lowered her eyes. “I don’t want to divorce Rodrigo; he is the father of my children.”

“My children were better off without Ludovico hanging about like a bad scent. But it is different
for you I suppose.” She finally sat down at the kitchen table, directly opposite Vanozza, and took
out a cigarette. She offered one to Vanozza, who refused with a polite shake of the head.

Catherina shrugged and lit her own, “you need to show him you are your own person. He does
things to make his own life better, and he does that without asking permission or seeking your advice.” She took a deep drag and let out a few smoky halos from her thick, red lips, “you should do the same.”

“I cannot bring Juan back, he needs to get better.”

“Let’s be honest, you do not want Juan. You want to start again. You want a baby.”

Vanozza bit her lip, “is that wicked of me?”

“No, of course it isn’t. We both know what we are talking about here, and I know you want my permission, for me to tell you to do it, but I won’t because you do not need my permission.”

“No, but this isn’t the first time we’ve had this conversation, why are you so invested in me fostering a child again?”

“Because from the moment I met you I knew you were a woman whose primary goal in life was to love others. You have much affection to give and you should be free to give it. Your husband is a greedy man and wants to keep it all for himself, but he cannot and should not. At least your children allow you to share. Did you ever tell him that you signed up for being a foster parent?”

“No, but only because I never had time. It’s just been one thing after another since we moved in.”

Catherina stubbed out her cigarette whilst blowing out the last of her smoke, “well, that’s probably for the best.”

“Can we go back up there? I want another child. I want to help someone. A baby, really, like you say. Would you mind going with me? I can pay petrol money.”

Catherina smiled, “I don’t care about that, money is not an issue. But first, there is something you can do for me to help me out. Your husband is a psychologist? Well, I believe my eldest son may need some assistance.”

“Ah,” started Vanozza, “I’m afraid he isn’t a child psychologist; he only works with adults.”

“My son is sixteen, almost an adult,” Catherina shrugged, sitting back down and taking a nonchalant sip of her own mug of tea, “besides, none of the psychologists we’ve been to so far have been helpful. Rodrigo has that sort of roguish charm boys tend to gravitate too, I think he’d have better luck. I shall pay full price of course, if you make the exception.”

“I can’t speak on behalf of Rodrigo, but I cannot see how it would be a problem. He returns tonight. I’ll broach the subject with him tomorrow and I’ll let you know.”

Catherina nodded. “Thank you. Now, I can help you. The Foster system will take too long. I have a better plan. I have an acquaintance, a dear woman, who lives out in Forli. She has exactly what you need. Are you busy today? We can go right now.”

Vanozza frowned in determination, “I am free for whatever. Take me to your acquaintance.”

They went straight outside, neither bothering to inform their children as to where they were going. Catherina lent Vanozza a rain coat as Rome was once again drizzling and overcast, and the pair climbed into her little yellow fiat.

Catherina put on the radio and they drove in near silence for almost four hours. They finally hit Forli in the late afternoon. Rome had been wet and grey, but Forli was bright and warm in the
cheerful afternoon. It was as if they had escaped the oppressive atmosphere of the ancient city and found freedom in the lively city and commune of Forli. Vanozza took it as a good omen.

Just realising, she took out her phone and texted Cesare. She then put it away just as Catherina parked up. They were on the edges of the city, near the country.

“We have to walk from here,” Catherina said and they pair began to make their way slowly through the last remnants of the city, out into where it was a bit wilder. The land stretched out in large, overgrown fields, ending where a forest stood in the distance.

Before the forest stood a picturesque country house, reasonably large with a long fence indicating a large back garden. They followed a path of flattened dry grass to the home.

In the front of the house chickens pecked about, a few children scattered here and there occupied themselves with games or drawing or teasing the birds. None of the children looked the same; all varied in hair and skin colour, with ages and shapes.

“We’ve come to see Mama Corella,” Catherina informed a small dark-skinned boy with wide inky eyes and a cheerful smile.

He nodded and ran into the house, calling out the name joyously.

“Is she a foster carer, this Mama Corella?”

Catherina smiled enigmatically, “sort of.”

They walked through the garden and passed through the threshold of the front door into the house. It was small and chaotic, but homely and safe. The smell of bread baking wafted through the small corridors and rooms. Teenagers lounged on the stairs, watching the ladies with slight interest. Upstairs the cries of young children playing could be heard.

“Come,” Catherina led her to a room in the back, “she is always in the kitchen.”

They walked into a beautiful room, the backdoor to garden was open and the window was large and wide, sunlight blazed through them both, lighting up the room and its inhabitants. The young boy was standing there, smiling, next to a rotund woman whose rosy cheeks and thick forearms were covered in flour.

She looked up, her eyes small cheerful and brown. “Ah, are these the ladies you were telling me of Piero?”

The boy grinned and nodded, rendered silent from typical childish shyness.

“Well one is a good friend of mine and I’m sure the other one d will be, off you go, play football outside.”

The boy nodded and ran out, bustling passed the two women.

“Catherina how are you?” said the woman happily, still kneading her dough, “I would hug you but as always you are so glamourous and as always I am completely country.”

“No matter,” smiled Catherina, silkily making her way across the room and settling on a chair opposite the lady. Vanozza mimicked her.

“This is my friend and neighbour Vanozza Borgias Vanozza this is Mama Corella.”
“Borgia?” asked Mama Corella, “that doesn’t sound too Italian. French, maybe, Spanish?”

“Spanish,” smiled Vanozza, “We hail from Sicily but have lived in many cities throughout Spain. We travel a lot.”

“Always looking for a fresh start,” surmised Mama Corella wisely.

Vanozza smiled, feeling embarrassed, “y-yes. But trouble always comes for us. This was supposed to be it. We bought a house, changed countries…but it isn’t working. I lost my baby.” She paused, her voice breaking slightly and her eyes welling, “he was only seven years old. There was an accident, only shortly after we’d moved in. And just today, my second oldest is sent away to Milan. I just,” she rubbed her eyes, a small sob escaping, “I just keep losing children. Juan may return but Joffre…little Joffre will not.”

An arm wrapped itself around her shoulders. She looked up to see the homely and kind face of Mama Corella smiling down at her, her own eyes brimming with unshed tears. “I am sure your Joffre is in a better place now, happy and satisfied with an angel watching over him. But we have many children here who have no one. You take a child from me to help fill the empty whole in your heart. Joffre cannot be replaced, but that spare love you have can be used on another who needs it.”

“Yes,” said Vanozza, eyes wide and streaming with tears, “yes, I just want a baby to love. To start again, in a real way.”

Mama Corella turned away, “I have a baby,” she said, settling back in her place behind the busy table, patting the dough now. “He is a sad little thing, unwanted by many. He looks like you, he will fit in with the family; dark brown eyes and dark brown hair with tan skin. You can make-believe, claim him in every way. Would you like to meet him?”

“Yes,” sighed Vanozza, longing in her voice, “yes, please.”

“Sofia!” Called Mama Corella, and a young teenaged girl entered the room. She looked at the two visitors warily, eyeing Catherina and her fancy clothes a fraction longer than polite.

“Come, stop eye-ball ing the lovely Ms Sforza and put this bread in to bake.”

“Yes mama,” she said politely in a way that reminded Vanozza of Lucrezia.

“Come with me,” said Mama Corella, leading them upstairs, passed a myriad of children and adolescents, and into a small, well-lit room with amber walls and rough, wood flooring, and containing three cots. In each one lay a sleeping child; one a caramel coloured girl, in another a curly, blond-haired boy and in the last was a little tan brunet.

“He looks how Juan and Joffre did as babes,” Vanozza muttered, her heart pounding at the little man snuggled up in a red blanket.

“You may hold him,” said Catherina with a gentle voice, “hold him Vanozza.”

She did, stretching out her arms and gently cradling him. He barely stirred.

“His name is Giovanni,” said Mama Corella, noting that Catherina’s lip curled but said nothing.

“Giovanni,” repeated Vanozza lovingly as she rocked gently, “little Gio, how lovely.”

“There is a price,” stated Mama Corella, her voice flat and not holding any of the joviality of
Vanozza looked up, “oh I have fostered before. I know how it works. But I’d like to adopt him, to be honest. I can start getting the paperwork ready immediately.”

“No, none of that is necessary. You may take home little Gio today.”

“What?” Vanozza frowned.

“I told you,” Catherina smiled and chuckled slightly, “Mama Corella is a friend. It’ll all be fine.”

“You can take the little one, but,” Mama Corella stepped closer, “you will also need to take his brother.”

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Lucrezia walked calmly into the bathroom on her floor. It was an ugly place, whoever had lived in the house before the Borgias had been very stylish, but evidently they hadn’t gotten round to re-designing the bathrooms. The walls and floor were covered in very old-fashioned black and white tiles. There was a grimy shower curtain hung on a rusty railing. The bath had bronze feet and taps and looked as if it were made in the Victorian period. The window, small, rectangular and patterned, always had to be left open because the bathroom steamed up so easily. The toilet was tall, cold and had a long chain which you had to pull to flush it.

Calmly, Lucrezia raised the toilet seat before being violently sick. Her body shook with the force of the expulsions, a cold sweat breaking out on her forehead. After a few dry retches that hurt her throat, she sat back and stared for a while into the toilet before realising how gross that was and flushing it. She then rinsed out her mouth and scrubbed her teeth.

“I should probably shower again,” she decided, “just in case. The smell of sick might be on me and I don’t need mom or Cesare asking any more questions.”

The water was slightly too hot, but she never bothered changing it. Instead she sat down in the tub, her knees pulled up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them. There was always a chance another ghost was watching her...or the same guy as before. She knew that Djem and Paolo said they would protect her, but she wasn’t sure if she could rely on two boy ghosts.

After about half an hour, she dragged herself out of the shower and, rubbing a rough towel about her body, padded back into her own room.

On her bed she saw a book waiting for her. Frowning slightly, she went towards it and picked it up. It was covered in what looked like brown leather. The paper was thick, yellowed with age and smelt musty. Opening up the front cover she saw two names written inside it:

Francesca Calderon 1926

Sancia Sforza 1994

She focused on the name of the last owner. Sforza? Wasn’t that the family name of their neighbours? She put the book down and re-dressed quickly, picking out a dark pair of jeans and a thick jumper without even thinking about it. Lucrezia then put on her i-pod, skipping past all the musicians Cesare had recommended and going for some soft Blues, before sitting back on her bed and taking a pen off her bed-stand. She then wrote her own name and the year in her neatest handwriting.
Opening the book with a nervous beat of the heart, Lucrezia began to read.

There was a knock on the door. "Lu," called Cesare, "mom says she’ll be gone most of the day but back tonight. Do you want me to make you something to eat?"

"No thanks," she called, not really paying attention.

Cesare walked away slowly, feeling like she was locking him out. He didn’t know what had happened the night before, but it hurt that she wasn’t confiding in him.

He popped into the bathroom and checked his face. His skin was still pretty raw from the scratches. He wondered if he’d ever see Joffre again? Had the battle really hurt him? Was it even possible for a ghost to hurt?

There was a knocking on the door, so he ran down to answer it. It was Carlo and Vitelli, both standing in their uniforms and looking pensive. Vitelli scowled, "shit man, what happened to your face?"

"Nothing…I just…it’s nothing. Come in. Why aren’t you guys at school?"

"We decided to skip, why aren’t you at school?"

Cesare gestured to his face, "I was hurt yesterday evening. I’m not up for school."

"Where’s your sister and brother?"

Cesare walked them into the kitchen, noticing how awed the boys looked by the grand foyer. The kitchen, being much more modern and reasonable sized, settled them down. They all sat at the table and Cesare offered them drinks before answering Vitelli.

"My brother has gone back to Spain for a while, my sister is upstairs. She isn’t too well either."

"Ok," said Carlo, not understanding why Cesare was being so evasive. "There’s a reason why we’re here."

"It’s about Collona, what did you do to him?" Vitelli interrupted, sounding very impressed.

Cesare smirked, "Is he in school? What has he said?"

"Nothing," emphasised Carlo, he seemed concerned about the situation rather than spitefully joyous like Vitelli, "he’s hair has turned white Cesare! Everyone is terrified of you now. When we told them that you lived here, it got even worse. Everyone is scared."

"We haven’t been beaten up all day," cheered Vitelli, "they haven’t even looked at us the wrong way! Being pals with you is the best thing that’s ever happened to us. Whatever you did to Collona, he deserved it!"

Cesare leaned forwards and said for Carlo’s benefit, "Everything I did I did to protect my family. Collona came here, threatening my sister and my injured brother again. I took offence and dealt with him appropriately. You both would have done the same?"

Vitelli nodded so quickly his head could have fallen off, whereas Carlo seemed to regretfully agree, "I suppose, if someone was threatening my girlfriend…but what did you actually do to him? He won’t talk about it. There’s talk of him going to a Psychiatric Hospital for a while."

"I did nothing he didn’t deserve. Anyone comes to you and asks you about what happened, that’s
what you say; ‘he got what he deserved.’ You say nothing else. Nothing about my family, nothing about me. Just that. If someone gets too pushy and doesn’t get the hint, tell them to speak to me.”

Cesare leaned back in his chair and took another deep gulp of his drink, “you got that?”

Both boys nodded seriously.

“Ok good. What’s all this about them being scared of the house? What have you been told?”

“This place has a reputation Chez,” explained Carlo, “A lot of people died here, including Burckhardt, the Founder of our School.”

“How?” Frowned Cesare, “How did he die?”

“Johannes Burckhardt used to live here with his brother.”

“They were both really smart,” said Vitelli, “like geniuses. But the older one was smarter than the younger. Johannes was the younger one. Anyway, one day Johannes hands in a paper at the University of Rome, who flip their shit at how awesome it is. He gets a swanky award and a load of money and attention. The school was being made at the time. It was for all the rich folk in the suburbs as this part of the city was ‘up and coming’ back then. They named the school after him.”

Vitelli grinned like a shark, “but one day things go wrong. It gets out that actually it was the older brother, Niccolai, who wrote the paper. His brother either stole it or did not know that his brother handed it in on his behalf. Whatever the case, Johannes was still the idiot of the pair. Johannes went crazy. No one really know what went down, but no one saw the men for like a week. So, eventually, neighbours called for the police. The police opened the door; apparently there’s flies everywhere and it reeks, so they already knew something bad had gone down. They found Niccolai, who had been hacked to death by an axe, in one of the bedrooms. Johannes had chopped him up into little pieces. Blood was everywhere.”

“What happened to Johannes?” asked Cesare.

Vitelli leaned in, “he was found ripped apart. No one knows how it could have happened. His limbs had been torn off and thrown around and he had these big scratches down…down…his…erm…face…” Vitelli stared at Cesare’s injuries, his statement trailing off awkwardly as he began to pale.

Cesare smirked, “so that’s the end of that story. Is that all? Two weird deaths?”

Carlo shook his head, “no, loads of people have died here. There was a big fire in the nineties that killed off all these kids, there were the last owners, two gays, who got killed under weird circumstances and then there were even some kids who died here and they didn’t even live here, they were just playing in the garden. The police always find an excuse, usually that it was an accident, or with the gays that it was a murder-suicide, but no one locally really believes that.”

“What do locals believe?”

Carlo shrugged, looking shy suddenly, “it’s stupid…”

“Try me.”

“They say it’s witches,” answered Vitelli, as Carlo looked up cautiously to gauge Cesare’s reaction, “they say it all started with some witchcraft by the servants back in the day.”

Cesare sneered, “witches? What, like, they cursed the place? Or that they live here?”
“Both,” said Carlo, “some say one thing, some say another. Stories of witches and Satanism and spirits have been flying around this house for years. Everyone in the neighbourhood is scared of this place, it’s why it sells so cheaply.” He spluttered suddenly, “n-not that I am calling your family cheap!”

“It’s fine,” stated Cesare, uncaring, “I’m not so sensitive. Witches. Huh, I would not have predicted that. Well, I do not believe I have seen any witches around here.”

“How would you know?”

The boys all turned to see Lucrezia standing in the doorway. Her face was ale and pulled back, her clothes all-black, like Cesare. She entered the kitchen and sat down beside her brother, facing the two visitors.

“How would you know what a witch looked like?”

“You mean they don’t wear black robes and have hooked noses and broomsticks?” Cesare smirked, “I’m sure I don’t know then. Do you want something to eat or drink?”

“No,” she answered, holding back a sigh. She looked at Vitelli and Carlo, “they’re gossiping about us at school?”

“They’re scared of you,” said Carlo.

“Which is a good thing,” continued Vitelli.

“Is this because of what happened to Collona?” she asked, frowning slightly. Cesare stood up and went to get some water.

She turned and stared at him, “I knew something had happened to him in that damned basement.” She turned back to the boys, “what’s happened to him? What is he saying?”

“Nothing, he’s just in shock,” soothed Carlo, “you should rest, you look tired. You and your brother both seem sore. Just both rest. We bought your homework too Lucrezia.”

Vitelli looked through his bag before pulling out some worksheets for Lucrezia.

Cesare smiled, appreciating the gesture, “thanks guys.”

“Happy to help,” smiled Vitelli, determined to stay on Cesare’s good side. “When you come to school join us in the Sword Fighting Club.”

“I’ll think about it,” he answered, walking over to the table and handing everyone a drink, the boys drinking dutifully and Lucrezia rising out of her seat and taking it with her as she left the room.

“But,” Cesare continued, aware of her leaving but not saying anything, “I really would like to join the school council. I’m thinking of running for president.”

The boys looked at each other. “That would,” Said Carlo slowly, “upset the established order.”

“Good,” smirked Cesare, “a toast, to upsetting the established order.”

They raised their glasses and toasted dutifully.

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After leaving the boys to their posturing downstairs, Lucrezia returned to her room, closing the door behind her, and sat on her bed.

She had overheard their conversation regarding witches and now was looking at the leather bound book her ghosts had bequeathed to her with interest.

“Have you read it yet?”

She turned and saw Paolo sitting behind her on the bed. His eyes were warm and his smile so sweet she found herself returning it. He reminded her of a more innocent Cesare, if such a thing were possible, and she found herself wanting to kiss him.

She turned away and looked back at her book, ‘I’ve skimmed through. I skipped most of Francesca’s parts and went straight to the bits written by Sancia Sforza.”

He crawled across the bed to sit beside her and, drawing his knees up, hugged his legs. “Why did you do that?” he asked, a smile still playing on his lips, “that’s not how you read books, you’re supposed to start from the beginning.”

She laughed at his child-likeness.

“I know that!” she cried, “it’s just that her name caught my eye. Sforza is the family name of our neighbours. Are they related?”

Paolo shrugged, looking a little confused.

According to her book, this was something Sancia had noticed a lot with Djem and Paolo. They were focused on their tasks of pleasing her (first Sancia and now, it seemed, Lucrezia) but other than that they seemed almost vacant; shadows of their past, living selves.

It was sad.

“Sweet boy,” she brushed his fringe with her fingers. She could feel each soft strand of hair as if he were still alive, but she knew that it wasn’t really there, not in the way she was. “How did you die?” she whispered.

“I was killed by my Papa.” Paolo answered mechanically, “He was drunk and trying to kill Djem. I died trying to save him.”

“You’re very brave!” she looked at him with new eyes. He wasn’t unlike Cesare really, there was some steel in those pretty brown eyes. In the moment she decided to do something she never would have been forward enough to do before; she leaned forward and kissed Paolo’s lips gently. As she pulled away, she saw him watching her carefully. Djem had now appeared by his side and also was looking with interest.

“Were you two friends whilst alive?”

“No,” answered Djem, “we didn’t know each other. We met moments before our deaths. I was dying anyway because I’d been shot. His father finished me off.”

The boys looked at each other and smiled fondly, “we decided to be brothers afterwards. We were bought together.”

“Why were you shot?”
Djem shrugged, “some local Christians did not like my skin colour or that I was Muslim.”

Lucrezia shook her head; despite being a devout Catholic, she could not understand how people could hate others over race or religion. She couldn’t imagine hating anyone over something so stupid.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” she responded at last, unconsciously clutching at the simple gold crucifix that hung about her neck, “please don’t think we’re all like that.”

Djem laughed softly, “of course I don’t! In truth, I was thinking of maybe becoming a Christian myself when I was alive. I like your religion very much. The actions of those men spoiled it a little, but then again my brother was a bad man also and he was Muslim like me. There are bad people everywhere.” He looked at Paolo and smiled, putting his arm around Paolo’s shoulders, “besides, my very best friend here is both white and Christian! I could never hate either of you.”

Lucrezia watched their happy faces with interest. It was strange to think two boys could die so young and so violently, and yet be so happy. “Are you not sad to be dead?”

“I’m happier now than I was when I was alive,” answered Djem, “my brother hated me. I had a horrible childhood.”

“I think I was loved,” mused Paolo, “before we moved here at least. Then I wasn’t anymore, though I don’t know why. But I don’t remember much before my death. It was all so long ago.”

Djem smiled sweetly at Lucrezia, “are you loved ‘Crezia?”

Lucrezia paused for a moment, “yes, I believe so. But I do not know how deep it goes. If I was to change, if I was to become more…more myself, would I still be as loved by my family?” she shrugged. She thought of Cesare and how he adored her sweetness and light; how would he feel about her if he realised that wasn’t all she was? That she had the same sort of darkness he harboured? The same perversions? Would he resent her? Would he no longer lust after her, realising she was not the angel he made her out to be?

“Are your family very strict?” Paolo broke into her reverie.

“That’s the thing,” she answered, sitting between them and leaning back on her bed, “they’re not in the conventional sense. We can be very accepting of different cultures and religions, even more than most people. But then we have a different moral code of what we think is important. Anyone who is against the family, we will ruin them and we wouldn’t care. Or, at least, my father and brothers wouldn’t.”

“My brother was like that,” said Djem, “family was the most important thing in the world, followed by our culture and then by our religion. He saw me as a traitor.”

She looked at him, “what was it you did?”

He blushed and had the grace to look a little embarrassed when he answered, “Well, partially because he resented sharing the family fortune with a brother. But, as I got older, it became more about my reputation and the family’s reputation through me. I had a lot of girlfriends…usually more than one at a time. It wasn’t…seemly.”

She smirked wickedly, “you bad boy. I don’t judge you. My brothers, especially Juan, can be audacious when it comes to women. If you and Juan ever find a way to meet, I’m sure you’ll be good friends.”
“Would they ever see you as a traitor?” asked Paolo softly, “your family I mean. You seem to be loved to me. I’ve seen how protective your brother can be,” he glanced over to the where, on her desk, sat a glass of water.

She looked at her fingers, inspecting her nails, “he’s too protective sometimes, and I find that revealing. I don’t know if they’d ever see me as a traitor. I don’t think they could imagine me as one, so if I ever did do something they’d consider a betrayal...” she paused before starting again, “they have this version of me where I am just this kindly little blue-eyed girl. My brothers idolise me and my parents put me on this pedestal. But I’m not that girl. I don’t know how Cesare would react to finding out I’m no longer clean.”

“No longer ‘clean’?”

“Well, no longer a virgin.”

Djem sat up and looked down at her with large brown eyes, “you being raped wasn’t your fault. It doesn’t make you unclean.”

“I know it wasn’t. It was that psycho’s fault. But it doesn’t change the fact that it has ruined me.”

“I don’t think you’re ruined,” Djem argued, “I think you are a strong human being. I think your brother would understand that.”

“Perhaps. Maybe I will tell him one day, but for now I just want to keep it to myself. I don’t want to discuss it; I don’t want to think about it.”

Djem lifted her hand and kissed it lightly as Paolo lay back down and kissed her on the cheek.

“We will respect that,” said Paolo, “but know we’re always here for you.”

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As Vanozza packed up the little Fiat, she heard Mama Corella and Catherina conversing quietly behind her.

“And how is Sancia?” Mama Corella was saying, “oh, how beautiful she was!”

“And always will be!” laughed Catherina, “she’s fine and well. I don’t see her as often as I like, but it is what it is. She has a child now.”

Vanozza frowned, thinking back to an old conversation she and Catherina had had.

They’d been together in the park, only a couple of days after Joffre’s death. She’d been wet and filthy, embarrassed on seeing how glamorous Catherina had looked.

“For what it’s worth you are coping well, much better than I did.” Catherina had then graced her with a small, sad smile. “I understand your loss. My son and daughter were killed. They died in a fire. I…I know that you feel this is all your fault. I know because I did. I took all the blame for their deaths into myself.”

“I thought her daughter had died,” thought Vanozza to herself, wondering how many children Catherina had. Hadn’t Catherina originally said four? Vanozza had only ever seen one, the strange young Alfonso and if she was due to see her other son in order for Rodrigo to begin therapy with, then who was this daughter they were discussing? Had she missed something somewhere?
“A child!” Mama Corella was exclaiming, “How wonderful, hopefully a balm for her previous loss!”

“Yes, a mop haired boy with big brown eyes. She dotes upon him. I feel this has helped her enormously with her tragic past,” Catherina glanced over at Vanozza, “I must go, my friend and I must be back by the evening in order to feed our respective broods.”

The ladies kissed and parted ways.

On the journey home, Vanozza forgot all about asking questions regarding Catherina’s home-life, being far too absorbed in the precious bundle in her arms.
Benito opened the front door. Outside in the cold darkness of the night stood his cousins Antonello and little Gian in Antonello’s arms.

“What’s going on?” he cried, allowing them into the foyer.

“Mama sent us,” Antonello said, shivering from the cold, “papa is furious. It’s all going wrong.” Benito guided them into the living room. “We had to get the bus,” Antonello went on, his teeth chattering. Gian looked pale and his lips were almost blue. “We’ve been travelling for hours.”

In the living room, Sancia got to her feet, “my god what happened?” she cried. She took little Gian from her older cousin’s arms and sat him on her lap, wrapping him up with a throw from the sofa.

“Auntie and Uncle have had some sort of falling out and Anton and Gian got kicked out over it,” explained Benito, “I’m getting mom and dad.”

He left Antonello to sit by Sancia, who wrapped her arm around him. “My gosh, I can’t believe this has happened,” she sighed, “They never should have sent you here on your own. Gian is only three and you are only thirteen for goodness sake!”

“Thirteen isn’t that young,” Antonello griped slightly. He hated being patronised.

“It’s young enough.” She retorted, “I know you can be responsible but this isn’t fair. Poor Gian is freezing.”

Catherina entered at that moment. Ascanio, who was at that time a new-born, was in her arms and a small Alfonse hugged her leg. “Benito,” she ordered, “go get your cousins a hot drink each.” She sat on the settee. “I want you to know you can both stay as long as you need to.”

“Thanks Auntie,” said Antonello gratefully.

“But what caused the argument?” she asked, “what was so terrible you both ended up on the streets?”

“I can tell you what,” a belligerent Ludovico Sforza suddenly charged into the room. He pointed at the children, “those little bastards aren’t Sforza’s at all! My brother’s been made a cuckold. I want them out of my house!”

Catherina pulled her husband out of the living room and into the foyer. Benito scampered past them carrying a tray with hot chocolates on it.

“I am not throwing the children out into the streets.” She said frankly, as if talking to a stupid child. “They shall stay with us.”

“No way,” argued Ludovico, “we do not have the money to look after them! They’re not even family!”
“How do you know?”

“My brother called me about half hour ago. That bitch cheated on him. Those kids belong to some jerk called Galeazzo.”

“I’m sure there’s more to it than that. But even so, I will not see them on the streets.”

“But—”

“You have let me down in every way imaginable and it is I and I alone who is supporting this family. We will spend my money as I see fit. We are keeping the children!”

Ludovico seethed. He was a big, heavy set man with very black hair. In school he had been nicknamed ‘Il Moro.’ He’d always been an alpha male- head honcho and a tough guy. He and Catherina had met at a family get-together and their relationship was all but an arranged marriage. He’d always worn the trousers in their relationship, even though he knew she quietly resented it.

Yet, since they had moved into this house luck had not been with him. Money had drained away as his business had begun to fail. His wife, who’d always been a viper, was becoming increasingly cruel and demanding. The biggest change was in his children. Since coming to Rome they’d become increasingly insular, secretive and above all, bizarre. Alfonso was quite crazy and Ludovico was sure that at some point Benito was going to do something mad. Sancia was the most unaffected, but she was quiet and private, so he was never sure where he stood with her. It was as if the house was twisting them all into monsters.

He had heard his co-workers talking about the house and how it was cursed. He had thought the whole thing was nonsense, but as the months wore on, he found himself cursing the day they had moved to Rome. They should have stayed in Forli.

“Fine,” he spat, “but do not expect me to be accommodating to the little bastards! They don’t belong here.”

Present Day

Cesare waved goodbye to Carlo and Vitelli. He watched them for some time until they turned out of his garden and disappeared behind the brick wall. He wondered how much he could trust them. He supposed that they were his friends now, but he still felt disconnected from them, as he did with almost everyone he’d ever known. He still felt as though he had to use a degree of manipulation and fear to have them do what he wanted. That wasn’t friendship…was it?

He then looked about the garden, a few days ago it had seemed much brighter and peaceful, but now it had that dour look about it again. He frowned; it was strange how much the atmosphere seemed to shift about the garden.

At last he closed the front door and ran up the stairs to his room. He slammed Juan’s bedroom door shut, (noting that it wasn’t given out a chill anymore and so assumed that the heating was working again,) and he resisted knocking on Lucrezia’s door. She had asked for privacy and peace and he intended to give it to her.

He put his radio on low and took the jar of mysterious red stuff he’d taken from the basement off his shelf. He stared at it. When he’d first seen it he thought it was blood, but it was too red and too gloopy. No, this was something else. Some sort of thick liquid.

After some thought he took the jar all the way back downstairs and grabbed a chocolate bar from the kitchen before entering the basement. He couldn’t see the Infantata anywhere, so presumed it
was sleeping. When he had played down here the previous day, he had noticed that there were many bodies of rats, mice, and other small rodents. All of them had been killed and mangled. Cesare rightly had guessed that the Infantata had been eating them.

He dipped the chocolate bar into the red liquid, then left it on the floor by the small rectangular basement window. He then hid behind one of the large bookshelves loaded with jars and crap, and waited.

After some time, a squirrel scurried through the window and into the basement. It sniffed at the chocolate bar before nibbling at it. The response was almost instantaneous. Cesare watched in slightly horrified fascination and the squirrel began to writhe in agony. Then blood spurted from the mouth and by what he could tell, its eyes either exploded or had bled out. Thankfully the poor creature seemed to be dead before its body had been so horribly damaged.

For Cesare, he now understood. He looked at the jar of liquid and wondered what sick, twisted individual could make such a thing and who they were going to use it on.

November 1994

It was early in the morning when the Sforza’s all woke up after hearing a mighty scream. Everyone ran out of their respective rooms to find Benito at the bottom of the stairs, on the foyer floor.

“What happened?” asked Ludovico.

“What do you mean what happened you fool!” shrieked Catherina as she ran down to her oldest son, “he obviously fell!”

“I know that!” argued Ludovico, arriving at his son’s side, “but how’d he fall down the damned stairs? He isn’t a klutz.”

“Mom, mom,” Benito was drenched in sweat and looked pale and frightened, “I saw a monster, I saw a monster! She tried to get me!”

Catherina hushed him before calling Sancia, who was watching with wide eyes, to call the hospital.

“Don’t worry my child, we’ll get you help.”

“What monster?” Ludovico interrupted, “what did it look like?”

Catherina pushed him away from Benito, and he cried out, “I told you there was something strange about the house. But you didn’t listen! Now our son is hurt.”

“It’s your fault!” she bellowed, “you messed up the finances and now we’re stuck here. I haven’t time for your crazy stories!” She turned her attention back to her son, “don’t worry darling, ignore father, he’s an idiot.”

The ambulance came quickly and took Benito away. Sancia, Antonello and Catherina went with him.

Ludovico was alone with baby Ascanio and little Gian. He went into the kitchen and poured himself a gin and tonic. It was far too early in the morning to be drinking, but it was his newest hobby and one he found that shielded him from his increasingly shitty life.

He glowered for a while. He hated how Catherina spoke to him now. It never used to be like this before- sure she had always been a firecracker, but now she had nothing but contempt for him. She
was his wife, she was supposed to support him in the bad times, not just the good. He would divorce her, but they were relying on her inheritance now. Without her he’d be on the streets.

He walked upstairs and into the pale green nursery. There his son sat in his cot. Ludovico couldn’t believe he had to look after two bastard children now as well as his own. For a moment, he wondered if his own children were actually those of another man. That would explain why Catherina had so much sympathy for Antonello and Gian. But as he watched his youngest son, he realised that there was no way his children belonged to anyone else. Sancia, Benito and Alfonso were all dark haired, tan and fearless. They were just like him.

He smiled at his small boy. Ascanio grinned in response, making his father chuckle. He picked up the baby and carried him downstairs into the living room. He then got out a tumbler and a bottle of whisky and put on the television. He didn’t like the house when it was silent.

Ludovico relaxed and found himself chatting to his son, who was cooing softly beside him and playing with the tassels on the cushions.

“You’re my favourite,” he said gruffly, taking down one shot and pouring another, “you can see Sancia turning into a little whore, always talking about boys and shit. And her mother encourages her. Then Benito is basically his mother. And Alphonso…Christ where did we go wrong with him?” He rubbed his baby’s head, “nope, it’s all about you kiddo. I got all my hopes pinned on you. I hope you stay true to the Sforza’s forever. Make your old man proud.”

He drank a bit more until he began to feel pleasantly buzzed. But then he got that prickling sensation one does when they are being watched. He turned around and saw little Gian standing in the doorway. The child jumped when he saw Ludovico had spotted him and tears welled up in his eyes.

“Don’t cry you little shit!” barked Ludovico and of course Gian began to do just that. It was a mistake of Catherina to leave any child alone with her husband, but Gian especially, for Ludovico bullied him at any opportunity and now the toddler was terrified of him.

“That’s it,” Ludovico, slightly inebriated, got to his feet unsteadily before going over to Gian and picking him up. “My god have you wet yourself?” he screamed at the baby, shaking him roughly, “you dirty little rat!

He stormed into the foyer and ripped open the basement door. “You stay down there!” He then threw the baby and slammed the door without looking. If he had not been drunk and had looked, he would have realised that he’d thrown a three-year-old down a short flight of hard, concrete stairs. The one mercy bestowed on the short and unhappy life of Gian was that his death was instantaneous.

Present Day

It was late in the afternoon now, the sun that deep gold before the sunset red begins to set in. Juan had left just an hour ago on his plane and now Rodrigo was heading back home. He’d enjoyed the day they’d spent together; Juan was his favourite child (though he’d never admit that to anyone). On their way to the airport Juan had been fidgeting and quiet. The further they moved away from Rome, the more he’d relaxed.

“It must be due to his injuries and Joffre’s death,” Rodrigo mused, “it makes sense that in a time of crisis, one would want to go back home.”

At the airport, they’d gotten lunch together and it felt like the old days. Juan had sat there, his one
injured leg up on a seat, laughing loudly and sharing crude stories with his father. It had earned them a glare and tut from an old lady walking past them, which made the both laugh even harder.

Rodrigo found himself chuckling to himself in the car just remembering that moment. His smile faded as he remembered waving goodbye to his son. He’d been pretty upset, blinking back a few tears. Juan just looked relieved. “He must really hate the house,” Rodrigo thought, “must be because of all the tragedy. What if he never wants to come back? Should I have let him go in the first place?”

Part of Rodrigo sincerely hoped that Juan would improve during his time in rehab; the boy was getting older and Rodrigo couldn’t keep protecting him from the bad decisions he kept making, but at the same time he really loved having one as fun as Juan about. Lucrezia was fun, but in a very lovely, sweet sort of way. Cesare was about as fun as a gorilla with a stick up its ass. No, for good, filthy fun, Juan was your man. Rodrigo was quite scared of losing him. Maybe that’s why Vanozza had been so upset when he’d told her the news, she’d always been more aware of consequences to actions than he.

He gripped the steering wheel, settling his thoughts. If Juan refused to come back home Rodrigo would either make him return or, if things continued to go south in Rome, then maybe they’d go to Madrid with Juan instead. That way, if Rodrigo truly failed in Italy and lost a lot of their money, he could use Juan and his addictions as a convenient excuse to return to Spain. It’d take away any of the shame associated with failure and poverty. Having a son who took drugs wasn’t embarrassing; most rich families had children in rehabs. It was quite cool in a way.

Also, it was actually a very good thing that Juan was going for the sake of the family. As mercenary as it might sound, it now meant that there was one less mouth to feed and one less Borgia to send to Burckhardt’s School. Sure, he had to pay Juan’s fees to get him into the clinic, but overall the pricing worked out better. They were now going to be a family of four which was much more nuclear and convenient. Maybe he could keep the whole economic crisis a secret from Vanozza for longer; if not indefinitely until the dry season blew over and he began to get clients again.

By the time Rodrigo entered the city of Rome, he was feeling pretty optimistic.

November 1994

Ludovico was passed out on the settee by the time Catherina came home. Benito had a leg in a cast and looked tired and ill.

"I'm going to bed," he'd murmured to his mother before hopping upstairs with the help of cousin Antonello. Catherina watched her son (her favourite, if she was being honest) and wondering where her once happy and vivacious boy had gone. He seemed so sullen and tired now. Luckily he and Antonello had become close, which was something.

Sancia was looking into the Living Room, "Mama," she called, "Dad's fast asleep again." She looked at her mother, "I think he's drunk."

Catherina ground her teeth together before ordering her oldest child to start boiling to kettle so they could warm milk for the babies.

Sancia obeyed. She was always very obedient towards her mother, yet seemed to go out of her way to displease her father. She couldn't help herself, Ludovico was a bog lummox in her opinion, whereas her mother was terrifying.
Catherina walked into the living room and saw little Ascanio sitting alone on the floor. He was covered in muck and by the smell of it needed his nappy changing badly. Alphonse ran up to him and began to play, giggling loudly.

"Where is Gian?" she wondered aloud. "Sancia!" she called out into the foyer, "is Gian in the kitchen?"

"No!" the teen called back. "Is he not with dad?"

Catherina marched up to Ludovico and gave him a wicked slap around the face. The man cried out, gripping his cheek immediately.

"You bitch!" he roared in pain and anger.

"Where is Gian!" she bellowed, her fear fuelling her fury, "where is he?! Tell me now!"

Ludovico flailed about in drunken, tired confusion, "what? The brat? I dunno…I dunno…"

She slapped him again and this time he looked more clear-eyed. He looked at her murderously, "if you slap me one more time…"

Catherina put her face very close to his and hissed viciously, "Where is Gian?"

"In…in the basement…" he muttered, "he was misbehaving."

"In the basement?" shrieked Sancia. Ludovico and Catherina turned to see her standing in the doorway, she'd dropped the warmed bottles of milk. "The basement- it's horrible and scary down there!" she cried out again in horror, before running out of the living room.

"What is wrong with you?" roared Catherina, turning her attentions back to her husband, "what sort of sicko does that to a toddler? How long has he been down there for? We've been gone for hours!"

"Moooom!" she heard Sancia cry, panic making her voice sound high and young, "moooom! Mom! Mom!

Catherina ran out into the foyer and saw Sancia looking down into the basement. Her hands were gripping the sides of her face, nails cutting into the flesh, and her eyes were wide and bulging. She was screaming out 'mom' again and again, not realising it.

Catherina pushed her away from the door. She then looked down to the terrible sight herself. There at the bottom of the stairs, lay the broken body of a toddler. Of little Gian.

Time froze for a second as the terrible truth failed to push through into her brain. It was only when she realised her daughter was throwing up beside her that she realised what was happening.

"What's all the screaming about?"

She turned to see her husband standing there, looking stupid. He must have read the situation and he began to stammer, "he-he was being naughty! I had to…"

"Get out," she said, "get out. GET OUT YOU MURDERING SCUM!"

"No please," he snivelled, "I can make it better!"

"You killed him you monster! I'll kill you if you do not leave now!"
Ludovico looked about wildly. His daughter was wailing loudly now, Ascanio was crying in the living room, and Benito and Antonello were at the top of the stairs, both looking shocked and pale.

Antonello was staring at Ludovico in the strangest fashion. Ludovico turned tail and ran out of the house as quickly as he could.

**Present Day**

Cesare lay on his bed. The Qemists boomed out of his speakers so loudly that he didn’t hear the knock on his door. It opened slowly and Lucrezia slunk into the room. She looked around. Unlike Juan, Cesare was fully unpacked. His room was very tidy, as it always was, with everything in its place. The bed lay in the middle of the room and he was draped on top of it, staring up at the ceiling. His top had ridden up, showing a slither of his belly. She looked at it, her eyes trailing down to where she could see his boxers just peeking above his black jeans.

She gulped, blinked, and looked away.

She stood awkwardly for a few seconds before walking over to his bed and laying down next to him, finally breaking him out of his day dreaming.

He turned and smiled at her, “hey.”

“Hey,” she looked at him. His eyes were so dark they were nearly as black as his hair, which were thick, dark curls framing his face. She put forward her hand and brushed away at his bangs the way she had with Paolo earlier.

As her hand passed across his face, her suddenly took hold of her wrist. There was a pause before, still looking at her, he pressed a kiss to the heel of her palm.

She took in a deep breath, feeling her body heating up.

He stretched their arms out, manoeuvring them so that their fingers interlaced. Then he bought their arms back down so that now they were lying face to face whilst holding hands.

He shuffled slightly, getting comfy, and this action somehow dispelled the taut tension that had just been between them.

“I’m sorry if I seemed rude to your friends earlier.”

He frowned, “you weren’t rude. You were perfectly polite as always.”

“I was grouchy. I’ve been in a bad mood recently.”

Cesare looked down for a moment before slowly gazing at her again, “do you…want to talk about it?”

Lucrezia stared at him trying to decide. She knew her brother loved her very much and likely would not have any disdain for her. But he had a certain image of her that she was convinced he would see as tarnished and, in a fit of blind rage, do something unforgivable.

She remembered how he’d hit Alphonso and how he’d locked Corella in the basement. She couldn’t trust his temper, especially in this house with all its monsters and ghosts.

“I’ll tell you one day,” she swore, “but not today.”

He sighed heavily, closing his eyes for a moment, “will you at least let me help you in some way?”
She wanted to say ‘nothing,’ but felt that was unfair. Cesare was already at sea with what was wrong with her, she didn’t want to add to his anxiety by not giving him a project.

“Honestly?”

He nodded.

“Keep making friends. I want to make my own set of friends in school and I want you to do the same. This house,” she looked around, taking in the high ceilings and dark shadows of the attic beams, “this house isn’t good. I know it doesn’t scare you how it does the rest of us, but that doesn’t change the facts that it’s dark and scary and making us even more insular. We need to get a break, from it and one another. It makes me happy to see you with friends Cesare. To see you making a positive connection to someone is so wonderful. You being happy and mentally healthy makes me feel the same way.”

“Really?” he asked, “this isn’t just your way of telling me to look after myself and forget about you?”

“No,” she answered firmly, “I never want you to forget about me.” She smiled smugly and, heart beating fast at her daring, said in a teasing manner, “I love being the centre of your universe.”

She swore he was going to lean down and kiss her, properly kiss her, which was far too dangerous. So, Lucrezia sat up suddenly, ignoring the slight dizziness it caused her.

“Where do you think mama has been all day?” she asked.

“I do not know.” He got off the bed and sat over by his desk, opening his laptop and starting his homework. The tense atmosphere around them had snapped again, and they were back to being siblings. “The lady next door wanted to see her. Hopefully they’re just out shopping and acting like normal, angry, rich wives.”

Lucrezia watched him typing away at his work for a minute or so before asking, “do you believe that’s what they are doing?”

“No.”

“Do you trust her?”

Cesare stopped typing and looked at his sister, “what do you mean; trust who?”

“Do you trust the neighbour, Ms Sforza?” Lucrezia just wanted a straight answer; Cesare, like their father, was very good at evading and it irritated her.

“No.”

“Do you trust the neighbour, Ms Sforza?” Lucrezia just wanted a straight answer; Cesare, like their father, was very good at evading and it irritated her.

“Why?” he said at last, his eyes focused intently on her, “don’t you?”

Lucrezia worried her lip for a while, wondering on how much to tell Cesare before answering honestly, “I found a book earlier. It had the name Sancia Sforza written on it. Is it possible that Ms Sforza used to live here?”

Cesare thought about the news article he had read a couple of weeks ago. He remembered how it had said that the Sforzas had lived in this house and that four children had died in a fire lit by their uncle. Should he tell Lucrezia? He hadn’t verified all the facts, for fear of angering whatever had
spoken to him that day and shut down his computer, and so he didn’t know if that family of Sforzas were the same as Catherina and her family unit. Perhaps Sforza was a common family name in Italy. It would be irresponsible to put his outlandish theories on Lucrezia’s, potentially frightening her.

“It could be that the book just ended up here,” he said calmly, feeling like a liar, “but this ‘Sancia’ lives next door.”

“But that’s the thing,” babbled Lucrezia, sitting up now, “she says she has four children, but I’ve only ever seen the one. Only Alphonso has ever appeared. Don’t you think that’s strange?”

“I saw him this morning,” Cesare paused, deciding to tell Lucrezia about the strangeness of Alphonse in hopes she’d be distracted away from the Sforza Siblings, “he said that both his brother and his father were dead.”

“Really?” Her heart skipped a beat and she could feel tell-tale burning in her eyes, “How?”

Cesare could hear how her tone had changed, suddenly there was empathy in it. He got off the chair and sat beside her on the bed, wrapping his arm around her small frame. He knew they both were now thinking about Joffre.

“I don’t know if he was telling the truth. The story is pretty outlandish. Apparently, his dad was killed and fed to an animal, and his brother was killed by the police.”

Lucrezia stared for a few minutes whilst she processed what he had just said. “Well,” she began at last, “that certainly is…something. Did he say why those things happened?”

“Don’t know about the father, but the brother shot a bunch of kids at the school, our school.”

Cynicism filled her azure eyes, “that’s a lie. If something like that had happened everyone would be talking about it at school…though…”

“Though what?”

“What if it had happened a long time ago? The book with Sancia’s name on it is dated 1995.”

“That’s years ago, she’ll be an adult now.”

“So what if that’s the case with Alphonso’s brother? Maybe that all happened years ago, and that’s why it isn’t big news still.”

Cesare frowned. It didn’t sit right with him. He curled Lucrezia’s hand into his own and said slowly, “Ms Sforza doesn’t look old enough to have kids that age…”

Lucrezia laughed loudly then, and even though he knew it was at him, part of his heart felt a little set-free that she seemed genuinely happy in that moment.

“You really do have a crush on her, Mama was right!”

“I do not,” he felt himself going red. Lucrezia gave him an incredulous look, which just made him want to convince her all the more that he felt nothing for Catherina. “I don’t, I swear!”

She took his arm from off around her shoulders, “I don’t care Cesare. Like whomever you want. I’m your sister, not your girlfriend.”

That comment stabbed his heart a little, the part that had been free just seconds before, and so he
remained silent.

“So you saw Alphonso this morning?” she pulled her hair to one side and began to braid it, not looking at her brother, “are you going to be his friend also?”

“He’s a freak,” stated Cesare frankly, “But I owed him for punching him before. This morning I saw some kids giving him a hard time. They were all in our garden, for some reason, and they were pushing him around. I chased them away but I’m betting he’s the type to get bullied a lot.”

“So are we,” she said morosely. Cesare got up from his desk and, standing between her legs, kissed her head softly.

“Not anymore,” he spoke into her hair, nuzzling it affectionately. “I’m making sure of it. No one will dare hurt us again.”

She reached out and touched his hand gently. Hers was so small and fair compared to his. “You cannot promise that,” she said softly, “we can still get hurt. Anyone can. Look what has happened to us in this house so far.”

He gripped her shoulders and made her look at him. His eyes were dark and fierce, “well then I will just protect you, alright? I can promise that!”

Lucrezia observed him for a while before smiling in a coy, sly way he’d never seen before; it made her look older and more alluring. He blinked and softened his grip on her arms, not quite recognising the girl in front of him. It was both surprising, shocking and quite appealing in a new way. He could feel heat pooling down into his groin and the familiar sensation of himself hardening as he stared at his little sister.

“Well, maybe you don’t need to promise to protect me,” she purred, moving her upper torso closer to him, their faces inches apart, “I’m quite capable of looking after myself Cesare Borgia.”

They stared at each other for some time before the sound of a car pulling up broke them of their trance. The pair looked out of Cesare’s small window to see Catherina’s small, fancy car in the driveway.

Vanozza got out of the passenger side, holding what looked like a baby.

Lucrezia gaped, “what on Earth…?”

Vanozza walked to the door, but looked back at the car. Slowly, someone else came out of the backseat. There was a beep of the car horn and Catherina drove away.

On the driveway stood Vanozza with a baby, and a young boy. He looked reluctant to enter the house, and stood a distance from Vanozza as if even unwilling to get close to her. She seemed to say something, before heading inside.

Immediately, Lucrezia carefully stepped down from the bed and made her way downstairs. Cesare however stayed a moment longer in his room looking out of the window. The boy was scruffy and thin, and had dark ginger hair. He looked up at the house and for a split second, he and Cesare shared a glance.

But then it was gone as the boy slowly followed Vanozza into the Murder House.

Cesare looked to his bedroom door, left open from where Lucrezia had raced out. He sat on his bed, taking in deep breaths and willing his boner away and wondering when the hell his sister had
begun to become so sultry.

**November 1994**

The house was in chaos for a time. Ludovico had scarpered and the children were crying…all expect Antonello and Benito. Anton seemed to be in some sort of shock, and Benito, who was so reserved nowadays, simply held him close, pressing kisses on the top of his head now and then.

Somewhere, in the midst of the chaos, the body of Gian disappeared.

By the time the police came, apart from the signs of violence and blood, Gian had literally vanished. No one understood what had happened and it made the trauma all the worse to bear.

Ludovico was never charged with murder, noting could prove he killed a child. If anything, Catherina came under suspicion when he claimed she had hurt the baby before leaving earlier that day, and was trying to blame him. He claimed she had stolen the body to hide her own guilt.

Nothing came of it and the police filed it as a cold case with no more leads.

For a time, darkness came over the Sforza household and each individual fell further into their own hell and insanities…

**Present Day**

Downstairs, Lucrezia cautiously entered the Drawing Room which had been converted to the new, make-shift living room. Vanozza was cooing over a small boy and looking better than she had in weeks.

“Mama, what’s going on?”

“I’ve decided we should start fostering again. I’ve always loved it.” She turned and gave Lucrezia a tight smile, “I thought that perhaps we shouldn’t get another teenage girl, but a baby boy instead!”

“They let you just take him, just like that?” Lucrezia couldn’t believe it, the Borgia family had fostered many different kids for years, but it was never this easy, especially considering that they had only just moved to Italy. Potential foster parents needed to have their homes had to be checked and the family evaluated and eons of paperwork to be done just to get your name on the list for being a foster parent.

“They were desperate,” answered Vanozza, “this little one has had a hard time being placed.”

“What about ‘the big one’?” Lucrezia continued, wondering why her mother hadn’t referenced the skinny teen in the foyer.

“He was part of the package,” answered Vanozza coolly, “to get this little angel I had to take on his brother as well. I don’t mind, we’ve fostered lots of teenagers before.”

Lucrezia frowned, feeling uncomfortable with the way her mother was behaving. Usually Vanozza was a loving person, so to hear her talk of another human being as if they were part of a Buy One Get One Free Deal was disturbing.

Cesare slowly walked down the stairs. He could see that the front door was still open. The smell of damp autumn rain wafted through the foyer.
The strange red-head stood in the hallway, looking small and out of place.

Cesare stood on the stairs, looking down at the boy. He was aware of the disparity between them; Cesare was handsome, well-fed and in fine clothing, the boy was plain, under-weight and scruffy.

However, the pale eyes of the boy took in Cesare completely unawed and unafraid. Cesare frowned, unused to such a reaction and barked out, “who are you?”

The boy only blinked, slowly and uncaringly. He still wasn’t intimidated, even when Cesare continued down the stairs.

“Do you not speak Italian?” he asked roughly, “why are you here and who are you? Answer me.”

Vanozza stepped outside the living room having heard her oldest bellowing. “Cesare,” she chastised, “this is the newest member of our household. He is called Micheletto and we’re fostering him and his brother.” She smiled and bought out the baby, showing him to Cesare, “isn’t he beautiful!” she gushed, “his parents are gone, poor thing, I’m already going to see if we can adopt!” she laughed slightly and walked back into the living room.

“Adopt?” he asked his mother.

“You told me to make my own damned decisions,” she said, back in the living room and calling out now, “I just took your advice!”

Cesare stared for a while before turning back to the boy. He felt a bit like a jerk now, but was also confused.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I wouldn’t have been so rough had I known you were our new foster brother. I had no idea we were fostering anyone.” He walked behind the boy and shut the front door. “Do you want something to eat or drink?” he asked, keen to make amends.

The red-haired boy shook his head. Cesare looked down and saw that the kid was just carrying a dirty, khaki coloured back-pack. It didn’t even look full.

“Are all your belongings in that one bag?”

A nod.

“Ok, well I’ll take you upstairs and you can pack. You can have your own room here as my brother, Juan, has left the country and won’t be back for a while. Are you staying a long time with us, or is this short term?”

The boy shrugged, his head hanging low. Cesare observed him carefully; his clothes were dirty and his hair greasy. He looked neglected and slightly ill.

“Well, I guess it’ll probably be long term unless you have some other family who can take you in.” Cesare continued painstakingly, “If Juan comes back we’ll get you somewhere else to sleep, so don’t worry. Worst case scenario I guess you’ll share with me.” A pause, “I’ll be honest I don’t like sharing Micheletto, but I do like my peace and quiet so if you promise to stop being such a chatter-box then we’ll get along just great, ok?”

Cesare got no response at all this time, not even a shrug, but he didn’t take it personally. Some foster kids were pretty emotionally scarred and meeting one who didn’t like to speak wasn’t anything new.
“We only just moved here,” Cesare went on as they went upstairs together, “we’re Spanish. We sometimes speak Spanish in the house but we’re trying to speak more Italian to help us acclimatise to the country, so don’t worry about not understanding us. Have you ever been to Spain?”

The boy shook his head as they reached the landing. They entered the red bedroom. Thankfully Juan had taken most of his stuff so now the room wasn’t filled with boxes. Unfortunately, it now looked bare and unattractive, the walls too dark and the high Victorian ceilings making it seem looming and oppressive. The bed was all made up and it looked like fresh sheets had been put down.

“Well, we’ll probably go on holiday there at some point,” Cesare said, “and you can come with us. You and your brother.

“We’ve been having some heating issues in here.” He said, checking the radiator, “It seems fine now but for a few days it was really cold. If it gets like that again, just ask us for help and we’ll get you a mini-heater or something. You can also re-decorate it if you like, we will help you. Don’t be afraid to ask.”

He looked at the boy as he said this, and realised as soon as the words left is mouth that this kid wasn’t afraid at all. He just didn’t want to speak.

Cesare brushed a hand through his hair, noting that the kid was watching is movements carefully.

“Look, Micheletto, my baby brother died just over a week ago and my younger brother just left for Madrid today. My mom is going crazy over your baby brother for that reason. But know that you are welcome here too, ok? To be honest, it’s normally kids and teens that we take in anyway; we’ve never had a baby before.”

Silence.

“Well I’ll let you unpack.”

As soon as Cesare left, Micheletto got up off the single bed and shut the door quietly. He then opened up his backpack and took out a glass jar with some money in it. He promptly stowed that away under his bed. He then took out an old personal CD player and a single CD. He put them in pride of place on the desk. Finally, he took out two shirts, a pair of old pants and two pairs of worn socks, all of which were put into a single drawer. These were all his belongings.

He then sat on his bed again. He felt little nervous. He hated leaving Giovanni on his own, but he knew the woman liked him a lot, so perhaps it was good to let the little one experience some love for a while. Everyone loved Giovanni at first. Giovanni would fit in here as well, for a time. Giovanni was adorable and this entire family were Hollywood attractive. It was ridiculous. The house was big and beautiful, making Micheletto feel out of place. He didn’t belong in a place like this with people like Cesare and his mother and the glimpse he got of the sister. They were too handsome, too rich, too perfect.

He sighed and lay down on the bed, trying to relax, at least they seemed nice. Micheletto knew that Mama Corella had to bribe potential foster parents into taking him; no one was allowed to take in the beautiful Giovanni unless they agreed to take him as well. It was one of the reasons why they didn’t get placed often; people wanted to foster or adopt a pliant and sweet baby, not a gawky teenager with a killer’s eyes.

December 1994

Up in the attic, Antonello put the finishing touches on his Dream Catcher.
"I don't think that will really keep the nightmares away," said Benito, who was sitting on the bed watching his cousin. Antonello, who had been at his desk, turned to Benito.

"No I suppose not," he responded, "but in some ways I don't want it to. It's only in my dreams that I get to see Gian.

"What does he look like in your dreams?"

"The same way he looked in life."

Benito got up and walked slowly to his bookshelf. He looked through until he found what he was searching for. He held up the book, it was Mary Shelly's Frankenstein.

"If only something like this could really happen."

"We both agreed it was fantasy," answered Antonello turning away.

"Then why do we keep the body," argued Benito. "Come on, we must try. We must."

Antonello sighed, "what if we create a monster?"

"Then we'll destroy it. But we'll know that at least we tried to bring Gian back. He was a baby. It's not right that he died."

Antonello nodded. The boys went over to a hidden door in the wall and pulled it open. Inside was a warm room, smaller than Benito's bedroom but still comfortable. In it lay a bundle wrapped in a white blanket.

"We leave it any longer and they'll be no body left to work with," said Antonello. They walked over to the bundle and unwrapped it, wrinkling their noses from its stench.

"We can replace the parts that are too rotted now," said Benito.

"He'll be more than human," smiled Antonello, looking down at the mangled corpse of his toddler brother, "we'll make him something better."

Present Day

"We shall need to buy him new things," Cesare heard his mother saying from the kitchen as he reached the bottom of the stairs, "poor thing has virtually nothing."

He walked into the kitchen and saw her and his sister. "You’d think he’d have more clothes," he added, making both women glance up at him, "his one bag wasn’t even full. How old is he anyway?"

"Mama Corella wasn’t sure," Vanozza responded slowly, making Cesare wonder who the hell Mama Corella was, "but I would say about six months."

"Six months? What are you-? No not the baby, the boy. Micheletto."

"Oh, um, I’m sure."

Vanozza lost interest, continuing on with making lunch and putting out the cutlery instead. Giovanni cried out in the living room, "I better go after him," she grinned, "can you two finish lunch?"
“Of course,” said Cesare noticing that she had only put enough places at the table for herself, her two children and the baby.

He looked at Lucrezia questioningly, she smiled sardonically and shrugged.

“Is it all about Joffre, do you think?” he whispered, setting a place for Micheletto.

Lucrezia nodded, “I feel sorry for the boy. We’ll have to make him welcome. I don’t even know his name. I barely got to say hello because I was too stunned about Mama even having two children suddenly.”

“I guess she and Ms Sforza really did go rich lady shopping, only buying things a bit more unusual than normal.”

Lucrezia snorted out a laugh and hit him gently on the arm, “don’t joke about these things. You spoke to the boy. What is he like?”

“Quiet. Reserved. He wouldn’t speak to me.” He went to the side and began to continue making the lunch Vanozza had started.

She gave him a reproachful look, “Well you did yell at him the moment you set eyes on him.”

“I had no idea who he was! He was just sort of lurking in the foyer. Anyway, he doesn’t seem afraid to me. I think he’s just quiet. And his name is Micheletto.”

“Micheletto? How pretty,” she said, helping her brother with the food preparations, “Giovanni and Micheletto. What lovely names. We sound like a proper Italian family with brothers named that.” Lucrezia glanced at the kitchen door and whispered, “Cesare, this is weird! How did mama get him do you think? You can’t just bring children home from a Children’s Home like you can get a pet from a shop.”

Cesare nodded, “it’s kind of sinister. It can’t be legal, whatever mother’s done. And I get the feeling father has no idea about this. Had he had known we would have been told.”

She nodded, “true, if nothing else papa is at least honest.”

December 1994

It was two weeks before Christmas. Catherina had gone out shopping with the babies and Sancia was out with some boy. Antonello and Benito were all alone.

As soon as the house went quiet they had grabbed their things, lifted up the small, wrapped-up remains of Gian and headed down into the basement.

They went down into the darkness and fumbled about a little until Benito lit a match and found a few candles. In the dim light they saw the dusty shelves with bottle of wine and various jars (some empty, some not- but none were labelled) and the vast array of spider webs and rat droppings.

"It's a big space down here," said Antonello in an almost whisper, "I'm surprised you haven't used it. Cleaned it up and renovated."

"Papa wanted to," answered Benito in his normal tone, "the wines are his. But he didn't like it down here. Said it was off. Before we realised he was going crazy and paranoid, he did say that there was an evil force down here."
"Evil force?" sneered Antonello, "how did you not pick up on his madness then and there? How did you not know he was an insane monster? A madman?"

Benito turned to him in the strange, amber light and shrugged. "There's a desk over there where we can set up. Let's get to work."

The boys put a Bunsen burner, the toddler's body, a coping saw, a tenon saw, two surgical knives, several wires, a pair of pliers, a TV satellite, a full (slightly soiled and bloodied) sack, a needle, a kettle, five large battery packs, surgical thread, several beakers and three test tubes on to the table. More candles were lit and placed strategically to give the most light.

The boys then put on butcher aprons, two medical masks and marigold gloves.

They looked at each other with dark, reflective and determined eyes. They were ready.

Present Day

The blood-red sun sank over the city skyline.

Rodrigo, standing outside his car was pulled up on the side of a large hill over-looking the city of Rome. The land reflected the night sky; pitch black covered in twinkling, sparkling lights. He smoked a cigarette leisurely. He’d sworn off them the same time Vanozza had, but secretly had begun smoking again. The stress of debt and his own failing business was weighing heavily on him, so he felt a little sin here and there was nothing to worry about. Before he’d relieve stress by having sex, but now he was being faithful to his wife and she hadn’t wanted anything since she had found him and his old foster daughter together. He had hoped that the new house would mean her forgiveness and that they could begin sleeping together again, but with the death of their son, Juan breaking his leg and then both boys over-dosing on whatever the hell they took the other night, she just wasn’t in the frame of mind. He understood that, but damn it was frustrating. Unlike her, the horror of losing a child had made him hornier, almost as if his body wanted to make a new child to make up for the loss of the other.

Of course, no one could replace little Joffre. Like Lucrezia, his youngest had been nothing but goodness wrapped up in a bundle of cuteness.

If Rodrigo had one major regret, it wasn’t even the house or the move to Italy, it was that he hadn’t spent much time with Joffre. Rodrigo likes babies and he liked adolescents. He wasn’t so good with kids. He had doted on Joffre as a babe but when he’d become a toddler and the tantrums had started, Rodrigo lost interest. He focused most of his energies on his boys, shaping them up in his own image. Both boys had much potential; Cesare in particular was becoming quite the force of nature. However, he had sort of forgotten about Joffre along the way. He knew that Vanozza couldn’t forgive herself that Joffre had been left alone in his room which had, admittedly, become the norm.

Rodrigo wished he had more memories of Joffre, like taking him swimming, or bowling, or helping him catch his first fish. Instead he barely knew anything about his youngest.

He took a deep inhale of smoke before releasing it slowly, dropping the butt to the floor and grounding it into the soft, still sun-warmed earth.

Still, he had two children to watch over now; Lucrezia and Cesare. This made their finances more manageable and he swore, swore, that he would be a much better father than he had been before. A better husband too. Vanozza clearly was in melt down, but he would support her until this grief-stricken madness left her.
He climbed back into the car, the chill of Autumnal Rome now affecting the atmosphere and continued on his journey home.

December 1994

The basement was full of noise.

There was the loud, insane screeching of the damned. The boys stood, covered in blood, stained instruments in both of their hands.

Benito was laughing loudly and crazily, "it's alive, it's alive, it's alive, it-!" He jabbered on like this, feverish and wide eyed.

Antonello stared at the thing bleeding and screaming hellishly on the table.

"What does it want?" he muttered quietly. He realised, on some level, that he would no longer get any sense out of Benito from this day forth, and so ran to the thing that was once his baby brother.

He lifted it up and held it close. "What is it you want? What-ahhhh!"

He screamed and blood sprayed from his neck dramatically. Benito fell back, still laughing despite all the blood and gore. Without thinking Antonello flung the creature down, which, with its new legs, sped across the floor with alarming speed and hid in the shadows.

"Did you see that?" shrieked Benito with ecstasy, "did you see that? Faster than any human!"

Antonello held his hand to his neck. The blood still streamed, dripping onto the floor. The thing in the shadows licked its lips, tasting the blood. It was no longer screaming.

Antonello realised what his baby brother needed.

The phone rang out.

The dark room was bare and dank. A television set played the news on mute, the serious face of the news reporter staring blankly out into the shadows of the room. Outside the neon light advertising the motel shone a pink garish light through the thin, brown curtains.

The mound on the bed moved and grumbled. A hairy hand reached out from under the bed cover and looked at the electric clock on the nightstand. It was one in the morning.

Ludovico swore and lifted himself up. The phone continued to ring.

Finally, feeling angry and tired, he swung his legs out of bed and walked over to the telephone. He picked it up and put it by his ear; he could hear heavy, frantic breathing.

“Hello?” he asked.

“Dad.”

“B-Benito? How did you-?”

“You need to come home dad,” hummed the boy on the other end. “You need to come hooome…”

Ludovico frowned. He’d always struggled with Benito who was so much like Catherina. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to listen to, what sounded like, the drunken pleas of his eldest son. As if hearing
his thoughts Benito said, “mom’s gone stir-crazy dad. I think baby Ascanio is in danger. You gotta come.”

Ludovico’s heart suddenly felt a fluttering, as if butterflies had flown across it, and he became very cold. Ascanio was by far his favourite son. How Benito got in contact with him was no longer a concern.

“I’m not far away,” he said, “I’ll be there soon. Keep Ascanio safe!”

“We’re hiding in the basement,” whispered Benito, “you…yooouuu should meet us down there.”

He then hung up.

Ludovico stared at the handset for a moment before stirring into action. He pulled on his jeans, grabbed his car keys, and raced out of the motel. He’d be damned if he let his crazy, bitch wife hurt his child!

It took him just under half an hour to return to the old house. He parked on the street and wandered into the garden and onto the porch. Before he even knocked, the door opened. Ludovico stepped inside and began to look around. The foyer was dark, except of a shred of light in the back by the stairs. Someone was in the basement and had the lights on.

He walked towards it slowly, not noticing the front door closing behind him. As he got to the basement door he heard a strange whining sound from down there, something like a cross between a baby’s cry and an animal growl.

Ludovico wasn’t a complete idiot, he was well aware that there was something very sinister going on. Unfortunately after living in the house for around half a year, his tolerance for sinister shenanigans was quite low. He wanted to make sure Ascanio was alright, he didn’t want his wife to win.

He opened the door. On each stair was a low burning candle. He stepped down slowly. The smell of candle wax was strong at first, but as he descended it became overcome by the smell of flesh and blood. The coppery scent made his nostrils tickle and itch. Despite the candlelight, the bottom of the stairs were too dark to see from above. The further down he descended the darker it became.

“Ascanio!” he called out, “Benito!”

He finally finished his descent and looked around. The corridor was dim, light was shining brighter further up. He edged his way through the labyrinth of the basement following the light until he got to the section where it grew wider, into the size of a small room. It was the place where, in the future, Cesare Borgia would find Juan Borgia whimpering and clawing at the concrete floor.

Ludovico gaped at the sight before him. “Mother of God!” he cried, making the sign of the cross. Ludovico had been raised Catholic, and though he had for many years considered himself a collapsed catholic, the old ways came back to him now in his distress.

Smeared on the floor was the sinister reddish-brown stain of recent blood. There were signs of something crawling about in it when it had been wet- but what he could not tell. Spatters of it were up across the wall and over the wooden shelves. It was hard to see in the low, flickering candlelight, but it also seemed than in the jars on the shelves were bits and pieces of bodies. He swore he saw an eye in one, but when he blinked, sweat pouring from his head and dripping into his arid eyes, he suddenly wasn’t so sure. Everything in the basement seemed hazy and unreal.
The most shocking thing was the one he tried to avoid, but his sight was pulled to it anyway. In the middle of the room was a table. The table had bloodied newspapers and various instruments on it. Everything was stained in blood. It looked like a sacrificial alter. The instruments all suggested that there had been a surgery which had gone horribly, darkly, wrong.

So frozen was he in his horror, he did not spot the two young men seemingly melting out of the darkness behind him. Antonello on one side, Benito on the other. There was a glint in the darkness—something shiny and sharp and evil clutched in the hand of an intense Antonello.

“Daddy!” screamed out Benito, leaping onto his father’s back.

“Get off me!” Ludovico reacted immediately, falling forwards and shaking. Benito hung on tight, sniggering into his father’s ear. Ludovico calmed down enough to stare at his son’s face. Benito’s eyes were wide, the white showing all around. His mouth was stretched into an unnatural, skull like grin. The wide eyes twisted round like that of a puppet to look Ludovico in the eye.

Ludovico’s heart exploded into a frantic pace. “G-get off Benito…Get off me!”

In his panic he had not noticed the other teen coming to his other side. Antonello watched passionlessly for a moment before holding up the thing in his hand. Ludovico caught the glint in the corner of his eye and turned just in time to the coping saw in Antonello’s hand. The boy put the serrated blade against Ludovico’s neck and cut into it before pulling it across just once. In one move he slashed the neck and cut into the jugular. Blood sprayed out into the basement.

Ludovico tried to scream but in the absence of a throat, instead gargled and fell to his knees. He could hear Benito laughing, not genuinely, but this sort of hysterical, maddening, humourless laughter. It was the sound of one person losing their mind. His hands automatically went to his neck to try and stem the blood loss. He could feel his own bloodied tendons, the warmth of his own life-force.

He could hear something shuffling about behind him before Antonello suddenly appeared, his hands behind his back.

“You evil son of a bitch,” he spat, “you killed my little brother…”

“But we bought him back,” cried Benito, dancing around in the background, “we bought him back!”

Antonello bought his hands around and showed the dying Ludovico the new and improved Gian. The older man was now unable to scream, so instead his eyes widened like a frightened horse and he fell back. Antonello stepped over Ludovico, one leg beside his chest, leaning down and letting Gian lap the blood from Ludovico’s neck.

“He needs blood to keep going,” he sneered, “and you will be his first feed!”

He then dropped the baby, which, with a predatory shriek, tore away at the remains of Ludovico. Blood sprayed onto the face of Antonello and poured onto the cold, basement, concrete. The body of Ludovico shook violently or a moment, before finally coming to a halt.
The Orsinis had been in the house for eight days. Paolo had a job lined up for him on the other side of the city but Roberto had nothing yet. Luckily, Paolo seemed happy for Roberto to spend some time re-decorating the house.

And boy did it need redecorating.

The house was last occupied sometime in the nineties. Apparently they’d been some sort of fire and the house was gutted before new walls and floors were put in. It was a good thing though, as it meant that Roberto could start from the beginning. From the age of sixteen Roberto had held secret dreams of one day being a self-employed designer and, now as an adult, wondered if he could use the house as a start to a portfolio. He’d grown up poor and had been unable to go to university, but he had a couple of qualifications from college.

The phone, newly installed, rang.

“Hello,” he said, grinning, “Orsini residence.”

“Roberto.”

His smile went as he recognised the voice on the other end of the line.

“Do you have any idea how our parents are faring right now?” the deep voice of a man continued.

“Leave me alone Abramo,” complained Roberto, hating how he sounded like a child, “none of you have spoken to me in…i-in years, and now you start calling me? How did you even get my number?”

“You know we’ve always loved you Roberto,” said his brother in a tired, chiding tone, “mother and father asked me to keep tabs on you. We had hoped you’d come to your senses once you realised you had lost us, but it seems your depravity has fallen further still.”

“Depravity!” repeated Roberto in disbelief, “I’m living with my fiancé, we’re planning our wedding. My life is finally starting to turn around!”

“You playing house with that sodomite doesn’t make it any less of a sin or any more real than a legitimate relationship between man and woman!” shouted his brother.

Roberto hung up. The phone began to ring again out he unplugged it from the socket.

The last time he’d heard from any family member was last Christmas when, after the meal and everyone was settled, he quietly had come out to immediate family members. Needless to say it’d been a disaster; the night ended in tears and hysteria and threats of violence. Roberto had to be picked up by Paolo who found him wandering along the main road in the middle of the night in appalling weather, crying and shivering.

The good thing that came out of it was that Paolo and Roberto had truly bonded that night. Paolo had taken an almost comatose Roberto, made him a hot drink and cuddled him until they began to kiss. They’d spent the night together making love in Paolo’s little apartment. The next day, with winter sun shining through the thing curtains, Paolo made declarations of love and how he was
going to take Roberto away from his life and to a better place. Roberto had thought it was just Talk at first; romantic whispers on a shared pillow. However, Paolo had impressed him by actually doing as he promised. They now were in Rome, a beautiful city full of promise, and were living in a large house under the same name. It was as if they were married already; the ceremony was just to make it official.

Roberto let out a sigh, his anxiety soothed. He looked around the large kitchen he was sitting in. It was bare and almost intimidating in how big it was, but it was his…no…even better than that: it was theirs.

Just then, the phone began to ring again.

He glared at it, wondering if it was his brother again. Finally, when it was clear the person on the other side wasn’t going to hang up, he answered it.

“Orsini residence,” he said cautiously.

There was a strange sort of crackling on the other end.

“Um, hello?” he asked, putting a finger in his ear and pressing the other one closer to the phone, “hello, I can’t…”

And then he realised the crackling wasn’t like that of bad-connection-static, but that of lames.


There was something else, something that caused Roberto to stop shouting. He frowned, straining his ear to hear what was being whispered amongst the flames…

‘It doesn’t… it doesn’t…end…”

The line went dead.

Immediately he redialled, but there was no sound.

And it was then that he remembered that he had unplugged the phone.

Roberto put the phone back on its hook and looked around the kitchen, the feeling of cold dread draining through his body.

PRESENT DAY

It was much later in the evening by the time Rodrigo parked the car in the front drive. He saw his eldest son, looking stern and thin lipped, marching out of the house, causing him to let out a small sigh; he loved Cesare but ye gods he was such a bore sometimes. Say what you want about Juan but at least he was fun.

He braced himself before getting out of his car. "What's the problem Cesare?” he asked in a bored tone. He wished he had stopped for another cigarette on the way home.

"Do you know what mama's done?” asked Cesare, his voice low.

"Of course not I’ve been out all day,” the pair began to walk back to the house. Rodrigo felt a little annoyed that Cesare hadn't asked about Juan but was instantly complaining about another family
member.

"She has adopted two more brothers for Lucrezia and me."

That stopped Rodrigo in his tracks. He whirled around to face his son. "She's what?"

Cesare crossed his arms. He didn’t smirk but he certainly had an air of satisfied smugness about him.

"A baby and boy about my age." He answered, “She came home this afternoon with them. We tried to call you but your phone was off. She says that they're our brothers now, apparently. Why did you not tell us? Or did you not know?"

Rodrigo looked about the garden desperately as if it held the answers. God, this could not be happening! Two kids? From where? And why? And how the hell could they afford not one, but two more mouths to feed?

Cesare grabbed his arm, pulling him from his frantic panic.

"She needs help." Cesare stated, frowning and looking a little wild, "She isn't coping with Joffre's death. Even with the two boys, you should hear how she speaks about them; she ignores the one and is obsesses with the other. It isn’t healthy father. She needs a doctor."

"I-I'll talk to her."

Rodrigo all but stumbled in the house, whilst Cesare stayed a while in the garden. The family were a mess. An absolute mess. This house was supposed to be their fresh start.

Cesare sighed, turning away from the house and looking out into the street. There he saw the bald preacher from the park. He was holding a placard which read, 'End of Days' which struck Cesare as a little uninspired. He stared at the preacher with dark eyes, as the strange man looked up at their house. Slowly, the man looked down until his eyes met Cesare’s.

They stared at each other with hard eyes.

Cesare was pretty much an expert at glaring intimidatingly and so stood, completely at ease, until the preacher blinked and looked away. He then carried on his slow pilgrimage down the street and out of sight.

Cesare looked up at the house, keen to see what the preacher had been staring at. It all looked normal until, there, on the second floor, in what would be the bathroom window, stood the pale face of Micheletto. Cesare put up his hand in a sort of wave when he noticed the pale eyed boy glancing down at him. Micheletto did not wave, but stepped away from the window, merging into the darkness.

Strange boy.

**October 2011**

Paolo sat on the grass in the park. He was still wearing his suit, Armani, though his tie had been pulled off and shoved hastily in his jacket pocket. His knees were drawn up and had his elbows resting upon them, his hands drawn together in a prayer stance as he stared into nothing.

Normally, when facing a problem, he would go home, talk to his boyfriend and together they’d work something out. However, this time it was different. It felt less like a problem and more like a
failure; he’d let himself and Roberto down and he didn’t have the guts to face it.

Paolo had sworn to Roberto that the move to the new City and into a grand house (far too big for
the pair of them) was the right move; Roberto had been cautious from the start. And now, just as
Roberto was buying into it, Paolo had discovered that the promised job for him had gone to
someone else. Luckily he wasn’t unemployed, the company had found him another role, but it was
for far less money than anticipated.

Paolo would have complained, but he didn’t really have the right. He was under qualified for the
role offered at the bank and he knew it had really been his dad rubbing shoulders with the Medici
grandfather at golfing that had gotten him the job offer to begin with. Of course, Roberto didn’t
know that. Paolo was more than happy for his boyfriend to see him as this powerful, intelligent
handsome hunk instead of a dopey rich kid who had had a run of good luck.

They could keep the house for at least the next six months, but it would be tight and would need
the help of a hefty over draft and a loan. After that, he wasn’t sure.

He sighed, resisting the urge to eat a massive, heavy dessert. Paolo used to eat a lot as a teenager,
back when he was insecure and anxious all the time, but as he’d grown older he’d began to work
out. Now he was six-foot-tall blond behemoth with hard abs and a washboard stomach. So, he got
up and made his way to the local gym instead. A couple of hours sweating it out there would surely
lift his spirits.

Present Day

Inside the house, Rodrigo barrelled into the kitchen, stopping dead as he saw Vanozza hugging a
baby and his daughter mixing up a bottle.

Lucrezia looked at her father with wide blue eyes. They shared a look before Vanozza commanded,
"Lucrezia, go to your room."

Lu, ever the obedient and most sensible child, immediately did as she was told, scuttling passed
Rodrigo without so much as raising her head.

"What have you done?" he gasped.

"Adopted a child in need," she answered, pulling the baby closer to her.

Rodrigo sat down at the table heavily. "I go away for a few hours and come back to a larger
family. Why didn't you discuss this with me before, and more importantly, how did you get these
children so quickly?"

"The Orphanage were desperate for them to find a home. He's had a hard time being placed.
They're over-ran. Mama Corella could see what a good mother I was. She had intuition."

He gaped at her, "have you any idea how shady and bizarre that sounds?" he paused then asked,
“you didn’t steal that baby did you? Please tell me the truth.”

“Of course not!” she scoffed, “Look, what would you have Rodrigo? Do you want to send him
back to the Orphanage, like a toy you do not want?"

Rodrigo sighed and put his head into his hands. Cesare was right, Vanozza clearly wasn’t in her
right mind. He put on his therapist hat and took in a deep breath.

"No. No of course not. They may stay." He wanted to ask her to go see a therapist, but with two
mouths to feed and their situation being so dire, he had no idea how he'd pay for it. Despite being a psychologist himself, he couldn't work on his own wife. That wouldn't be ethical or unbiased.

"Oh, they may stay, may they?" she parroted in a mocking, sneering tone, "of course my baby will stay! I shall raise him with love and care."

She kissed the baby on the head.

"What is his name?"

"Giovanni."

"A very Italian name"

"Yes. Suitable though, don't you think? An Italian in our family, now we're here?"

"It is. What about the other one?"

"What other one?"

Rodrigo was quiet for a moment again, remembering what Cesare had said about her being disinterested in the other child. If that was the case, why did she take on both of them? "I was led to believe we had taken in two foster children," he said at last, "a baby and one around Cesare’s age."

"Ah yes," she began fussing with Giovanni, wrapping him up in his swaddle and brushing through his curly, auburn locks. "Another boy, part of the deal."

Rodrigo raised his eyebrow at the term 'deal' but didn't challenge it. "And his name?"

Vanozza did not answer, but instead lifted baby Giovanni up and kissed him saying, "time for you to have a bath little one! Bath and then a nap I think."

She walked passed Rodrigo, never bothering to answer his question.

He sighed after she left, the pressure building up. He would have to find out where the children came from of course. He couldn't have a strange teenager and a random person’s baby in his home. It sounded like something illegal had happened. Maybe the children had been trafficked, stolen from another family or even another country to be illegally adopted out in this country? It wasn’t unheard of. He remembered back in the 1980s when a huge furore was going on over Irish born babies being sold illegally to childless American couples.

However, on the off-chance that Italy simply had some very lax laws on fostering and adopting, then how were they to afford all of this, especially if he wanted to keep Cesare and Lucrezia in Burckhardt's school of excellence? Would he have to pay for the new orphan boy to that school as well? It would be cruel to treat him differently. Plus, his family would not understand him refusing to offer this new child the same luxuries as their own; they had no idea the crippling debt they were in.

He could tell the truth, of course, but with the recent loss of Joffre and now with his wife's mental state in disrepair, how could he put this extra stress on her?

November 2011

The Orsinis had now lived in the house for six weeks. The shine of a new home had worn on them
both now. They hadn’t made love for a month, Paolo often being too tired after work and the gym. Roberto kept having…experiences. Nothing to make him too suspicious, but he was becoming aware that there was something wrong with the house. Often, whilst his larger lover lay snoring heavily beside him, Roberto would strain his ears, hearing something dripping walking outside the hallway and something else scratching at the door.

It was probably nothing, and Roberto would always try and find a logical explanation for the things he saw in the corner of his eye or the strange slips that would occur, but it was becoming increasingly worrying to remain in the house.

Ignoring decorating for a while, Roberto began to spend more time out in the gardens; and that’s when he began to see other things.

Paolo came home after a heavy work out in the gym. Roberto was in the back garden, staring at the bushes.

“What are you looking at?”

“I thought I saw someone, a man I think,” Roberto said thoughtfully before he turned and gave Paolo a quick smile, “good workout?”

“Yes.” A very good work out, Paolo was sure some guy had been eyeing him up. Needless to say he may have gotten a git vocal whilst lifting weights. “How’s the job-hunt?”

Roberto shook his head, “still nothing. And with the recession bearing down on us still, people are losing jobs. It’s not good. Maybe I should go back to school, re-train as something else.”

“Perhaps,” said Paolo evasively. They were still paying off the mortgage and they were supposed to be saving up to get married. However, funds were running low. Paolo had predicted they could survive for the first six weeks, but funds were non-existent already. He had arranged for a large new loan and was becoming so desperate he was considering asking a family member for help and one thing the Orsini family did not do was grovel for money; his father would be furious with him should he ever find out how badly Paolo had mismanaged his personal funds. He still kept Roberto in the dark, hoping that at some point he’d figure things out.

“Just keep trying,” Paolo said at last, “something will come up.”

He turned to go in the house but saw that Roberto wasn’t following him, “aren’t you coming in?”

Roberto watched the house and said, “The main reason I want to work again isn’t for the money. It’s for the company. All day I have no one to talk to.”

“Isn’t there the neighbour?” Paolo turned back to face Roberto, guessing that they were not going inside even though he was tired and in need of a shower. Roberto was selfish sometimes.

“Yes,” he said slowly, “but I don’t really like her,” he whispered, as if she could hear. “Her children…well…some of her children seem alright but…” he shrugged, “something is off with that family. It’s obvious that I…well, that I don’t fit in.” He walked past Paolo and to the house, Paolo following like a large puppy. “It’s like being at home all over again. The odd brother, the one who didn’t match the others. The stupid hot-head.”

“No one thinks of you like that here.”

“Only because no one knows me. But I can tell they’ll think badly of me if they do get to know me.”
Paolo rolled his eyes, “this isn’t like you.” they entered the house, Roberto standing awkwardly on the threshold. “You’re just being paranoid. I’m going to take a shower.” He bolted upstairs away from his boyfriend.

Roberto looked back out into the gardens. He knew he was being whiney and weird but he couldn’t help it. With a strange sense of foreboding he took one look at the outside world before closing the door, locking himself inside the house.

Present Day

There was a knock on the front door. Going out into the dark foyer, Rodrigo could hear music playing about the house; a nursery rhyme being sung by his wife upstairs, a soft violin from Lucrezia’s room, Billie Holiday from the Living room.

He opened the front door, opening it to reveal the smiling and sophisticated Catherina. Rodrigo found himself frowning. The last thing he needed was the hot neighbour coming around when his wife was being such a nuisance.

"Hello," she smiled, "how are the boys settling in?"

Rodrigo peered up at her with dark eyes, "you know about that?"

"I do," she answered soberly, "may I come inside?"

He nodded, and led her into the office next to the living room. "The living room is damaged, there was some issue with the TV yesterday night."

Catherina looked at the living room door, hearing the music but saying nothing.

Rodrigo turned on the light, revealing a partially decorated office. Many of his books were still in boxes.

"Yes, for you are a psychiatrist, correct?" She began, “your wife and I were discussing it earlier.”

"I am," he smiled, "I've always had a great deal of respect for the human mind."

"Do you work with children at all?"

"Not usually, I'm more focused on adults, why?"

"My son," she settled onto the settee and he sat on a chair opposite her, "he is going through distress. He has dark dreams and dark thoughts. He's told me he's fantasised about murdering all his classmates and teachers! I do not want anything bad to happen to him. I thought that maybe he could be a client of yours." She paused and sat down elegantly, her long legs stretching out from under her long rain coat. He found himself staring and so forced his eyes back to her face.

"Vanozza said that perhaps you would make an exception for my boy. He isn’t so young," she continued.

Rodrigo had to stop himself from grinning like a Cheshire Cat. Surely this was a sign from God!
Sure, children weren't really his qualified area, but it wasn't beyond him. Plus, he'd be a fool to refuse work.

"How old is he?"

"Fifteen. Very sensitive and mature. He's being home taught at the moment, for the safety of his friends and his own mental state."

"Very good. I can see him as early as tomorrow afternoon would that be acceptable?"

"Yes, shall we say three-thirty? Excellent!" She leaned forward and shook his hand. Her grip was dry and firm. He respected that.

"What is your son's name?"

"Benito," she smiled, "Benito Sforza, my artistic angel!"

"Well, now that that is done, we may talk of something else."

She smiled knowingly and without humour, "the adoptions."

"Yes. You say you spoke with my wife earlier," he leaned back in his chair, "did you go with her to get the children? If so, I would like to know where they came from and why I was not informed."

"There is nothing untoward going on," she said lightly, "you must believe me Rodrigo. Mama Corella is an excellent judge of character."

"Mama Corella? Is she the one who handed them over?"

"She is an excellent woman who takes in unwanted children," explained Catherina, "there is a great strain on her and she couldn't look after the brothers your wife so kindly has adopted instead."

"So this is an adoption and not fostering?" he asked, frowning, "will we not receive any state funds for taking in these children?"

"You wife is a kind woman," was Catherina's only answer.

He sighed, feeling a headache coming on again, "how long have you known this Madam Corella?"

Catherina raised an eyebrow, "am I being interrogated?"

"Does it feel that way?" countered Rodrigo, "it makes sense for me to ask many questions for such an unusual set of circumstances to return home to. Maybe you feel it is an interrogation because you feel guilty?"

She laughed, crossing over those long legs and distracting him once more, "I never feel guilty."

"How unusual!"

"Perhaps I am a sociopath. Should I be in therapy with you also?"

"Only you can answer that," he smiled amiably but it didn’t reach his eyes, "I would like the number of Mrs. Corella. I need to talk to her."

Catherina and Rodrigo swapped mobile numbers, she swearing to text him Mama Corella's number later that evening.
After Catherina left, Rodrigo leaned back in his chair and let out a sigh. She was damned sexy and he was damned horny. She also had told him nothing of worth.

“Vanozza wants to keep the baby,” he thought, “so we’ll do that. But the other one was just ‘part of the deal.’ I’ll have to just work out a new deal with this ‘Mama Corella’ character.”

He opened his drawer which had a tumbler and a bottle of brandy in it. He helped himself to two fingers and gulped it down in one go before pouring another. He felt bad for whichever kid would have to be returned to whatever Child Ring Catherina had involved them in, but what else could be done?

He stepped out of his office, noting that the basement door was open again. He walked over to it slowly. He still hadn’t been down there himself, though he originally had plans of making it a wine cellar. Right now they could barely afford apple juice so a wine cellar was absurd.

“Cesare,” he called, “are you down there?”

Silence. The basement was a gaping black mouth. No way would anyone actually be down there in that darkness. He closed the door.

As he reached the first floor, he wondered about meeting the new kid. In the end, he decided against it. Normally, he’d throw out the red carpet for any child coming to stay with them, but now he was just too exhausted. Besides, if he was going to get rid of this kid it’d be better to not get too attached. He walked passed the bathroom, hearing water being splashed about and so knowing Lucrezia was in there. He called out a ‘goodnight’ to her but got nothing back. Shrugging, he carried on upstairs to the second floor. As always, he averted his gaze from Joffre’s room.

The room was always shut up now, but he knew that inside there was still a massive blood stain on the floor. He hadn’t been able to get rid of it, breaking down in tears at one point when he’d tried, and he hadn’t enough money to get in cleaners. He opened the door to his own room. Clothes were all over the floor and Vanozza was rocking a bundle whilst sitting on their enlarged window ledge. The city lights twinkled in the distance.

“Will you please clean up at some point?” he snapped, his temper getting the better of him.

“Why don’t you?” she countered calmly, still rocking the baby.

“I work,” he complained, picking up a few clothes and sniffing them for freshness; they were thrown into the laundry basket, “you are the housewife.”

“You haven’t worked since we got here.”

Well *that* stung.

“I have been preparing,” he said a little stiffly, “I have a new client starting tomorrow.”

“Catherina’s son, I know,” Vanozza stood up and placed Baby Gio in a crib at the end of their bed. “I see, you know do you?” he said bitterly, “I suppose that was part of whatever shady business has
happened today. Where did that om from?” he pointed at the crib.

“Catherina’s son bought it in.”

“When?”

“Just now, he must have come when she arrived.”

“I answered the door,” he said, frowning, “no one was with her.”

Vanozza shrugged, already losing interest.

The pair undressed in silence and got into bed. Rodrigo lay unhappily, he hated it when they fought. His stomach churned as the unpleasant emotions of anger, regret and sadness all churned together. He supposed that if he told her the truth of their finances she’d understand his reluctance to take in more children, but at this stage it was a point of pride. Vanozza wasn’t the supportive wife she had once been and she definitely didn’t respect him anymore. If he told her the truth that would be just another reason for her to hate him.
The Death of A Preacher

Chapter Notes

Guys, there are various reasons for me taking so long to update. Not sure if any of it matters though (and I don't really want to go into my personal life.) However, when I read over this story again I realised it was FULL of plot holes, inconsistencies and spelling errors. So I went back and re-edited the whole thing. It's taken ages and I damn well near lost the will to live when I lost a bunch of work. Basically, the story is now more succinct, has more detail and, god-willing, is easier to read.

I think the heavy re-editing happens around chapter 11 or so, but it might be worth quickly re-reading the story anyway.

I apologise for the length of time you've all had to wait.

Present Day

Cesare stared at the jar of red liquid. He’d poured, carefully, a small amount into a vial he’d found amongst his things. He wasn’t sure where the vial had come from but it was just what he’d needed. Now the vial was safely stored in a back pocket of his jeans and he was turning the jar in his hand this way and that, watching the gloopy mass moving lazily.

How much would it take to kill a human? How much for a boy, say Collona or Alphonse? How much for a grown man, say…?

There was a knock at the door which opened before he could invite anyone in.

It was Lucrezia. Her eyes were dark and her skin pale.

She’d looked ill for days now, but he knew better than the bother asking what was wrong. For whatever reason she was shutting him out, but at least today she’s started talking to him again. This was the second time today she’d been in his room.

He casually placed the jar in the drawer of his work desk, he didn’t want to draw attention to it but needed it out of sight.

“ Weird day.” He said, “I can’t even hear them arguing.”

“I was expecting smashed plates and screaming voices as soon as they sent me out of the kitchen earlier,” she answered, “but nothing.” She looked up at him and hugged herself, “we should warn the boy.”

“Warn him, what, of our parents?”

Lucrezia’s shoulders slumped as she rolled her eyes, “no, of the spirits in this house.” The ‘obviouosly’ was added silently.

Cesare walked over to his bed and lay on it, inviting her silently to join him. Definitely she stalked around the bed and sat on the chair at his desk.
He smirked, “don’t you want to see his reaction?”

Lucrezia frowned, the hairs on the back of her neck rising. She hated Cesare when he was like this; he had that same look on his face that he’d had when he told Collona to go into the basement.

“No I don’t,” she said, “I don’t want him thrown down the stairs like Juan, or crushed to death like,” her voice caught in her throat and tears swelled in her eyes.

Cesare sat up, previous arrogance gone. “He’s not a little boy like Joffre,” he said gently, “he seems tough to me. I didn’t mean to tease, I’m sorry. But he won’t believe us. He’ll think we’re being mean or playing a trick on him.”

She rubbed at her eyes angrily. She hated crying, one because it made her look weak and two because it made her skin go blotchy; Lucrezia crying was the closest she ever got to looking ugly. She pulled her knees up, her feet gripping the edge of the seat of the chair.

“I don’t care, he needs warning,” she looked at her brother, “warn him tonight, or I’ll have him stay in the bedroom with me. I don’t care how inappropriate it is.”

Cesare’s face was sour, “what if he reads the situation wrong? What if he tries something?”

She shrugged, “maybe I’d let him, I don’t want him hurt Cesare.”

Cesare rolled his shoulders. He didn’t like being manipulated. “That’s a terrible threat to make,” he muttered.

“It isn’t a threat, I’m just saying,” she snapped, “it’s only sex. I’d have sex with him, if he wanted, if it means nothing horrible kills him.”

“Nothing will kill him. We’ve been here for weeks now.”

She raised an eyebrow at him and he sighed, “you know what I mean. Joffre was an accident. He’s not sad, where he is. Juan saw him. A girl looks after him.”

“A ghost took him more like. I’m going to bed, I’ve said what I needed to.” She began to leave and Cesare let out another sigh.

“Lu, don’t go,” he pleaded, “I’m sorry.”

She shut the door, leaving him alone.

“I’ll tell him!” he shouted through the closed door. He hoped she heard him. He scowled, feeling jealous and resentful of the new kid already. He didn’t want to tell Micheletto about the spirits. He had meant it when he had said that the chances were he wouldn’t be believed; how could you tell someone the house was haunted and potentially dangerous without coming across as an idiot, mentally unstable or as a practical joker? Micheletto had to see for himself. And besides, he was interested in seeing Micheletto’s reaction; would he go on ignoring it like their parents, runaway like Juan or would he embrace it like Cesare?

Slowly he walked over to his little round window and looked outside. It was late now, the sky dark and ghost of the sun dying embers on the horizon. There was that one guy, the one who cast no shadow, smoking by the bushes. Cesare had noticed that the man seemed to stare up at Lucrezia’s bedroom window, but he hadn’t known what to do about it. How did one warn off a barely cognizant ghost? Besides, he probably didn’t offer much threat, he seemed pretty much trapped in the garden.
Cesare slowly looked across the landscape and saw a familiar shape standing outside the garden. It was that of the preacher with his ever present placard. Cesare scowled.

The Preacher looked up, his pale eyes judgemental. Cesare felt an unnatural grin spreading across his face, one that was all teeth. He leaned forward, his nose tip almost touching the glass. “Come in here,” he whispered, certain that somehow the Preacher could hear him, “I dare you.”

xxXXxx

The red walls stretched up to the ceiling like a scream. Micheletto sat on his bed, the mattress bare and his trainers still on. He was hugging his legs up to himself. He didn’t feel safe.

This place was off.

As he’d sat in his room, the girl, Lucrezia her name was he believed, had entered into her own room which was adjacent to his but before she had done so had given him the strangest stare. He didn’t know what to make of it but had shut his bedroom door as soon as she’d disappeared into her own room. He could hear music playing from there, something old fashioned. Maybe they wouldn’t find his CD so strange if he dared to play it out loud.

He had wanted to play his CD player and remember better days, but he didn’t feel confident enough to let his guard down.

The bedroom door rapped politely.

He stared at it. Slowly, the handle turned and the handsome boy from earlier popped his head in.

“Hello,” smiled Cesare, “settling in ok?” he looked around at the bare room, “hm, I suppose not then.”

He left for a moment, making Micheletto stare after him, before returning with bedsheets, a quilt and a couple of pillows.

“It’s not been a warm welcome,” he said apologetically, “you were a bit of a surprise today.”

He sat at the end of the bed and looked over at Micheletto. He was small for his age. Cesare wondered if he’d be going to Burkhardt’s with himself and Lucrezia.

“Do you find the house creepy?” he asked at last.

Micheletto nodded.

“Good,” answered Cesare cheerfully, “I wanted to leave you alone with this but Lucrezia wanted you know…”

There was a noise, something like a smash of a window. Both boys froze.

“Stay here,” Cesare stood and made for the door.

“No.”

Cesare turned to see the redhead was standing behind him. He didn’t look afraid.

Cesare smiled, “ok, come then, let’s see what that noise was.”

xxXXxx
Paolo and Djem had heard the smashing sound as well.

The boys looked at one another before both looking at their charge. Lucrezia was fast asleep on the bed, her earlier threat of seducing Micheletto into safety being a false one; she had known Cesare would speak to him.

Quietly, Paolo locked the bedroom door as Djem turned off the music.

The boys climbed into the bed, one on either side of Lucrezia. As they closed their eyes, the bedroom lights simultaneously shut off.

Whatever happened in the house now would not be heard or witnessed by their girl.

Cesare and Micheletto went slowly downstairs. They could hear quiet talking in the study; father was with a woman, Catherina by the sounds of it. Cesare paused for a moment, wandering why those two would be speaking so late at night. He considered father was probably having another affair, but as soon as he came to that conclusion, decided he didn’t care and continued down the stairs. The boys stood in the foyer for a moment, standing in darkness, until Micheletto tapped on Cesare’s shoulder. Cesare looked at him and saw the boy staring down the hallway, passed where the basement door was and beyond to the pantry which would lead out into the back garden, parts of the home the family rarely used or ventured into. Micheletto must have seen something. The boys moved as one slowly to the back of the house.

The night was cold, not a cloud in the sky. The moon was large and white. Its frigid light touched the earth and lit it up. The boys could see better now, in the dark blue of the pantry. The light of the moon fell through the back door window, one that had been smashed open and the source of the earlier noise. On the floor was sparkling shards of glass and a few black droplets of blood.

“We have an intruder,” muttered Cesare. He looked out at the garden, he could swear that amongst the swaying bushes and trees he could see shadows of people moving.

Micheletto, his eyes grey and cold, slowly looked out to follow Cesare’s line of sight. If he could see what Cesare did, he showed no sign of doing so.

Something fluttered in the right side of their peripheral vision, the boys once more moving in unison, their heads immediately turning to the source.

The corners of the room were very black with shadow. It would be easy for someone to watch them from there, hidden away, even if the hider was a large man.

The boys stood in the light, staring into the darkness that seemed to stare back. It was a Staring Contest that Cesare had already won once that day; something in the shadows moved. A bulky figure dashed from the pantry out into the more deafening darkness of the foyer and hallway.

Micheletto went to give chase but Cesare gripped the back of his shirt. The redhead looked back to find the black-eyed boy shaking his head. Cesare released Micheletto and went to the drawers of the pantry. He opened one, revealing various kitchen utensils forgotten by the family during the move. He picked out two very sharp knives, passing one to Micheletto.

The boy frowned, more at the presence of the object rather than being given it, but took it obediently before the pair then went after what they now knew was the Preacher.

They moved slowly and carefully, like predators.

They came to a halt when they saw the basement door was open. Micheletto peered inside, a frown
on his face. Cesare sniggered quietly and passed Micheletto, walking down the dark steps confidently. Closing the basement door behind them, Micheletto followed; Cesare was impressed.

Their eyes became accustomed to the greater darkness of the basement, broken up only occasionally by the slips of white moonlight let through the slim basement windows near the top of the dirty walls.

Micheletto could feel the amusement rolling off Cesare but he didn’t understand what was so funny. The minute Cesare had ignored his father in favour for hunting this intruder had made Micheletto aware that something was going down tonight, something sinister and fucked up, but he had no will to stop it. It was as if all his instincts were off and now he was just blindly following Cesare’s lead. His hand was gripping the knife tightly. He was aware on some level that this was who he was; a creature that skulked about in the night, armed and dangerous. He was just surprised that there was another such creature standing beside him. Cesare was dangerous, but Micheletto wasn’t avoiding him like any rational person would.

Micheletto stilled himself, quietening his thoughts and doubts and allowed his senses to stretch out. He could smell the basement, hear everything in the basement, could feel the slight wind drafts against his skin. They were not alone down here. There were things hiding in the shadows.

Becoming completely still, not noticing Cesare staring at him, Micheletto could sense the Warning hanging in the atmosphere.

He could tell there was something small but sinister hiding under the stacks of shelves to their left, but it was not that that they were hunting. He moved his head away just a moment, dismissing the creature. He focused his senses to the right. The one they hunted was too fond of lingering. He lingered on the streets and on the corner and outside houses. He was also too loud; too fond of letting his opinion and presence known. Micheletto could hear his breathing, raspy and deep. He could taste the sweat of stress. He could feel how the only source of heat, other than themselves, was coming from that area.

Coming back to himself, Micheletto straightened, and stared into the corner of the right-hand side. He swept to the side, Cesare leaving him and going in the opposite direction but towards the same goal.

The Preacher moved, but found himself being attacked on both sides. Like wolves, the boys rushed in at once, moving skilfully in the darkness even though they must have been as blind as he was. He felt a burning pain in one shoulder on his right, and another pain in his left side. He’d been stabbed twice, once by someone not aiming to kill, and by another who was.

He let out a cry, animal-like in its outrage.

But this was his mistake. Cesare drew the vial from his pocket, flicked off the lid and poured it into the gaping mouth of the Preacher.

He coughed and spluttered, falling to his knees.

“What did you do?” Micheletto could be heard asking, as Savonarola, the Preacher, stumbled back to his feet and began to fall through the basement. He needed to leave, he needed to get out!

He grasped at his neck. What evil had been put into his holy throat? He could feel it seeping down into his core, something burning and fiery, like a piece of hell itself.

He fell about, making a lot of noise, before finding the stairs and running up them quickly. He
slammed the door open loudly, speeding down the hallway back out through the back-door entrance.

“Cesare?” Rodrigo could be heard, “Cesare are you down there?”

The boys stood in the complete darkness. At last they heard Rodrigo walking away.

Micheletto put up his hand, he still couldn’t see anything, until he felt Cesare’s shirt.

“Cesare,” he began, his voice hoarse, “what did you do?”

He jumped when Cesare replied, because the boy’s voice was low and much, much closer to his ear than he’d anticipated, “let’s go see.”

At once the pair rushed down the hall, through to the pantry. The pantry door was now wide open. The Preacher had practically smashed through it.

“What a lummox,” thought Cesare without charity.

The boys stepped through the wreckage of the doorway and looked out into the vast garden. Savonarola could be seen, gasping for air and grasping at his throat.

The pair waded through the long grass, it was wet and dark.

Micheletto felt like a lion approaching a wounded animal; something big and lethal like a bull, but prey nonetheless.

Savonarola turned to face them. His mouth was open like a Munch’s scream, his eyes rolled back and began to turn red.

Cesare stared, waiting for them to explode.

The Preacher, beyond screaming now for his throat was so damaged and his pain so much, stumbled back, falling into the swamp like mess that masqueraded as a pond.

There was a scream then, loud and high and wild, like a fox’s but stretched out. It was like the wail of a banshee. Micheletto took a step back, but didn’t run.

Cesare remained still.

Two arms burst from the swamp, gripping the legs of the Preacher and dragging him into the pond.

“No!” he screamed, desperation reviving his vocal cords. He scratched at the mud, trying to pull himself out of the clutches of the evil spirit, but to no avail as the mud slipped through his thick fingers. Blood poured from his mouth and leaked from his eyes like the Mother Mary’s Tears.

And thus, the Preacher was dragged screaming and heaving into the pond. It was slow and horrifying, like seeing a snake eating something far bigger than itself.

The boys stood for a few moments, hearts beating until Cesare muttered, “I need more to kill a grown man.”

Micheletto turned abruptly to stare at the dark-haired boy with wide eyes.

Cesare turned to him and smiled, “no need to look so alarmed.” He brushed Micheletto’s long fringe from his eyelashes, “I saw you tonight. You’re like me.”
Micheletto turned his body to Cesare and took a step forward. He was wet from the dewy grass and shaking slightly. He felt what initially had seemed like sexual attraction but now was developing into something else.

“You are like…like me,” muttered Micheletto, taking in Cesare’s dark form, “you aren’t afraid of the dark places?”

A slight snigger, “we live in the dark places.”

Micheletto lifted his eyes to Cesare’s beautiful face which was now looking out to where the Preacher had been killed. He could tell that Cesare was impressed but not as won over as Micheletto was.

“He’s my brother,” thought Micheletto, and for the first time in his life, found himself determined to prove himself as such.
Hi guys. Sorry I've been so long. A number of my fanfics have suffered over the past few months. Basically my mom got cancer back in August. It was pretty developed but we sort of all fooled ourselves into thinking she had years still. But she didn't. And she died back in January. I don't have a dad so I'm sort of trying to support my siblings whilst feeling pretty lonely. Anyway, my main stories deal with death and loss and parent/child relationships so as you can imagine facing them was pretty hard. But, it's been a while and I'm getting back on the wagon, if you like. So, yeah, hopefully enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Present Day

It was late.

The air was clear and the atmosphere cold.

A murder had taken place in an Italian suburb, but not one neighbour had stirred and no living soul within the Murder House had been alerted.

Cesare stood in the long, wet grass with an admirer by his side. He recognised Micheletto as useful and as amazingly loyal, but he wasn't sure yet of any real connection between them. He did see in Micheletto a new weapon.

"What is that?" Micheletto pointed at the vial loose in Cesare's hand.

Micheletto's speech was rough for someone so young, but simple and child-like. It spoke of a bad education and rare usage.

"I found it in the basement."

"Was it found," Micheletto asked, "or did something give it to you?"

Cesare smiled, sharp and false, "what makes you ask that?"

Micheletto looked back to the house. The windows were black and empty, like sockets in a skull. He thought of how convenient it was to find two sharp knives, of how he and Cesare were together and how only they, apparently, heard the Intruder breaking into the house.

"It seems like that's a thing that would happen."

Cesare smiled but didn't quite understand, the slight cocking of the head and his flash of a frown betraying this confusion. Micheletto observed him quietly, Cesare was more refined than he, but less aware. Was this a side-effect of being in a house like this for so long?

The wind nipped at thin, pale skin, making Micheletto shiver.
"Let's go inside," said Cesare, worrying a little in a manner he was accustomed to doing only for Lucrezia.

Micheletto considered refusing. He considered insisting on taking himself and his brother back home, but perhaps it was right that this was the place for them. Miss Sforza had directed them here herself, and she'd never been anything but coolly kind to Mich and Gio.

He found himself being guided back in, Cesare holding his arm lightly.

As they went in, Micheletto looked back at the bubbling pool of muddy water. Why had the Intruder come into the house? What had he been looking for?

Cesare led Micheletto up to his own bedroom, insisting that Micheletto sleep in decent nightclothes as he'd been out in the cold.

As soon as they entered the attic Cesare put on Spellbound by Siouxsie and the Banshees quietly before faffing around in his drawers pulling out the warmest pyjamas he could find. Micheletto looked around. The room was cluttered but tidy. Cesare seemed the type to collect. He had a lot of things, most pointless, which added to the impression of wealth taken for granted.

"I'd make you a hot drink," said Cesare, "but I don't want us downstairs at the moment. I've learnt to avoid going out of my room at night. That's when the weirdest stuff happens." He placed some warm pyjamas on the bed in front of Micheletto. They were thick and dark blue.

"They should be ok," Cesare said, as usual finding himself talking more than usual to fill the silence left by Micheletto. "You see these marks on my face?" he gestured at the claw marks and on Micheletto's slow nod, continued, "my brother did that to me a few nights back. It's why he left. When he was ok again, I mean. He was possessed I think, before, when he did this. Something evil was in him. Maybe even that thing we saw outside."

"What is it? Monster?"

"No, ghosts I think. Get dressed."

Micheletto obeyed the command, somewhat self-consciously undressing. Cesare sat on the bed and watched in that calculating way cats have when watching birds.

"If it's ghosts," said Micheletto, pulling his top over his head to reveal a thin torso with small muscles and too many ribs, "then won't he become a ghost?"

"Maybe," answered Cesare, "it's what I was hoping to find out."

The playlist switched to Lauren O'Connell's House of the Rising Sun giving the room a tawdry air, so Cesare stopped watching Micheletto and instead began to undress himself. Normally he only wore boxers to bed, or nothing, but tonight he put on bedclothes. He noticed Micheletto markedly looking away as he undressed.

It was strange how Micheletto swung the pendulum between shy and quietly confident. Maybe when he came fully into his own as a man he would be solely quietly confident, which would be quite a thing to behold. Cesare hoped they would still be friends. He was more invested in being friendly with someone like Micheletto than he was Vitelli or Carlo.

Micheletto looked over the many CDS and records on Cesare's wall and shelves. There was a lot of Dark Wave stuff from the eighties and nineties, which would lead one to think that Cesare was one of those kids overly enamoured with their parents' music, but there was also a lot of modern singers
and bands too; the likes of Serj Tankian and Nine Inch Nails to Snow Ghosts and Kanye West.

"What music do you like?" was the smooth voice behind him.

Micheletto shrugged.

"You can borrow any music from me if you like," Cesare said, sitting back in the chair at his desk, watching Micheletto carefully. "It's fine. Lucrezia borrows my music all the time...by the way," he sat up, suddenly remembering her threat from earlier, "Lucrezia, has she said anything strange to you today?"

"She hasn't spoken to me," Micheletto turned to Cesare, deeming it safe. And it was, the boy was dressed. "Neither has your father. You're the only one who has. She looked at me earlier."

Cesare was stunned into silence for a bit before slowly saying, "That's...embarrassing...I'm sorry. We are a nice family, it's just. It's been strange, I'm sure you understand."

"I saw a preacher being dragged into a back garden swamp by a zombie," Mich answered, "I get it. It's ok."

Cesare stood, "sleep with me tonight."

Micheletto almost fell over, "no!"

Cesare looked at him in shock, already accustomed to Micheletto obeying his every command. "You're in shock," he argued, "tonight was too much for most people. Besides, it's safer. Stay with me."

Micheletto shifted uncomfortably as Cesare climbed under the duvet. He seemed to be gritting his teeth.

Cesare huffed and rolled his eyes. "It's not a big deal, have you never had to share a bed before? Get in."

Reluctantly the boy climbed in. Cesare switched off the lamp by the table but let the music play quietly, it now falling into soft classical.

Micheletto was ramrod straight and awkward in the bed.

Cesare rolled to his side to watch him. Light from outside shone in through the bedroom, the moonlight making them both look paler than normal.

"We'll look after you here Micheletto," Cesare whispered, "you're one of us now, as far as I am concerned. You and Gio will be safe."

Micheletto blinked, turning to look at Cesare. Dove grey eyes analysed the rich browns of Cesare.

"You are used to making promises you cannot keep," he said to Cesare at last. The darker boy frowned.

"I can try to keep us safe," said Micheletto, "and so will you. But you don't need to lie to me Cesare."

Micheletto closed his eyes, his lashes pale and long. Cesare watched him for a while before falling asleep himself, Micheletto's last words resonating.
Outside, the spirit of Savonarola the Preacher stood upon the sodden earth. He was at a loss. He wasn't in Heaven. He wasn't even Hell.

He was stuck in Purgatory.

Putting his head into his hands, he wailed.

The sunlight dappled across the bedsheets, the Fawn-like spots dotting through the quilt and patterning the plain mattress cover. Rodrigo crawled up between two lily-white legs, parting them to make space for him. He kissed her legs, smooth and creamy and warmed by the summer heat. The corner of her ankle, the dent of her knee, up into the thickness of her thighs. He allowed in some teeth there, not enough to mark, but enough for her to feel. She flinched and giggled slightly, breathy and girlish. He continued up, her skin becoming softer and warmer. Reaching to wear he knickers sat, he pulled them aside and, slowly, mouthed at the softness there. He could hear her take in a soft breath. He allowed himself a small grin, before gently licking her there. Another little giggle. He let out a small laugh himself, before going in for the kill.

Rodrigo grunted and opened his eyes. He was achingly hard and the sun was blazing into his eyes. It wasn't the warm summer sun of his Spain, but the distant winter sun of Italy. He looked at the time, 8:15am. Damn it, that was too early to be up on a Sunday.

His wife stood at the end of the bed, folding linens belonging the crib which sat in the corner of the room. Its tiny inhabitant was gurgling cheerfully inside it. As irked as he was by the surprise presence of this small creature he had to admit that so far Gio was proving to be a very easy baby to raise.

"You were dreaming," said Vanozza, her cheeks pleasingly pink, her skin dark and tanned and sexy. "You were murmuring her name."

Rodrigo felt his stomach sink. He didn't want to apologise again. He couldn't. The words had lost all meaning by this point.

He brushed his hands over his face. "We need to sort out the other one's education." He said at last, "I suppose you want him in Burkhardts?"

"Mon dieu, it's too early to think of that! Gio is barely able to crawl."

He bit back the stab of irritation, "not him," he ground out, "the other boy. The older one you 'adopted,'" he used his fingers as quotation marks, "remember him?"

She looked up at him, her eyes glassy.

Rodrigo sighed and looked away. He couldn't stand what was happening to her, "don't worry, forget it. I'll sort it out."

He stumbled out of bed, glancing at the large mirror on their wall as he passed. It was large and ugly, when had it even been put up? He went outside and grabbed a towel from the airing cupboard. He was about to return to his room to use the bedroom en-suite bathroom when he heard footsteps coming down from the narrow attic stairs.

A messy haired, irritatingly sexy-looking Cesare emerged with another boy, a pale, skinny ginger
"Ah, good morning," smiled Rodrigo. The boys stared back, Cesare with disdain and the ginger kid with solemnness. For the life of him Rodrigo could not remember his name.

"I'm sorry I didn't see you last night," he explained to the red-head, "I meant to but work came up and then it was late and all the lights were out so I assumed you were asleep. I thought you were in Juan's old bedroom?"

"I wanted him with me," snapped Cesare who was already seething for some reason, "dad go away, god, you're so embarrassing."

"Why am I embarrassing?" demanded Rodrigo, flinging out his arms and feeling completely put out at this point. God damn it, his family were pissing him off this morning.

"You're standing there in your old pants with a hard on!"

Rodrigo looked down. So he was.

"This is how I sleep." He argued, "and hard-ons are perfectly normal so get off the high moral ground." He winked at the ginger kid, "you'll get used to me eventually!"

To his surprise, the kid actually responded with a hint of a Mona Lisa smile, so Rodrigo took that as a win and went into his room shouting that he'd see them both for breakfast.

Inside he saw Vanozza singing to Gio in French. He wondered if she'd actually banged her head at some point and so was suffering some sort of brain damage. He wondered how much it would cost to fix her.

With a sigh he climbed into the shower and washed off. He had a wank, which made him feel much, much better. He thought of Giulia at first, just out of revenge for Vanozza. However he soon felt guilty so switched his fantasy to his wife and came pretty hard anyway. Not bad for an old man.

He came out and dressed. The room was empty. He was a little disconcerted at this. He didn't like being in the room alone for some reason. Something that had been an issue since their move here; he wondered if it was a manifestation of the anxiety about Vanozza leaving him. But then again, there were a couple of places in the house he didn't like. The old Living Room was creepy and he was glad they couldn't go in there due to the damage now; the foyer was creepy as he just related it to seeing one or both of his sons injured; the first floor was creepy since that night when he'd bumped into some random stranger there; and he didn't even look in Joffre's old room. This bedroom was creepy right now because of that mirror. It was so large it took up a good portion of the wall. The light from outside kept reflecting off it and catching in the corner of his eye. He looked over at it. He felt like the mirror was looking at him as opposed to the other way around. He sighed, dressing quickly and getting away from its appraisal.

He wondered why that kid was in Cesare's bedroom. Was Cesare gay? Maybe he was experimenting? The redhead wasn't the hottest kid around; Rodrigo was confident his son could do a lot better, but there was more to a person than looks. The kid had sort of smiled at his joke earlier, that was a mark of good character. Plus, Rodrigo approved of anyone if it meant Cesare cheered up a bit and stopped salivating over Lucrezia. Rodrigo knew nothing was going on between the two but it was only a matter of time. Lucrezia was growing older, sultry and much more aware, and Cesare had limited patience. Frankly, Rodrigo wasn't too sure how to deal with the Freudian mess that was his oldest son.
"Please be closeted gay," he thought, "and not incestuous, my god, how would it affect business if it ever came out?"

Though, if Rodrigo was being completely honest, he could see why Cesare loved Lucrezia so much. She was pretty hot. All his kids were; Juan, Cesare and Lucrezia. No doubt Joffre would have been pretty hot too had he lived to, say, sixteen or so. It was something Rodrigo had been proud of. The world should be grateful to he and Vanozza for blessing them all with such sexy kids. But still, these were private thoughts, nothing he'd say out loud. (Except that one time, when he was drunk- it hadn't gone down well but people purposely misunderstood.)

Thinking on incest bought him back to Giulia. He didn't understand why this particular affair was hitting Vanozza so hard. Well, no, he did know. He wasn't a fool. Giulia, with her long legs and big doe eyes, had been their foster daughter. It was too close to incest, the mistress too friendly to Vanozza. But, it wasn't as if he had been having sex with his daughter. With the level of disgust Vanozza kept throwing at him, it was as if he had committed incest; but he hadn't. He sighed, wishing society was less up-tight. The Cesare could have Lucrezia and get all that out his system and he could have Vanozza and Giulia. Hell, they'd been great friends before Vanozza realised he'd been fucking them both.

He left reached the foyer and went into the kitchen. He sat at the table there and took in the light atmosphere. They had a dining room next door, but that got as much use as the pantry. The kitchen was the nicest room in the house, the gay couple from before had done a good job in this room.

He wasn't alone, Cesare was boiling the kettle and Micheletto was sitting at the table opposite Rodrigo munching on cereal.

It looked like something that had too much sugar in it, but Rodrigo didn't mind; kid looked starved. He frowned, so the 'adoption' centre had taken care of the baby but not the teenager…

"I'm gonna call up Burkhardt's later," he said, "try and get you in for an entrance exam. Then you'll be with your brother and sister."

Micheletto looked up, eyes wide. He glanced at Cesare, who said nothing, before turning to Rodrigo and murmuring, "I'm not clever."

"Not everyone is," answered Rodrigo at length, still trying to remember the kid's name, "don't worry too much."

"I won't get in."

"You might. It's worth trying."

"I won't get in. Don't make me."

There was something of a warning in that. Where most kids would plead, the redhead looked like he was fully prepared to murder Rodrigo if he felt threatened enough. It was disheartening that Rodrigo was just as certain that should the redhead kill his new daddy, that Cesare's response would simply be to continue making tea.

"Ok," he said, sensing that this could play to his advantage as he'd be damned if he could afford another kid in that fucking school, "how about you go to a regular state school, but we'll tutor you on the side? We'll get you all caught up."

The redhead chewed slowly, thinking. At last he nodded.
"Good," Rodrigo took a cup of tea from Cesare gratefully. It was a rule in their house; coffee was fine on any weekday morning, but Sundays was tea and hot chocolate. Cesare placed a cup of hot chocolate in front of the redhead before placing the pot of tea on the table and pouring a cup for himself. It was green tea. God he was too much sometimes; Rodrigo already missed Juan coming down the stairs smelling of weed, B.O. and last night's booze.

"My name is Micheletto," said the boy to Rodrigo, "I know you didn't get to find out before. It's Micheletto Corella."

Something about the way he said it took the shame out of not knowing and Rodrigo almost felt stupid for not simply asking beforehand.

"Thank you," he answered humbly.

"I'm going to show him around Rome," said Cesare, "and maybe go visit Carlos and Vitelli."

"Who the hell are Carlos and Vitelli?"

Cesare rolled his eyes, "friends from school. Look, I'll have my mobile on me ok?"

"Yeah that's fine," answered his father vaguely, still spinning from the information that, for the first time, Cesare had not one but two actual friends. Three, counting Micheletto. Or was this tied into his sexual experimentation? Rodrigo sat back with a frown, no way would someone who drank green tea voluntarily have a sex life that kinky…

December 2011

Roberto sat in the ruins of the Living Room. His head was bowed. Billie Holiday played quietly in the background. He didn't care for the singer himself, but the ghost of Ursula pitched a fit whenever he didn't play it, so he left it on.

He was staring at a text he had received. It was a picture of his boyfriend lying in bed. Someone else's bed. Who had sent him this?

He looked at it. Paolo looked relaxed, far more than he ever had since they moved into this house. He knew that he and Paolo had been pulling apart, that he had become more distant as he was dragged into the world of the dead, but Roberto couldn't believe that Paolo would cheat on him. Whoever he was having this affair with was malicious; what cruel person would send a picture like this to the loyal partner at home?

Roberto switched his phone off and rubbed at his eyes.

He got up from the floor and went upstairs into the Master bedroom of the second floor. He slumped on the bed, hugging the pillow around his body.

"Monsieur, y at-il quelque chose que je puisse faire pour aider?"

Roberto leaned up, his face wet with tears and his nose stuffy.

A large, rather hairy man sat at the bottom of the bed. Roberto hadn't seen this spirit before, but then this was the first time he'd felt this lost and lonely.

"I cannot speak French. I'm Italian."

"Ah, erm, I said," began the spirit, turning to look at him, "is there anything I can do to help?" The
spirit looked slightly damp and muddy. His clothes were well-made but musty.

Roberto sat up. "My lover has another. He's having a secret affair, all while I stay locked up in this house."

"Unlike me you are very attractive," said the ghost, "go find another."

Roberto smiled weakly. "I'm not attractive. And in any case I don't want another." He paused, "what happened to you?"

"I was betrayed," said the spirit, "by someone who I thought could love me."

"What is your name?"

"Charles."

Roberto crawled closer to the spirit. He could smell mud and water on him. "Charles," he said carefully, "do not possess me. I do not want it."

"But I can stop the pain," argued the spirit, "I can make him stop hurting you."

"No, I have to try and fix this on my own. I know I called you here, but I didn't mean to. I didn't mean to wake you up. Just don't possess me, please."

Roberto blinked, and the spirit was gone. He looked around the room, wondering if the spirit had merely jumped into a different area, but it seems the room was empty.

The brunet sighed and sat up in the bed. One was never really alone in the Murder House.

Anger moved slowly in his chest, like a caged beast. It would be so easy, to let the angry poltergeists of this house fall upon Paolo, but he would never let that happen. No matter how angry Paolo made him, he always would love him. Paolo was the first person to ever make him feel good about himself. It was a cruel hand that made him also the person that made Roberto feel lower than he ever had before.

He got up and looked out the window. What was he even doing in this place? He had no friends, he couldn't get a job and all his energy was spent on keeping the monsters in his house contented so they didn't kill him or his boyfriend. Of course, Paolo either didn't care or didn't know about any of this; he was conveniently blind to all the weird shit that went down in their home.

"I should just leave," he decided. "Let Paolo deal with the spirits himself. See if he's so blind to them then! But...they'd kill him."

Roberto sighed. He'd challenge Paolo tonight and let that decide the outcome. Maybe he'd insist on them leaving. Maybe they could go somewhere else in the city, maybe out of the Vatican state all together.

But first, he wanted to know who this other person was. He was tempted to text them back, but knew that'd give the other person too much satisfaction.

He marched back downstairs, fury pushing him forwards. Roberto was normally a pretty good boyfriend when it came to respecting people's private things, but as Paolo had betrayed his trust so badly he decided that it was a free for all now.

He marched into the room beside the Living Room. It had once been a Drawing Room but the boys
had turned it into a little gym for Paolo, which was pointless as Paolo was always at the gym out in
the city anyway.

Going to the filing cabinets reserved for Paolo's business files, Roberto pulled them open and
began to search through. He was surprised to find a lot of bills with red lettering.

Present Day

The family were all out. Micheletto and Cesare had skulked out of the house at an unusually early
time to go tourist-ing through the Vatican City. Lucrezia had left with her mother and baby Gio to
get clothes and other essentials for the baby. Considering they had not been prepared for a baby,
that was bound to take most of the day.

"Make sure to get things for Micheletto too," he had said quietly to Lucrezia before she left, "he
needs things for his bedroom. And his clothes are terrible. This is Rome, he cannot go about
looking like that. He'll be treated terribly and we would look appalling."

"I know," she answered, keeping her voice low, "trust me papa, I know. Poor boy, he came with
almost nothing. Mama won't remember him but I'll get some basics. I can't help with clothes, but
I'll text Cesare about it."

Rodrigo had nodded, passing one of his credit cards to his daughter. He wasn't happy about
spending the money, but he sort of liked Micheletto and Gio, by what he had seen of them. He
didn't want to see them go without.

"Take your time today," he said, "I have a patient this afternoon."

Lucrezia smiled warmly, though it wasn't quite the sunny beam he was used to from her, "papa I'm
so glad for you." She leaned forwards and kissed him on the cheek.

A loud clearing of the throat made them both turn to Vanozza. She was watching with
disapproving eyes.

"We should go," she announced firmly.

Rodrigo let out a sigh, she surely wasn't jealous of their own daughter! Before they left he placed a
kiss on her cheek. It was stiff and unresponsive. She was losing too much weight, her cheeks were
hollow and her skin was thin.

He spent the morning pleasantly at home. His fear of being alone was silly and not one that he
wanted to take a hold of him, so he used the time to enter into the Living room in order to start
tidying. The Television lay smashed, its black shards spread across the floor. The room was very
still. The curtains were closed, so he opened them. He could see the back garden, wild and in
disarray. The Borgias weren't really gardening types, but they really needed to do something; the
neighbours would get annoyed if they didn't do up their part of the neighbourhood. He didn't want
people to think they were trash.

Focusing back on the living room, he looked at the record player to his side. It was clean and well
used. He recognised it as Lucrezia's but for whatever reason it seemed it belonged down here now.
He wondered why she kept playing Billie Holiday; Lucrezia's choice of music was very carefully
manipulated by Cesare and he was not a fan of the Blues. Perhaps she was falling out from under
his thrall?

He got on with work, picking up the shards carefully and discarding them in an old newspaper,
wrapping it up tight before putting it in a refuse bag. He then picked up the television and took it
out into the foyer. After a moment's thought he decided to dump it in the Pantry, a room they never used, as he couldn't just throw it outside. As he walked passed the stairway, he noticed how cold it was.

The pantry was very white, the walls bright and clean and the windows to the back garden large. He could now see that the door was heavily damaged and broken glass was on the floor. He couldn't tell if the house had been broken into or just damaged. He put down the television and inspected the door for some time. No way could he get someone out to fix it, he couldn't afford it. He'd do it himself.

He grunted to himself in annoyance, the list of today's chores growing longer. If the house had been broken into, nothing was stolen as far as he could tell.

Curious, he stepped through the wreckage and out into the garden. The grass was long and wet with the typical damp of Autumn. The leaves of the trees were on fire with colours of golden and red and brown.

On the concrete slab before the door there was a mess of muddy footprints, obscuring whether someone was coming in or out.

Well if someone had broken in they were gone now and heaven knows no one in the family were hurt. If one of his family had actually broken the door, a scenario seeming more likely at this stage, then he would deal with that in time.

He went back into the house and went up the stairs quickly. There was a curious feeling, like he shouldn't be going up there alone, but he ignored it.

Getting to the second floor he walked more steadily to his room. As he passed Joffre's old bedroom, he could hear someone talking softly inside. Rodrigo paused for a second. He listened carefully, leaning closer to the door. He could hear Joffre, instantly recognising his son's voice, but couldn't make out what he was saying…

He sighed and pulled away. This wasn't real. He knew he was still deep in grief for the loss of his youngest child and that his mind was playing tricks on him. He left the bedroom door and went into his own room, not noticing the shadow on the top of the attic stairs staring down at him.

In his own room, he got onto his knees and looked under the bed, searching blindly until he felt his tool box.

He pulled it out and began to look through it. Yep, all the necessities needed. He hadn't done any D.I.Y. in a while, not since the early days when he and Vanozza were young and poor, but he was sure that it was like riding a bike; no one ever truly forgot skills like that.

Taking the box, he went back out of his room and paused. Joffre's bedroom door was now open. The stain of blood was still on the floor; they hadn't been able to get it out yet and he couldn't afford professionals to deal with it.

With a slightly shaking hand, he reached out and gripped the bedroom door knob. He closed his son's bedroom quietly. Unbeknown to him, the spirit of Joffre watched with wide eyes as his dad locked him into the bedroom again.

Rodrigo moved away, frowning to himself and not noticing that the shadow at the top of the attic stairs was now further down and far closer to him.

He walked away, making his way back down the stairs.
Rodrigo fixed the doorframe pretty easily, the frame being flimsy anyway and so easy to manoeuvre back into place. He had to replace some of the wood and use quite a few drills, but it was fine. It was probably more secure than before, in fact.

He looked back and smiled. He boarded up the window, getting rid of that chill.

Feeling deserving of some lunch he pottered in to the kitchen. He put on the radio to a classic station, Allelujah sung by Micha Luna playing cheerfully as he made a sandwich.

He sat, munching cheerfully and reading the online newspaper from his phone. Across the table sat the spirit of Roberto, observing the patriarch with a critical eye.

The phone beeped, a message had arrived.

I am pregnant.

Rodrigo stopped chewing. The number was unknown. He swallowed and sat up.

Roberto, intrigued, got up, circled around the table, and read the message. He then gave Rodrigo an evil look.

Rodrigo rubbed a hand over his face. The music had stopped and the room was now silent; he hadn't even noticed that the radio was uncannily silent.

Who is this? He text back.

Seriously? It's Giulia. Remember me?

"Oh god," Rodrigo fell forward. This could not be happening. This could not be happening!

He knew she wasn't lying, Giulia wasn't the type. However, he could pretend that he thought she was, make her go through the aggravation of getting proof and so on. That could buy him some time; some time to find a way to keep this a secret from Vanozza. At one time he would have told her and hoped she'd adopt the baby as her own - she was capable of such kindness and love - but with her mental state so fragile now he couldn't risk that. Who knew how much more she'd snap with the knowledge that Giulia was pregnant, right after she'd lost one son permanently and another temporarily?

He could pay Giulia to be silent, but he couldn't afford it. He wasn't surviving as it was, yet the pressure and the expenses kept building up! What was he to do?

December 2011


Their finances were in complete disarray. They were drowning in debt. The shared accounts were in arrears. They were living off credit cards, day-loans and over drafts.

Roberto felt sick.

The enormity of their joined debt tied them to the house, and it was a rock sinking to the bottom of a filthy swamp. Paolo had ruined them, ruined them. He felt himself hyperventilating at the enormity of what lay before them. How were they going to cope? The marriage was definitely off, no way would that be afforded.
Then he remembered the text. Well, yes, he realised, tears forming in his eyes. Yes, the marriage was off.

His parents were right after all. He never should have left with Paolo. He should have stayed at home and married some lady and lived a normal life.

Then none of… this… nightmare would have happened to him.

Roberto would have to get a job, not one that he wanted, but any job, no matter how bad the pay. Maybe multiple jobs. They needed some sort of income in an attempt to claw back their credit to some sort of reputability in order to keep applying for more credit cards, which now was their lifeline. Paolo's current income was simply a trickle in the ocean. They'd have to declare bankruptcy as Roberto wasn't sure they'd be able to pay this off ever.

No, not them, he. He needed to declare bankruptcy. He needed to get away, far away from this house and this boyfriend and this secret lover and this fucked up house. He needed to go. Get a shitty flat somewhere and begin again, from the start, building up his credit and a new social circle. He couldn't stay here any longer.

"Do you think they'll let you leave?" a quiet voice in the back of his head whispered, "do you think anyone gets out of this house alive?"

Roberto let out a low, fearful whine, putting his fist into his mouth and biting down hard enough to feel but not break the skin. Sweat began to bead on his forehead as he considered his options other than keeping the spirits of the house happy; none of them were good.

It had all gone so wrong, so quickly. He began to breathe deeply, trying to fend off the urge to throw up and the encroaching panic. He just had to wait until Paolo came home. Then they'd hash it out. They'd work it out. Somehow. He lowered his head into the darkness of his bunched up legs. He let out a small whimper and tried not to cry or scream.

Roberto lifted his head, hearing a car outside. He glanced over at the clock; he'd lost time again, hours had passed without him realising. His body was stiff from having stayed still so long and his head swayed from the blood rushing out of it.

The house, once lit up brightly from outside, was now dark. A storm was outside and Paolo was back home.

Roberto waited for the front door to open, to hear his boyfriend entering the house, but it was silent.

Seems Paolo was hiding in the car.

That's fine, Roberto could wait. He took out his mobile phone and looked at the photo of his boyfriend on another's pillow case again. His chest seized with hurt and betrayal. Quietly he sobbed as in the Living Room next door one of Bach's Arias began to play politely.

Modern Day

Rodrigo and Giulia, through text only- he didn't think he could bear to hear her voice- decided a time and day to meet later that week. They needed to talk. Maybe he could tell her the truth of his finances, maybe she'd take pity on him. She wasn't a wicked girl, but he knew she was poor herself and he had no idea how she could raise a child. Maybe it would be better for everyone if the child was adopted out. He didn't like the feel of that, especially when he was unofficially adopting two children himself, but he didn't know what else to do.
Reluctant resentment of Micheletto and Gio settled a little more firmly in his chest, as did frustration with his wife. If only she listened to him, if only she didn't disrespect him, then they wouldn't be in this mess!

Roberto looked across at the kitchen door and saw the malevolent spirit of Ludovico lingering. So, he'd come out of his hovel in the basement had he? Roberto scowled at Ludovico, the kitchen door slamming shut in the spirit's face.

Rodrigo jumped as the door shut suddenly. He stared with wide eyes, knowing that no wind was blowing through that could have done such a thing. He barely restrained himself from clutching at the crucifix he wore around his neck. Feeling that suddenly the kitchen was a hostile place, he went outside and ran up the stairs. He needed to change his clothes ready for his new client.

There was a monotonous thumping at the front door as Rodrigo barrelled down the stairs buttoning up his shirt and straightening his tie. He opened it just in time to see Benito holding his hand up mid-knock.

"Hello," smiled Rodrigo, "Benito Sforza? Catherina's boy?"

"That's me," smiled the handsome brunet, "ready to be cured of my Crazy."

Rodrigo chuckled, used to this sort of humour from most of his patients (and other psychiatrists) and opened the door to allow him in.

The boy was slender but not thin, wearing skinny black jeans and a Sex Pistols T-shirt. They settled in the Study, warm golden light reflected from the autumn leaves outside shining through the window. The light touched gently upon the bookshelves and on Rodrigo's various degrees and awards decorated upon the wall. He knew it was perhaps a bit much putting them up there in frames, but he liked to think his patients were comforted by knowing someone well educated had their mental healing in their hands.

"Mama sent me here," stated Benito, "because of my dreams."

"How Freudian, do continue," Rodrigo loved it when patients dove right into the matter, it was so much easier than easing them in with small talk first.

"I dream of getting up and putting on my war paint. I look like a skull," he gestured to his face, "similar to the candy skulls of Mexico during the Day of the Dead, do you know what I mean?"

"I do."

"Like that, but simpler. Without the fancy artistry. I'm not about making art you see, it's about making a statement. That's what matters more. It isn't about how beautiful or how ugly something is, it's about what the meaning behind it is. Ugliness is a statement, or can be, in itself."

"Well one can argue about the concepts of beauty and what that truly means anyway," argued Rodrigo. Kids like Benito just needed adults to taken them seriously, so that's what he was doing.

The boy shook his head, dismissing his remark.

"Please, let's not get philosophical."

"Is that not what we were doing?"
"No," the boy frowned, "I'm talking practically here. We do know what we mean by ugly and beauty. A shit on the floor is ugly, a rainbow is beautiful. There's only so much you can argue the point in terms of, I don't know, culture or whatever. But on the whole we know what we mean by ugly and beauty. My point is that beauty doesn't matter when it comes to making a statement, and that's what I dream about; making a statement."

"And what is your statement?" Rodrigo picked up a pen and played it against the notepad resting on one raised knee of his crossed legs.

"I wear all black," the boy continued, "get the shot gun from the attic, and then go to school. I wait for class to finish, when people are roaming about the hallways, and then I start shooting. I kill anyone, it doesn't matter who; the girl who was nice to me last Wednesday and lent me her pencil in calculus; the jerk who laughed at me when I fell over two Fridays before; the first-year kid I've never spoken to; all of them," he put up his arms as if he were holding a shot gun, loaded and shot:

"Boom"

"Boom"

"Boom."

"All gone."

"And what is your statement?" repeated Rodrigo. Since the growing prevalence of high school shootings in America, this fantasy was not a unique one. Many of his younger, and even older clients had fantasies of doing the same thing, for different reasons.

"That everyone dies, and it doesn't matter if you're an old man who treats his wife like shit or a cute little boy crushed under a wardrobe," said Benito with wide eyes. Rodrigo winced but didn't let his discomfort show. "Everyone dies," Benito continued on, "Death catches you. Life really is meaningless. It's a flash. But death is infinite. Life is that one, burning star. Death is the darkness that surrounds it. We shouldn't be less concerned with death, we should be more concerned with it."

"If life is so short," answered Rodrigo, "shouldn't it be savoured? As you say, it is a rare thing. A flash in the dark. Doesn't that make it more precious?"

The boy smirked as he shook his head, "that's what we like to think, but no, no it doesn't. Our lives mean nothing. But death could mean something."

He leaned forwards in his seat, "do you ever see Joffre? Maybe in the periphery, or whispering behind a closed door?"

Rodrigo remained perfectly still, his face composed. "It wouldn't be professional of me to speak of my personal losses," he answered at length, "but I shall speak a little on it as it's of such interest to you. I do sometimes think I see him, in the shadows, or maybe that I am hear him, but I know he isn't around. My son is dead and he is gone. What I feel is grief. Have you ever lost anyone?"

In the back of his mind he cursed his greed; had he been allocated this child properly he would have had time to get his medical records and read his notes. As it was, this student was a blank slate. He'd made an error and underestimated this child's knowledge of his personal life. He should have known; even if he hadn't seen him before, this boy was a neighbour.

"My dad died," Benito said, "right here, in this house."
There was a beat.

"Excuse me?" muttered Rodrigo very quietly.

The boy watched him with careful brown eyes. There were no physical tells of a lie being told. Rodrigo was a good liar, and a good spotter of other liars. This child was not lying.

"In the basement," he said, gesturing with his head in the correct direction.

"And how do you feel being back in this house, with such a dark history?" Rodrigo fought to keep himself calm.

"I like it here." The boy wriggled in his seat, settling in, "I'm used to it now. You do. Get used to it. You have to or else you'd go mad. I mean, mom says I'm crazy, but I'm not. You know it, I know it. Clever, morbid maybe, but in good graces with sanity. I don't judge those who lose it though. Death stretches on endlessly and there's no end, no proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. So it sends you mad. Breaks the mind, thinking of eternity. It's nice, having a connection to the living."

"Is that what I am?" asked Rodrigo, feeling something was amiss, "a link to the living?"

"Very much so," nodded Benito with a serious look on his face.

Rodrigo resisted asking if he meant his words in practicality, or if they were talking solely philosophically.

Instead, Rodrigo cleared his throat and asked, "so, how do you feel about school?"

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"I'm sorry Madam but your card has been declined," the cashier was polite enough to break the news very quietly so those behind in the queue couldn't hear.

"Excuse me?" frowned Vanozza, though she had heard very well. She glanced at Lucrezia, who shrugged in response, before getting another card out of her purse. She put it in the machine and typed in the pin number.

Declined.

"I'm sorry," said the cashier quietly, glancing back at the growing queue whose occupants were becoming restless.

"I have a card," said Lucrezia, heat in her cheeks and the tips of her ears, putting in the one her father had given her. Everyone relaxed when the card was accepted.

The cashier smiled, passing over the various toiletries for their new brothers and wishing them a good day. The ladies replied in kind and left quickly.

"We need to go to the bank," commanded Vanozza, "that shouldn't have happened."

In the coolness of the Bank Lucrezia looked around, spotting a boy from school standing with what looked like his parents. He was a small curly haired boy with dark eyes. He reminded her a little of Cesare, only a younger, much kinder Cesare. A Cesare she remembered from her childhood. The boy spotted her, blushing gently. She smirked, Paolo and Djem having made her realise her power as a woman. She smiled sweetly at him, blinking slow and holding up a hand to say hello. His shy look increased, as did a pleased grin on his face, he waved at her just as his parents went into a
private room, him following along.

Alfonso, that was his name. Alfonso Trastamara.

"Mrs. Borgia?"

"That is me," answered Vanozza.

"Please follow me," said the polite young man in a sharp suit.

Vanozza followed, both she and Lucrezia feeling a sense of foreboding.

Lucrezia looked at the text she'd sent to Cesare regarding buying clothes for Micheletto. Hastily she wrote:

**Hey, forget what I said before. See you at home x**

December 2011

It was raining hard outside. The wind was bellowing, throwing bins and debris down the street and threatening to break out into a full storm. Still, Paolo sat in the car looking pensively at the house. He took out a cigarette and began to smoke, feeling at ease now that its poison was floating through into his lungs. Roberto hated it when he smoked, especially in the car. But for the last few months Roberto had increasingly become insufferable to be around.

It was one of the reasons why Paolo was sitting in the car, and had been for half an hour, simply looking at their home.

It seemed like the house, which had once appeared tall and noble, was now leering down at him. Everything was going wrong. Beside him, on the passenger seat, was a bunch of flowers, (all various shades of red, from scarlet to vermillion, to match the house's dark and passionate decor) which was laughable because how were flowers going to fix anything?

It was hard to pinpoint exactly when Paolo began to fall out of love with Roberto and when Roberto, doubtless sensing this, began to pour all his love and energy into the house instead. It was utter madness. The men had wanted to marry, now that it was legal, and adopt a child or two. Now it was as if the house was Roberto's child. His child and lover.

'Maybe we should go and get therapy?' Paolo mused. "I can't stand the idea that we're one of those couples now, the kind that hardly talk to one another. Going to therapy is stupid and pathetic, but what else can I do?" He glanced at the backseat thinking about what he had been doing in it just over half an hour ago. "God, look what I've become!" He finished his cigarette and threw it out the window before climbing out of his car, grabbing the flowers before he did so.

He ran across the drive up onto the patio before scrambling for his keys and letting himself inside.

As usual the foyer was wide and intimidating. The wide staircase stood before him, the lights were off upstairs and it looked like the staircase was leading off into Death.

For him this house never really seemed like a home and as time had gone on and his relationship with Roberto deteriorated, he increasingly resented it.

A light shone on his right, signalling that Roberto was sitting in the living room. Paolo sighed and hung his head slightly. He had only been in the rain for a few minutes as he had run into the house, but his hair had been sufficiently soaked, and now clear droplets fell to the floor like tears. He
hated the living room. He had had a disturbing experience in there a few weeks ago and since had tied to avoid it. Conversely Roberto went in there increasingly frequently.

Steeling himself, he raised himself up to his normal height and walked into the living room. His heart dropped almost immediately. The whole room had been re-arranged, again, and Roberto was sitting on the floor surrounded by letters. Paolo recognised them. They were warning letters from his bank, his lawyers and other companies he owed money to.

Roberto looked at him, brown eyes blank of emotion. He held up a late bill letter that was threatening them. "What is all this?" Roberto said, his voice calm. Paolo was not convinced, he knew that soon the storm was coming. "Why did you not tell me we were in so much debt?"

"You've changed around the furniture?"

"So this is another secret you've kept from me?"

"It looks kinda nineteen-fifties in here now..."

Roberto stood up, "what have you done that you've been sitting in the car for almost an hour? I see you have bought flowers. You never do anything romantic for me anymore unless you feel guilty."

Paolo gritted his teeth and pulled his eyes away from the re-designed room to look at his lover. Roberto looked pale and tired.

'I'm sorry about the bills.' He said at last, "I just didn't want you to get worried, and costs just spiralled out of control-"

"Screw the bills!" screamed Roberto, flinging the papers in Paolo's face. Ah, so finally Roberto was reverting back to his usual fire-cracker ways. "You only say that because you now know that I know!" the younger man continued, "you could have told me! You could have! We never kept secrets before! Now we move to this house and I am doing my best to make this house our dream home whilst you waste away our funds!"

"I waste away our funds?" repeated Paolo incredulously, "you keep re-designing the house! You keep redecorating! It's insanity. There was nothing wrong with it when we arrived. For god's sake it was fully furnished. But you keep insisting on bringing it back to whatever period takes your fancy from week to week." He gestured around the room, "why is here now decorated like it's 1953? Why? You've never even been interested in the past? What's this insane obsession?"

"Stop using the word insane," hissed Roberto in response, "If I had known the trouble we were in I wouldn't have spent the money. I re-decorate because I have to. Besides, how else shall I spend my time? I can't get any work in this god-forsaken town and you're out with your whore!"

Paolo opened his mouth to argue but Roberto sighed and sat down on the arm rest of a settee. "I'm so tired." He continued, more to himself than the Paolo. "I decorate the house to keep them happy, so that they feel at home. But I can't do it right. I can't sleep. I can't..." he brushed a hand over his face and through his long, brown hair, "I can't make love to you because I'm so tired. And that's why you go to other men. But I need you. I need your support but every day you slip further away and I fall into the clutches of this house."

"What are you talking about?" whispered Paolo, suddenly feeling cold. The unspoken tension between them was now being voiced, and Paolo found that he was too afraid to talk about it. "Who are 'they'?"

There was a silence before Roberto looked at him, his eyes once more blank and his voice
inflectionless. "Nothing," he muttered, "I'm not talking about anything. Forget it." He stood and walked over to Paolo with small, subdued movements. "Thanks you for the flowers. They'll match the first floor bedroom."

"We'll sell the house," called Paolo after Roberto had taken the flowers and walked to the living room door, "we'll sell it and move away. We'll have a fresh start somewhere new."

"This was our fresh start," bit back Roberto, "remember?"

Watching his boyfriend vanish into the living room, Paolo took out his phone and text his lover:

Hey. Look, we need to stop this. I'm sorry. X

**Present Day**

Rodrigo sat behind his desk. He toyed with the idea of leaving the house, but then became annoyed that he was so frightened that he couldn't stay alone in his own home, and so stayed put.

Quietly, he seethed. Why the hell had that bitch next door not warned him about the death of her husband in this house? She hadn't told him that they had lived here! What else didn't he know? The bitch who sold him the damned place had kept that to herself as well.

He opened up a drawer and took out a bottle of scotch. He didn't normally drink this time of day but he was too angry and up-tight. Besides, he wasn't like goody-two-shoes Cesare who was far too much like his damnable mother as far as Rodrigo was concerned.

He poured two fingers and downed it in one go before pouring another two.

Benito put him on edge but he couldn't afford to pass the kid on to someone else. God knows the whole thing was unprofessional; the kid was too closely connected to his family and their home. But he needed the money. Damn Vanozza and those brats she bought into the house…

He shook his head, frowning as the negative thoughts crowded into his mind, blurring his thinking. No, he didn't hate his wife or the kids. He loved kids as a general rule and knew a lot of this current situation was due to his own poor actions.

He downed another glass and turned up the thermostat. The house was freezing. Outside the weather had turned. The sky was slate grey and raining morosely.

Rodrigo felt strange. Like something was crawling around his skin, prodding and poking, seeping into his pores. He shuddered and rubbed his neck, wanting to get the creeping feeling off.

He downed another tumbler before refilling. Something was wrong but he couldn't figure out what. It was just like this house; strangers appearing and disappearing in the corridors, his children behaving secreively and strangely, the loss of family and the arrival of new ones. He felt as if he was continuously having the rug pulled from under him. There was never any respite.

His body suddenly felt weak. He slumped in the chair of his office, breathing heavily. He closed his eyes, focusing down onto the soles of his feet. It was a mindfulness technique, meant to help with in-coming panic and stress. He focused down and allowed the darkness to surround him. However as everything began to slow, he heard a whisper of:

"**daddy**…"

He grunted.
"Daddy… watch out."

He jerked violently, eyes open and sweat on his brow. He had heard that last bit. Heard it, as if someone was in the room with him. No, not someone. He knew that voice. He had heard Joffre, loud and clear. He looked around. That hadn't been in his head, it hadn't been an illusion. But how was it possible?

It was raining hard outside, the drops beating themselves against the window pane.

Rodrigo forced himself to calm down. He must have imagined Joffre's voice. It seemed unlikely, because Rodrigo knew his own mind and knew his senses, but there was no other logical explanation.

He took a swig from his tumbler when it happened. He felt his body grow tense and taut. His jaw gripped together and his couldn't cry out. He let out a few muffled sounds of panic before…

It stopped.

Rodrigo was now sitting in his chair. He was very still. Blinking slowly, he looked at the tumbler in his hand and frowned slightly.

He jerked up when he heard the front door opened and shut. Walking out into the foyer Rodrigo saw Micheletto standing, very wet, with Cesare. The boys were taking off their coats, Cesare's thick and warm, Micheletto's a small, thin jacket.

"Why is he still dressed like that?" he barked at Cesare, pointing at Micheletto.

Both boys startled suddenly and then stared at him with wide eyes.

"What-?" began Cesare, a frown forming.

"Save whatever smart ass comment you have for me," Rodrigo growled, "why is he still dressed like a tramp? For god's sakes it makes us look like idiots having him look like sick dog! I told you to get him sorted."

Cesare's eyes darkened and a tremendous scowl blackened his features, "first of all," he said quietly as if to counter Rodrigo's noise, "he isn't a dog and he doesn't need to be sorted. Second, you said no such thing to me."

"I told Lucrezia to tell you."

"She text me to tell me to get him clothes but then twenty minutes later said to forget about it!" Cesare shouted back, feeling intense anger and humiliation on behalf of his foster brother, "who do you think you are speaking about him like that! He's a kid in your care! I don't give a fuck what people think about us!"

"Well maybe you should and then you'd actually have friends!"

"I have friends!"

Rodrigo let out a scoff, "I doubt that Cesare. Probably some poor saps you've bullied into submission or some losers like this guy pining over you," he gestured at Micheletto, who watched the whole argument quietly and dispassionately.

"Are you drunk?" asked Cesare suddenly. "Oh god you are. Well, we'll leave you to feel like a jack
ass tomorrow, but don't bother apologising to me because I don't forgive you!"

"Of course you don't," sighed Rodrigo disdainfully.

Cesare grabbed Micheletto's arm and raced up the stairs.

"They used to call me Il Moro!" Rodrigo shouted up at them, "that's how respected I was! That's how much people used to look up to me!"

Cesare slammed his bedroom door shut, having pulled Micheletto all the way up there. He buzzed around the room, pointlessly angry and moving without purpose.

"He's a fucking pathetic animal!" shouted Cesare, turning on Micheletto with wild eyes, "you need to ignore him! Understand? Never listen to a thing he has to say! He doesn't respect anyone of any worth and only cares for the most base and most useless things in life!"

He stared at Micheletto for a moment before pulling the boy into a bone crushing hug. Micheletto allowed him, feeling pretty stunned by the whole situation.

"You're so much better than Juan," said Cesare brokenly, "don't let them tell you otherwise. You're not stupid, or a dog, or a loser."

Carefully, Micheletto moved his hand so that he was gently tapping Cesare on the back in a 'there, there' motion. Cesare cried softly and bitterly, feeling humiliated by his father. He couldn't bear Micheletto seeing him in such a state, so he pushed him out of the room as suddenly as he pulled him into a hug.

"I'll get you clothes, go to your room," he bit out, slamming the bedroom door on Micheletto before throwing himself on his bed and crying into his pillow, hating how dramatic he was being but feeling at a loss to stopping it.

Outside, the family car came screeching into the driveway.

Vanozza stormed out. The rain was pouring heavily. Her face was wet and make up was running down it. She looked a lot like Beatrice. She stormed into the house, leaving her two children in the car.

Lucrezia leaned over to the driver's door and shut it, making no move to leave the car. She looked back to Gio who was sitting in the back seat, in a baby chair. He smiled gummily at her. She returned the smile. She wasn't going to let what happened to Joffre happen to Gio, he wasn't going to grow up hearing his parents arguing. Instead they would just sit in the car and wait it out. She turned on the radio and turned up the heating, pointedly ignoring the fact that outside her window Giovanni Sforza was staring at her, one cigarette hanging out his mouth.

Inside his bedroom, Cesare began to slow his tears. He rubbed at his face angrily, embarrassed that Micheletto had seen him in such a state. There was something wrong with his father, he knew that much. He wasn't stupid enough to not notice that Rodrigo had been speaking in a way that was
completely unlike him…and yet…

And yet… Cesare couldn't help but wonder if there was some truth in Rodrigo's words. Cesare knew how much Father craved the affections and respect of people around them, how much he needed to be validated by others. So was it such a stretch to imagine him being ashamed of Micheletto, of being ashamed of Cesare?

The way Rodrigo looked at Juan was so different to how he looked at Cesare. It was clear that Cesare was a nuisance to him, a bore. Juan and Rodrigo would have long chats together, laughing and cackling. They were lads together. It was never like that between Cesare and his dad.

He leaned up and turned so he was sitting on the bed when, suddenly, a force dragged him across the bed so that he ended up falling on the floor. He yelped in pain, scrambling to his feet just as something violently threw him. This time he hit into the wall by the window. He let out a pained cry before running to the bedroom door. He got out and slammed the door just as a heavy chest from his desk flew at his head.

Stunned and in pain, Cesare raced down the stairs to reach Micheletto.

Micheletto had arrived on the first floor just as the door opened and he heard a whole lot of shouting in French.

He stilled for a moment, considering going into his bedroom, but against his better judgement, slowly peeked around the stairs to see Vanozza and Rodrigo staring at each other in the foyer. She looked half mad and he looked drunk off his ass.

Micheletto felt a slight stab of panic; where was his little brother?

Vanozza began to shout again, pointing dramatically at Rodrigo.

"I don't speak French you crazy whore," he said belligerently, swaying slightly. The bottle of scotch now in his hand. How it had gotten there so quickly was anyone's guess.

She began to play around with her bag, struggling to get it open until at last it tore free and she tipped its contents onto the floor. From the mess on the ground she scrambled to pick up a piece of paper. She continued to yell, tears streaming down her face.

Micheletto jumped when he suddenly saw Cesare at his periphery. It wasn't often Micheletto was snuck up on; so either Cesare was very stealthy or he had been more distracted by the argument than he realised. Cesare was bleeding slightly on the lip and one of the scratches on his face had re-opened. Tears tracks were on his face.

Micheletto looked away.

Rodrigo looked at it with bleary eyes, and then began to laugh. "Yes, we're broke!" He laughed, "it's all over! We're ruined!"

Vanozza dropped to her knees and began to cry.

"Hah!" shouted Rodrigo, "you didn't react that badly even after Joffre died!"
Suddenly a black ball of anger barrelled into Rodrigo's side, knocking him over and sending him flying across the polished foyer floor. Rodrigo looked up to see Cesare standing over him. Further back he saw Micheletto standing by Vanozza.

"You little bastard," he bit out angrily, "how dare you! Do you know who I am?"

"Do you?" asked Cesare.

Rodrigo stood up, no longer Rodrigo but now Ludovico Sforza. He looked at the boys, now seeing Ascanio and Benito.

"You think you little bastards can kill me?" he asked, "you really think that?"

Micheletto took a couple of steps back, not liking where this was going. He wanted to get Vanozza into the kitchen, but she was just slumped on the floor like a rag doll. She was dead weight and at his light weight and small height he wasn't strong enough to move her.

As he stood by the kitchen door, he felt something pressed into his hand. Before he even had a chance to register the feeling and look up to whoever had put something there, Rodrigo rushed Cesare, barrelling on top of him and punching him in the face. Cesare began to fight back, but naturally pulled his punches as it was his father he was fighting with.

Micheletto ran over and pushed Rodrigo off, pushing the thing in his hand into Rodrigo's side.

Rodrigo fell heavily, crying out in pain.

Cesare pushed himself up on his arms, looking at his father and then Micheletto with wide eyes. Micheletto looked down and saw that in his hand was a bloodied knife. He felt his heart flutter.

"I didn't mean to," he said immediately to Cesare, hoping the boy believed him.

Cesare got to his feet.

He walked over to where his father lay on the floor, grabbing at his bleeding side, and taking a vase from a nearby table, smacked him over the head with it.

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Lucrezia was still waiting in the car when the ambulance and police arrived. She watched from inside the car as her heavily bandaged father was taken away.

She watched Cesare watching his father leave, with a cold glint in his eyes. And in that moment, she knew it had been her brother who had done that to her father. Besides Cesare stood Micheletto, her brother's new shadow.

It was still raining. Vanozza was in the kitchen. She was sitting at the table, staring down and apparently in shock. Cesare had lied to the police, saying an intruder had attacked his father. It hadn't been very convincing despite how well Cesare lied. However, the moment he gave them the description of the Preacher, the police had given each other ominous and knowing glances. Suddenly, his story seemed more reliable and the police were willing to leave, at least for now.

Standing by Cesare, watching an unconscious and possibly dying Rodrigo being taken away in the ambulance, Micheletto glanced over to the car. Lucrezia was watching them, staring with wide eyes, like they were monsters. But then, he supposed they were.
He was relieved to see Gio in the backseat, staring forwards as if focused on Lucrezia. That was interesting; Gio never showed much interest in anyone usually.

"Get Lucrezia and the baby in the house," Cesare commanded Micheletto without taking his eyes off the receding ambulance, "the police are leaving a couple of family support officers outside to watch over the house. I don't want anything suspicious going on, like her refusing to come inside."

Micheletto nodded and went to do his bidding, stepping out into the pouring rain.

He tapped on the car window. Lucrezia wound down the window.

"Your brother wants you inside," said Micheletto.

"You mean our brother," she answered faintly. Micheletto didn't respond.

That was the first time the pair had ever spoken to one another.

Slowly, she unzipped her seat belt and followed him inside, he holding happily gurgling Gio who he'd taken out of the backseat.

Sensing that this was the right thing to do, she hooked her arm around Micheletto's free one. He looked a little surprised by this, but allowed it.

They passed Cesare standing on the threshold of the house, neither looking at the dark-haired boy.

Cesare closed the door behind them.

Chapter End Notes

I hate the ending of this- with the fight between the family. I've re-written it so many times and I just can't get it right. There were so many different perspectives and the whole thing was so quick. I just...urgh... I think it's difficult to read and choppy. IDK. I didn't want to sit on it any longer, but, yeah, it feels messy.
**Roberto's Death**

Last time: Rodrigo receives a text from Giulia saying she is pregnant and that they need to meet. Vannozza is behaving increasingly strangely- speaking French and forgetting things- and also has found out the family are financially ruined. Micheletto and baby Gio have been adopted into the family. Micheletto is bonding with Cesare over their murder of The Preacher. Lucrezia vows to protect baby Gio. Rodrigo was possessed by Ludovico. Micheletto stabs him and he is taken to hospital.

Present Day

Rodrigo was unconscious but stable.

Lucrezia broke the news to her brothers, Cesare and Micheletto, as they sat around the kitchen table. The sun shone weakly through the window. It was early, Cesare and Lucrezia wearing their uniforms. Micheletto had no school to go to and it was unlikely their mother was mentally stable enough to begin arrangements; she barely even remembered that Micheletto existed.

“I don’t mind staying in the house,” he said when the subject arose, “I didn’t go to school much before.”

“Why?” asked Lucrezia, determined to get to know this strange creature that had somehow befriended were notoriously unfriendly brother.

Micheletto shrugged, his reticence returning.

“It’s works out better this way” said Cesare, serving everyone with hot drinks before loading up the toaster, “it gives you time to settle in. You’ve barely been here two days and look at all that has happened.”

Lucrezia shifted uncomfortably, “is staying in the house the best idea?”

“I don’t mind,” answered Micheletto.

“He’s tough,” said Cesare at the same time.

Lucrezia pinched her lips together before passing Micheletto her mobile phone. It had a case that was pink and sparkly. It looked so at odds with Micheletto that Cesare burst out laughing as he buttered the toast.

“Keep it,” she said, ignoring Cesare, “and if you need to call us, even just to hear Cesare’s voice, do. Go out for a walk whenever you can. If mama let’s you try to take the baby too.”

He nodded solemnly. Cesare put down the plate of toast and they all began to dig in.

Cesare and Lucrezia walked to school slowly. They’d left the house earlier than necessary, which made Lucrezia feel bad for Micheletto who was stuck there alone, but she had simply been too keen to leave its oppressive atmosphere.
“What are we going to do about the money situation?”

“Is it really that bad?” Cesare asked.

Lucrezia nodded, “mama’s debit and credit card are maxed out. I think it was pot luck that we had a small amount left on dad’s express. Maybe we can get jobs. The minimum age here is fifteen.”

“Maybe, but is this because you also are looking to spend more time out of the house?”

“Of course,” she frowned, not liking how stupid Cesare was being, “of course I want out of the house! It possessed Juan, it killed Joffre! And according to you it possessed dad too. I don’t want some ghost getting into my head, or worse.”

“It’s not that bad,” Cesare sighed, “they can be reasoned with.”

“Like that thing you visit in the basement?” she bit out, “I think you’re falling under it’s thrall. I don’t like what it’s doing to you Cesare.”

He stopped walking and she followed his example, “what it’s doing to me?” he repeated incredulously, “what do you mean by that?!?”

She looked determined, but worry was in her eyes. She hated fighting with Cesare. Before they moved to Italy they almost never fought. “You’re becoming mean. What you did to that kid from our school, sending him into the basement? That was horrible. And your toadies from school, marching around acting like a gang, like you own the place. I get that you always want to be top dog Cesare, and that’s fine. I even respect you for it. But the way you’re going about it…” she trailed off, shrugging.

“I’ve always been this way,” Cesare argued, feeling stung, “the one who’s changed is you! You think it doesn’t hurt me? I see you hiding away in your room, blasting music in the living room that you never listened to before. I know you’re keeping secrets from me. I hear you speaking to others in your room. I can tell by the way you look at me. Something’s happened and you won’t tell me.”

She backed away, her throat constricting. He watched with large, dark eyes.

“I thought you loved me,” he whispered.

“I do!” she cried, horrified he would think otherwise, “but… I can’t tell you everything! Yes, something has happened, but I’ve dealt with it. It’s something you couldn’t save me from. So I just… got through it.”

She could tell this hurt him even more, so she took a deep steadying breath before stepping closer to him once more and putting her hand on his arm. “I promise to tell you one day. I’ll tell you everything. But not right now. If you want to help me, you need to give me this time to come to terms with it all.”

He clenched his jaw but nodded his assent.

They continued walking to school, joining the legions of other students pouring through the school gates.

December 2011

Roberto ran himself a bath. He felt drained and empty, like loving Paolo had drained all the emotions out of him. They were ruined financially. Even though they weren’t married, they both
were on the mortgage. It meant that the house would be repossessed (no way could they keep up mortgage payments) and he’d probably never have the opportunity to own his own home again. It was his own stupid fault; he never should have allowed Paolo to talk him into buying such a huge house.

He climbed into the bath, looking sadly down at his body. His was small and tan. His muscles were small and soft. He was nothing like his Adonis boyfriend. He wondered about the Other Man. He was probably tall and beautiful and fair just like Paolo.

He closed his eyes and leaned back in the bath. He always knew Paolo was out of his league, but he had hoped…

He snorted, what? Hoped that Paolo would love him for his ‘sparkling personality’? Roberto knew that he was a short, angry man who had been a self-loathing homophobe most of his life. Then in this house he’d become strange and distant and forgetful. There was nothing lovable about him. He had no idea why Paolo had wasted his time with him to begin with.

He heard the front door slam before hearing an engine starting up. Paolo had left. Probably meeting his lover. Roberto wanted to cry, but he didn’t. He rarely cried anymore. He just lay in the bath that was just a smidge too hot, filled only with regrets and self-loathing. That was probably the saddest thing, that even with everything Paolo had done, Roberto still found that he was angrier with himself.

He’d told himself earlier that he would leave, return home and obey his family. He’d marry a woman; someone kind who wouldn’t mind his being bad in bed due to feeling ill at the notion of it all. Someone who he could at least be friends with. Someone who he could bear. He would start again.

But Roberto knew that wouldn’t happen. He couldn’t go back to his parents, even if they accepted him he would end up killing himself out of misery. He’d come close a few times as a teenager.

No, instead he would leave and find some cheap flat somewhere. Get some shitty job to pay the bills. No dating. No men. Just no one. He didn’t deserve anyone; ugly, annoying and now poor to boot? Who would want him?

The air chilled around him and he felt a presence. He wasn’t alarmed, it was likely a ghost, and right now he didn’t even care if it was one of the more violent ones. He opened his eyes and looked straight into a pair of pale blue ones.

Roberto blinked and attempted to sit up, “who are-?”

Had he opportunity he would have seen that the man- who was not a ghost- was wearing a plastic overall and a pair of leather gloves. That he was sweating slightly and had the look of a determined killer.

Before Roberto could finish his sentence his head was pushed under the water. He flailed and splashed around for a number of minutes before…”

He ended up sitting calmly in the kitchen. He was wearing the outfit he had worn earlier that day. He was dry. Roberto looked around the kitchen, confused. What had just happened? He stood and left the kitchen, going back upstairs and into the bathroom. A man he did not know was sitting on the floor, panting heavily. In the bath, lay Roberto. He saw himself there, naked and wet, in the bath. One leg was cocked over the side. Several items like the soap bar and the shower body wash had fallen into the bath, likely from his kicking and thrashing about earlier. And it was then that
Roberto realised that he had died.

He was a ghost.
Last time: Rodrigo is in hospital. He is unconscious but stable. Lucrezia finally admits to Cesare that something did happen to her, but she isn’t ready to tell him yet.

Warning/triggers: Brief mention of the subject of abortion. I’m pro-choice, for what it’s worth. I’m just writing in the mind of the character, not making any statements.

Present Day

It’s late. Giulia sits outside of the Borgias house, uncertain of how to proceed. She and Rodrigo had spoken via text that Sunday, arranging to meet on Thursday to discuss their…situation. She was already five months along. Abortion was too late and being a Catholic it didn’t comfortably sit aside with her views. She knew this was laughable, considering she had conceived this baby with her married foster father, but she didn’t want to compound one sin with another. However, there was no way she could afford to raise a child and this was a bad time in her life, she had only just started getting her shit together (mainly thanks to the help her ex-foster mother, Vanozza, had given her.)

Rodrigo had told her the address and the day, but they had agreed to talk later regarding a time. However, he hadn’t gotten back to her or responded to any of her texts or calls.

The lights were on in the house, so she knew people were home. What was best, for her to march up to the front door and either hope it was just him or bear with the fallout if the rest of the family were there? She couldn’t bear another drama like the last one. It had been awful; Vanozza crying and screaming, the look on the faces of Cesare, Juan and Lucrezia. She had been sure that Cesare would have killed her that night if he could’ve. They had always had a cool relationship. Cesare was a closed book and had an air of danger about him. She’d avoided Juan because he was skeezy, less-fun version of Rodrigo. Though, that night, even he had looked disgusted at her. But the biggest hurt, besides Vanozza, had been Lucrezia. Giulia had lived with the Borgias for four years. In that time the girls had grown very close, Giulia a big sister to Lucrezia. She had taught Lucrezia how to dress and how to act around cute boys. Her look of betrayal had been devastating.

To walk into that again, to reawaken that trauma didn’t seem worth it. Yet, another part of her, the base Id part, did want that to happen. She wanted to shake the hornet’s nest, to let them know she hadn’t gone away. It wasn’t fair; Rodrigo was as guilty as she, yet he had gotten to stay with his family. She, being now nineteen and not needing a foster family (the Borgias had kept her out of love), had been cast off. They had given her money before throwing her to the street, but that had only been enough to pay rent on a tiny, awful apartment for a month. From there she was on her own. Meanwhile, Rodrigo lived in this big fancy house, with his three children and his wife. They had all moved on, and she had been sacrificed. She had been the goat, sent off into the wilderness to carry away with her all the sins of her people.

She looked down at her small but swollen belly. Well, she had bought those sins right back.

December 2011
Paolo returned home about midnight. He had spent a good chunk of time waiting for his lover to turn up. He had text that they needed to stop their relationship, but he wanted to do it in person as well. Paolo was a weak man but not evil and he avoided cruelty when he was strong enough to do so. Seeing Roberto like that had woken him to the reality of their situation. It wasn’t just that their finances were in ruins or that something had gone wrong in their relationship; it was that Roberto was having some sort of mental health breakdown. At first he’d been concerned, then frustrated, but now he was truly worried. Roberto needed to go to hospital. Paolo needed to fix their money problem. Then, when they were both somewhat whole again, they could begin their lives once more.

Roberto was his soul mate, he was sure of that. They had been dating around five months before Paolo came to that conclusion. They went through a lot together; the evil of Roberto’s family, Paolo never being accepted by his father not because he was gay but because he could never live up to the ridiculously high expectations his father wanted. He realised now that all of this; the fancy house, the fancy job, living in the Vatican State, having a boyfriend and a side boyfriend, was all part of him trying to live out the fantasy life his father wanted. His father had cheated on his mother multiple times. She was a drunk racist who didn’t care as long as she had credit cards to spend. Paolo had grown up in a large house where no one spoke to each other. He had learned Spanish by talking so often to the maids.

Well no more. He’d break it off with Allesandro gently and kindly. Then he’d go home and make Roberto feel like the beautiful, loved being that he was. He remembered when he first saw Roberto. His family had been driving out somewhere in the countryside. The sort of place that stinks of cow shit and always has bug flying around. Their fancy car, driven to fast by their father, raced down the gently curving country lanes. To the one side were large, hulking trees belonging to a forest. On the other were vast fields, all cultivated by farmers. There was a fence shielding these fields from the road. And on one of these fences sat a boy. They had been going so fast Paolo had only seen him for a second; dark, shiny autumn hair that was too long, brushing down the boy’s neck. His skin was tanned and covered in dust and mud. His eyes were dark as he glanced at the roaring car, judgement in his eyes.

He was like a vision. Maybe Paolo had fallen in love with him right then, and only his logical mind had forced him to stave off that thought until he had really gotten to know him.

They had met a few days later, at some crap country fair that his mother had sneered as being quaint before going to get buzzed on cider and that his father had said was a waste of land space before going off to join a group of men playing cards. Roberto’s parents had been there too; screaming about god and handing out pamphlets. Roberto had stood stock still, and leaflet in his outstretched hand, a pissed off expression on his face. He was the oldest in what was about nine other children. All were dirty, all were spitfire, and all gave the slight implication of not quite being right. But, as Roberto’s dark eyes met his own light ones, he found himself smiling and not minding that at all.

Whatever was not right about Roberto had been enhanced in their time at this house. Paolo was determined for it not to ruin him like it ruined his parents. He wasn’t going to end up like that mad Preacher in the Park, screaming about heresy and death. He wasn’t sure how yet, especially with money being so tight, but he’d find a way. And the first step was by dumping Allesandro.

However, Allesandro had never turned up, despite all of Paolo’s texts and calls. So in the end he returned home.

He entered the house. Billy Holiday played softly in the living room.
As he walked through the foyer, the kitchen light suddenly switched on. The door was open and so he could see that no one was inside. This didn’t bother Paolo; the house was old and weird stuff was always happening. He reckoned that Roberto was attributing it all to some divine or supernatural entity, but Roberto had been raised by religious nut-jobs so that would be his first line of thought.

He walked up the stairs and saw a distant light on; the light of the first floor bathroom. He smiled softly and walked towards it. The door opened and someone stepped out.

“Rober-” Paolo stopped. It was not Roberto in front of him, instead it was the tall and slim Allesandro.

“What are you doing here?” hissed Paolo. This was all wrong; he didn’t want these two worlds colliding; one that was his home and his soulmate, the other was his tawdry half life with his sexy illegitimate lover. Never were the two to combine. Don’t cross the streams.

The light of the bathroom shone over the open door behind Allesandro, lighting up his bright hair and making him seem more angelic than usual.

Allesandro smiled, “it’s ok baby,” he gushed, “I’ve sorted everything.”

Paolo felt himself grow pale and his stomach rolled. “What…?”

Allesandro kept smiling as he lifted out his arms to embrace Paolo. The thought made Paolo sick, he pushed passed his lover barking, “what have you done!!”

He stepped into the bathroom. Water was all over the floor. The mirror and window were slightly steamed. The bath was full of water, slightly coloured with the oak milk bath stuff that Roberto liked. He said it was good for his skin. He said it made him feel indulgent, as back home they only could bath in semi-warm plain water.

Paolo found himself shaking. Knees giving way, he slid down the wall and sat on the wet floor. Insanely, the thought that crossed his mind was, “Roberto must have really put up a fight.”

As well as the splashed water was all the stuff knocked off the sides into the bath. In the bath with the oak milk soak. And his boyfriend. Roberto, also, was there, in the bath. Well, only his arm and leg were visible, both slumped over the side. The rest of Roberto, including his head, were all under water.

With a sudden pulse of energy, Paolo threw himself forward. He needed to get Roberto out of the bath. He needed to save him. To call an ambulance. He dove his hands into the water (the water was cold) and heaved up his lover. Roberto had been tanned all his life, such were most born in the sunny south of Italy, so close to Greece. But now he was pale. His lips were even white.

Paolo let out a sound. A wail, short but pained. Animalistic.

Roberto was small in his arms, and heavy. His hair darker than normal thanks to the weight of the water in it. His eyes were blessedly closed, so he couldn’t see how those big doe eyes had been warped by death and water.

It was too late to save him.

Dragging the body further out of the water, Paolo hugged his soulmate tightly. He rocked them gently, Paolo realising at some point that he was whimpering. It was a high sound, not unlike that of a distressed dog.
It took longer for him to realise someone was talking. It was only when Allesandro knelt down beside him and began to shake him arm that he heard him.

“It’s for the best. Now we can be together. You said you hated him.”

Paolo turned to look at Allesandro. He no longer looked angelic. He looked sickly. He looked stupid. Lanky and scrawny. Too much time working on his glamour muscles and nowhere that truly counted to make the body strong. His face thin and horsey. That annoying way he wheezed when he slept that used to keep Paolo up.

“I never said that.”

“You did,” Allesandro’s eyes were wide, that of someone desperate to seem innocent whilst lying through their teeth, “You did. I remember.”

“I did not. I never said that. I know. I remember.” Paolo stood, rage beginning to thrum through his veins. Adrenaline was coursing, causing his body to shake. “Leave. Leave before I kill you.”

Allesandro stood also, shaking his head in shock, “no, no. This isn’t how it was supposed to go! Look, we’re in love. We can make something of this. We needed to do this!”

“We? What do you mean we?” Paolo felt tears burning in his eyes. “You did this! I told you we needed to stop and I never, ever made you think this was more than what it was. You knew I love Roberto! I,” he paused, adding painfully, “I loved Roberto. I loved him. And you’ve taken him away.”

He lunged towards his ex-lover, anger in his heart. Allesandro cried out. He had been prepared for murder. Drowning Paolo had been convenient. But he had bought other tools.

Paolo slumped on top of him, the growl he’d let out on charging dying. Allesandro pushed him off himself. Paolo slumped down onto the wet, bathroom floor. His side was bleeding, and quickly. The red of his blood merged with the water. Paolo’s eyes were wide with shock as he looked up at Allesandro holding a large butcher’s knife.

With one terrified glance at the two men, Allesandro fled the scene, taking the knife with him. Gasping for air, Paolo used the last of his strength to reach up and hold Roberto’s hand.

Slowly he closed his eyes.

And when he opened them again, he was standing in the bathroom looking at both himself and Roberto.

He too was a ghost.

Later he watched as police decided that Roberto, with a family history of mental illness and unsocial behaviour, must have killed his lover and then calmly drowned himself in the bath. Roberto locked himself in the kitchen, refusing to engage with any of the spirits other than what was necessary. He wouldn’t see Paolo at all. Paolo ended up haunting the attic bedroom, bitter and angry with all that he had lost.
And then Cesare moved in.

**Present Day**

There was a knock on the door.

Vanozza, rocking a happily gurgling Gio tutted and sighed, “now who could that be?”

The door knocked again, more insistent this time.

Vanozza sighed, cursing her lazy children who were probably closer to the door than she was, and placed Gio in his crib before making her way downstairs. The corridors were dark as usual. She could hear something heavy moving about in the attic, so it was likely that Cesare was moving about furniture for some reason. Vanozza loved her oldest child, and she recognised how loyal he was to her and appreciated it, but she had always found his to be the oddest of her five little ones.

The room opposite her’s was Joffre’s and she could hear him whispering inside. Not for the first time she wondered who he was speaking to, but she smiled softly, taking comfort in the fact that his spirit was there as usual, safe and sound. Down to the next floor she heard music playing softly in Lucrezia’s room and the sound of her voice and an answering male.

The door knocked again and she rolled her eyes, making her way down the dark, wide staircase to the foyer. Through the stained glass above the front door the outside light shone in, lighting up the centre of the foyer and accentuating the darkness of its edges.

Of all the ghosts Vanozza had been subjected to, this was not one she expected to see.

Giulia Farnesse, her former foster child.

Vanozza felt her jaw tighten as Giulia, young and slim and pretty shifted anxiously in the doorway. “Hello Vanozza,” she muttered, looking to the side and down. It was clear Giulia had dreaded this confrontation as much as her ex-foster mother.

“What are you doing here?” Vanozza hissed, a part of her mind shocked at how frosty she sounded.

Giulia’s eyes pricked with tears, “I needed to see…Rodrigo. I wasn’t going to restart the affair! It’s about something else, something important.”

Cold shock melted away into pure, red-hot anger. “Go away!” snapped Vanozza, glaring at Giulia, She hated this girl. She *hated* her! “I cannot believe you have the audacity to come back to us! Go away and never return you fucking little whore!”

The insult made Giulia look up at her, “oh, I’m the whore?” she let out a short, humourless laugh, “and what of your precious husband? He still gets to stay her, in the bosom of his family!”

“He isn’t any more forgiven than you!” roared Vanozza, the old fiery passion of who she once was letting rip once more. The strange feeling she had been experiencing recently, the one of her slipping away, was suddenly torn from her and she felt wholly herself again. “However, he was with us first and get’s squatters rights! You do not! Come here again and I shall call the police.”

She went to slam the door shut, but Giulia put her foot in the way and leaned her body into the
door. Evidently, Giulia had gained some weight where Vanozza had faded away since the death of
Joffre.

Giving up but irrationally angry, Vanozza stepped away from the door and marched up the stairs;
angry and desperate to leave the conflict. Giulia chased after her.

“Vanozza!” she called, “Vanozza listen to me! Stop hating me because he chose to fuck me over
you!”

Giulia grasped the edge of Vanozza’s sleeve just as Vanozza spun around on the stair and, without
thinking, pushed Giulia.

Time slowed for a moment. Vanozza took in Giulia, her skin so fair her despite coming from the
Spanish sun; her body tight and slim; her pretty eyes wide with shock, the whites showing all
around the irises. Her arms flung out automatically, trying to grasp onto something. Perhaps on
some level her brain was searching to grab onto the bannisters, but the stairs of the foyer were
unusually large and wide, and she could not reach their safety. She fell, her long auburn hair
framing a white, frightened face.

Vanozza, a mother above all things, automatically reached out.

Time returned.

Vanozza could hear herself breathing heavily. She was standing on the stairs, both her arms out in
front of her. She frowned. What on Earth…?

Looking down she saw a broken doll at the bottom of the stairs. Giulia, her eyes still open, lay at
an odd angle on the floor. Blood pooled from underneath her.

Vanozza gasped, high and short. No…no…this couldn’t be happening…?

Downstairs, children appeared from the kitchen. Cesare, staring down at Giulia, a boy who was
Juan, and Lucrezia. Lucrezia was looking up at her, with terror in her eyes and, more importantly,
Gio in her arms.

But how? Hadn’t they all been upstairs?

“What are you all doing down here?” she asked, “you are all in your rooms! Why is the baby
here?”

All three children stared at her.

“Mama,” Cesare stepped forward, looking at her closely, “we can’t speak French. We don’t
understand you.”

Chapter End Notes

This work is not beta’d so please let me know of any spelling errors, grammatical
errors or inconsistancies.
Chapter Notes

Last time: Giulia returned to the family, determined to find Rodrigo. Instead, she met Vanozza. He two fought and Giulia fell to her death down the grand staircase.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Present Day

No one went to school Friday. Their attendance in school was poor and if it hadn’t been for the school being sympathetic to their recent tragedies of Joffre and the hospitalisation of their father, no doubt they would be in a lot of trouble. Instead the Borgias siblings along with Micheletto buried Giulia. Cesare wanted to take her down into the basement…to whatever that thing was down there. The thought horrified and disgusted Lucrezia so much he relented.

“She was still my friend,” Lucrezia had said, “my sister. The only one I’ve ever had.”

Digging the hole had taken hours and replacing the dirt almost as long. They had gone to bed aching, filthy and upset.

They had all noticed she was pregnant, but none said anything about it to the other. There seemed no point.

On their way to bed, when they had reached the first floor, Lucrezia gently placed her hand on Cesare’s arm.

“Stay with me,” she muttered as he looked down at her with dark, searching eyes, “just for tonight. Don’t go all the way upstairs when we’re down here.”

His throat suddenly dry, he’d nodded before turning to Micheletto and saying, “I want my mother protected against any spirits. I need you to keep an eye on her.”

Micheletto had nodded obediently.

The Borgias entered Lucrezia’s room and shut the door.

Micheletto looked at it for a while before taking a duvet and pillow from his own room and marching to the second floor where his foster mother slept. He placed the pillow and duvet outside of her bedroom door and settled down to sleep in the dark, eerie corridor.

Cesare and Lucrezia had washed separately before climbing into bed. Cesare was only in his underwear as he stepped in, his sister already in there.

As he snuggled down under the duvet, he felt the tense atmosphere of the room. He was aware of Lucrezia’s soft breathing, of the warmth of her body just out of reach. Large blue eyes stared up at him from blonde ringlets.

“I heard an argument between mama and father once,” she began.
“Just once?” he joked, trying to break the strange tension between them.

She didn’t allow it, instead continuing, “I was very young. You and Juan were in bed. You had been fighting all day and so we’d been sent to bed early. I snuck out. I was angry at the injustice of being forced to my bed when you two had been the ones making all the fuss. So I remember sitting at the top of the stairs, looking through the balcony and listening to them argue downstairs.” She shifted a little and blinked, “I didn’t bond with Giulia just because we were both female. It was because she wasn’t a Borgias.”

Cesare felt himself grow very still, “what are you saying?”

“Mama and father both have brown eyes.”

“So?”

“Genetically their children should as well. You, Juan and Joffre are all brown eyed. I’m blue eyed.” A beat, “in the argument they said one of us wasn’t father’s. I know it’s me.”

Cesare wrestled with himself. The idea that Lucrezia was not a sister by blood was always a possibility in the back of his mind. He wanted in some ways, as it would make the sin of his lust less egregious. But he also railed against it; he loved the idea of the Borgias sticking together no matter what. He would choose his family over anyone.

“That’s not always the case with genetics,” he paused, “you’re worried you’re my half-sister?”

“That I am sister in name only. I’m the youngest bar Joffre. Do you really think mama would cheat?”

“Under the right circumstances absolutely. Father is a pig to her. Maybe she felt the warmth of another man in vengeance, or out of desperation.”

“Do you remember her being pregnant with me before I was born, or introduced to the household?”

He didn’t know. He barely remembered. There was only two years between them.

“Let’s not talk about this now.”

“But one day?” she asked, hope in her eyes. Did she want the same as him, for them not to be related, for them to be able to have a relationship?

“One day. Yes.”

Friday saw the children getting up late, Cesare calling into school to let them know of his and his sister’s absence. He cooked breakfast whilst Micheletto cleaned the bloodied floor in the foyer and Lucrezia bathed and dressed Gio. They ate together in relative calm and silence before Lucrezia took breakfast to Vanozza, sitting with her mother for an hour or so before returning downstairs. She carried baby Gio in her arms, marvelling at how quiet and serious he was.

The boys had finished cleaning and were standing out in the back garden, Cesare gesturing and talking animatedly whereas Micheletto stood still and silent.
Lucrezia observed them for a moment. She felt Cesare was very different when alone in Micheletto’s presence. She still hadn’t fully made her mind up on Micheletto yet, though she admired his stoic nature. He was very different to the family. She stepped closer and Cesare’s could now be heard saying, “maybe a gazebo, if that isn’t too much. And flower beds. Just something respectable.”

“You want to remodel the garden?” she asked. Both boys turned to face her, Micheletto leaning forward to take the baby from her arms. Gio observed his older brother calmly.

“Yes,” answered Cesare, “it looks like the sort of place that holds dead bodies right now. We need it to look nicer. For appearances. The only issue is that pond. It’s basically a muddy marsh and I cannot see how it can be improved. How’s mama?”

“Delusional,” she answered flatly. “She talks to father and rocks baby Gio. And that’s when she’s not speaking in French.” She paused for a moment, pressing her lips together anxiously before asking, “what are we going to do financially? How are the bills going to be paid? Father is unconscious in a hospital bed and mama is insane. What are we going to do?”

“The legal age to get a job here is fifteen,” answered Cesare, “so we can get work.”

“Part time no doubt as we still are legally required to be in school. It’s not the same as a psychiatrist’s wage.”

There was a moment’s silence before Cesare offered reluctantly, “we could ask Catherina for help.”

That caused a pause as a fissure of discomfort ran through the Borgias siblings. Cesare turned to Micheletto, “you know her a little better than us. She was the one who introduced mother to you. What is she like? Will she help us?”

“Your mother was shown to my brother,” corrected Micheletto, “I don’t know about anything else. I don’t know her well. I have known her all my life, but only as a quiet observer, always on the sides but never really getting involved.” He shrugged, “I’ve never understood her or her apparent relationship with me or Gio… vague as it is.”

Cesare gave him a curious look but Lucrezia rolled her eyes and complained, “I don’t like her. Something is off with her… just like how we knew something was wrong with this house from the beginning. I don’t want to entangle her into our lives anymore than she already is.”

Cesare rolled his shoulders back, “I don’t have a problem with her,” (Lucrezia scowled, “but if you really don’t like her Lu, then I won’t force her onto us. I just don’t know what else we can do.”

“The worst is likely to happen; we’ll be financially ruined. But that just means that we’ll be thrown out of this house and that can only be a good thing.”

“How so?”

She gaped at her brother, “what do you mean ‘how so’? Why would we want to stay here Cesare? It’s a terrible place full of horror and misery and, oh yes, we could all be killed!”

He shook his head, “we’ll be fine. Juan is weak and so is mother. We’re strong. They can’t get us. We’ll live alongside them. I’m sure it can be done. The couple who lived here before lasted around two years.”

“Oh, wonderful! Two whole years ahead of me!”
“Maybe their ghosts could help,” suggested Micheletto, shifting slightly as both Borgias turned towards him, “I mean…we could ask what they did right and what went wrong…and make sure we don’t make their mistakes.”

Cesare allowed a slow grin to form on his face, “excellent idea!”

Lucrezia nodded along, “but we need to call them to us, or find them in the house. I have something that might help, but it’ll take time.”

“What thing?”

She took in a deep breath, “a book,” she finally admitted, “one that used to belong to a witch.”

The book was leather bound and dark, but there was nothing particularly ominous about it.

“I thought it was a diary,” said Lucrezia. They were all in her room, Cesare, Micheletto and Baby Gio. “And it is, in a way,” she continued, “a girl who used to live here, a servant, wrote in it. Then later another girl from the nineties. In between the usual entries, there’s other stuff. Francesca, the first girl who wrote in this, she said that the other staff begin to think she’s a witch. She believes she’s one herself. She finds a way of communicating with the ghosts. She gets to know them. I reckon there’s a lot more here now than what there was when she was alive, but I can look into it.”

Cesare eyed the book hungrily, “can I read it?”

She held it closer to her chest possessively, “no, they say only I can have it.”

“They?”

She looked a little put out, “two boys. Two ghosts I’ve been speaking to.”

Cesare rose himself up stiffly. Micheletto recognised the instant protectiveness mired too with jealousy. Lucrezia did also because she rolled her eyes and complained, “oh don’t start Cesare! I wanted to keep this to myself. It’s not like you don’t have secrets! They’re nice kids. Kind. They died under terrible circumstances but they make the best of it as ghosts.”

“I’m uncomfortable with this,” he crossed his arms.

She smiled at him, not sunshine and flowers like before, but sultry and cynical. “I’m fine,” she insisted, “I know what I’m doing. Give me some time, but I’ll get the ghosts of the men from before and we’ll hopefully get some answers.”

She sat on her bed, tucking up her legs. “Well,” she looked at them expectantly, “off you go then!”

Whilst Cesare chose to go into the basement (he didn’t ask why) Micheletto himself chose to take Gio out for a walk. He hoisted his brother into the rickety baby carrier donated by the foster home. He noted that Gio seemed a lot heavier.

Outside the air was cool and the sky overcast. He looked forward to summer.
He knew the area a little bit, having paid attention when arriving in the car and having Cesare show him around. But he didn’t intend to go to far. The Borgias lived at the end of the street and so only had one neighbouring house. He left his own dark and messy drive to walk up the neatly clipped neighbouring one.

He rung the bell of an impressive oak door and stood quietly. He was still in awe that he lived in such an area as this. He felt underdressed and out of place.

Catherina opened the door. She levelled him with one of those expressions he couldn’t read.


There was a big difference between the Borgias home and this one. The darkness and hostile atmosphere was non-existent here. The foyer was bright and airy, as were all the rooms. The living room, rather than ravaged and inhabitable at the Borgias house, here was comfortable, modern and pleasant. She sat him down on a couch, Gio settled beside him, and got him an orange squash.

“So, Micheletto,” she settled down regally, “what brings you here?”

“I wanted to thank you for taking me to the Borgias,” he responded. He looked down at his brother, “it’s a weird house but he’s changing.”

She eyed the baby with interest, “he is.”

Micheletto looked up at her, “his hair is longer and he’s heavier. I think he’s growing up.”

“How wonderful, it’s about time don’t you think?” she sipped her tea whilst smirking, looking at him with laughing eyes.

“Why is this happening? Did you know?”

“I suspected.”

He frowned. Looking around the room there were many photos of Catherina and what looked like her children. He picked up one that sat on the table beside the couch. Catherina was sitting on a porch with two boys (one sour, one grinning) and a very pretty girl who held a toddler in her lap.

“Your family?”

“Yes,” she said, “are you interested in them?”

He blinked slowly, unsure of how to answer.

“My sons are Benito, he was going to sessions with your new foster father; Alfonso, you’ll meet him soon; and Ascanio is the baby. Isn’t he adorable?”

He looked at the picture with hard eyes. Ascanio looked small and serious, much like Gio. He nodded.

“My daughter, what do you think of her?”
He shrugged.

“Very pretty. Don’t you think?”

He nodded again, his eyes focused on the girl in the photo.

“I never saw you with a girl at the foster home. Is she your type?”

He shook his head and looked up at her. He hadn’t told anyone of his preferences; everyone he knew was Catholic and very conservative. But now he felt as if he were being accused of something worse than homosexuality.

“I’m not into girls at all,” he answered frankly, “I like men.”

Her face went blank with shock. After a few beats she blinked and recovered, a startled laugh erupting from her.

“Well, well, I had no idea!” she leant back and stared at him as if she were seeing him for the first time. She was smiling. “Boys. You like boys. My. Well there’s no judgement here so don’t worry about that. God loves all his creatures. And loving someone isn’t a crime. It’s not the same as, say, paedophilia…or rape.”

A pause.

“No,” said Micheletto, feeling she was waiting for some response.

Her look turned mischievous, “is there a boy you like now? Come, you must gossip with me! I’m basically your god-mother.”

He started a bit at that. He never viewed her that way and it seemed odd for her to suddenly be so friendly. All his life she had been cold and distant. Just watching and observing. Now, suddenly, this shift had occurred.

Also, he did not want to have this conversation.

“Where are your children now?” he asked, heart beating hard.

“At school,” she waved a dismissive hand, “I bet it’s young Cesare you like. He is a very handsome boy.”

Micheletto gulped, looking alarmed when Catherina suddenly sat down next to him and put her arm around him, “you should be careful around boys like Cesare. They use and abuse, even if they don’t mean to. They’re psychopaths, it’s their nature to be sadistic, even to those they love, or those that love them.”

He nodded again, looking down. The smiling family of beautiful brunets looked back up at him from the photo.

“My daughter was called Sancia.”

“Sancia?” he repeated, he heard that name earlier today, “that’s a nice name.”

“Thank you,” she sighed, shocking him by very gently stroking his hair in a motherly fashion.

He felt his breath beginning to speed up and his heart was now racing.
“The Borgias are worried about money,” he blurted out, turning red as soon as the admission was made.

She stopped stroking his hair, placing her hands on his shoulders instead and turning him so he faced her,

“What?”

“Rodrigo is in hospital still,” he explained, “and Vanozza…is ill.”

She looked sage then, “of course. You need help.”

“Please, they’re very proud. I don’t want them embarrassed.”

“All great people are,” she smiled, “don’t worry, I’ll find a discreet way of helping them out.”

He nodded, looking away, “I better go…”

“Of course. This was lovely. You must come again. This is good news about your brother, so do not worry.”

“Ok,” he wasn’t sure about the truth of her comment, but the whole conversation had up-ended him so much he didn’t feel he had the strength to challenge her or dig for further information.

Once outside he took a few calming breaths and walked twice around the block before returning to The Murder House.

The weekend passed quietly. It was disconcerting. There was next to no activity from the spirits, but it felt as if the house had taken in a deep breath and at any moment, it was going to loudly exhale.

Juan was informed over the phone about his father and after much cursing and complaining, he swore to beat his addictions (and his fears) in order to return home for his father. Cesare strongly suggested that he come home when father recovered.

“It only means you’ll have both of them annoying you at once,” Lucrezia told him after he’d hung up.

“I don’t care,” he answered, “I’ll just deal with that problem when it arrives.”

Little did the family know that outside the ghost of Giulia sat above her grave. There was a man wailing nearby, as he did every night, but she ignored him. On first waking up in the grotty garden she had been confused. It was only when she found she could go through things such as trees and bushes that she realised she was a spirit. She’d been furious, of course. She went to march into the house, determined to haunt the shit out of her so-called family, when she found she couldn’t enter. Instead she was doomed to spend an eternity wandering around a badly designed, ugly garden.

However, Saturday night she sat watching her shallow grave because she could hear the buzzing of her mobile phone, buried deep underground with her body.
And she knew exactly who it was.

Allesandro and Giulia had never been very close. They looked very similar; porcelain skin and large eyes. But that was where the similarity ended. Their mother, a single parent as their father was in prison, became addicted to painkillers and soon could not take care of her children. At the age of sixteen, Allesandro had already run away with the butcher’s son to make a new life for themselves in Greece. Giulia, for had been fourteen, had been carted off by the State and, being too old for anyone wanting to adopt her, found herself being passed about foster homes.

The pair didn’t speak, but apparently, after a few years, some form of sibling affection came up in Allesandro, and he reconnected with her just after she’d been thrown out by the Borgias. He sent her money to help her out and revealed that he had been living in Rome for some time. The pair met once or twice where she broke the news of her impending child and the unfortunate events that had led to its conception.

It had been Allesandro who encouraged her to get money from Rodrigo.

“A man has to pay his way in the world,” he had told her, “he’s an adult. He cannot have his way with you but then let you to be the only one with any of the consequences.”

They had been sitting in an American-themed diner, both drinking milkshakes even though it was winter.

He looked much older, pale and bulky from working out at the gym. He was nothing like he remembered.

“What happened between you and the butcher’s boy?” She’d asked, “what was his name…”?

“It doesn’t matter,” he smiled ruefully, “he was just another mistake I’ve made; along with leaving you and,” he sighed wearily, “just so many other things.”

“You used to be boy-crazy,” she grinned, trying to lighten him up. Instead his face seemed to darken further.

“I was obsessive.” He stated, “I’ve learned to stop all that. Look,” he leaned forward and took her hands into his own, “go to Rodrigo, tell him the truth and demand help. He owes you. Successful or not, come to me afterwards to tell me what he says.”

“I will,” she promised, “I will.”

Then she went to the house and died.

Allesandro hadn’t heard from her in two days. So Saturday night he stood outside the garden of The Murder House. His heart was in his throat. He felt sick, his stomach churning in anxiety. He knew the nickname of this house, he knew about its curse. He knew what happened to the previous occupants. To the gay couple, Paolo and Roberto.

He knew because he was the one who did it.
Allesandro had met Paolo Orsini at the gym. Paolo was tall, athletic and with a mane of blond hair. He used to tease him about it, about how old-fashioned it was. He knew that Paolo had a partner, but he was convinced that Paolo didn’t love this “Roberto.”

Allesandro had hated Roberto. He would hear Paolo trying to reason with him down the phone, making excuses to his partner so he could stay longer with his lover. Roberto sounded whiney and pathetic. He sounded like the sort of person who drained all the life and joy out of a room.

So Allesandro had drowned him.

He had been in shock after he completed his task. This wasn’t normal behaviour for him. The obsession over his lover was normal; after making a fool out of himself for the Butcher’s son he went on to be obsessed with a painter, then had a sordid affair with an older married businessman and finally stalked a barista who had rejected his advances for three whole months. Paolo was the last in the long line of bad romances and obsessions for Allesandro.

But still, murder was a level he’d never even contemplated before. Even when Paolo arrived and screamed in horror and dismay, even as Allesandro had tried to play of his own horror show as a self-sacrificial thing he’d done for the pair of them, he knew it wasn’t true. Roberto wasn’t some whiney, miserable wretch. He had taken his death well, looking up at Allesandro with big, brown, accepting eyes. Roberto had been a sad, depressed man and Allesandro had added to his misery.

Then after that everything had gotten worse.

By the end of the night Allesandro had found himself in his apartment, sobbing on his bed. He remembered how he had taken a photo of Paolo sleeping and sent it to Roberto. That had started the whole thing.

He expected the police to come knocking on his door, but no one did. Eventually it came out in the local news that it had been a murder suicide. People believed Roberto was a mentally ill killer and Paolo his victim. The religious screamed about the weak and corrupt nature of homosexuals. The wider public complained about the dangers of those with mental illnesses.

Allesandro had cried again. He swore to become better. He started with his first error, finding and protecting his little sister.

And now, in a cruel twist of fate, that very concern for her bought him back to the Murder House.

He stepped through the gate, a feeling of unease settling within him.

Halloween was coming up, and already people were putting out Jack O Lanterns which glinted an amber light menacingly around the street.

His feet made too-loud, crunching noises on the gravel, so he began to recite to himself what he was going to say.

“Hullo, I’m looking for my sister Giulia. Giulia Farnesse. Yes, I’m her brother,” he muttered in quick whispers. He saw a movement in the corner of his eye.

He stopped and whirled around. The garden was dark and shadowy with too many over-grown trees and evergreens. Something pale was shifting between the dark leaves.

Frowning, Allesandro walked towards it.

“Hello?” he asked, something in the back of his mind screaming at him for the cliché.
The light thing shifted some more and seemed to morph into a human body. It stepped out from behind the bushes.

It was Paolo Orsini.

Allesandro felt his mind go blank; a sort of white noise screamed through his brain.

It couldn’t be…it wasn’t possible…

The ghost of Paolo looked bigger and angrier than the human version of him had ever been. He came towards his ex-lover, fury lighting up his spirit.

Allesandro let out a strangled scream, just as the vengeful ghost fell upon him.

The Borgias family were never made aware of Allesandro’s presence and slept on in their home.

Chapter End Notes

This isn't a good chapter. I feel it needs re-doing and more detail. But I didn't want to hold on to it any longer. Please offer any critical feedback as it is weak and I'd like instructions or ideas on making it work better. Thanks all.
Another Highschool Drama

Chapter Notes

Last Time: Cesare and Lucrezia inch closer in admitting their feelings. Micheletto talks to Catherina and finds himself bonding with her a little. Juan wants to come home. Allesandro, Giulia’s brother, arrives at the house and is promptly murdered by his ex-lover.

Present Day

The morning was cold.

Micheletto stood with Cesare in the kitchen. Lucrezia was with Baby Gio, getting him bathed before they went to school.

“You will be home all day,” Cesare was saying.

Micheletto put on the kettle whilst Cesare prepared sandwiches for himself and Lucrezia to have at school for lunch. Micheletto had quietly begun doing more and more around the house, an odd compulsion to please his new family, specifically Cesare. Normally, Micheletto’s natural mode was to hide, but Cesare made that near impossible. The red-head remembered Catherina’s warning but didn’t really know what to do with it.

“I’m making sandwiches because we’re running out of cash,” Cesare said, “we need to eventually arrange for you to come to our school, but it will be expensive.”

“Your father said he would send me to a regular school.”

“Unacceptable, you are useful by my side.”

Micheletto looked away and searched for mugs in the cupboard. His heart had stopped for a second and he was slightly blushing. Cesare had a way of doing that, of unravelling him in a moment. He hated it.

“But for now you are home all day. You can watch mama, of course, so nothing untoward happens to her.”

“Yes.” Micheletto had seen things around the house. Shadows and movements and had heard strange sounds. He was beginning to see the scale of the haunting here, even if the ghosts appeared to be keeping a distance from him for now.

“But you do not need to watch her all day,” Cesare looked at Micheletto as he arranged the mugs on the table and began to fill the tea pot. “Lucrezia prefers coffee on weekday mornings.”

Micheletto nodded and dutifully put on the coffee maker. “What else would you like me to do in the day?” he asked.

Cesare leaned against the fridge, understanding that Micheletto would need direct instruction, “we need money.”
“I could get a job.”

“At your age? Doing what?”

Micheletto turned around and faced Cesare. Cesare’s eyes were large, inky pools. They were beautiful.

“I could steal for you.” Micheletto heard himself saying, “I used to run with a group, for a time, when I was younger. I’m not a master criminal but we did a few petty burglaries. Sometimes houses. Sometimes cars. Nothing major.”

Cesare nodded. He didn’t smile (he rarely did unless Lucrezia was around) but his face was softer and he seemed less tense; Micheletto had said what he wanted to hear.

“What did you used to take?”

“Cash. Occasionally things we could sell but I wasn’t in charge of that. I don’t know the value of something by looking at it.”

Cesare nodded, “cash is good. We need cash. We’re nearly out of groceries. It’s a temporary thing. Nothing too bad. We’ll keep it between us.”

Micheletto nodded. Lucrezia could be heard walking down the stairs, talking softly to Gio in her native Spanish. Micheletto wondered if his brother, who seemed to be aging quickly, would master two languages.

Cesare came close to Micheletto, “make sure you do nothing too close to here,” he muttered. Micheletto tensed, feeling goose bumps rising where Cesare’s breath brushed. Large dark eyes looked at him, “nothing too big. Not yet. I don’t want anymore attention.”

“What are you whispering about?”

The boys turned to see Lucrezia scowling from the doorway.

Cesare gave a charming smile. It didn’t win her over, her scowl deepened.

“Just wishing him good luck. He, mother and Gio will be alone today,” Cesare explained with a shrug, “I’m just concerned.”

Lucrezia looked over at Micheletto then back to her brother, “I don’t think you have any reason to be concerned Cesare.”

School was a welcome reprieve from home. Lucrezia now found herself surrounded by female friends. It seemed that the sharp rise in Cesare’s social standing and the tragedies that had befallen her family had made her prime friendship material.

By lunchtime, she had taken her place at the coolest table in school. Cesare was away, having joined some club. Cesare was good enough that the little clique he had created had become the coolest male group. Lucrezia wasn’t quite at that level. She was more of an infiltrator. The Queen Bee of this group- Giorgia- was mean and spiteful and none of other the girls actually liked her. It wouldn’t be difficult to topple her. It would just take time.

“I know a boy who likes you ‘Crezia,” giggled a pretty brunette who had been on Lucrezia’s arm
all day. It made sense; in this group the girl, whose name was Pia, was the bottom rung. She barely spoke and when she did she was dismissed or mocked. Lucrezia was being very kind to her and so her loyalty had been won quickly.

“Ugh, so many boys like her,” sighed another girl, one with long dark hair who did not like Lucrezia as much. “It’s the way it goes. New girl, reasonably pretty – you’re welcome Lucrezia-foreigner and so exotic enough…they’ll all fancy you for a week or so. It will calm down soon enough, don’t worry.”

“Thanks,” Lucrezia pasted a smile on her face before turning back to Pia, “so who likes me?”

More giggling. It was annoying. They weren’t twelve years old. She repressed her frustration and waited for Pia to get a hold on herself. Around her, the other girls began to have their own conversation, making it clear they were not interested in Lucrezia’s popularity.

“Alphonso Trastamara,” she laughed.

“Trastamara?” Giorgia spat out, suddenly paying attention. She recovered quickly, “his brother Frederigo is much better looking and lot cleverer. However, Alphie isn’t so bad.”

“He’s the one with the curly black hair?” asked Lucrezia.

Pia had the giggles still, her blue eyes watering slightly. Lucrezia was beginning to realise it was probably a nervous trait. “Yes.” Pia laughed, “he’s cute.”

Lucrezia remembered being at the bank and seeing a shy boy looking over at her. Dark eyes and dark hair. Like a boyish, more innocent Cesare. She smiled.

“Oh, yes, he is very sweet. Is he single then?”

“If that’s your taste,” sighed Giorgia, “now can we please talk about something else? Thank you!”

“We’ve actually been invited to a party this weekend,” Vitelli was practically bouncing with excitement.

It was lunchtime, but the gang of Bastards sat outside on the playing fields.

Cesare bit into his sandwich, “have you accepted the invitation?”

“I said I’d think about it,” the blond answered dutifully, “I wanted to see if you and Carlo thought it was worth it.”

“These people used to be our enemies,” sighed Carlo, “they still look down on us. They’re just scared and intrigued by you Cesare.”

Cesare was quiet. He knew it was because a lot of the boys had their eyes set on his sister. Regardless of the fact that they were seen as second-class, a pretty girl is a pretty girl.

“Halloween,” responded Vitelli, “he’s getting ready early for the Presidential elections.”

“That’s what you do to get votes here?” Cesare sneered.

The boys laughed, “yes basically.”
“You could throw a party at your place,” Vitelli suggested, “it’s a big house with a bad reputation.”

“I remember you saying,” complained Cesare whilst Carlo complained, “No way. People will be too scared to go. Especially after Colonna.”

“How is he?”

“Still in the Mental Health Unit,” said Carlos with a bit of attitude, he clearly did not appreciate what Cesare would do for the sake of his family.

“I’ll think about a party,” he said to Vitelli, who cheered, “but only near the end of the campaign. I want to keep things classy. I have to be better than my opponents. I need to be beyond reproach.” He paused for a moment before asking, “do you know your fathers well?”

Vitelli scowled, “mine has nothing to do with me or my brother. Just bangs my mom and pays for her to send us here.”

“I do a little,” admitted Carlos, “but not much. He also is more interested in my mom being…you know…his mistress. Plus she’s also his cleaner,” he shrugged, “so he doesn’t want to be seen with the Help too often.”

Cesare nodded without sympathy, “so you must have some dirt on your fathers? Or at least your mothers do?”

The boys looked at each other.

“Yes,” said Carlos slowly, reluctantly, “probably.”

“And everyone here knows everyone else, the fathers of you know the fathers of other legitimate boys here. You should see what you can find out about them all. And you must know other illegitimates and other mistresses.”

The boys’ eyes became bigger as they realised what Cesare was saying.

“What you want blackmail material?” Carlos hissed.

“Nothing too bad…nothing too light. Just anything. It could be useful.”

“Yeah,” Vitelli licked his lips, “yeah that sounds fine to me. I’ll have to be kind of sneaky.”

“Do be. Trust me,” he smiled winningly, “this will go well for us. It’s nothing bad. Just listening to gossip, not even passing it on, apart from to each other.”

The house was quiet.

Unlike the rest of the Borgias, Micheletto had no concerns about wandering about the house in general. This was the first time he’d been left in the house essentially on his own.

Leaving his brother sitting quietly in a baby chair in the kitchen, he stepped outside in to the foyer. He stared at the door to the side of the stairs which led down to the basement, but knowing that it belonged to Cesare in some way prevented him from going down.
Instead he turned away and walked into the wreckage of the living room. He hadn’t been told what exactly had happened here.

“Possession.”

He turned to see a young boy with a mop of brown hair and expressive eyes.

“I’m Alfonse Sforza,” the boy smiled, “I would visit more often but the last time I was here Cesare Borgia punched me in the face.”

“You’re Catherina Sforza’s son?”

“One of them, yes.”

Micheletto stared. Catherina came across as a serious woman to him, so it was strange to see the high-pitched boy claiming to be her son. But he did recognise the child from the photo, so he assumed it was the truth.

“Why are you here and not at school?”

“Why are you?” the boy countered.

Micheletto did have an answer, but he didn’t much feel like indulging his personal life to a stranger. Instead he looked at the exploded television and ruins of what was once a nice carpet.

“The other brother,” Alfonse continued, “the stupid one. He got possessed. He’d only just arrived and already he got possessed! What a dope! It caused a big fight with the alpha bitches of this lot and boom! Ghost temper tantrum equals a ruined living room.”

Micheletto stared. Ghosts did this? Just how powerful were they? He had only seen shadows and things in the corner of his eyes.

He padded out of the living room slowly and entered Rodrigo’s office. It was how he expected. Certificates littered the wall, all in neat, tidy frames. There were two dark wood bookcases filled with books, all on psychology and psychotherapy.

“He hasn’t read half of them,” trilled Alfonse cheerfully, “and to think this dummy got possessed as well. Like father, like son.”

On the table was a photograph. It was of the family, some years ago by the looks of it. Rodrigo was in the middle. Beside him was a younger, smiling Vanozza. She looked very pretty. Next to her was a girl he’d never seen. She was very beautiful, with red hair and pale eyes. In front of her was Lucrezia. She was very young, perhaps on thirteen or fourteen. She was already blossoming. Was that when Cesare began to fall in love with her? Across from her was a boy with brown hair. He was very good looking as well, fairer and more roguish than Cesare, but with the same unfair level of handsomeness. It must be Juan. Rodrigo was looking down at him fondly. To the side of Juan, a little way from everyone, was Cesare. He was in his usual uniform of black and he wasn’t smiling.

They were a beautiful family.

“So what are you?” the boy squeaked, “are you a servant or something?”

Micheletto put the photo frame down.
“No,” he said. Leaving the room he went back into the kitchen. He turned on the kettle and began to take out cups.

“Hi Roberto!” trilled Alfonse as he entered.

Micheletto paused, then looked around the room. It was just him, Alfonse (now sitting at the kitchen table) and his brother Gio.

“His name is Gio not Roberto,” said Micheletto.

A giggle was what he got in response.

Feeling ill at ease at not understanding something he continued making a pot of tea.

“Are you staying?” he asked, “because I need to get this to Ms. Borgias?” He turned and saw the boy was gone. He looked around the room, even glancing under the table. The kid was gone.

He looked at baby Gio. “Did he run away?” he asked, “or did he disappear?”

Gio gave a grin, revealing a few baby teeth that had started to grow.

Micheletto knocked politely on the door of The Borgias master bedroom before entering. Vanozza stood at the window, staring into the down into the garden.

He bought in his brother first, knowing she responded well to Gio. He then set up the tea tray, thinking about the strange lady at the window. She looked so different now to how she looked in the photograph downstairs. She was so much thinner and paler now.

He straightened up, his gaze immediately turning to the large, ugly mirror that took up most of the wall to the side of the bed. He could see Vanozza’s reflection gazing out of the window, but what struck him was the man on the bed. He was heavy-set and in dark clothes and had a melancholy way about him. Slowly Micheletto turned.

No one was on the bed.

He turned back to the mirror, but the man was gone.

More strangeness; but a strangeness he was becoming accustomed too. Besides, his life had been strange before entering the lives of the Borgias.

Taking a risk, he slowly made his way to Vanozza.

“Ms. Borgia,” he tried quietly, “Ms. Borgia I made you tea.”

She was whispering, he could hear it now, but it was something in French. Micheletto didn’t know any other languages. He was lucky the Borgias knew Italian so well and spoke it most of the time when he was around.

He stepped closer until he was next to her. He followed her gaze, down into the front garden, but couldn’t see what she was looking at. It was just the gravel drive, her little red car, and the dark trees and bushes and grass.
“Gio is here,” he said quietly, repressing a small smile as the baby gurgled loudly.

She turned from the window, gazing at the child. It was then that Micheletto realised she had been crying. Tear stained her pale face.

He turned away, leaving the room silently as she cooed over his baby brother.

“Hello.”

Alphie Trastamara turned to see the most beautiful girl in the world smiling at him. Immediately he turned bright red and dropped his books.

He scooped down to pick them up, his face and neck burning hot, as he heard her chuckling. She helped him pick up his books, passing them to him as they straightened back up.

“Hello,” he returned.

“So, Alphie, right?”

“Yeah,” he hated how goofy he sounded, “I saw you in the bank the other day.”

“I remember,” she smiled, “were you with your parents?”

“Just my dad,” he shrugged, “sorting out some stuff with my account. I hate that we have to do stuff like that with our parents.”

“I know,” she rolled her eyes, “my mom had to practically baby sit me when opening up a saving account. It was embarrassing. I heard your brother is throwing a party on Halloween.”

“Oh yeah he is! My parents are away but our eldest brother, Raphael, is watching over us so it’ll be ok. I mean!” he blushed again, “I mean it’ll be wild! But not…you know…too wild.”

She laughed.

“Um, you are more than welcome to come.”

“Really?” she stopped laughing now, “your family don’t seem too keen on me.”

It was true that when the Borgias turned up, Federigo immediately pegged them as trash. Cesare was straight in with the sons of Cleaners and Lucrezia was deemed a slut. However, the tide was turning against the Borgias. People were shit scared of Cesare and some pretty crazy rumours were flying around about him. Also, their little brother died and the other brother had vanished overnight…so being mean to the remaining two siblings seemed wrong. Plus Lucrezia was in with Giorgia’s clique now, so surely his brother couldn’t be mad at him for inviting them?

“Well, we misjudged you. Not me! I mean…my brothers. They’re not friendly naturally but they’re great once you get to know them. When we found out about your little brother…everyone was cut up about it. I’m sorry that you went through that.”

It was strange then. Her face, whilst still pretty, changed slightly. Like a mask falling free for just a moment. Her eyes watered and a little pain showed. But then she blinked and smiled again.
“Thank you. It was awful. I try not to think about it too much.”

“Well, you’re more than welcome to the party. You and Cesare. He seems like a …a…c-cool guy,” Alphie wished he was a better liar. Cesare seemed like a scary guy. He remembered how both Cesare and the other brother attacked some random kid in the canteen; the one brother, the brunet, even was on crutches but still went in for the fight. Frederigo had declared the Borgias absolute savages after that display.

“We have to stay home a lot nowadays, to help mama,” she said, “but hopefully we can come. But…maybe we can meet up earlier? What’s your number? I’ll let you know when I’m free and maybe we can work something out?”

His heart was racing. Was this a dream? It had to be a dream. Was she actually asking him out? That made no sense. He was the youngest dork in a family of handsome men…

“S-sure,” he typed his number into her phone, shaking the whole time. She then cold called him so he had her number too.

“I’ll see you soon then?”

“Yeah.”

He watched her walk away from him, feeling dizzy with excitement and affection. She was perfect in every way.

Micheletto was on the bus. What little change had been left to him by Cesare had paid for the single ticket. He would maybe have to walk home if this idea did not work. The bus was hot and sweaty. Locals crowded closely together. It was quiet, almost everyone looking down at the screens of their mobile phones.

Cesare had given Micheletto one of his old phones earlier that week. He’d cringed when passing it over, looking embarrassed. Micheletto had no idea why; the phone worked well and was the first one he’d ever personally owned.

The area outside transformed from large, beautiful houses to the crumbling crowded town houses of the inner city. The unemployed roamed the streets. A number of brown faces appeared; refugees, escaping their own countries but not being welcomed into this one. The poor white and the refugee, stuck together by being trapped on the outskirts of society, but forced into hating and resenting each other.

Micheletto got off the bus, feeling himself relax for the first time. He was more at home here, with these people, in these surroundings.

He walked through the gutter thinking of Gio and hoping he was ok with Vanozza. As ill as she was, he didn’t think she was a danger to his brother. And it seemed that the spirits of the house were leaving her alone; at no point had Vanozza been hurt or shown any sides of being attacked. There was something supernatural going on with her, but it seemed a sort of partial possession more than anything else.

He finally reached his destination, a small doorway under a bridge. He opened it and walked through into a wider space. It was used in roman times for sewers. Even now, the smell was bad
and modern sewers flew underneath the stone steps. A number of young, thin people sat around. Some counting money, some searching through bags and purses.

He wove through them, most giving him little more than a passing glance, until he reached a slightly older man. A sort of Fagin character.

“Welcome back Micheletto,” smiled the man.

Micheletto nodded.

“You said you were done with all this. Thought you were finally being a good boy for Mama Corella?”

“I am adopted now,” he said, “I need money.”

“To get away?” laughed the man, but he gestured for Micheletto to sit anyway. Both sat on the hard floor, cross legged.

“I need to be flexible,” Micheletto said, “and I need cash manly. Nothing big.”

“You’re small and quiet,” the man answered, “a gift in this profession. Do some big jobs and I shall pay you. Then you will be needed less, freeing up your precious time.”

Micheletto nodded. Fair enough.

“Return tonight,” the man said, “we hit a big house. We pull out of here at eleven pm. If you don’t make it, don’t bother coming back at all.”

Micheletto nodded again.

The man grinned, his good humour back, “how is your brother? Still a baby?”

“Yes.”

Sly eyes narrowed, “you are a strange pair of boys. Otherwordly. What will your new family say when they notice?”

Micheletto shrugged.

“There’s always a permanent place for you here. The Family is interested in you. Micheletto, our little ghost. Untraceable and silent. You could make something of yourself within our ranks one day. When you’re older and bit tougher around the edges.”

“Maybe.” He stood up and brushed himself down.

“See you tonight then.”

“Bye.”

When he returned back to the Borgias house, he found Vanozza singing to baby Gio, still in her room but now washed and in clean clothes. She was brushing her hair. He saw that the tea had been drunk. He made her a sandwich with the remains of food in the kitchen and warmed up a bottle and some mush for Gio. He left them on the bedside table as he had before with the tea and saw himself out.
Cesare and Lucrezia stayed late at school. Cesare told her he was joining the Fencing Club and she decided to sign up with him. It was a good decision, both sweaty and happy by the end of it. Lucrezia had gotten to know Vitelli and Carlos a little, which Cesare decided was good for increasing their loyalty to him.

They waved goodbye to the pair before walking home slowly. The afternoon was warm, the sky glowing.

“I prefer Carlos,” she said, apropos nothing.

“Really?” he sneered, “I prefer Vitelli. Carlos always disagrees with me.”

She laughed, “that’s why you need him. You need more friends to tell you no. I wish Micheletto would once in a while.”

“How do you know he doesn’t?”

“I have eyes. And ears. He never says no to you.”

“You sound disapproving. Like you’re any better. I saw you making friends with that girl…what’s her name? Pia? Because she’s the easiest to shape I bet. You don’t like girls like Giorgia.”

“I don’t like girls like Giorgia because they’re arrogant bullies who watched too much Disney Channel as kids and think that’s what makes them popular with other kids. They have such delusions of grandeur they never see that everyone just hates them. If she was poor,” Lucrezia shrugged, letting the sentence hang.

Cesare smiled but said nothing.

“You should know,” she began slowly, feeling tense, “I am going to go on a date soon.”

He tensed and she felt frustrated.

“With Alphonso Trastamara. He’s a nice kid. Shy, reserved. Very sweet. He’d never hurt me.”

“Why?”

“Because I would like to have a boyfriend? It would help us to make friends in school? His family are very influential? It’s what papa wants.”

Silence.

“We can never be together Cesare,” she whispered.

He flinched, “I don’t know-”

“I see how you look at me,” she said. They were quiet, despite the fact that they were alone. “But it can never be. It’s wrong. Morally. Ethically.”

“Only in that it can result in children with disabilities,” he muttered, hating this conversation. He had carried guilt and shame for loving his sister for a long time and only recently had decided to make peace with it. But now it felt like she was bringing back all those old anxieties and concerns. “But if we never had kids,” he continued painstakingly, “if we were careful…what would it matter? I mean, that’s the only problem, right? The idea that someone was groomed or if children
are born out of incest. That’s it. I didn’t groom you. And we don’t have to have kids.”

She sighed, “oh Cesare.”

“We could change our names. No one would know. We don’t look alike.” He gulped, remembering their conversation before about her being a Borgias at all. He couldn’t tell if that made it worse or better.

He was pulled out of his thoughts by her putting slim, delicate fingers between his own. She didn’t know what to say. That she loved him. That she was horrified by him. That something had gone very wrong in their family, long before they arrived in The Murder House, for them to have these sorts of feelings for each other. What was it? An over reliance on family? Them locking out the whole world so in the end all they had was each other? And whilst that thought scared her, she couldn’t help but feel that Cesare would love that; that he’d celebrate locking her up and never letting her out. Maybe that’s why the threat of The Murder House didn’t get to him like it did to her and Juan. And maybe Micheletto was the same? Maybe Micheletto wanted to be locked up? Was that why he and Cesare got on so well, despite being from such different worlds?

“Why do you like Micheletto so much? Other than him being obedient?” she asked.

“What has that got to do with what we’re talking about?” he was angry. He always was nowadays.

“Cesare. I said no. That’s the end of it. Answer my question.”

He sighed but relented, “he’s loyal. And he’s different from us in some ways that I think is interesting. And the things he shares with us I admire.”

“What does he share with us?”

Cesare thought of the violence between he, Micheletto, and his father. Which resulted in father being put in hospital. It almost made him smile.

“He understands the importance of family.” He looked down at her, “you go on your date, if you want. It is your choice. But I don’t have to like it.”


“Fine. I had no plans to do anything to him but fine. I’m running for President of the School Council. Vote for me?”

She grinned, “of course.”

They came up to the Murder House. “Do you think mama, Gio and Micheletto have been ok in there, all alone all day?”

It really was something when coming home you didn’t know if everything would be fine or if a blood bath was waiting for you.

“I think it’ll be fine,” answered Cesare, but he sounded testy. “Things have been quieter since dad went into hospital.”

“Do you think there is a connection?” They were walking up the drive, the small grey stones crunching noisily.

“I don’t know. I doubt it.”
Inside the house it was dark and cool.

Music could be heard playing in the distance. Lucrezia followed it, her brother choosing to step into the basement. She followed the music, something brash, like jazz, until she found herself in the back garden. Her mom was sitting in a rusty deckchair with the baby lying silently in her arms. Besides the chair was an old radio blasting out a chaotic trombone.

“Mama?”

Vanozza turned and smiled, “hello ‘Crezia. How was school?”

Lucrezia went over and kissed her cheek. Gio was fine, ruddy with soft brown hair and pale blue eyes. She kissed his cheek also.

“It was ok,” she said, “I’m making friends. How was your day?”

“I made friends too,” smiled Vanozza. “Giulia said she forgives me, isn’t that nice?”

Lucrezia went pale, glancing around the garden. She couldn’t see anyone.

“Y-yes…so she won’t hurt you?”

“No. She thinks I am ill and she really blames your father, but he isn’t here anymore.”

“Papa will return,” said Lucrezia, “and we do not want Giulia to hurt him.”

“Well,” sniffed Vanozza, “he’ll have to learn to stay out of the garden then.”

Cesare climbed out of the basement. He’s spent some time playing and talking to the creature that lived down there. By what he could tell it was some sort of child. Or it had been.

He noticed the living room door was open. He popped his head inside. The floor had been cleared of debris and the walls had been given a cursory wipe down. It was far from habitable but looked a lot better.

He closed the door carefully and made his way into the kitchen.

“You tidied the living room?”

Micheletto was at the oven, looking anxiously at some spaghetti boiling in a pot.

“A little. I don’t know how to make bolognaise.”

Cesare smiled and began to get the relevant ingredients from the cupboards. “It’s one of our most haunted rooms,” he said, “the ghost in there is very active. She didn’t bother you?”

Micheletto shook his head.

Cesare peered at him, “maybe they avoid you. I wonder why?”

Micheletto shrugged.
“I have to go out later. I am meeting an old associate. We’re doing what you said earlier. It’s a job.”

“Good,” said Cesare, dicing onions and garlic, “and you will be paid tonight?”

“If I do a good job.”

“Then make sure you do. We need this.” He reached out to Micheletto, rubbing the back of the boy’s head, “we appreciate this. We really do. You are a Borgia now. How did mama treat you today?”

“She was fine.”

“Sure? She wasn’t cruel or cold? I’ve not seen her talk to you yet.”

“Sure.”

“She is very ill,” Cesare got out a frying pan, “she is normally very warm and kind. Give it time.”

“Yes.”

The family ate in the dining room. They rarely went in there because it had a weird vibe to it, but with them all there it was too cramped in the kitchen.

Vanozza paid little attention to her surroundings, focused on her baby. Lucrezia tried talking to Micheletto about his day but got so little in response eventually gave up. They ended up eating in silence until the phone rang out, loud and obnoxious.

“I’ve got it,” said Cesare, heaving himself up and going out in to the now dark foyer. He didn’t care about the moving shadows or the tense atmosphere. He was becoming accustomed to it.

“Hello.”

“Cesare it’s me.”

“Juan,” Cesare immediately regretted answering the phone, “we’re eating dinner…”

“How is papa?”

“The same as yesterday,” sighed Cesare, “I told you. Stay where you are and get better. The house is still…you know. And father is ok. He’s stable. But not awake.”

“You need to leave,” hissed Juan, “that house is going to get you killed.”

“We’re fine.”

“Think of Lucrezia! Do you want anything to happen to her?”

“I’ll protect her.”

“How?” gasped Juan, “you can’t watch her all the time! And it’s you versus…ghosts…”

“Look Juan, you don’t have to come back-”

“Oh fuck off Cesare!”

“-if you’re scared. It’s normal. You have a lot going on. We want you clean.”
“I am clean you fucking twat! It was some weed and little else, you know that! You know I just wanted to leave the house! But now with papa and I can’t stop thinking about Joffre… Cesare it’s fucked up! I don’t want to wake up and hear that you all died one day.”

Silence.

“We,” Juan began slowly, “we were friends once…I used to really look up to you. Um, I still do a bit. Sometimes. I don’t understand you all the time but…”

“Are you serious?” asked Cesare, “you want some sort of fucking heart to heart? Spit out what you actually want to say. What do you want?”

“Jesus Christ, you’re such a fucking asshole. I really hate you.”

“Well you’re an idiot,” Cesare sighed, looking up the stairs. He could see something crawling about on the top of the bannisters. He rolled his eyes at it and looked away.

“Where’s mama? I want to talk to her.”

“She doesn’t like you any more than I do.”

“I know that!” he spat, “but I need to speak to someone with sense.”

“She’s busy. She adopted a baby.”

“Yeah…” there was a pause, “I still don’t really understand.”

“She’s lonely and she wants to replace Joffre,” Cesare narrowed his eyes at the thing on the stairs. It was standing up now. It was dripping water. He had the idea that it was looking at him. “Juan I have to go.”

“Ok, ok,” Juan began to rush, “I get it ok. I don’t want to fight. Can’t you see I’m trying? Fuck. I just. I can’t talk good and you’re so difficult to get through to!”

“Look, come home if you want,” Cesare heard himself saying, “but papa isn’t here so you won’t get your own way all the time.”

“Is that what this is about?!” Juan all but screamed, “you get to be mama’s favourite and Lucrezia’s favourite and everyone loved you at school but just one person likes me more and that’s what fucked us up? God, you’re such a jealous asshole!”

“I’m not jealous,” spat Cesare, “You being an idiot ruined whatever friendship you think we had. Cleaning up your messes annoys me. I have to go. Some fucking ghost is on the stairs.”

“What? Seriously? Cesare, go, now!”

“Yeah, see you later.” He hung up and flipped off the spirit, who was halfway down the stairs, before slinking back into the creepy dining room. It was still quiet and he wished someone would turn on the damned radio or something. Dinner was mediocre, the ingredients not fresh. He needed Micheletto to get them some cash tonight.

“Juan may be returning soon,” he said, tucking his chair in before wrapping up spaghetti onto his fork, “Micheletto we need you out of his room.”

“Ok.”
“Where do you expect him to sleep?” said Lucrezia dangerously, scowling at Cesare.

“There’s a spare room next to mine.”

“What?”

“A spare room.” He repeated. “I found the door to it one day. It’s a whole other space. It’s not very big but is about the same size as my room and Juan’s.” He smiled at Micheletto, who simply nodded.

Mollified, Lucrezia returned to her food. Outside the room was various crashes and bangs as the house seemed to wake up. They ignored it.

“Good,” Lucrezia said after a few moments, “I miss Juan.”

Cesare scowled, a flare of jealousy flashing, “really?”

“Yes.”

“Juan is such a good boy,” said Vanozza, before falling into French so no one knew what she was talking about. They ignored her as well.

Tensions lifted slightly as everyone retired in the evening.

Lucrezia stayed in her room with Djem and Paolo.

“Trastamara,” she read in the diary. She looked up at the boys, “a Trastamara built this house originally?”

The boys shrugged. It was before their time. She looked back down at the book. The diary of the old maid, Francesca, had started off being an interesting story of the life of a maid in the 1800s. But now it was increasingly taking in a darker turn. She wrote of her Lady, who had fallen into madness caused by lust, and her Master, who was increasingly jealous and paranoid; She wrote of the potions she made, in an attempt to clear them of their negative spirits and of how the others suspected her of witchcraft as a result.

“Cantarella,” she read, “a blood red liquid that expels blood from the mouth and eyeballs.” The rest of the page was a list of ingredients, all stuff that grew locally, at least in Francesca’s time period. Lucrezia raised an eyebrow, she’d have to keep this book away from Cesare.

She looked back at the boys, “and this really will help me with the spirits of this house?”

“Absolutely,” said Paolo.

“Definitely,” said Djem.

She heard footsteps outside her room and low voices. It was Cesare talking to Micheletto. She thought about going out for a second, demanding what was going on, but she knew that Cesare would just lie to her and Micheletto would stay silent. She huffed and silently fumed and she tore her way through Francesca’s diary. There was something artificial about the diary, as if Francesca knew it was going to be read by others, but Lucrezia couldn’t quite put down why she felt that way. And even if it was true, it wasn’t unlike people to do that.
Maybe she should have her own diary?

She immediately dismissed the thought. What would she write about? Her brother? Her feelings for him? About the ghosts and spirits? Her mother’s madness? Their spiralling poverty?

No.

Instead, she put down the diary and picked up her phone.

“Hi,” she text to Alphonse. “I’m free tomorrow if you want to go somewhere.”

She waited about half an hour before, “Sorry! I was in bed.”

A moment later.

“I wasn’t asleep, I don’t go to bed super early or anything.”

A moment more.

“Yes, if you still want to date me I’d love to go out.”

She smiled, “great,” she text back, “I’d like to see the museum in town. Meet me after school and we’ll go down on the bus.”

“Okay
The Art Club

Chapter Notes

Last time: Cesare and Lucrezia are finally honest about their feelings, but Lucrezia does not want to pursue a relationship with Cesare. Instead, she wants a normal relationship with a kind boy. She begins dating Alphonse Trastamara. Juan wants to come home. Rodrigo is still in hospital. Vanozza is still distant and unlike herself. Meanwhile, Cesare is making plans for the future; using Micheletto to keep the family afloat he is making preparations for his own little empire and building on his reputation at school.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Present Day

Micheletto stood for some time at the doorway of the Borgia household. Cesare and Lucrezia had skipped off the school, looking resplendent with their shiny hair and clear skin. He stood with his brother in his arms. Gio was looking good. He'd gained weight, his cheeks were brighter and his hair thick. It was darker than his, more of a brown, but the red could be seen. They shared the same eyes still. It was currently Gio’s worst feature.

“Micheletto!”

He looked up to see Catherina waving at him, just outside of the drive. He stared. Why was she calling him? Her behaviour threw him through a loop. He didn’t understand her at all. Nervously he put up a hand in greeting, a confused frown on his face.

“Bring your mama over to my house,” she called, and it took him a moment to realise she was talking about Vanozza, “as soon as you can my dear. I need to speak to her. Bring yourself and dear little Gio.”

He watched her walk away before slowly going back into the house. He went upstairs slowly, pushing open the master bedroom door to reveal Vanozza, who was sitting on the bed, on top of the quilt, cross-legged.

“Ms. Borgia,” he said, “you have to come with me.”

Balancing his brother carefully on his hip, he reached and gently touched Vanozza’s hand. When she had no reaction he laced his fingers into hers. He’d never touched her before, and she had never touched him.

“Please,” he said, “come.”

He pulled slightly, and she rose, almost like she was hypnotised. She looked at baby Gio and smiled, the baby smiling back. She never looked at Micheletto.

Still holding hands, they made their way slowly down the stairs. As they walked through the
corridors, doors slammed angrily. Micheletto felt a sort of strange prickling feeling in his thumbs. Still he continued on.

The air turned cold, colder with every step they took towards the front door.

Not much further now.

They were at the bottom of the staircase and moving across the foyer. The living room door stayed slightly ajar, inside an old song he didn’t recognise was playing. It was eerie. He knew he hadn’t put on the music, and Vanozza had been upstairs. The floor was cold and looked like it was beginning to frost over. The kitchen door slammed shut violently, making him jump slightly.

His brother felt heavy in his arm, but Micheletto did not want to let go of Vanozza’s hand. It was cool to the touch, and soft. She had long delicate fingers like Cesare and Lucrezia. Micheletto’s were slim also, but tough and calloused with bitten down nails.

They were in front of the door. He needed to get the keys from the key holder but both arms were occupied.

“Ms. Borgia,” he said in a low voice, embarrassed to find that he felt afraid, “please get the keys.”

He could hear a door creaking open behind him. Without looking he somehow knew it was the basement door. The kitchen door rattled, as if something angry was trapped inside it. He found himself standing up straighter as he felt instinctually that something was at his back.

“Mother,” he said, his voice low as if a wild animal was somewhere in the vicinity, “please open the door. Get the keys.”

Vanozza blinked, reached across and took the keys, and then turned the door handle. Micheletto heard a hiss behind him before he stepped outside quickly, pulling Vanozza out with him.

He turned around, but the foyer looked the same as usual, dark and empty. He let go of Vanozza’s hand, feeling it was safe now, and pushed the door shut. He then took the keys from her limp grip and put them in his pocket. Time to go.

He all but dragged her along to the neighbour’s house, hoicking his brother up onto his hip now and then. It was only next door, but he felt like the journey took forever. The shine of the sun radiating off the windows of their neighbour’s houses irritated his eyes. Why were the only neighbours they ever saw only Catherina? By the time he had made it to Catherina’s he was sweaty and frustrated.

“Hello my dear,” Catherina greeted at the door, though she couldn’t hide her slight disgust at the way he looked. He didn’t blame her, he was sure he looked appalling. His fringe was stuck to his head and his skin was prickling from heat and sweat. He was sure there was a wild look about his eyes too.

“Catherina?” asked Vanozza, looking confused about where she was.

“He is in high spirits,” smiled Catherina, placing down a tray of lemonade. “Take a drink of this,”
she informed Micheletto, “you look like you need it. Then go to the bathroom and wash your face. You need to calm down.”

He nodded, taking a swig of the lemonade. It tasted delicious and cool and homemade. He put down the glass and looked across at Vanozza. She was looking around the room and blinking. She seemed bewildered.

“Go out of here, up one flight of stairs and then the second door to the left. That’s the bathroom.”

“Thank you,” he said to Catherina.

He stumbled to his feet and left the room too quickly. He felt awkward and embarrassed and stressed out. Catherina’s house was, as mentioned, brighter than the Borgias. But there was something unreal about it. Something artificial about its joviality.

It was quiet, like the Borgias’ house. However, there were small, mundane sounds; the ticking of clothes, the soft murmur of conversation downstairs, the wind drifting passed an open window, the distant hum of a lawn mower. It was normal and safe.

He went into the bathroom and splashed water on his face. Looking up at the mirror he half expected to see a ghost in the reflection, but of course there was nothing.

“How have you been my dear?”

Vanozza blinked and found herself looking at Catherina. She shifted in the too soft settee.

“Well,” she responded automatically, then she tried to think about it. How had she been? Pretty happy. She’d been happy.

“Happy,” she smiled, relieved to find Catherina smiling back, “um…let me think why…I…feel freer I suppose. And Gio has been a huge help. Such an angel. Sometimes I still think I see Joffre, sitting in his room. I, um, I keep the door closed now. I think it’s best. And Juan’s been very helpful. I hardly see him but he’s become much more conscientious. My other two,” she tried to think…what of Cesare and Lucrezia? The last time she saw them was…was…last night. At dinner. They were staring at her blankly. Rude.

“Well,” she said, “they’re the same as ever. But,” (they had been in their school uniforms) “But they’re back in school. Which is good. It’s healthy.” She let out a sigh. She felt good, more clear, less foggy.

“I missed you,” replied Catherina, “I haven’t seen you for some days. Ever since you adopted the boys.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’ve just been busy with Gio. We must meet up more often.”

“Well you have a lot on your plate,” said Catherina with an understanding smile, “especially with Rodrigo being in hospital.” (Rodrigo was in hospital?) “You must be struggling, essentially a single, stay-at-home mom of four children? Have you always been just a homemaker?”

“It isn’t just home-making,” frowned Vanozza, “it can be a lot. Looking after all the kids. Preparing all their meals. Keeping on top of housework. Other people pay for nannies and cleaners. I just do it.”
“Of course,” Catherina held up her hands, “I didn’t mean to be patronising.”

Vanozza sighed a little, “no…I bit your head off. I didn’t mean it like that. Oh Catherina I feel so strange…”

“You are in that house alone too much,” said Catherina. “The last couple who lived there…one of the boys… he was in that house all the time. He rarely left. One day, he somehow got locked in the basement for hours. He was never the same after that. He barely left. Became pale and thin. And then, of course, he went quite mad,” she shrugged, “it’s a tragedy. I don’t want the same happening to you.”

Vanozza noticed the tray covered with glasses of lemonade. She picked one up, feeling the weight of the glass. Taking a sip, she revelled in its coolness. It’s realness.

“Back in Spain,” she began at last, “before Rodrigo and the children, I was self-employed. I did art therapy in schools, and taught art to children during the holidays.”

“How wonderful! My children would love such an activity!”

“Really?” Vanozza blinked, taking in the colours of the room. It was as if someone switched the light on. She was suddenly so aware of her physical body, of the room she was taking up on the chair. That she was in her friend’s house drinking and conversing. What day was it? What month?

“Of course, my son was receiving counselling from your husband, but he is indisposed right now. Maybe this could tide him over until Rodrigo comes home?”

“Sure, ok,” She let out a small laugh, “I’m sorry if I seem spacey today. Honestly I feel so strange.”

“You’ll have to let me know your prices,” Catherina said in response, “I can ask around too, get other parents interested.”

“That’d be wonderful, thank you.”

The women spoke more casually then and of things that didn’t matter. Catherina dispensed gossip about the surrounding neighbours. Vanozza shared her favourite Jeanette Winterson book and gave a recommendation. They swore to do something together one day; something child and husband free. Even if it was just going out for coffee.

Eventually Vanozza stood to leave, picking up Gio and bouncing him happily on her hip.

“Honestly Catherina thank you for everything,” she said, “if it hadn’t been for you I wouldn’t have this little man in my life. I feel so…so distant from my family. I can’t get through to Cesare or Juan and Lucrezia is growing up so fast…I think I would have had a breakdown if you weren’t here.”

Catherina leaned forwards and kissed Vanozza on her cheek, “you’re very welcome my dear.”

Vanozza stepped outside into the sun, squinting up at the sky with a renewed vigour. Catherina watched her for a moment, before looking back into the house and seeing Micheletto sitting on the stairs.

He had been waiting there while they had conversed.

“Would you like to finish your lemonade before you go back home?”
“No thank you.”

She nodded, moving aside so he could follow after Vanozza, who was already half way down the path, Gio in her arms.

Micheletto busied himself the rest of the day. He cleared out the rest of the living room. The music was playing softly on an old record player. He was certain he’d caught a glimpse of it in Lucrezia’s room before, but he decided to not investigate it and left it alone. The music was quite nice, in a melancholy way. He packed the last of the rubbish in bin bags and carried them outside. He then began to scrub down the carpet, getting as much soot as he could out of its threads.

After that he went to the local shops and bought some food. He made lunch for everyone, leaving the food on a tray as usual for Vanozza and Gio. He then went outside and began faffing with an old lawnmower. It took a few tries to get it going but eventually he was able to whip it around the garden. He avoided going too close to any trees and bushes and left the marshy, bog area well alone. It wasn’t a great job, but he hoped Cesare would like that at least some attempt had been made to normalise it.

He was washing the dishes left over from lunch when the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Who the fuck is this?”

Micheletto paused for a moment before saying, “I am Micheletto.”

“Oh…one of the adopted kids?”

“Yes.”

“Hi, I’m your brother Juan.”

So this was the famous brother who lived in Spain. Cesare spent a lot of time complaining about Juan, so much that Micheletto felt like he already knew him.

“Is my mom there?”

“No,” it was too much trouble to try and get Vanozza to pay him enough attention to actually come down to the phone.

“Ok, um, look, tell her that the Centre I’m in is bullshit. Dad’s sick so I should really come home and, like, if they get any calls about me from the centre, they should know that that girl is a fucking liar and I didn’t even fucking touch her, ok?”

“Ok.”

“Good. So… how are you finding the house?”

“Creepy.”

Laughter, loud and uninhibited, “yes it is! I can tell you’re a smart one. Well, try to survive before I get back so we can meet. I tell you what, that’s how much this place is a wank-fest; I’m willing to return to the god-damned murder house in order to leave here.”
Micheletto nodded and realised Juan couldn’t see so just said, “mmhmm.”

“Ok Chatterbox, pass on that message and, um, I’ll be a few days, tops. And don’t tell Cesare, he’s a fucking dick. Or Lucrezia, because she sucks his dick and will tell him anyway. Just mom. And dad. Maybe.”

Micheletto then heard an angry “Juan!!” in the background and some scuffling.

“Gotta go, bye!” cried Juan and the phone went dead.

Micheletto put the phone on the hook, but then felt something hit his foot. He looked down and saw a small, bouncy ball. He picked it up and looked across. The Basement door was open.

He stepped towards it slowly. Looking down, the stairs disappeared into darkness. He stared at it for a while; the gaping emptiness. It looked like death. He threw the ball down the stairs and shut the door slowly.

After saying Micheletto should move into his room, Cesare had begun moving Micheletto’s things that afternoon. Granted, without Micheletto’s permission but the red-head had no real issues with it. Sure, it was a bit intimidating knowing he would see Cesare everyday and in various states of undress, but it was easier to keep an eye on Cesare. Micheletto knew he wanted to keep the whole family safe from the spirits in the house. He wasn’t too concerned about his baby brother, who was flourishing, and by what he could tell Lucrezia was protected by some sort of magic. But Cesare was wild and reckless. Micheletto wasn’t sure how he could keep his friend safe, but he would try nonetheless.

The phone-call from Juan had lit a fire under Micheletto’s ass, Juan’s return would mean he’d want his room back, and so Micheletto cleared the last of things from the bedroom. He didn’t have much, though he now had more than when he had first arrived.

In Cesare’s room the wall to the right had been and so the door to the spare room could be seen. They reckoned it must have been where the servants stayed back when the house was first built. The room was very small and empty, but it had a great view of the area and a lot of natural light. A sun catcher hung from the ceiling. It was beautiful; pieces of coloured glass, rough string wrapped around a twig.

He had a small bed that was usually used for camping set up in the corner. He put his backpack with his clothes in the far left corner opposite. He put in treasured possession of the CD portable player on the bed and put on the headphones, listening to the melancholy cries of Radiohead for a little while. Lucrezia and Cesare would be home soon.

When they did arrive, Micheletto opening the door for them, Cesare barrelled passed with a thunderous look on his face and without so much of a look in Micheletto’s direction.

There was no Lucrezia.

Micheletto stepped outside onto the step.

Lucrezia was just outside the walls of the house. She was talking to a small boy who had soft
brown eyes and a riot of inky black curls on his head. He looked like a softer, cuter Cesare.

Lucrezia giggled, and Micheletto couldn’t help but notice that she seemed a lot more like a regular pretty girl, and not the somewhat icy, intelligent queen he’d come to know her as.

“Thank you for letting me walk you back,” Alphie smiled sweetly.

“No problem,” responded Lucrezia. The truth was she had been quite stressed out when he initially had caught her and Cesare after school and asked to walk down with them. First of all she knew Cesare wasn’t yet prepared to accept Alphie and second of all she didn’t want her brand new boyfriend anywhere near the Murder House.

“So,” he began after a moment’s pause, “your brother doesn’t seem so keen on me. Um, hopefully he will warm up to me soon?”

The truth was it had taken all of Alphie’s bravery to march up to the pair after school and ask to walk home with them. They had been standing with Vitelli and Carlos, both of whom had glared at him. He couldn’t blame them, in the past the Trastamaras hadn’t been very kind to the bastard children of Great Families, those two included. Alphie had never bullied anyone, but his older brother certainly had. Since Cesare’s arrival, things in school had been shaken up. Carlos and Vitelli had become people to be feared.

Lucrezia had smiled sweetly, if a bit nervously at his arrival, but Cesare…Cesare looked incensed. He was a very tall boy, tall for his age, and broad too. It had been very intimidating. Alphie had smiled at him, trying to get him to see that Alphie wasn’t a threat…but that hadn’t done much.

During their walk home, in which Cesare had been quiet but not silent, Alphie almost wondered if Cesare would have respected him more if he was more aggressive. The Borgia boys had built a reputation in school quickly after having a fight on their first day, and so it was possible that violence and aggression was what they understood.

Lucrezia laughed lightly, “Cesare is just stressed at the moment. With our dad being in hospital and him running for president, it’s a lot. That’s all. Don’t take it personally.”

“Oh, ok,” he looked over to the house, “you know we used to own this house? Back in the early 20th century?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it was my ancestor who built it. Ferdinand Trastmara. He didn’t have a great reputation. The family don’t speak about him much.”

Lucrezia nodded, but didn’t seem overly surprised. Had she already known?

“There’s a new Marvel film out tomorrow,” she said, “take me to go see it?”

“Sure,” his heart raced again, “sure, I’d love that.”

She leaned forward and kissed him softly, enough for him to want more but chaste enough to not anger her brother.

Micheletto spent most of the night in his room.
The house was tense. Cesare and Lucrezia had had a massive argument about Alphie after she came in. Micheletto had stayed out of it, escaping to his room as the argument escalated. Cesare ended up shouting at Lucrezia, which was rare. Lucrezia was now sobbed in her room. He thought he could hear Cesare sniffling in the night, but decided not to say anything. He didn’t want to embarrass his friend.

The tension lasted even until the next morning. They ate breakfast in silence before leaving for school. Micheletto felt relieved they were gone.

Then his usual routine started. He made breakfast for Vanozza and Gio. He went into the living room. The debris was off the floor. The carpet was mostly cleaned. He got a washcloth and began carefully wiping the walls down, allowing the original colour to come through. After that he opened the curtains and wiped down the windows using vinegar, a trick he’d learned from the Children’s Home. Behind him, Billie Holiday began to play. He was beginning to really get a grip on the hauntings now. He could feel when a ghost was coming, a weird prickling feeling, the drop in temperature. But it was also useful learning when their intentions were malevolent or not. The Living Room Ghost had never hurt him, despite the power she was capable of. Maybe she appreciated him tidying her room? In which case, maybe that was how he could help the family? He was home all the time anyway? Maybe he could help them by keeping the house nice for the spirits? It wasn’t a big ask, even if he did feel like a maid sometimes.

He turned and nearly leapt out of his skin to see a tall woman behind him. She was blonde and had an American look about her.

“Hello,” she said.

He stumbled back out of the room, falling onto his butt.

She had vanished. Gone in the blink of an eye.

He sat stupidly on the floor for some time before becoming annoyed at himself and not a little embarrassed. He forced himself back into the room to collect the bowl of water and cloth he had been using to clean. The living room was much better now. It needed a bit of a revamp, but it was now safe to go into at least.

He was in the kitchen, pouring out the water from the bowl, when a slim girl entered the room.

“Oh, hello,” she said.

Micheletto stared.

“I’m Vittoria. I’m with the art club,” she was covered in smatters of paint.

“That art club?” he asked, “that’s started already?”

“Yes,” she laughed, “Vanozza is running it. She’s lovely. She did say she had children. Would you like to join?”

Micheletto tensed. He didn’t want to bother Vanozza. She still acted strangely around him. He found himself not wanting others to see how she ignored him. Also, he wasn’t very good at art.
“Vittoria,” a voice called from the hallway, “Rufio asked…” a boy entered the room. He had pretty sea-green eyes and dark curly hair. He immediately caught Micheletto’s eyes and smiled, “hello, who is this?”

“I am Micheletto,” he said, looking away. His chest was hurting from his heart beating so hard. Why was Rome full of such pretty people?

“That’s an accent you have,” the girl said, “where are you from?”

“Forli,” he answered brusquely, “excuse me.”

He rushed out of the kitchen, brushing passed the girl and boy and barrelling upstairs. He locked himself up in the sanctuary of his room, and sat on his thin bed, looking up at the pretty sun-catcher.

He waited until the sun was setting before sneaking back out of his room. Cesare and Lucrezia were not home, the former likely at some school club and the latter likely on a date.

He walked down the stairs quickly, noting on the second floor that Vanozza’s bedroom door was open and Gio was standing in the doorway, looking up at Micheletto with a smile on his face.

“Hello,” said Micheletto, rubbing his brother’s head fondly. It was growing long and becoming curly. Vanozza was inside the room, talking quietly on her mobile phone.

He left her to it and continued downstairs. It was on the first floor that he passed the bathroom, and heard the faucet running. The door opened and instead of it being a Borgia, it was the pretty boy from before.

Micheletto blinked and stepped back. The boy grinned mischievously, “I’m still here I’m afraid. I’m waiting for my parents to pick me up. I think Vanozza is calling them now.”

Micheletto nodded slightly and moved passed him, going down the wide staircase to the foyer. He was going to start dinner.

Finances had improved recently. Cesare was getting money by working with his friends at school. Apparently they were bribing rich parents. It wasn’t something that was safe to do long term, but Cesare just needed to keep the family going for now.

In any case, it was no longer a struggle to make meals for the family. Micheletto wasn’t sure when it became his job to do that, but it seemed fair as he was the one home all day and unlike Vanozza was still of sound mind.

He had put on the oven before he realised the boy had followed him. He turned to stare at the kid, amazed that he hadn't noticed him in all this time, and shocked the boy had decided to trail after him. Was he really that bored?

“I am Pascal,” said the boy, taking Micheletto's staring as an opportunity to speak, “my brother and I are not really artists but our family like to sign us up to these things to keep us out of trouble. I’m actually quite good at writing and stuff, but I cannot go to the old poetry club anymore.”

“Where is your brother?” asked Micheletto.

The boy shrugged, “wandering around. This house is very big and easy to get lost in. Vanozza said
that she doesn’t mind.”

Fair enough.

“What do you do for fun Micheletto?”

Micheletto watched the boy closely, feeling that somehow he was being laughed at.

“Shall we go watch some TV or something?” the boy tried.

“The living room is out of bounds.”

“No it isn’t,” Pascal smiled, evidently soothed by finally getting Micheletto to answer him, “that’s where we were painting all afternoon. Come.”

They walked into the living room and sure enough, it was looking as good as new. The wall was newly painted and a new carpet was on the floor.

They sat on the couch and turned on the television. It seemed Pascal was at last content to be silent, and Micheletto found himself slowly relaxing. They sat close on the settee, but not too close. The show was called ‘I Love Lucy,’ some old timey thing that Micheletto had never even heard of until now. Pascal chuckled every now and then, and Micheletto had to admit it was a nice sound.

The show ended. The room was dark now, the sun having set. Micheletto pressed on the lamp just as Pascal rose to hit feet.

“I better go,” he said, gesturing to the living room door. Micheletto looked over and saw another boy, a thin teen with lank brown hair and curiously cold brown eyes watching them from the threshold.

“Our parents are here,” said the boy to Pascal.

“His name is Rufio,” Pascal explained, “he’s my brother. I shall see you again Micheletto.”

Micheletto nodded. The boys did not look alike. Perhaps it was a scenario similar to his and Cesare’s?

The next day was the same as always. He saw Cesare and Lucrezia off to school. He then took his brother and breakfast to Vanozza. He figured Juan would be arriving any day now and so began tidying that room up. He considered tidying the bathroom on the first floor, the one next to Juan’s room, but decided against it. The last couple of days the room had taken on a weird atmosphere. He noticed that Lucrezia had stopped using it as well.

He thought about Pascal. Why had that kid seemed so eager to talk to him? Before Cesare, Micheletto had never had any friends. The closest he had was a boy called Augustino, who had been part of that little gang of thieves Micheletto had returned to. Augustino wasn’t in foster care, but his family were very poor. He had been trying to help them out. They had had some weird connection, Augustino was tall, broad and with curly black hair and because Micheletto has a specific type, he had developed a crush on him early. In fact, Augustino had been the first real crush Micheletto had ever had, cementing Micheletto as gay. Before then the feelings he had had for certain boys had been vague; the desire of wanting to kiss and touch only fleeting. He had felt
something similar for some girls, but as he progressed into his early teens, that desire had flittered away into nothing.

Augustino never reciprocated Micheletto’s feelings (not that Micheletto had risked even asking.) But they had spoken quite a bit and were generally friendly. Sometimes Micheletto regretted not pushing for something more, because he was certain there had been a spark between them. There was a sort of energy whenever they were together, a sort of waiting for something to ignite. In the end Augustino left that lifestyle, his family fortunes improving and them all moving into a better area.

He remembers the last time he’d seen Augustino.

It was the day he had been out with Cesare, the day when Cesare had gone to buy clothes for him and when they had come back to find a belligerent, possessed Rodrigo.

They had been in a part of Rome that was filled with designer shops and tourists. Cesare, who was talkative, had been discussing at length what types of clothes and colours would suit him. “I go for black,” he had been saying, “it’s seen as boring, but it makes sense. It suits my colouring so still looks striking, you know? That’s the thing, you have to dress to impress. It’s all part of the costume you put on everyday.”

Micheletto hadn’t really understood; he didn’t put on a costume. He just was who he was.

“You suit earthy colours. Little hints of blue to bring out your eyes…” Cesare’s voice had faded out into the background as Micheletto had recognised a figure across the courtyard. There was a fountain separating them, but he knew straight away who it was; Augustino, smiling and laughing with his arm around a girl. She was an ordinary looking girl. Micheletto had been surprised by that. He would have thought Augustino could have done better, being so tall and handsome.

Augustino had spotted him then. There was a moment, a sort of freeze frame where they just stared. And then the moment was gone and Augustino was walking away with the rosy cheeked girl. Micheletto had realised then that he really was no good at reading people. There’d been nothing between him and Augustino. Augustino was probably just being nice, talking to the weird, quiet kid who was too intense and had no friends.

“Micheletto!” Cesare had barked, impatient and annoyed at being ignored. “Come on, we need to go home. For some reason Lu’s saying not to buy you anything…”

The heavens had opened as they made their way back home. And it was really weird, because Micheletto had felt like crying. He didn’t know why.

He had just finished vacuuming Juan’s bedroom floor when he heard the sounds of happy kids downstairs.

He came out of the room and peered through the banisters.

Down in the foyer, Vanozza was laughing with Vittoria, Pascal, Rufio and some other girl he didn’t know. She was pretty, with dark hair and eyes. She reminded him of Lucrezia in a way; girlish and sweet with a pouty mouth and clever eyes.

They all went into the living room.

Micheletto sighed, turning to sit on the hallway with his back to the bannisters. He wasn’t scared of people. He just knew that he was awkward because he didn’t understand them. And that meant that often they were quite scared of him. Micheletto wasn’t keen to get in anyone’s face if he didn’t
have to, so he just avoided people.

But still.

Everything in his life now was about Cesare. And to a lesser degree, the Borgias overall. Was that healthy? Would it be so bad if he had his own life outside of Cesare? Cesare had his own friends, Lucrezia did. Even Vanozza had a special relationship with Gio, a friendship with Catherina and this art club to keep her busy. Micheletto’s life, never exciting or fulfilling, had become a monotonous routine of serving a family who barely noticed him.

Decision made, he heaved himself off the floor and made his way downstairs. Soft music was playing from the living room, not Billie Holiday, but something soft and contemporary. It sounded like something Lucrezia would listen to.

He peeked a look into the living room from the stairs. Vanozza was working with the dark-haired girl on a watercolour laid out flat on the coffee table. Vittoria was sitting cross legged on the floor, a large board covered in clay in front of her. Her hands were filthy as she moulded into a shape. Pascal and Rufio stood a little out of sight, just in front of the window.

He stepped down the last of the stairs and crossed the foyer to peer into the living room more closely.

He saw the boys properly now, standing with their backs to the window which revealed the back garden. Before each of them was an easel. They painted sloppily. Neither looked too interested in what they were doing. The light behind Pascal provided a beautiful, bright backdrop that lit him up. It almost looked religious, a beatific saint cast on painted glass.

Rufio noted Micheletto. He elbowed his brother, who grinned at the red-head.

Micheletto felt his heart do a small skip.

Pascal made some excuse to Vanozza, who waved him off with little interest, and stalked towards Micheletto, his movements faintly seductive. Vittoria smirked and Micheletto found himself ducking out of the living room out of embarrassment.

“Micheletto,” smiled Pascal, “you’ve saved me from my boredom.”

“Have I?”

“Of course,” Pascal slipped his hands, soft and warm, between Micheletto’s, and squeezed. “Let’s run away for a bit.”

The boys wandered hand in hand out into the back-garden. Micheletto felt his brain fuzzing. Boys didn’t normally hold hands, did they? Was Pascal flirting? This had to be flirting, right? He was too naïve, he couldn’t be sure.

The garden looked a lot better thanks to Micheletto’s efforts, but it still was wild and over-grown. Pascal lead Micheletto down in a shaded area that he hadn’t yet gotten to tidying. The walnut trees were thick here, leaning against a large brick wall. But it was off one of these old trees that a home-made, rustic swing sat.

“It’s wide enough for the two of us,” Pascal said, his mouth very close the Micheletto’s ear. Micheletto felt his neck reacting to Pascal’s breath brushing across it, goose bumps breaking out and him tensing slightly.
They sat facing opposite directions so they could look at one another with a turn of the head.

“How old are you Micheletto?”

“Fifteen. Nearly sixteen”

Pascal looked surprised, “you look younger than that. I’m glad though, I’m sixteen.”

Micheletto wasn’t sure how to translate the second sentence so instead focused on the first and replied, “I’m short for my age. Cesare thought I was around thirteen or so. They originally were planning to send me to middle school before realising I should be with Cesare and Lucrezia.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, why are you not in school with them?”

“They’re still arranging it all.”

Pascal was quiet, but there seemed to be some judgment in the air, which seemed unfair on the Borgias; they were trying their best.

“Why are you not in school?” Micheletto countered, suddenly realising.

Pascal smiled easily. Micheletto noted that he smiled a lot. “We’re home taught,” Pascal explained, “all of us in the art club. It’s how we all came to be friends.”

“The girl, what’s her name?”

“Vittoria?”

He shook his head, “the dark-haired one. I only saw her recently.”

“She’s called Charlotte D’Albret. Her grandparents are French but she was born here in Italy. Vanozza speaks French to her occasionally so they get on well. Why?” Pascal leaned in close to Micheletto, his eyes trained on his face where as Micheletto stubbornly kept his own gaze averted.

“How do you like her? Do you find her pretty?”

“She is pretty,” responded Micheletto, feeling like he was being tested, “but I don’t like her, I don’t know her.”

“Do you like the look of her? You know what I’m asking. I can set you up if you like.”

“No…and no.” Micheletto chanced a glance at Pascal before looking away, “I don’t have crushes on girls.” His hand which was on the rope of the swing tightened.

A small huff of laughter of Pascal before, “another thing we have in common. I don’t like girls like that either.”

Micheletto felt his ears and cheeks growing warm. He repressed a nervous gulp.

“Are you shy Micheletto?”

“No.”

“Really, you aren’t?”

“No,” Micheletto glanced up at Pascal, who looked positively delighted, “I’m not shy. I’m quiet.”
“Aren’t they the same thing?”

“No.”

Pascal had a strange look pass his features then. He looked at Micheletto, as in, he really looked at him. His face became serious and a contemplative look came into his eyes.

“You’re interesting Micheletto, there’s something about you.” he brushed his hand through Micheletto’s fine hair, “something about you is mysterious and wild…I don’t even think you do it on purpose. You’re sort of elemental. It makes you intriguing.”

Micheletto didn’t really understand what Pascal said. There was no real mystery to him. He was pretty boring and standard. It seemed to Micheletto that he was often surrounded by weirdness, and he simply dealt with it the best he could. Pascal’s hand felt nice in his hair though, so he said nothing.

“Have you ever been kissed?” Pascal asked, his eyes searching Micheletto’s face.

The wind was cool with the promise of winter, but pleasant. The autumn leaves fell around them, a riot of red and gold.

Micheletto shook his head.

Pascal laughed lightly again, as if entranced, “may I kiss you? I’ve never been anyone’s first, and you’re very kissable right now.”

Micheletto didn’t understand what that meant, how could one be “kissable”? but he nodded anyway.

Pascal came very close and Micheletto instinctively closed his eyes. It was too much. Too much stimulus.

He felt Pascal’s nose brushing passed his, and soft lips on his own chapped ones. It was light at first, and chaste. Just getting used to each other.

Pascal’s hand was still in his hair, first passive, but then it pressed into his head, moving him closer to Pascal who opened his mouth. Micheletto mimicked him, and the kiss deepened. More of a lovers’ kiss instead of two curious boys.

Pascal moved his head a little more to the side, pushing closer again, and just flicking his tongue into Micheletto’s mouth. Only light, not too much, though it almost made Micheletto pull back. The hand in his hair prevented him from doing so.

Pascal’s other hand joined Micheletto, holding the side of his face, his thumb bushing passed Micheletto’s jaw and rubbing down to the warmth of his throat.

Apart from moving his mouth, getting used to it and developing a technique, Micheletto stayed very still. His hands were now both on the wooden seat between them, on what little space between them there was. His body was very still and very tense.

Pascal began to pull away, pressing a few chaste kisses to Micheletto’s lips by way of goodbye.

They both sat back, assessing. Micheletto trying to resist putting a shaking hand to his lips, Pascal closely watching watching him.
“Are you sure that was your first time?” he asked after a moment’s silence.

Micheletto nodded. Suddenly, his mood changed and intensified. He didn’t want to talk to Pascal and he didn’t want to hear any more. He jumped down from his seat and began to walk away.

“Micheletto?” called Pascal, sounding alarmed.

“Going now,” Micheletto bit out, not quite looking behind him, “you have to go back to art.”

He marched inside the house, all the time resisting breaking into a run. He avoided looking in the living room and bounded up the stairs, two at a time. He kept going until he was all the way back in his room.

He shut the door behind him and walked around anxiously for a moment. His heart was racing. He felt a little ill. He couldn’t tell if he wanted to grin, laugh or break down in misery. Micheletto began to remember old breathing techniques he was taught when he was younger and they were trying to contain his anger issues. Breathe in through the nose and out of the mouth. Count the breaths. Slow them down. Calm down.

He sat on his bed, his breaths slow and purposeful. Eventually he lay down and closed his eyes. Eventually he drifted away, dead to the world.

**Wake up.**

When Micheletto awoke the next day, he started his usual routine. Breakfast with the siblings, who were arguing about Juan. He cautiously stayed out of it, as he often did with their arguments. He waved them off to school. He fed his brother and bought breakfast for Vanozza, who seemed bright and cheerful.

He felt bright and cheerful too. There was something lighter about his day, and he was noticing little things; the dust motes floating in a strip of sunlight breaking through the stained window into the foyer, the giggle of his baby brother as he tickled his belly and sides, the rich smell of coffee Cesare had made for everyone that morning.

He wondered what he should do for the day. The living room was fully functional now. He could tidy the garden…but he wanted to avoid it for now. Juan’s room was done and he was avoiding the first floor bathroom…so maybe the second floor? That was where Vanozza’s and Joffre’s bedrooms were.

He wasn’t to go into Vanozza’s room, and he wasn’t sure about Joffre’s. He knew that the family kept the bedroom door shut. He went upstairs and peeked inside the room. There was an old blood stain on the floor. It must have been where the boy was crushed under the heavy wardrobe, which still stood behind the door. It was an ugly thing, black with a cheap plywood outer layer. It was heavy, so he could see how they hadn’t gotten it out of the house yet.

He’d clean the carpet.

He went down a floor and stared at the bathroom door. Maybe it wouldn’t be a big deal to go in there and get a bowl of water and a cloth?

He opened the door and peered inside.

The room was cold but empty.

He stepped inside and instantly the floor frosted over. The shower curtain rattled, bringing his
attention to the bath. Inside it sat a man. He was pretty, pale skin with fair hair and light eyes. But he had a bloody gash on his head and his eyes looked murderous. All the taps suddenly turned on, water gushing and the bathroom heating up.

Micheletto backed out of the bathroom and slammed the door shut before making his way downstairs. He kept aware of his surroundings, but the ghost didn’t follow him. So maybe that was why everyone was now using the small downstairs bathroom for washing, even though it was cramped and inconvenient. But why was the ghost only now haunting the bathroom? They were such strange beings.

He went into the kitchen and froze. A bowl of soapy water complete with a brush to scrub the floor sat waiting for him on the table.

Micheletto stared. Who had-?

He looked around but couldn’t see any ghosts lurking.

Eventually, he went up to the bowl and took it. If ghosts wanted to be helpful, he wasn’t going to refuse their aid.

Back in the room, he scrubbed the floor, humming quietly to himself. He’d opened the window letting the air and birdsong breeze through the room. He hoped this would help the family heal somehow. And maybe it would help make up for what he did to Rodrigo. At least now, when the man returned from hospital, the blood of his youngest would finally be off the floor. Despite Cesare’s complaints and the bad first impression, Micheletto was certain Rodrigo was a decent enough man. Throughout the house were many photos, most of the core family, but many containing other children. Vanozza and Rodrigo had fostered many children, before and during having their own, and that made them seem like good people to Micheletto. It seemed it had only gone wrong for them recently.

A slight creaking behind him. The brushed of wood against his back.

Micheletto tensed. Slowly he turned around. The wardrobe doors were open. A girl stood amongst the clothes. She was tall, wearing a long white dress. He could see her dark hair, but her face was mostly covered by the clothes hanging up.

But it wasn’t her, but what sat crouched between her legs that he focused on. It was a small, wide eyed boy. He was cute, but clearly dead, his skin a ghastly pale, his lips blue. But he was beautiful, the same way Lucrezia and Cesare were, and he was sure that had this boy lived to grow up he would have been as enticing as they were.

The boy stared at Micheletto.

“Joffre?” Micheletto heard himself croak.

The boy allowed himself a very small smile and a slight nod, before leaning forward, holding out his hand and offering a white feather to Micheletto. Micheletto took it, feeling bewildered.

What was this?

“What’s this?”

The moment snapped. Time shifted. The wardrobe doors were closed. In the hallway stood Pascal. He was in the doorway, looking down at Micheletto.
Micheletto looked at the window. It was late in the day, almost time for the siblings to come home from school.

“Is this your room?”

Micheletto shook his head. Why was the boy here?

“Can I see your room?” Pascal smirked.

Micheletto stood and brushed himself down. The blood had been cleaned up at last, and the floor was dry. He must have been sitting there for hours without realising.

“Why?”

“Because I’d like to see it,” answered Pascal, “and I was waiting for you to whisk me away again at art club and you never showed!”

“I didn’t realise I was supposed to.”

“Of course, to make up for kissing me so nicely yesterday only to run away.”

“I didn’t run away,” he came out of the room and began walking to the stairs up to the attic, Pascal following.

“Ok. Your hasty retreat then.”

“No.”

“Yes!”

“Cesare will be home soon,” said Micheletto, “and I haven’t got permission to let you through his room.”

“He’s already home,” said Pascal, “he’s flirting with Charlotte downstairs.”

Micheletto paused. Oh. Ok. Well... Cesare would because Charlotte was very pretty and as much as he loved Lucrezia it was never really going to happen between them. Also, he had the impression that the Borgia siblings were going to grow up with quite voracious sexual appetites.

He looked back at Pascal, with his black curly locks and eyes that looked like blue and green crystals.

He opened the door and let Pascal in. Cesare’s room was a riot of books and papers and CDs and records. Posters of bands and various European monuments covered the walls. It was the room of someone with a busy mind and not enough stuff to pour that active mind into.

“Through here,” Micheletto grunted, pulling open the door to his own room. The small military style pop up camping bed. The backpack in the corner. The CD player hidden under the pillow. The cuts of glass hanging from the ceiling.

It was quite a difference from Cesare’s room.

Pascal looked around once then twice. Slowly he made his way to the small circular window. The silence had a tension to it.

“It’s nice, the view,” he said at last.
“Yes.”

Pascal turned to him, his face cautiously blank, “you do not have as much as your siblings.”

A pause. “I’m new.”

“Still,” Pascal looked around again.

“Cesare is very important to me,” Micheletto stated, without knowing why or thinking it through. Pascal had a way of doing that, of throwing him off. Pascal made him stupid. “And… I’m important to him.”

“Are you?”

“I’m helpful.”

Pascal gave him a queer look then. It was assessing and piercing.

“You are very important to me,” he said.

_How?_ thought Micheletto, _you don’t even know me._

“But not because you’re helpful,” Pascal continued, a smile slowly forming. He stood in front of Micheletto now, tall and in his space. He put both his hands around Micheletto’s face, cupping it.

“Can I kiss you again?” he asked, his voice low, close to a whisper.

“No.” Micheletto ducked out from under him, creating space.

Pascal let out a huff that sounded like a laugh but there was an element of frustration to it as well.

“You’re a tease.”

“No,” Micheletto bit back, “why are you here?”

“I’ve told you why.”

_I don’t believe you._

Pascal moved forward then with scary speed. It was like an adder striking. A snake in the grass.

He grabbed Micheletto by the waist, lifting him slightly and making Micheletto feel strangely petite. He pushed his lips to Micheletto’s, making a bruising kiss. Micheletto frowned and moved his head away.

“Just a small kiss,” he felt Pascal whispering next to him, his lips on his skin, his breath brushing through his hair. A thrill ran as a shudder through Micheletto and he allowed it, he turned back to Pascal who this time kissed him properly straight away. It was more violent, more frantic. More charged, Pascal pushing his whole body against Micheletto’s, putting his tongue into Micheletto’s mouth, Micheletto occasionally biting him, his hands fisted in the front of Pascal’s shirt. It felt a bit more honest between them, unlike the day before when it seemed like something out of a film. When Pascal pushed closer, Micheletto allowed his arms to wrap around Pascal’s shoulders, his hands in Pascal’s hair. It was soft and beautiful. Pascal smelt nice too.

_I could fall in love with you._ Micheletto thought. _And maybe if this is real… then you could possibly fall in love with me too._
And it was that second part that scared him so much. People like Micheletto do not have people fall in love with them. Micheletto wasn’t wanted by his parents. He was rejected by all his foster carers. He had no friends other than Cesare, and that was because he worked for Cesare. He didn’t have people love him just for him. Was this even possible?

*The evidence is here,* said his mind in response, *this boy who’s so close to you right now. You’re young, this was going to happen to you at some stage. It happens for everyone at some point. It’s time. Enjoy.*

Micheletto’s life continued the same. He served Cesare in whatever way he could. He looked after the Borgias. But now there was someone else as well. His life was more than just Cesare.

Now he had a friend. A boyfriend even.

They spent afternoons together, Pascal sneaking away from Art Club.

“You’re my project,” he would tell Micheletto in between kisses, “exploring you in all your mysterious ways.”

Pascal spoke like an idiot sometimes. Like they were in a cheesy eighties teen romance or something. But he sort of liked it, so he didn’t complain too much.

Joffre kept appearing. He kept trying to talk to him, but either the words wouldn’t come or he’d vanish as soon as he opened his mouth.

It didn’t make any sense.

Until one day, Micheletto was in the foyer. It was evening time. Everyone was upstairs, apart from him. Joffre appeared beside him.

“Can you see me?” the boy asked, sounding annoyed.

“Yes.”

Joffre closed his eyes, as if relieved. “Good. Good. I’m your new brother. The one who died. You need to listen. Try to leave the house.”

“What?” That wasn’t what Micheletto expected to hear.

“Try to leave.”

It was bizarre, but he did tell himself that he would try to appease the ghosts if it meant they wouldn’t hurt the living Borgias.

He walked outside. The air was crisp and cold. Halloween decorations were out and about. The garden was filled with dead leaves. It reminded him of the first kiss between him and Pascal. He allowed himself a small, secret smile as he headed down the gravel drive way to the gate.
The gate came closer and closer. Outside of it was the main road. He often heard cars driving by it but he rarely saw any, which suddenly struck him as weird.

He was at the threshold. He stepped forwards to leave and enter the main pathway outside of the garden when

He was suddenly in the back garden of the house.

He looked around in confusion. How?

What had happened? He had been at the front of the house, just about to go onto the main street!

Micheletto ran back into the house, through the foyer, he caught a glimpse of Ursula in the living room and Joffre in the foyer as he ran through, back through the front door, out into the front garden, running towards to gate and…

he was back in the back garden.

His breath was coming quickly, his chest hurting.

What was happening? What was happening?

Something was telling him that he knew, and to stop being fucking stupid already.

He ran again, back into the foyer. He paused. He could see people everywhere. They were on the stairs, looking down from the bannisters, from the kitchen, the basement door was open but he glanced away from their quickly.

He ran back outside through the front door, running back down to the gate towards where the road and main path were and…

back in the back garden.

He stopped now. He felt out of breath but knew he wasn’t. He wasn’t because he didn’t breathe anymore.

“Oh my god,” he whispered, bending forwards and leaning his hands on his knees, “oh my god… oh my god…”

“God cannot help you now you sodomite!”

He looked up to see the Preacher glowering at him, his eyes full of hate. The preacher he and Cesare had murdered. He stumbled backwards and fell into a girl.

“Remember me?” she asked, “you helped bury me out here and wiped away my blood.”

He shook his head and ran back into the house.

The foyer was rammed. Everyone was watching him. Apparently he was tonight’s entertainment.

“You’re dead,” barked a tall thin man standing on the stairs, “for God’s sake, you are dead! We’ve been trying to say for ages! Welcome to the party! You’re here forever like the rest of us.”

“What?” whispered Micheletto. His eyes drifted up the stairs, taking in all the people. They all had on different clothes from varying eras.
And then he saw, on the bannisters of the first floor: The Art Club.

Vittoria, Charlotte, Rufio and Pascal.

And now he saw. Their clothes were dated. Their skin had that faint pallor of death.

And he realised he hadn’t spoken to Cesare or Lucrezia for ages. He couldn’t even remember when…when he last had.

He had died, at some point. He had died.

He had been on the phone.

And then a ball had rolled towards him, leading him to the basement…”

“I was pushed in,” he muttered. He looked up back to Rufio and Pascal. Pascal, looking at him with pretty but blank eyes, “you pushed me in. You got me killed.”

Micheletto sunk to the floor.

It had all been a lie.

Something shifted. His death had been violent. And painful. And horrible.

And there had been betrayal. So much betrayal. Even now, he could sense his body, locked away in the house.

Possessive, obsessive…

He clenched his teeth, the rage of a poltergeist suddenly building up in him. The lights began to flicker violently. The floor began to shake. Blood spat out of Micheletto’s mouth and nose. His sight began to turn red. He could feel his body becoming icy. He could sense the ghosts shifting about him, the anxiousness, them beginning to flee. Let them be scared. He’d punish them and everyone else in the world.

Micheletto exploded.

Chapter End Notes

A longer chapter this week because I may not have time to update next weekend. But I should be back on schedule after that.
Two Weeks

Chapter Notes

Time is becoming confusing.
A slightly disjointed chapter that tells us what everyone else was doing during the events of the previous chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Last time: Micheletto meets a boy called Pascal and falls into the throes of Puppy Love. Then he finds out that he is dead.

Present Day

The lights in the house went out. The music Lucrezia had been listening to stopped. The temperature dropped. She tensed. This was another poltergeist attack and it was bad. Maybe, if she stayed very still …

The entire house began to violently shake.

She leapt out of bed. “Djem!” she screamed, “Paolo!” She ripped open her bedroom door. The doors of every room were slamming open and shut. The floor and walls were frosted over, “Cesare!” she screamed, panic taking over. Oh god, she was going to die, “Mama??”

There was a loud crashing noise, reverberating all around the house when every single window suddenly exploded outwards. She screamed, crouching down and covering her ears for a moment before coming back to her senses and looking up.

Her heart jumped at the sight of Cesare stumbling down the stairs.

“I cannot reach mama,” he shouted, as the house began to emit a loud roaring sound. They ran to each other, their hands reaching out and,

Whoomp!

They each were thrown back.

She screamed his name, trying to reach him, but there was a force in the way. She wasn’t able to get to him.

Her mind began to work then. She couldn’t rely on her brother and mama was trapped, presumably with Gio.

She needed to find the cause of the disturbance, try to calm it down.

She moved a little, working out where she was allowed to go and quickly realised that she could make it downstairs. She went that way, ignoring Cesare calling out to her in alarm.
As she crawled down the stairs, the rocking slowly ceased. The air froze. The roaring stopped and everything became still.

She got cautiously to her feet and began to walk down into the foyer. The floor was so cold it stung her bare feet.

She slipped a little when she finally reached the foyer, but turning to the right of the stairs, she saw him.

Micheletto sat on the floor. He was covered in blood, just like that day.

She let out a sigh, it transforming into dragon’s breath before her.

“Micheletto,” she whispered.

She could feel the anger and betrayal radiating off him.

Still, she walked towards him, sitting down in front of him. He looked at her, blue eyes icy.

“I remember,” he ground out, his voice hoarse. “I remember everything.”

**Two Weeks Ago**

By the time she’d kissed Alphie and made her way back in the house, Cesare was standing in the foyer seething.

“Cesare calm down.”

“Why should I? Why did he insist on walking you home?”

“He’s my boyfriend.”

“Do you have to throw it in my face?” He sounded hurt now, and she was sorry.

“That’s not what I want,” she sighed. She looked at Cesare. He was so beautiful. Tall and dark and handsome. Clever and kind, at least to her. “Cesare, I love you. You know it. I know it.” She let out an exasperated huff, “I’m pretty sure Micheletto knows. Juan knows! But don’t you see? it cannot be! Even if I refused to find happiness with any other boy, at some point papa would have insisted on me marrying someone important, even if I dedicated myself to you body and soul. Don’t you understand that I can’t? We can never be.”

“It’s not 1896,” spat Cesare, “father cannot make you marry anyone. And I told you, we could leave, make a new name for ourselves. No one would know.”

She hesitated. It was tempting. But as much as she loved Cesare, and she truly did, he wasn’t her only love. She’d loved Djem and Paolo and she was sure to love Alphie in time. He was already quickly becoming a favourite.

Also, Cesare’s love was…intense and possessive. She wasn’t a stupid girl. As much as she liked to dream that perhaps they were not really related, that once she became his he would begin to settle down and become something closer to the fun boy she’d known in childhood, that that wasn’t going to happen. Because Cesare was dark and he was sinister and he was forceful. It was part of is genetic makeup. It was part of his appeal. But it made him dangerous and it made his form of love toxic.
Cesare would ask of her and ask and ask until she had nothing left to give. And it wasn’t out of spite or cruelty, but because he was a Borgia and that’s what he understood.

“You could never truly be mine,” she whispered, tears forming in her eyes.

“Of course I would,” he argued, stepping forward. His voice was lowered now, her tears forcing him to calm down. “Of course I’d truly be yours. I already am. I’m yours, completely. What is the problem, really? Are you worried about children? We’ll take measures to not have any. You can have a surrogate if you wish to get pregnant, or we can adopt. That’s the only problem.”

“It’s a sin.”

Cesar scoffed, “stop it, you don’t believe in god.”

“I do,” she argued, feeling cross, “you don’t believe in god, but I do! I always have and you never believe me.”

There was a pause before she bit out, “I’m not an extension of you.”

“I know that!”

“Sometimes I wonder.” She looked at him thoughtfully with dark blue eyes, “the way you treat me and Micheletto. Do you realise we are not just parts of you? That we are our own autonomous beings?”

He crossed his arms defensively, “why are you being so cruel to me?” he said quietly, “I respect you as your own woman. Not like Juan, who chased off all your old boyfriends. Not like father who even you worry will try to marry you off like some Medieval Lord.”

“But aren’t you?” she asked, feeling mean but knowing it needed to be stated, “you chase off Alphie. Or wish to. And you would push for me to be with you. Maybe you’re not as direct as papa or Juan, but I’m not sure if you are any less controlling. But…I do love you. I do. I wish… I wish things were not as they were. That you were not a Borgias. Or better yet, that neither of us were. Then we could love each other properly.”

“Don’t demean your name,” he said, the desire to defend the family name innate, “Borgias love better than anyone else. You will be too much for that boy.”

That stung.

“Maybe,” she shrugged, “but I’ll try not to be. I want to stay close to you,” she began to walk towards Cesare, “I want to be here for you. But we need to find a way of…managing our feelings.”

He rolled his eyes.

Her eyes suddenly fell upon the basement door. It was open.

“Cesare,” she alerted, nodding in its direction.

Not only was the door open, but there was a blood stain on the floor.

Cesare felt himself growing cold. Had the Infantata crawled out and attacked mama? Baby Gio? Micheletto?

“Stay here,” he whispered softly to Lucrezia, before starting to descend the steps in to basement. The steps were black and sticky with blood.
A creak.

He turned behind him to see Lucrezia following.

“Told you to stay!”

“No,” she said forcefully, “of course I won’t.”

He clenched his jaw but said nothing, he couldn’t after the argument they’d had.

They went down the steps slowly.

It was only when they arrived at the bottom that they heard the gagging, choking sound. They followed it, weaving their way through the long shelving units filled with random, eerie trophies, until they arrived at the end of the basement. There was a small window just above, shining what little light there was on the victim.

Micheletto was on his back, blood covering his face. His body twitched and shook. He was having a seizure.

They ran over to him.

“Oh god,” gasped Lucrezia, she scrambled in her pocket, pulling out a phone. “There’s no signal down here!”

Cesare stared at his friend. He recognised this. It was the effects of red poison he kept in his room.

“Who did this to you?” he hissed.

“Never mind that now!” cried Lucrezia, on the edge of hysteria, “we need to call an ambulance!”

“It’s too late for that,” he said, cradling Micheletto’s head under his arm, “he’s dying. We need to let him die here.”

“What?” Lucrezia recoiled, “no… Cesare I know what this is. I’ve read about it. He’s lungs are filling with blood! It’s poison! Please, he needs to go to hospital.”

“He’s doomed to die! They cannot save him,” he brushed a hand through Micheletto’s blood-soaked hair, “everyone who has died here remains as a spirit. That might not happen if he dies outside. He stays. Then we can keep him.”

Lucrezia leapt to her feet and began to run to the stairs. Cesare removed his arm from under a still seizing and choking Micheletto and chased after her.

“Where are you going?!”

“To ring an ambulance!” Cesare grabbed her arm, she swung at him in response, her face covered in tears, “you’re being cruel!” she screamed, “stop it!”

“Oh,” spat Cesare, his voice cracking and tears forming in his eyes, “so you get to keep Alphonse and whoever else you keep locked away in your room- don’t deny it I hear the voices!! But I cannot keep my friend? He’s my friend! He’s mine and he should stay!”

Lucrezia felt herself growing cold. She shook her head, “tha-that’s not how friendship works…”

He was crying now. It shook her to her core. Cesare never cried, not even after Joffre.
“Don’t lecture me,” he sniffed, his voice heavy with grief, “I’m all alone. No one is like me. You have so many boys but I only have you and one friend.”

There was a moment of silence.

Silence.

The choking had stopped.

They glanced at each other before heading back to Micheletto. The boy was soaked in blood. It had even started streaming out of his eyes. He was still. He had died at some point during their argument.

Cesare felt himself growing cool and calm again. There. Too late to call an ambulance now.

Lucrezia had ran into her room sobbing. Cesare waited for Micheletto to turn up, but he never did.

Days became difficult. Cesare and Lucrezia sat the next morning in their school clothes. They ate breakfast slowly. Neither spoke, not even on the way to school.

At school things progressed normally. It was nice, being away from the house. It was at school that Cesare would feel bad. That he would understand that somewhere along the long he had been unreasonable. But then they would get back home and he would then decide that he had been right, and he just needed to be patient until Lucrezia understood herself.

Mama began to speak in French all the time. But she looked better. And somehow she was getting them money. Neither Cesare nor Lucrezia could understand it but small wads of cash kept appearing on the kitchen table.

“Is this you?” she asked one morning, a few days after Micheletto’s death, when the change first appeared on the counter.

“No,” he answered cautiously, “mama left it there late last night. I tried talking to her but she was in some sort of trance.”

“But you are making money?”

“Yes.”

“There are rumours going about school. That you and your Band of Bastards are getting information on rich families and blackmailing them.”

“How would we do that?” asked Cesare, “come on ‘Crezia…”

“Because their parents are servants of the rich men of this city,” argued Lucrezia, “I’m not stupid. I know how it works. Feeding off the gossip and stories they tell, working out what is true and then blackmailing them for all their worth; who’s gay and fucking the pool boys, who’s in debt, who’s having an affair, who cannot perform sexually. On and on. You could end up costing these women their jobs, or what if the rich men cut off their bastard children?”
Cesare popped a grape in his mouth, “their families have enough money to survive on without their married lovers’ support. It works well for everyone. And we’re careful. We ask for one large payment and leave it there. We don’t get too greedy. Some stuff I keep for myself, just in case. It’ll be fine.” He sat opposite her on the table, “I’m worried about where mama is getting money from. One of us should stay home and see how she gets on during the day.”

Lucrezia knew that by ‘one of us’ he meant her. He was in the running for student President and doing very well. He couldn’t afford time off, but…

“I’m… too scared to stay home alone,” she muttered, turning red with shame at her cowardice.

Cesare took her hand into his. It was the first time they’d touched in days, “it’s ok. Don’t be upset. I get it.” He rubbed her long thin fingers, feeling relieved at finally having a piece of her to touch again. He missed her, even if he was still angry with her stubborness.

“We don’t know how Micheletto died,” she sniffed, “who did that to him? We should never have left him here alone.”

“We leave mama and Gio…”

“They’re protected. Of course they are. But he was normal and our responsibility. Mama ignored him and papa isn’t here. It was our job.” She put her face in her hands. She hadn’t known Micheletto very well. On arrival Cesare had essentially swept him up and ran away with him. “It’s like Joffre all over again. Someone we cared about died because we weren’t paying attention. I hardly ever see Joffre, just the odd glimpse here and there. And now Micheletto is just,” she looked up, tears on her face, “have you seen him at all?”

Cesare gulped and shook his head.

“Have you found out anything more in your diary about ghosts?”

“She doesn’t talk about spirits much,” answered Lucrezia, not quite telling the truth as she rubbed away her tears, “but she says that on Halloween the spirit and physical world are close. She’s seen as a witch and reading it I think she was, even if she doesn’t accept it herself. She knows there was something wrong with this house from the start. So I think we need to be here and focused on Halloween.”

“Well then we cannot go to the party we were invited to.”

“That’s fine.”

“Will Alphie not be sad?”

“I see him everyday at school,” she shrugged.

Cesare nodded. He said nothing but secretly crowed that already her boyfriend was starting to irritate her a little. Lucrezia was beautiful and sweet, but Cesare knew that that sweetness was relatively shallow. She was more Borgia than she would care to admit, for though her love for her family ran deep, for others it only ever really stayed skin-deep. He was certain most of her good intentions and actions were out of societal pressure than her actual desires.

“After election day I’ll stay home, claiming sickness,” he said at last, “I’ll see what mama is doing, other than obsessively cleaning the house.”

“She cut the grass in the garden too,” sighed Lucrezia, “it looks a lot better but I wish she would
rest and allow her sanity to come back.”

“Maybe keeping busy keeps her distracted,” answered Cesare, “maybe she needs to focus on the mundane so she doesn’t face her real problems.”

They got the call about papa a day or so after. Rodrigo had finally woken up and was stable.

Lucrezia went to see him, Cesare refused.

The room her father in was shared with a few other men on a ward. Originally he had his own room, but now he was awake and talking, his condition had stabilised and they had moved him into this new area, preparing for him to eventually go back home.

“Lucrezia!” He cried out when seeing her. She ran up to him and embraced him warmly. She’d forgotten this. She forgotten how much she deeply, deeply loved him.

“Now, now no crying,” he softly chided as she sniffled on his shoulder.

“Sorry,” she pulled back, “I’ve been crying a lot lately.”

“My poor darling,” he said, his light eyes soft and sweet, “why?”

“Worrying about you,” she said thickly, “and mom and Cesare. God Cesare! I’m glad Juan isn’t here because god knows I couldn’t deal with worrying about him too.”

“What do you mean?” Rodrigo looked horrified, “oh god, what has been happening?”

“No,” she shook her head, “I’m sorry. I-I’m being unfair. I should have unloaded on you like that.” She grabbed his hand, “I’m just so glad to have you back. To be able to talk to you again.”

“You are the sweetest thing,” he smiled but it was false. There was a steel in his eyes now, “but you need to tell me what’s been happening. I cannot go home not knowing. Cesare and Micheletto…” he paused and looked around. All the other men were either speaking quietly to their visitors or engaged in watching TV or sleeping.

“Cesare and Micheletto almost killed me,” he hissed, “now Cesare doesn’t need to feel bad. Neither of them do. I wasn’t myself. But I’m sure you understand that I do not want to be attacked again.”

“Yes, I understand. Cesare…Cesare is getting worse. School helps to keep him balanced, I think. But I swear the house is taking his more…aggressive side and ramping it up.”

“Has he hurt you?”

“No, never. But I’m worried about others. I have a boyfriend.”

“How wonderful.”

“I’m terrified Cesare is going to kill him.”
“Well,” Rodrigo shrugged nonchalantly, “he’s always been a bit like that with your boyfriends. Juan too, to a degree. You have protective brothers.”

“Papa, it’s different now. It’s stronger.”

“What does your mother say?”

Lucrezia winced, “she’s gone more strange as well. And, papa, I’m sorry, but I have really bad news about Giulia.”

Whilst Lucrezia told a distraught Rodrigo about the fate of his previous mistress and her unborn child, Cesare wandered about the house in the dark.

He wasn’t sure where mother or Gio were, but he was after Micheletto.

He had called for him in his bedroom and spent most of the evening looking for him in every room. The bathroom of the first floor was now newly haunted by some blond-haired dickhead Cesare had never seen before. He didn’t do much, but the bathroom was now always cold and unforgiving, so Cesare guessed it’d only be a matter of time before the spirit lashed out violently.

Cesare then went down into the ground floor, wandering about all the rooms, calling Micheletto now and then.

In the end, he went into the basement and sat by the corpse of his friend. “Do you need to be buried?” he asked a dead Micheletto, who was covered in flies and starting to smell.

There was a shuffling in the corner. Out of the shadows, the Infantata crawled.

“Did you drain all the blood out of him?” asked Cesare. The creature that had once been a child stared at him in response.

Cesare looked away, “that’s fair enough I suppose. Have you seen his spirit?”

Silence.

“No…I suppose not.” Cesare bought his knees up and lowered his head onto them. He missed Micheletto.

The doorbell rang.

Cesare opened the door to find Juan standing there, looking tired and pissed off.
“Hey,” he put up his hand in greeting, “sorry I took so long.”

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Um,” instantly Juan went from tired to fiery, “I left a message! I said I was coming days ago!”

Cesare stared at him with wild eyes. Juan stepped back in concern but was grabbed by the front of his shirt and dragged into the foyer. He stumbled when Cesare let go, and watched his brother cautiously as Cesare slammed the door shut. The whole house was dark, did Cesare not put on lights anymore? Why was he running around in darkness?

“You ok?” Juan asked, giving Cesare a wary look, “you seem wired. More than usual.”

“Who did you talk to?”

“Micheletto. I told him to let you know.”

Cesare was quiet for a moment. Juan knew that look, his brother was plotting something.

“I’m glad you’re home Juan,” he said, straightening up and attempting to look less like a madman running around a haunted house at night, “I need your help.”

“Of course you do,” Juan rolled his eyes, “I’ve been home all of two minutes.”

Cesare walked passed him, “come on, down in the basement.”

“No fucking way!” Juan shrieked, “I’ve only just come back! I’m not going down there!”

“Everywhere is haunted,” spat Cesare, “every room! Nowhere is safe. Look, papa is now awake. I will take you to the hospital, but I need you to come with me first.” He held out his hand, “don’t be scared.”

Well that was convincing, with Cesare looking like something out of a gothic novel and covered in shadows. But Juan was stupid and so he took Cesare’s hand and followed him down into the basement.

“What are you going to do to me?” Juan asked in a shaking voice as they descended the stairway.

“Nothing, I want to meet someone.”

They stopped in front of the body, the light of the window just showing its outline.

“Did you kill someone?” Juan whispered after a few horrified heartbeats. Micheletto’s body looked pretty horrible at this point.

“No, someone else killed him. But I can’t find him Juan.”

“What do you mean?”

“His ghost. I can’t find it.”

“Maybe he went to heaven or something,” muttered Juan. He had a very bad feeling about this whole thing. Cesare was being weird. Like he was actually sad or something…

Cesare turned to look at him. It was hard to see his face, the room was so dark.
“You were easily possessed,” he said.

“Yeah…I guess,” Juan was annoyed to find this was another failing he apparently had.

“Could he possess you, do you think?”

“Wha-”

There was violence then, brief and ridiculous as the boys suddenly began to struggle in the darkness, Cesare having leapt at Juan. Soon he over-powered him and Juan found himself on the ground looking directly at the dark figure of a corpse in front of him. The smell was horrendous.

“Cesare!” he screamed, “Cesare get off me!! Let me go!!”

“Micheletto!” called Cesare, ignoring Juan, “please, possess him. I’m sorry ok. You can have his body.”

“WHAT!??”

“Come on Mich, please!”

“No fucking way,” spat an enraged Juan, “you are fucking unbelievable Cesare!”

“You will have to share,” Cesare hissed in his ear, “it’s not a big deal!”

“You’re selling my body! Like I’m some sort of…ghost whore!”

They huffed and struggled a while longer, Juan gagging at the smell of the dead boy in front of him. Eventually Cesare got off him.

Juan leapt to his feet, coughing and spluttering, his lungs bruised from being pressed into the cold ground.

“Maybe he is gone,” muttered Cesare. “I thought everyone who died here stayed here.”

“You’re an asshole,” muttered a winded Juan, making his way back through the dark basement.

“Juan,” Cesare called behind him. He ignored Cesare, pissed off and upset.

Cesare grabbed his shoulder and turned him around.

“What now?” barked Juan just as Cesare stabbed him.

The boys stared at each other. All Juan could think was, ‘where did he get the knife from?’

Cesare stabbed him again and again.

Juan stumbled to the ground, bleeding. He didn’t know what to say. It didn’t even hurt. He was just too shocked. He looked at his hands, warm with blood.

Cesare was observing him calmly, like a cat who’d just clawed a bug to death.

Juan scrambled back onto his feet and ran out of the basement. Cesare walked after him slowly, like something out of a damned horror film. And like a typical horror film victim, Juan didn’t have the sense to leave the house. Instead, as his brain malfunctioned from panic and increasing blood loss, all he could think of was how much he wanted his mom and dad. He stumbled up the stairs
hoping to get to their room. However, by the time he reached the first floor, he had realised that he was most definitely dying.

Blood dripped heavily through his shirt, down his jeans and onto the floor.

He could hear Cesare walking behind him.

He needed to get away from that crazy motherfucker.

He pulled open the door nearest him and fell inside. It was the bathroom. He locked the door and fell backwards into the bath. He groaned in pain and misery.

Suddenly, there was a man standing above him, his eyes cold.

“Who are-?” Juan managed before he found that the bath was now full of warm water. The man pushed him down into it.

Outside of the bathroom, Cesare could hear panicking and splashing.

“Juan?” he called, before beginning to slam into the door. It took a few go’s, but being tall and heavy had its advantages. Soon the door gave way, the lock ripping from the wall.

Cesare stared. The bath was filled with bloody water. His brother’s arms and legs were slumped over the bath side.

He knelt down by the bath. It was hard to see Juan in all that blood, but the outline of his face was there. Cesare put his hands in the lukewarm water dragged the upper half of his brother’s body out of the bath.

“Juan?” he asked, “are you dead?”

He tapped Juan’s face a few times. Yeah…he was definitely dead. Cesare sat with his little brother in his arms for a few moments. It was weird. He had wanted to kill Juan for a while now. Jokingly at first, but since they came to the house those thoughts had become increasingly focused. And now he was dead and Cesare didn’t really feel anything. He didn’t feel guilty but he wasn’t happy either.

“What have you done to me?”

Cesare looked up. By the door was a very wet and very bloody Juan. He looked angry and confused.

Cesare smiled, “you’re a ghost! I knew it,” he let go of his brother’s body - Juan watching it sink back into the water in horror- and got to his feet. “People who die here stay here. But then where is Micheletto?”

Juan stared at his body in the bath and looked back at Cesare, who was smiling like a fucking tool. He couldn’t believe this. He couldn’t believe…

“You killed me.”

“I had to.”

“NO YOU DIDN’T!”

Cesare held up his hands, “calm down. I owe you one, ok? But I need to find my friend.”
“You owe me?” Hissed Juan’s ghost, “You fucking owe me? Cesare, this isn’t like you stole some change out of my pocket. You killed me.” He stepped back, the shock fading from anger into a more surprising emotion…hurt.

Could ghosts even cry? He felt like he was.

“I always knew you hated me,” he whispered, “but this…Cesare…I’ll never grow up. I’ll never get married or have kids…you took my life.”

Cesare was watching him carefully now and it seemed like something related to remorse was flickering in his eyes, “that is true. But I can fix it. I can…you can possess someone. Lots of people. You can still live a life.”

Juan was shaking his head and could feel a grey sort of mist appearing around him, “no…it’s not the same.”

“I owe you,” Cesare said again, “just…look for a kid with ginger hair. Tell him I need him to come back.”

But Juan was gone.

Cesare didn’t want to bury his brothers. They were family and family stayed together. Down in the basement was an ottoman. He dragged Juan’s body down from the bathroom back to the basement, and folded him up into the ottoman. Juan was like Cesare, tall and broad, and so he took up a lot of space in there. Luckily, Micheletto was very small. He dragged the corpse of the younger boy and stuffed it in with Juan. It was a shame that Joffre had been buried in a graveyard. He should be in the house with them. Cesare slammed the ottoman’s lid down.

Rodrigo had wanted to return home as soon as Lucrezia had told him everything that had happened. The doctors and nurses disagreed and the scene had turned quite ugly until one doctor lost his patience and injected Rodrigo in the arse with a powerful sedative.

Lucrezia cried a little on the bus ride home but eventually took a hold of herself.

When she got home, she was greeted by blood stained floors.

She checked on mama who was, thank god, asleep in her bed. Gio was in a crib to the side of the bed. He was awake and kicking his feet, giggling.

Satisfied, Lucrezia went up to Cesare’s room. The light was on.

She knocked the door.

“Come in.” He sounded normal.

“How is papa?” he asked when she entered.

“Why is there blood on the floor?”
Cesare was lying on his back on his bed re-reading *Catcher in the Rye*. He glanced over at her, as if deciding whether he should lie to her or not.

“I'll clean it tomorrow. After school.”

“Whose blood is it?”

He sighed, “I’m just trying to fix our family.”

She stormed out, slamming the door behind her. He lied to her all the time now. He never told her anything!

“Don’t use the first floor bathroom anymore,” she heard him call from behind the door.

“Why do you not listen to me?”

She looked at Alphie. They were sitting together in the school cafeteria. They both had food in front of them. Hers’ was untouched. She’d been staring at Cesare, who was talking conspiratorially to his two friends. Everyone was scared of him because now there was an actual aura of danger about him. His eyes were darker, his barbs vicious. He was likely to win the student election on fear factor alone. The two boys who were his friends followed him as obediently as dogs. They weren’t as good as Micheletto had been, but they were close enough.

“I’m sorry,” she said as her boyfriend pouted, “I’m tired. It’s been a hard week and me and Cesare are fighting.”

“So?” he argued, “I fight with my brothers all the time.”

“Yes, but Cesare and I are close. This isn’t normal for us.”

Alphie gave her a weird look then, suspicious.

“What?” she spat out with more venom than she intended.

“Nothing,” he sniffed, looking away and stabbing his pasta morosely.

The election was between Cesare and Frederigo Trastamara. The results were read out. Cesare had won. The school cheered and clapped with genuine joy. Lucrezia knew why. The Trastamaras were snobs. The school was full of kids like Vitelli and Carlos, kids not seen as good enough by the old wealthy families who funded this school. They hadn’t voted so much for Cesare as they had against Trastamara. But Cesare knew this and gave the crowd what they wanted; he turned to Frederigo and laughed in his face.

The crowd laughed with him.
“He’s making enemies.” Lucrezia was sitting at the end of father’s bed.

He was made a gruff sound, “he always was better at that than making allies. For some reason he’s only even wanted to be friends with odd-balls and outsiders.”

“His friends are known around school as a Band of Bastards.”

“What?”

“They’re the bastard sons of rich families.”

“Good lord,” Rodrigo rubbed his hands over his face. Everything had gone wrong, everything. Giulia was dead and buried in their back-garden. Their adopted son was dead. Cesare and Vanozza were completely insane. He looked at his daughter, aged and saddened by events.

“How are you still ok?” he asked, making her look at him, “you don’t seem to be affected like your brother and mother.”

“I made friends with two ghosts,” she said, “early on. They said they would protect me and I think they have.”

“Why just you?”

She thought back to that first week where she had been raped in her own bed. She remembered screaming and crying, and the sad, frightened whimpering that came afterwards.

“I don’t know,” she said distantly.

“Listen, I haven’t just been sitting here. That’s why it was good that you were honest and told me how things were.” She nodded, she knew her father would always have a plan. She had hoped for this.

“I made some calls,” he said, “back in the Old Country. Our cousins have allowed us to stay in their holiday villa until we get ourselves sorted. We need Cesare and your mother healthy again. Juan is sure to finish his programme soon and will join us. I will start my practice again.”

She smiled and nodded, a lump in her throat. He must have begged their cousins for help. It must have been humiliating, but he did it for them. “Thank you papa,” she whispered, her voice quiet with emotion. He nodded and kissed her forehead, “I’m coming home tomorrow,” he said, “we’ll sell the house. We’ll control Cesare until we can leave. Then we’ll go. As soon as possible. If anything goes wrong…you need to just run. Run back to our cousins, anyway you can.”

“Papa no. I will never leave my family.”

He took a hold of her shoulders and looked directly into her eyes.

“You may have to.”
Halloween was only two days away.

Lucrezia was eating breakfast downstairs, dressed in her school clothes, when Cesare joined her wearing t-shirt and a pair of jeans.

“Did you make breakfast?” he asked.

“No.”

“Who keeps doing stuff around the house?” He asked. It was like they had an invisible maid or something.

She shrugged, biting into some toast. “Are you not coming to school?”

“Remember our plan?” he asked, “I’m staying home to see how mama is making money.”

“Oh yes. Good luck, I’m quite curious. Also, it’ll be good not having you in school. Alphie says the other Trastamaras are threatening murder.”

Cesare laughed, “tell Vitelli and Carlos they can come here, if they want.”

She dropped her toast, “are you serious? No one should come in here! It’s a death trap.”

“They’ve been here before. They’re fine if I stay with them. I don’t want them being hurt by the Trastamaras. It’d ruin our reputation. By the way, how is Alphie?”

“You care?”

“He’s your boyfriend, so yes.”

Alphie had text her over twenty times last night. And then he’d announced his undying love for her at 1am. Then he’d gotten upset that she hadn’t responded. When she told him, at 6am today, that she had been asleep, he’d apologised so much it’d annoyed her further.

“He’s ok. But he’s suffering from low self-esteem I think.”

Cesare stretched out his arms, his shirt showing off his chest. He looked like a man already, though he still hadn’t stopped growing. He and Juan were both going to be very tall.

“Well,” he said, “hopefully he’ll feel better about himself by having you as a girlfriend.”

“I think that’s what he was hoping.” She got up and kissed him on the cheek, “I’ll see you later.”

It was nice spending the day with Mama. She was a lot more switched on than Cesare had thought. She kept trying to speak to him, and seemed disappointed at his lack of response. It seemed that she had no idea that she was speaking in a completely different language. Maybe it would just be
easier to learn French.

But, she was happy to have him around and he in turn was delighted to find that Gio had learned to say his name…

“Chez-ray!” he had screamed when Cesare entered the room.

Ok, so close enough to his name.

“Hello Gio,” he grinned, swinging the little boy up into his arms, “god, you’re getting heavy.”

“Chez-ray!”

“Yep, that’s me.” He saw that breakfast had been left on the table for Vanozza and Gio. His mom came out of her en-suite bathroom, smiling softly at her son.

“Mama,” he tried, “who made this?” He pointed at the food.

“Juan,” she responded.

Cesare frowned. He found that hard to believe.

Mama did no chores during the day, which led him to the conclusion that whoever was sorting the house out with military precision was not his mother after all. And it sure as fuck wasn’t Juan’s ghost. He thought of Juan and Micheletto buried in the ottoman in the basement, and it warmed a little. He liked his family all being together.

However, half way through the day she began arranging the living room. They didn’t bother replacing the tv, which was still smashed and had to be thrown out eventually, but the rest of the room looked fine.

She put out paper and paints and other art stuff from her old business.

Then the bell went.

Cesare opened it, feeling curious.

Four teens, all around his age, looked back at him.

“Hi,” said a pretty girl with long dark hair, “is Vanozza here?”

“Yeah, she’s my mom.”

“Oh, so you’re Cesare?” asked a girl with short blonde hair.

“The one and only,” he smiled.

One of the boys, a thin kid with shoulder length brown hair rolled his eyes and pushed passed Cesare, making his way to the living room. The other boy, who was annoyingly pretty, chuckled softly and winked at Cesare as he passed.

Cesare sneered in response.

“Ignore them,” said the dark-haired girl as Cesare invited them inside, “they’re so rude. They’re known around the area as jackasses.”
“Really?” he hadn’t heard of them.

“Infamous,” giggled the blonde, “I’m Vittoria, and this is Charlotte.”

“Pleased to meet you both,” he smiled as charmingly as possible and the girls looked at each other knowingly.

They spoke for a while before leading him into the living room. Vittoria didn’t like paints, preferring woodwork and clay modelling. “I used to collect junk,” she said, “from dumping sites. It could be gross, but I loved taking it home, cleaning it, and then turning it into something new.”

Charlotte had less to say. Apparently, she just liked painting for painting’s sake, and whilst that was honourable in its own right, it was a little boring.

Cesare looked across to where the two boys were painting lazily.

“So, why are they so infamous?” he asked Charlotte. Vittoria was the more interesting conversationalist, but she was engaged in her work and he didn’t want to annoy her.

“They’re pranksters,” she muttered, “and they break stuff. It’s irritating. Their parents send them to stuff like this to try and calm them down. They’ve been expelled from every school they went to.”

“Are they related?” She spoke as though they were.

“Brothers.”

Cesare blinked in surprise, “they look nothing alike.”

Charlotte watched him carefully, “I’ve seen photos of your family. You do not look like your sister. Though she is tall like you, I suppose,” she smiled, “you’re all very good looking as well.”

He grinned at her, but now was somewhat interested in the boys.

She must have sensed it as she added, “one of them, the small one, he used to bully Alfonse, Catherina Sforza’s child. But they’re friends now.”

“Alfonse Sforza has friends?” Cesare was stunned. He hadn’t seen the giggling arsehole for some time now, but the memory of that idiot and how he had caused the first fracture in his and Lucrezia’s relationship stoked up a flame of anger in him.

He made his way across the room, smiling at Gio who was toddling about unsteadily on his feet between Vanozza and Vittoria.

The boys both stiffened when he came close to them, the brunet openly hostile whereas the dark-haired one watched with too bright eyes.

“Hi,” he greeted the aggressive one, because he seemed more like what Cesare understood, “I didn’t get to introduce myself properly earlier. I’m Cesare.”

“Rufio,” said the boy, “what do you want?”
“I hear you are friends with Alfonse Sforza,” answered Cesare, looking over at what Rufio had been painting. It was a messy black circle.

“What is it supposed to represent?” he asked, pointing at it.

“Nothing,” said Rufio before asking again, “what do you want?”

“Excuse me,” sniggered the dark-haired brother, slinking passed them both and leaving the room.

“I’m just being friendly,” stated Cesare reasonably, “I’m new here and would like to make friends. And you are in my house.”

“Oh,” the boy raised his eyebrows, “your house? I thought it belonged to the Sforzas.”

“Not for a long time now,” Cesare stared at him suspiciously, “not since the fire claimed some of her children. She’s our neighbour now.”

Rufio grunted and went back to his painting, scribbling black paint in a circle, over and over and over again.

Cesare went out of the room, intending to go into the kitchen for a drink. He was relieved to find that mother, despite not speaking a god-damned word of Italian or Spanish and being completely out of her mind, had somehow re-started her old teaching business. He was deeply impressed. She was more use than Rodrigo had been sober and sane.

Just then, he noticed the dark-haired brother coming down the stairs.

“Where have you been?” he asked, his voice low and dangerous. Why was this boy poking around their house?

The kid smiled charmingly and Cesare felt himself bristling with offence.

“I just went to the bathroom,” he said lightly.

“On the first floor?”

“Yes?”

Cesare and the boy stared at each other. It was like two predators circling each other, sniffing and wondering how they were so alike but so different. A fox and a badger. A snake and a mongoose.

“What is your name?”

“Pascal.”

“Your brother, Rufio, doesn’t seem to like me much.”

“He’s like that,” Pascal grinned. It was fake and annoying, “he doesn’t like anyone much.”

“I heard he’s friends with Alfonse Sforza, that interested me as Alfonse is possible the most
annoying kid I’ve ever met.”

Pascal let out a genuine bark of laughter then, “he is,” he whispered conspiratorially, “but don’t let my brother know. He’s a big fan of the Sforzas.”

“Are you not?”

Pascal shrugged, “they’re ok. I like your family a lot more. Your brother and mother are wonderful. My mother is happy with how well my French is coming along, even if my artistic skills are still lacking.”

“The girls were saying you are all home-schooled.” Cesare began to walk to the kitchen, Pascal following cautiously.

“We are, we became friends through joint classes like this. We share a maths tutor too. The rest of the curriculum is taught by our individual parents though.”

In the kitchen Cesare grabbed a tray and started putting glasses on it, with the intention of serving everyone in the living room. He looked up to see Pascal loitering at the threshold, looking into the kitchen.

“You’re allowed in,” he said, “you’re not banned.”

Pascal looked at him and gave another false smile. He was pretty and he used that against others, that smile used to make people stop asking questions he didn’t want to answer. There was a sort of wall with Pascal, a nothingness behind the eyes. He was pretending to be open but really he was closed.

Am I like that? Cesare wondered, is that why people don’t like me? Surely I’m not so obvious?

“I better go back,” Pascal moved away from the door, “goodbye Cesare. It was nice to meet you.”

“Yeah… you too.”

That night, Cesare was sitting on his bed when the lights started flickering. The room began to shake. He heard Lucrezia screaming. He ran downstairs but wasn’t able to reach her. Then every window in the house exploded.

Present Day

“I’m so sorry Micheletto,” whispered Lucrezia, “I’m so, so sorry.”

She reached out and touched his face softly. The dried blood crumbled on her fingertips, “who did this to you?”
“The basement door opened,” he said, “a ball rolled over to me. I went to throw it in and they pushed me down there. I must have been knocked out for a while…”

He remembered waking up. His head was stinging badly. There had been four boys down there. Pascal had been smirking.

“I’m still down there,” he said.


He shook his head. She shut her eyes, feeling embarrassed. What was wrong with Cesare? How much further was he going to fall?

“It isn’t his fault,” said Micheletto, apparently having read her mind or something.

“He never used to be like this,” she said, her voice wobbling with emotion, “just everything has gone wrong. My sweet Cesare is gone. We need to get him out of here. Papa and I are going to take him back with us to Spain.”

“And leave Joffre and Micheletto?” said Cesare.

She jumped to her feet.

Cesare was standing a few feet from her and Micheletto. He looked pale and angry, “I’ve only just gotten my friend back, and you talk of us leaving?” he seethed, “and you dare to accuse me of being cruel? You’d leave their spirits here, all alone?”

Lucrezia looked down at Micheletto for a wild moment and then back at Cesare, “I didn’t kill him! He’s with Juan,” said Cesare, “my brothers, together. I only wish we had Joffre.”

“Juan?” she muttered, “what have you done to Juan?”

The lights suddenly turned on. The temperature was back to normal. The hum of electrical items resumed and faintly Lucrezia’s music could be heard playing from her room upstairs.

“What did you do to Juan!” she screamed.

“Shut up!” he hissed, “do you want mama to hear? She cannot cope with Joffre’s death she mustn’t know about Juan!”

Lucrezia wailed and fell to the floor, her knees giving way. Cesare ran over and crouched down in front of her.

“I didn’t kill him,” he insisted, “I didn’t! He turned up one evening when you were out. We talked, then argued, he ran into the bathroom and that new spirit drowned him.”

“Is that why you told me not to go into the bathroom?”

“Yes,” he smiled, “yes, yes, because I love you.” He kissed the top of her head and smelt her hair. “God, I love you Lucrezia,” he kissed the side of her face, “I love you so much. I’m so lonely. I just wanted my friend and my sister.”

He kissed her lips. He was warm and soft and she felt herself yearning. She wanted him so badly. Without thinking she put her arms around his neck and allowed herself to stop thinking. Instead it
was just him and her. Together. Warm and wet and belonging. It felt like destiny.

He lay her down on the floor, brushing his hand down her neck, across her breast and down the flatness of her stomach.

‘Just this one time,’ she thought, ‘just one night. Just one time...just one time...’

Above them, on the balcony looking down at the coupling were the spirits of Joffre, Juan and Micheletto.

Juan turned to Micheletto, “so, Micheletto, welcome to the family.”

Chapter End Notes

And there we have it.
Halloween Day

Halloween

Last time: Juan comes home and is promptly murdered by Cesare and the spirit haunting the bathroom. Rodrigo is awake and coming home. Micheletto realises he is dead and is angry. He and Lucrezia begin their illicit relationship.

November 1981

It was late evening when a girl came running around the corner.

Vittoria gasped for breath. She had been on the run for half an hour now. She didn’t know where she was; she had been running wildly into an increasingly desolate suburban labyrinth.

She stopped, her chest burning and her legs screaming. She inhaled air before suddenly throwing up out of stress and exhaustion.

Her Hunters turned the corner and began to walk up to her slowly.

She ran to the nearest house and began banging on its door, “Help me!” she screamed, “help me please!”

No answer.

She ran off the stoop and flew to the house opposite.

“Help!”

Bang, bang bang! She slammed against the door with the side of her closed fist.

“Help please!”

Her Hunters were two brothers. Both wore hockey masks. One, Pascal, was swinging a metal cricket bat. Rufio, the smaller one, had a steel pipe.

Vittoria knew them from school. They hadn’t arrived all that long ago, they were quiet and kept to themselves. But their reputation proceeded them; it was known that they had been thrown out of every school they’d been to previously. They were known for causing trouble: smashing cars and windows, petty theft, graffiti, bullying and so on. She had never bothered the boys before. She never spoke to them in school because they ran in completely different circles. She was a nice girl. She was friends with other nice kids. They liked art and doing well in school and got along with most people. The brothers were like Hyenas, on the periphery but never truly involved.

That evening she had come off the subway and had seen them loitering around the dark tunnels. And they saw her and, with joint smirks, had begun following her. Apparently, the shared look in the subway had been all it took for them to decide to terrorise her.

“Please,” she shouted at them, her voice shaking with tears, “I haven’t done anything to you.”

She saw Rufio shrug, as if to say, ‘we don’t care.’

Vittoria saw a house then, right at the end of the street. It looked deserted. She could hide in there
until they got bored.

She ran into the Murder House.

Present Day

Lucrezia lay on the floor.

Beside her was Cesare. Her brother and now her lover.

As she lay she tried to think how she felt. Exhilarated? Horrified? Excited? Satisfied? Damned?

She felt none of these things. Instead she just sort of felt…numb.

It was weird. When she had been with Cesare just moments ago, she felt like she was truly living for the first time in months. She felt the barriers between her and another had broken down and just for the few minutes they were together she didn’t feel alone. She didn’t feel that her family had become alien and distant and that everything she knew about the world hadn’t turned on its head. She actually felt connected. It’s what she had tried to find with Alphie, Paolo and Djem, but had so far failed. It was the first time that sex felt nice to her. It wasn’t something that made her think of that horrible night so long ago now, but instead it felt like she had been in control, that allowing something like incest had given her autonomy. Who cared what society thought?

But now, that moment was passed.

She was on the floor, her clothes torn and pulled apart. Her thighs mildly sticky. Had Cesare used a condom? What if she fell pregnant?

She pulled on her jeans and sat up.

“Crezia?” Cesare sounded like his old self.

She looked down at him, and felt her heart sink. He was still Cesare in body; dark and beautiful; but that slightly psychotic look he’d developed in his eyes was still there. It hadn’t been enough. Her brother was still lost to her. She felt like crying.

“What’s wrong?” he sat up, talking softly and gently placing his hand on her shoulder.

She felt like it was burning her. “Your soul,” she muttered, her throat sore and full of unshed tears, “I’m sad because it’s corrupted.”

“You haven’t corrupted me.”

She frowned. The thought that what they had done had corrupted his soul hadn’t occurred to her before.

“I meant before,” she sniffed, looking at him with bright eyes, “I thought maybe I could…I don’t know…fix you. Fix us.”

He smiled wryly, an eyebrow raising, “we don’t need fixing. There’s nothing wrong with us.”

She stood up, doing up the fly and button of her jeans.

There was an air of annoyance now, within them both for each other. Nothing had been solved and
he didn’t understand what she was saying. Before coming to this house, they had been so in-tune with one another. But now they kept secrets from one another. Now they lied. Now, even giving into their desires wasn’t enough to stop the gulf between them spreading further out.

“Are you leaving?” he asked.

“I need to go pee,” she answered, “it’s one of the rules we learned in sex ed. Did you use a condom?”

He stood up, fixing his clothes, “no,” he said without looking at her, “I wasn’t expecting us to have sex. But it wasn’t very long so it should be fine.”

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms, “what kind of logic is that?”

He finally looked at her, “I’ll look after you, no matter what.”

She levelled a tired glare at him, “how many times do I need to say it? I don’t need looking after. It’s not what I’m asking for. It’s never what I asked for.”

He shrugged, “it’s what I can give. I’m not stupid. I know I can’t be sweet or kind like Alphie or any of your old boyfriends. I know that. But I can protect you. I can defend you. So that’s what I’ll do. Lucrezia, it’s all I can offer you.”

She uncrossed her arms and felt her shoulders lowering. “I’m sorry,” she said quietly, “you offer me a lot Cesare. A lot more than protection. It’s why this is so hard. Why it’s so hard to be your sister. Because I love you, so much. And it hurts and it…” she looked at him, her face open and vulnerable, “but you scare me and sometimes I think the only person you need to protect me from is yourself. And I’m not saying that to hurt you. It’s a compliment if anything. Because that’s how close you are to my heart, you can cause that much damage.” She went up to him, touching his face gently, “I don’t want you to break my heart.”

“I won’t,” he insisted.

“But you break everyone’s,” she argued, “have you not noticed? Every ex, every friend? Even Juan.”

Cesare rolled his eyes and pulled away, “don’t start making a martyr of him.”

“I won’t,” she said after a moment’s quiet, “but just remember, I do love you. Even if I can’t show it. Or if I don’t want to.”

“Sometimes I don’t understand you at all,” he grumbled.

She smiled lightly in response before making her way upstairs. She peed in the second-floor bathroom and showered for good measure. She sighed in the shower, revelling in the warm water beating down on her. She thought about Cesare and what she had done, feeling the silver crucifix she always wore on a silver chain around her neck. Would she ever be allowed in heaven now? Or had she crossed a line that went too far? There was no doubt in her mind that God existed, she’d been raised a Catholic. And this house had proven that an afterlife existed. But she only ever seemed to see evidence of evil and none of goodness. And the only time she felt better was when she had committed that sin with her brother. The family hadn’t been the church once since coming to this house, was that perhaps part of the problem? Maybe God hadn’t abandoned them, maybe they had abandoned him? This bought tears to her eyes. She didn’t like the idea of hurting God.

She had now finished the diary and knew what Francesca the maid had said needed to be done to
heal the house. But it was such a steep price.

Dark blue eyes opened as she came to her decision. She had to make good on her promise to Cesare and Micheletto regarding contacting the dead. It was Halloween the following evening, so now was the best, or close to, the best time. The veil between life and death was thin. However, she would also follow her moral code. She would ask for help from the church.

When she left the bathroom, the steam of the shower billowing out of the room across the floor, the hallway was dark.

The house was quiet, other than Billie Holliday playing from the living room, and she couldn’t tell where Cesare had hidden himself.

She padded to her bedroom and got dressed quickly into her nightclothes.

She then pulled out the diary from her bed, opening it to a specific page and focusing on memorising the instructions and images of various plants and herbs. They would all be found in the garden, Sancia had seen to that.

She took off her necklace and stared at it for a moment before getting a compass out of her schoolbag and carving a fish into it. As early Christians had used the fish as a signal to one another, it didn’t feel too sacrilegious carving it onto the crucifix.

“Djem,” she then called, “Paolo.”

The two boys appeared at the end of her bed.

“I need you to get me some dried sage,” she instructed, “can you do that?”

They looked at each other, then back to her and nodded. They flittered away for a few moments, before returning with a bunch of sage tied together.

“It’s from the basement,” informed Djem, “left behind by another from long ago.”

She stood, “it’s perfect, thank you.” She stood up, putting on a dark blue nightgown and a pair of trainers. “Where is Cesare now?”

“In the basement,” informed Paolo, “talking to the Infantata. He didn’t see us.”

She paused. “Infantata?”

“The creature that the Sforza’s created,” supplied Djem.

She nodded, “right…right. Just inform me if Cesare gets close. I cannot have our paths cross tonight, understand?”

“Yes.” The boys intoned simultaneously. She smiled shark-like, wondering if this obedience was as addictive as she feared, and was why Cesare was so determined to get Micheletto back.

She took one of her scented candles and lit it, using it in turn to burn the end of the sage. The boys stepped back from it.

“This won’t bother you too much, will it?” she asked worriedly.

The boys shook their heads. “But we cannot stand too close while you have it,” said Djem.
“That’s ok,” she stood and walked out of her room, the boys following, “as long as you can still protect me from my brother, that’s all I need.”

She walked out into the hallway, shadows heavy and breathing all around her. The sage smelt strong and she could feel the spirits flinching away from her. She went upstairs, crumbling some of the top of the sage off and littering it outside of her mother’s bedroom in order to protect her. She then went up the final set of thin stairs to Cesare’s room.

In front of his door there was a dim, fiery rectangle showing where he had left the bedroom light on inside. She turned the handle and threw the door open. She wasn’t sure what she had been expecting, but finding an ordinary teenager’s room wasn’t it. Maybe because Cesare had become so strange to her recently, she’d forgotten that he was just another eighteen-year-old kid.

The room was reasonably tidy, Cesare had never been a messy boy, but with a level of manic disorder with papers and books all over his desk, his CD’s sprawled out on his bed, floor and around his CD player, and the books on his shelf thrown on without any thought to their order.

She walked up to the bookshelf, searching through the mish-mash of various items until she got to what she wanted; a jar of blood red liquid.

Cantarella.

It’s what had been used to kill Micheletto. With Cesare becoming increasingly erratic, she didn’t want him to have a hold of it. She placed the softly burning sage on the bookshelf in the place of the jar, whispering an incantation that she hoped would make sure it didn’t burn. She hadn’t gotten this incantation from the diary but from the internet, so she had to just hope it was real. In any case, she slid a clay plate underneath it, one that had a few crumbs on it from what must have been a sandwich.

“You mucky pup Cesare,” she thought to herself.

Pushing down the feeling of being a traitor, she raced out of the room and downstairs quietly. She could hear breathing in the hallway, and footsteps that were not her own but she didn’t dare turn on the lights; she couldn’t risk Cesare seeing her.

She went into the kitchen first, taking two candles and a jug of water. Then she went out back to the foyer and passed the living room, she could see the light was on and there was a brief glimpse of a blue dress before it vanished beyond the door. She continued, slowing by the basement. The door was open. A dim red-gold light was glowing somewhere within its depths. She knew Cesare was down there with the Infantata and the bodies of Micheletto and Juan.

Lucrezia didn’t even dare to breath when she passed the door, moving lighter and quicker than she’d ever known. She went into the pantry, the cold, white, concrete room that led outside. She put down her candles, the jug of water and the jar of cantarella, lighting them before she stepped outside into the shadowy garden.

The moon was high and the lights from houses around the neighbourhood gave some light. She could hear the occasional car driving in the distance and that gave her some comfort; it was a connection to the real world.

She walked out into the wilderness. The grass was recently shorn but there was a still an elemental feel to the garden. She was aware too of the bodies dumped in the swampy pond and that spirit unseen to her roved around.
With a quick look back to the house for fear of seeing Cesare watching her in the dark, she began looking for the plants she needed to collect. A few mushrooms that grew this time of year, an assortment of different leaves, moss and bark of a Yew Tree.

She collected her items quickly, using her phone of occasion as a torch. She was tense the whole time, aware of the cross she wore on her silver necklace as she chanted a witch’s protection spell under her breath.

November 1981

The boys entered the house following after Vittoria.

Rufio pulled off his mask, looking around. The house was dark. The window were smashed and partially boarded up. Cracks stretched from the floor to the ceiling. A large staircase leading up to the first floor gaped like an open mouth, ready to devour them.

“She do you think she went?” he asked, looking over to his brother.

Pascal still had his mask on. For some god damned reason he’d scrawled a big grin on it in marker. The result was suitably unsettling though.

Pascal shrugged. The boys hadn’t actually decided what they were going to do to the girl once she was found. Before they had stuck to little stuff, picking on smaller, weaker kids and being a general nuisance. Their parents had basically given up on them sometime in their early childhood and the brothers were essentially feral; capricious and uncaring and wild.

They had never properly hurt anyone though. Not properly.

But things had been escalating the last few years. Maybe it was time to do some real damage? It sucked for the girl. She was pretty and seemed nice. But Pascal and Rufio both had this weird kink for ruining anything that was nice.

“Oh,” Rufio instructed, “you stay and look down here. I’ll go up.”

He headed up the wide staircase carefully, the stairs creaking with each step. Pascal watched him for a while, until he heard a noise in the back … similar to a door being slammed. He walked into the darkness, heading to where the back garden was.

The hallway, narrow in the back, was full of twisting shadows. Pascal, still wearing his mask, giggled quietly.

“Vittoria,” he said in a warbling voice, mimicking his favourite line from The Warriors, “come out to pla-y. Vittoria…come out to pla-y…”

He found himself in the white backroom/pantry which led out into the garden. The backdoor was open. The sun had set completely and the night had rolled in. His parents didn’t care what time he and his brother got home.

The garden was even more unkempt from the rest of the house, the grass up to his knees and the branches of trees and bushes stretched out like witches’ gnarled arms.

He was about to go back inside, when something caught his attention. Near the back of the garden was a tall figure hunching over but facing him.
Pascal took a few steps close, trying to see the figure more quickly. Huge horns…no…antlers appeared to be on the top of the person’s head. The man himself was unnaturally tall and very skinny. His arms and legs were bent at strange angles.

Pascal cocked his head on the side. Weird.

He walked up to the figure, curious.

He stopped for a moment when he was close enough to see that the person was a ghastly pale and the horns were a deep colour, black or possibly a dark red.

Pascal waved.

The horned man waved back.

Pascal grinned in delight and carried on walking towards the creature.

Modern Day

She had almost everything. All she needed now was some rue. She had spotted little yellow flowers growing in the back of the garden that day she had been outside watching Cesare and Micheletto. She stood up, shivering in the cold, and that’s when she saw it.

A figure, tall and thin, by one of the trees.

Lucrezia’s eyes widened. She wanted to turn her mobile’s torch on to it, but she daren’t. She knew it would attack her.

Sweat broke out on her forehead.

“Please,” she barely could whisper, “I need the Rue. That’s all.”

The figure cocked its head slightly. Even though it was far away, it had heard her. She could see now, at this new angle, that there were tall antlers on its head. What did that mean? In the diary, Francesca had mentioned something about a tall man, but never about him looking so demonic.

There was a rustling beside her, causing her to jump slightly.

To her left was a boy. He was short, about the same size as herself. He was wearing a hockey mask, so she couldn’t see his face. He stretched out his hand, in it was a bunch of rue.

She took it carefully.

“Thank you.” Lucrezia glanced back towards the Thing, finding that if she had to keep an eye on anything, that rather than a ghost was more pressing. The creature was still there, but before it, a little to the left, was another spirit. It was a boy, taller than the one near her, also wearing a hockey mask. She couldn’t see well in the dark, but it looked like an image was sprayed on to it.

The boy next to her left her side to go meet his brother, walking slowly across the grass.

She backed away, careful not to run, before her feet hit concrete and she knew the pantry was behind her.
“Thank you,” she mouthed, unable to speak. She stepped backwards into the pantry, putting her things on the floor and then shutting the door. She sucked in a few cleansing breaths, taking comfort in the light provided by her small candles and willing away her panic.

She knew she had been a hairsbreadth away from evil.

**November 1981**

Rufio walked through the building more carefully than his brother. He opened the doors of the rooms slowly, scanning the rooms for any sign of life before moving on. The house was old, but noisy in the dark. Squeaks and scraps, creaks and the odd rattle. He could see why people said it was haunted. No one ever came to this area and it was said that everyone on the street would become strange because of the amount of paranormal activity. But it was this specific house that everyone knew of. On first hearing about it, Pascal had been keen to visit the Murder House, but Rufio hadn’t been as it was far from where they lived. Also, they didn’t believe in ghosts. Pascal had been Catholic, for a little while. Rufio believed it was because of all the gore and violence in the Bible. But then one day he saw Pascal, who had been about twelve years old at the time, ogling the torso of the martyred statue of Jesus. Rufio reckoned his brother was probably a homo. Which was fine, if a bit strange. But with Pascal he figured it was the least weirdest thing about him. Plus, Rufio had his own kinks. Later, when Pascal started actually listening to the sermons, he gave up on Catholicism and instead began to worship the world of music, specifically the art of rap. Pascal wasn’t one for the instrument, but he did love words.

A high-pitched scream ripped through the house, causing something like ice to shoot up Rufio’s spine, even making him jump a little.

Out of the shadows came a fleeing Vittoria. She landed right in his arms. He stood there, stunned, feeling the warmth of this small, slim girl in front of him. She was really pretty. He wanted to bite her lips off.

“We need to get out of here!” she screamed, looking behind her in terror, “we need to go, now!”

“Why?” he was stunned. She wasn’t scared of him at all and considering they had intimidated her into running for about an hour with just a set of masks and waving around some mediocre weapons, whatever had scared her now must have been pretty intense.

Big blue eyes turned back to him, “I’ll tell you later, come on!” She grabbed his hand and they ran back down the corridor, heading for the stairs.

All he could focus on were her fingers around his.

She came to a sudden halt. They were at the top of the stairs. Looking down, they could see that the front door was open. The light from the street lamps helped light the foyer. A tall figure was standing by the door. Because it was in front of the light, they could only make out its silhouette. It was tall and gangly, with limbs too long. It seemed to be wearing some sort of furred, baggy trousers. But notably were the long, pointy antlers coming from either side of its head.

The figure put up a hand and waved.

The teens stared. Their joined hands increased their grip. Rufio could hear her breathing hard next to him and was aware she could probably hear his fear as well.
Then the figure lent over and dragged something from the shadows next to it.

It was a body of a boy.

“Pascal?” Rufio whispered, not knowing how he felt about the potential death of his brother.

The body had dark liquid coming from it. He was bleeding. He was limp in the hand of the creature.

Rufio’s calculated mind began whirring then. They couldn’t run out the front door because the Thing was in the way. They could try to make it out the back, but the Thing would likely get them before they could leave the foyer and even if he sacrificed the girl to it so he had long enough to get outside, he had no idea if the back garden had a gate to it or if it was a dead end. If they went upstairs they could try to hide, but she had been running from something so there was more than one Thing in the house.

Rufio was saved from making any difficult decisions when he was suddenly pushed down the stairs. Still holding hands with Vittoria, she crashed down with him.

Everything went black.

Modern Day

Lucrezia knelt on the cold concrete floor of the pantry. Two candles burned either side of her. By the door leading into the foyer stood Djem. By the door leading to the garden stood Paolo.

She had never, other than the first time they’d met her after her rape, felt more grateful to have them protecting her.

Cesare would be devastated if he ever knew of their existence. But, he was devastated by every boyfriend she had ever had.

She sighed, brushing a hand through her hair. No more thoughts of Cesare, she needed to concentrate.

She mixed together a concoction of things she had found outside, following the advice laid down in the book. She couldn’t warm up the drink as she wasn’t in the kitchen, but she figured she would just drink it cold as it was likely to taste vile in either case.

Before drinking, she opened up the jar of cantarella. Dipping in a twig of one of the walnut trees in the garden, she began to write out on the floor a ouija board. This, of course, was not in the diary. Ouija boards were a modern invention. However, the book had expressed a portal to the dead, and she had had no idea what that had meant. So, surely a Ouija was the best option?

Lucrezia then held her nose and gulped the drink down. It was bitter and slimy with all the fungal plants and leaf pulp within it.

Then she waited a few minutes, taking a few calming breaths. The world seemed to tilt slightly and she hoped that she hadn’t accidentally poisoned herself. She didn’t want to end up a ghost in this house, hidden away and probably lost like Joffre or an angry poltergeist like Micheletto.

Putting her hands over one another, she let them hover over the cantarella Ouija board.

“I call upon the spirits of the previous owners,” she whispered, her eyes closed to stop the dizzy feeling she had, “the owners before us. Two men.”
Up on the attic stairs, Paolo Orsini, already repelled from his usual haunt in Cesare’s room, found himself being dragged through multiple floors from the house towards the pantry.

Likewise, Roberto in the kitchen suddenly felt his spirit being pushed towards the door of the kitchen. “No!” he shouted, hating leaving his favourite place in the house, “leave me alone! LEAVE ME ALONE!”

Lucrezia opened her eyes.

A pair of similar blue ones were looking at her. A man, tall with wavy blond hair, was watching her. He sat opposite, cross legged.

She let out a breath, “you are the owner before us?”

“Yes,” he said, his voice low and bass-heavy, “you have made my husband very angry. Ghosts don’t like being bossed around. It’s bad enough that we’re dead.”

“I’m sorry,” she answered honestly, “I’m doing this out of desperation. You and your husband survived this house for two years. How?”

“A couple of reasons. I think, mainly that it was happy to just toy with us. Roberto, he kept us safe from the spirits. He kept them happy.”

“How?” she frowned.

“By reverting their favourite rooms back to how they remembered them, it kept them calm,” he smiled ruefully, “it was quite clever, really. He got the idea from the Infantata apparently.”

That word again.

“The thing in the basement? So he talked to it also?”

“And it sent him mad. I wasn’t paying enough attention…I…” Paolo sighed and looked away, pain on his face, “the worst thing about dying…is that you freeze in that moment. I died full of regret and guilt. And that won’t go away. He died angry with me, and that won’t stop either. I’m never going to be forgiven.”

She recognised that feeling. She felt it all the time with Cesare. That she was letting him down, that she wasn’t being what he needed her to be. She leaned forward, taking his cold hand within her own.

“Tell me.”

He looked at her, blue eyes grateful, and began.

“Roberto and I met many years ago. He was young. We both were. He was from a farm, I was from a city. I took him away from his homophobic family and promised him a better life. I took a job in central Rome. He stayed home, preparing for college life to better himself. But…it never happened. The house had problem after problem. The bills began to climb. Every time I thought an issue had been fixed, it either turned out to be worse than before or another would crop up. Life became hard and then Roberto… The love he once had for me changed. It wasn’t less genuine, but it was intense. Like the house took it and twisted it. He became obsessed with me, with protecting me and keeping me safe, but it was possessive and dark. And the worse he got, the more I wanted to escape. I stayed out later. I began to secretly date someone else. And that made Roberto worse. I didn’t believe him about the ghosts. I watched as his personality got stripped away, little by little.
Him talking to himself (or so I thought) him spending all his time in the basement or hiding in the kitchen, the only place he deemed ‘clear’. I was so focused on his obsession with me and the house, that I didn’t notice that the man I was secretly dating on the side was similarly obsessed. One night, I came home to find Roberto… dead…in the bath. My lover standing over him gabbling about our new life together. And that’s when I realised, he kept offering and trying to protect me, but really I should have been protecting him. It was awful. My lover killed me after I rejected him, and Roberto’s spirit has stayed away from me since.” He took a deep breath, “I’m not sure why the house is moving so quickly with your family, but I do think it’s something to do with gender, with you being a girl. But, I don’t know what that means other than you should leave.”

“I can’t,” she said tearfully, “my family are here. Cesare…”

“Is going the same path as Roberto,” answered Paolo. “I cannot speak to Roberto’s experience, but if I were you I would talk to Roberto tomorrow. He is in the kitchen and will speak in the day. Halloween is the best time. But, remember my warning, you should leave Lucrezia, while you still can. Don’t end up like me.”

The following morning, Cesare woke with a start.

It was the early and so still quite dark outside. He’d fallen asleep on his bed with the side lamp on, a book under his head. He was still wearing the clothes he’d hastily thrown back on after Lucrezia had run upstairs immediately after he’d rolled off her. It was a little bit hurtful that it was taking her so long to see that she and him belonged together. Forever. It was destiny.

Micheletto was sitting next to the bed, looking down at him impassively.

“Micheletto?” he gasped, sitting up groggily, “you’ve come back to me then?”

“Yes.”

He leaned in and hugged his friend. “I missed you,” he smiled, sitting back and taking in the sight of the small, pale boy.

“You let me die.”

“You were dying anyway,” Cesare insisted. Why did no one understand that?

“I’m stuck here.”

“Yes, but with me.”

Micheletto watched him for a while before saying, “your brother is angry with you.”

“Juan? Yes, I guess so. I told him that I owe him.” Cesare stretched, “I hate that I have to keep repeating myself. Everyone needs to stop being so dramatic. I know what I’m doing.”

“He might try to kill you one day,” said Micheletto, “and then you’ll be stuck here too.”

“As long as I have you and Lucrezia, I don’t think I’d mind. This isn’t a curse to me.” He looked over to his small window. A large piece of ply wood covered it.
“Did you cover my window?”

Micheletto shrugged, looking awkward, “I was the one who smashed them all…”

Cesare grinned, “and I’m guessing you were the one doing all the chores around the house. You’re like a house elf.”

Micheletto had no idea what that was and so said nothing.

Cesare sat up properly and moved over, pulling back the covers for he and Micheletto to climb into bed together. Micheletto paused for a moment and then obeyed.

They sat quietly in the semi-dark for a while before Cesare, always talkative, asked, “why were you gone so long? Were you angry with me?”

“I’m still angry,” Micheletto answered. Cesare began to brush his hand through Micheletto’s hair, starting from his crown and threading his fingers down through fine, ginger hair and just skating them across his neck before returning to the crown again and repeating the action. Micheletto felt himself tensing. He’d watched Cesare finally succeed in seducing Lucrezia only hours ago. He knew that Cesare didn’t feel that way towards him. He winced painfully when an image of Pascal flashed through his mind and he remembered; no one thought of him that way.

“I wasn’t away on purpose,” he muttered reluctantly, shivering slightly. Outside, it began to rain. The drops pounded against the wooden boards and for the family’s sake he was glad he had spent most of the night boarding up windows. Some of the other ghosts, the friendly open ones, were impressed by his ability to move corporeal things. Apparently it took most spirits a long time to develop that sort of self-control, especially when it was used on purpose.

He thought about the last few days. His first kiss on the swing. The leaves twirling in the air. He thought of crystal blue-green eyes. He clenched his jaw and forced himself to ignore Cesare’s hand in his hair. He felt himself growing cold again. Good. That’s what he was now: a cold, empty creature.

“I didn’t know I was dead,” he admitted, “I was distracted.”

“Oh?” Cesare sounded sleepy, sinking down into his pillow, “by what?”

Micheletto was silent. He didn’t want to say.

This apparently snapped Cesare out of his drowsiness, he opened his dark eyes, staring at Micheletto and repeated his question.

“A boy,” Micheletto choked out.

“A new friend?” Cesare sat back up again.

“No,” he felt his cheeks warming slightly. Could the dead blush?

Cesare peered at him, analysing his face. Pascal always did the same. Micheletto understood what it meant now; they were reading his expression carefully because he didn’t give much away naturally. And he guessed that they could read him well.

“Are you gay?”

Micheletto nodded.
“Oh,” Cesare blinked, his hand stilling in Micheletto’s hair, “well…well then,” he began stroking again, “that’s ok. But who is this boy? Are you still with him?”

“No.” Cesare’s fingers dug more deeply into his hair, scratching slightly at his scalp.

“Why not?” Cesare leaned close to him.

Micheletto gulped slightly, turning his head so Cesare’s face wasn’t so close to his. He felt his breathing speeding up. He closed his eyes and he felt himself back in the basement, on the cold floor, drowning in his own blood and listening to Cesare screaming at his sister.

When he opened his eyes he felt colder and stiller. The quick breathing had stopped. The fingers were still brushing through his hair, but they weren’t affecting him anymore.

“I don’t love anyone anymore,” he said at last.

Cesare stilled, “not even me?”

Micheletto climbed out of the bed without looking at his friend, “we don’t really know each other that well. I didn’t live here very long. Go back to sleep. See you tomorrow.”

Micheletto opened the door to the Master Bedroom. Vanozza was asleep in bed. She slept most of the time now. She’d even slept through him smashing the house apart in a rage last night.

The window was broken and not boarded up. The window blew the curtains. It was cold.

He looked to the right and saw a heavy man sitting in an armchair, looking over at her.

“Who are you?” asked Micheletto. He’d seen the man before, in flashes.

“I am Charles,” said the man, his accent heavy.

“You’re French. Are you the one making her speak French?”

“Maybe, it’s not on purpose.”

“It’s annoying. And it’s making her relationship with her children strained.”

Charles sneered, “it was already strained. Those two, brother and sister sleeping with one another. It’s unnatural. Her youngest son died and no one even cares. They all just get on with their lives, leaving her behind. She was going mad before I came to her. I understand her loneliness.”

“What if we give her son back to her?” asked Micheletto, “just allow Joffre in the room.”

“I’ve tried,” Charles replied with passion, “I really have! But, alas, she isn’t ready. She cannot take it in yet. She’s still grieving and seeing her son’s spirit will not fill the void of his death.”

Micheletto walked up to the bed, watching her. She was like Sleeping Beauty. She had tried to fill the void of her son’s death by adopting his little brother, but that hadn’t worked either. He almost hated her for bringing him into the house, but Micheletto had the idea that life was always destined to be short and unhappy for him.

“Her husband returns today.”
“That brute,” Charles sniffed, “there is little wonder why Il Moro chose him as a meat suit.”

Micheletto looked at Charles, “is there a way I can protect the family from such things?”

“From possession? Perhaps,” he looked Micheletto up and down, “you are stronger dead than alive. You’re quite the guard dog. They were smart, bringing to their side, earning your loyalty and then letting you bleed to death in a basement. You’re their attack dog for all eternity now.”

“Yes,” Micheletto accepted, “and so I can keep them from dying?”

“The house is cursed, everyone dies. But, possession, other spirits?” the man shrugged, “perhaps you are strong enough to hold them off. The blonde girl, Lucrezia, would be better off with you in her bed rather than those two soft boys or her mad brother. But, sadly, you are ugly like me. And a sodomite so,” he shrugged again, trailing off.

Micheletto nodded and saw himself out of the room. In the hallway, a long-legged pretty boy was waiting for him.

“Ignore him Micheletto,” Pascal’s voice was as soft as rainwater, “he thinks he is ugly and so calls everyone else the same to bring them down. You’re…pale and sharp… like a knife.”

Micheletto was walking down the hallway and down the stairs, ignoring the boy. Pascal followed him anyway, chattering the whole time.

“I was thinking that that day, you remember, our first kiss? Your first one all together,” he chuckled, “I remember thinking you were white and gold. Fire and ice. It’s pretty.”

Micheletto and he arrived at the first floor. There was some sort of argument going on in the bathroom, Micheletto stilled. This gave Pascal the opportunity to catch up and touch him softly on the neck, “I couldn’t believe you had never been kissed before. Who wouldn’t want to kiss you?”

Micheletto put out his arm to Pascal and concentrated. Pascal suddenly found himself being hurled backwards, like a force in his stomach. He cried out and landed on his back. Feeling pain isn’t beyond a ghost, but it is rare. So Pascal was surprised to find that being flung like that hurt.

“My god Micheletto,” he stammered, pulling himself up, “how did you—” He opened his eyes and saw he was down in Rodrigo’s office. “How did you do that?” he muttered, a frown plastered on his face.

Whilst Cesare had laid in bed with Micheletto, Lucrezia was in the kitchen with Roberto. She hadn’t slept much after Paolo Orsini had vanished. The boys, Djem and her own young Paolo, had guarded her as she had returned to her room. The candles had burned out in the pantry, where she left them and the jug. She did, however, clean away the dangerous cantarella Ouija board by washing it away with the remaining water in the jug, and had taken the jar of cantarella back to her room and hidden it in the recesses of her wardrobe.

After tossing and turning for a few hours, the sun had risen behind the clouds, allowing some light into the sky. She’d then gone downstairs to the kitchen where she found a grumpy, small man with dark eyes and brown hair. He was the opposite of Paolo Orsini, and she imagined that they’d looked sweet as a couple. Their story was tragic.

“Your brother,” the brunet said after cursing her out for attempting to summon him the night before, “you know he’s going mad don’t you?”
Lucrezia clenched her teeth together in anxiety before asking, “is there anything I can do to stop it?”

“Madness is as inevitable as death I’m afraid.” Roberto watched Lucrezia’s shoulders slump, “the house gets everyone. Death or madness and death. That’s it. You’d be best to try and run away. Maybe you’ll make it.”

“I’m a Borgias, we don’t abandon one another.”

Roberto shrugged, “maybe you should. Nothing good has come from keeping you all together. It would have been better for your father to have left your mother for this Giulia, and raising his new child. Your mother could have moved on with her life. I’m sure she would have been happy with you four even if her husband was gone. Given the choice, I think she would pick Juan and Joffre over Rodrigo.” Roberto leaned forward, “I stayed for my husband. Tried to keep him safe from the ghosts. All it got me was betrayal, death and eternal damnation in this place.”

“There’s a way of breaking the curse,” said Lucrezia, “I’m sure of it. A woman, long ago, lived here. And she had the answer.”

“Good luck,” Roberto leaned back, looking unconvinced, “but be aware of snake oil.”

She was quiet for a moment before, “Paolo misses you. He’s sorry. He made a mistake.”

Roberto sneered, “I’m aware. Once a cheat, always a cheat. I should’ve stayed home with my family. Married some nice girl and lived the way god intended. Not out here, in a den of sin. Trapped in one of the circles of hell.”

“What do you really believe that?” she asked, “that you’re sexuality damned you?”

He gave her a dark stare, “you know as well as I do what the Bibles condemns. Homosexuality and incest are on the list. You should leave, while you have the chance. Don’t end up like me.”

The rain from the early hours returned. The earth outside became drenched within moments. The spirits wandered about aimlessly and hopelessly.

Cesare watched them from his bedroom window. The plywood had been taken down, and he was leaning out, the rain wetting his face and hair.

“I can see them all Micheletto,” he cheered.

Micheletto sat on his bed, watching Cesare quietly. Cesare pulled his head back in and looked at his friend.

“To think, I have you back, I can see the spirits and Lucrezia…” he grinned and ran over to the bed, jumping onto it happily. “Everything is perfect. We should celebrate.”

“How should we do that?” asked Juan, who was suddenly sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed, “Oh I know!” his face lit up in false glee. Cesare watched it curiously. Juan looked beautiful when he smiled. “Let’s kill Lucrezia,” Juan suggested gleefully, “then all the Borgia kids will be here.”
Micheletto glared at him, and Juan gave him the finger because when you’re dead you fear nothing.

“Don’t kill Lucrezia,” Micheletto said to Cesare.

“Let’s play outside!” Joffre climbed up onto the bed, having come out of nowhere. Cesare grabbed him and hugged him tight. Memories, broken and short, flashed through his mind. He remembered that he loved Joffre very much.

“See,” Juan said to Micheletto, “he likes everyone better than me. Even you and you have only been family for a couple of weeks.”

“Let’s go outside,” said Cesare, “you too Juan.”

They all marched down stairs. Well, Cesare did. The others flitted in and out of existence, often appearing just slightly ahead of him then vanishing as he passed them.

They went outside into the back garden.

“Sinners!” roared the Priest, “incest and sodomy!”

Cesare let out a laugh. “He needs to get laid,” he informed Juan, who laughed along with him.

“Hey Savonarola!” cried Juan at the Priest, (Cesare bullying the Priest had over-excited him,) “fuck you old man! It’s not our fault you died before getting laid!”

“Sinner!” spat Savonarola, “cocksuckers and whoremongers!”

“You wish you could suck a cock!” Juan argued back as Cesare laughed at Joffre who was running around the garden like a mad man and splashing in all the puddles. “Get out of Narnia you fucking fairy!”

Micheletto left Juan and Savonarola screaming slurs at each other and went over to the far corner where a permanently pregnant Giulia stood.

“So,” she said, “you were adopted into this family?”

“Yes. You?”

“Fostered,” she took in a deep breath and closed her eyes, “Rodrigo fucked me and I got pregnant. And I got thrown out.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” she looked over to the Borgia brothers, Juan still screaming at the preacher and making rude gestures whilst Cesare seemed to be worshipping the rain, his arms out, his face to the sky.

“Christ,” she sneered, “Cesare has really lost it hasn’t he?”

Rodrigo’s taxi stopped just outside of the house.

“Could you go into the drive?” he asked the taximan, “the rain’s coming down quite badly.”
“Sorry,” muttered the man, who was sweating a bit, “we don’t go any further into that home.”

“Really?” Rodrigo saw the man was clutching a rosary tight in his hand. “Is this house really so infamous?”

“Yes,” said the man with a gulp, “especially amongst believers. Please, Sir, come to my Church. We will help you if we can.”

“Yes, I’m a god-fearing man myself,” Rodrigo answered seriously, not noting that the man had been nervous and subdued throughout their journey. After getting the address for his church and paying his fair, Rodrigo eased out of the taxi and made his way down the gravel path to the house. Broken glass was all over the floor and the windows were boarded up. It looked like the house was empty.

He tried the door and saw that it was unlocked. He opened up and stepped inside.

Indoors, thank god, was a bit more normal. A cheerful French song was playing from the living room, which was a welcome change.

He looked into the room and saw Vanozza. She was surrounded by three easels, all with (bad) paintings on them. On the floor was an unfinished statue made of clay. She was completely alone, dancing fondly to Dominique.

“Vanozza?” he called out nervously.

She didn’t respond, but kept dancing to the cheerful nuns’ ditty.

He stepped away from the living room and heard, “papa?” behind him.

He looked over to the stairs and saw Lucrezia. “Oh, I’m so happy to see you!”

She ran down the stairs and into his arms. They hugged for a few moments.

“What is wrong with your mother?” he asked when they pulled apart.

“She’s teaching her art class.”

“There’s no one in there apart from her.”

Lucrezia frowned and looked in. “Oh,” she said, stepping away, “Cesare said she was teaching a group of kids. Two boys and two girls.”

Rodrigo rubbed an anxious hand across his forehead. Maybe these other children were simply in the house somewhere?

“Ok,” he said tiredly, “where is Cesare?”

“Outside, I think? I thought I heard the back door go earlier but I’m not sure. I was busy reading.”

“Come on,” he took her hand and they walked through the foyer, into the back rooms and out the back door.

Outside it was still raining heavily.

Cesare was in the middle of the garden. He was soaked, his hair heavy and black, sticking to his face and neck. His clothes were stuck to his body. His arms were out and he was turning in circles,
evidently muttering to himself, his eyes closed but his face turned up to the sky. His skin was unnaturally pale. He must have been outside for a long time. Too long.

“Cesare?” called Rodrigo in alarm. He glanced up at the nearby houses. Had the neighbours seen his son acting like this? His stomach clenched in embarrassment.

“Cesare!” he shouted again, “come here! Get in!”

The boy stopped twirling in circles and instead he looked over at his father. His eyes, usually dark and scornful, now looked confused and foggy.

“Papa?”


As usual Cesare didn’t obey. Instead he fainted, dropping suddenly to the ground.

Cesare felt himself being carried. Opening his eyes the first thing he saw was his sister holding his legs. Her face was red and sweaty with exertion. She was beautiful.

“I love you,” he heard himself say.

She looked at him and gave him a quick, embarrassed smile.

He turned his head back and saw that Father was carrying his upper body, Rodrigo’s hands under Cesare’s armpits.

“Put me down,” muttered Cesare, “I’m fine.”

Rodrigo looked forward and nodded, presumably at Lucrezia. They placed Cesare down gently. They were back in the foyer. Lucrezia put her hand to his head. He didn’t have a fever, despite how ill he looked.

“You need to go to bed,” she instructed.

He ignored her, squinting at Rodrigo instead, “you’re home?”

“Yes, Lucrezia said she’d told you.”

“Mmm, maybe I forgot,” he brushed a hand through wet, overly long hair, “I’m forgetting stuff a lot recently. It’s been annoying my friends at school.”

“We should get you to bed,” said Rodrigo, feeling like he was dealing with some sort of wild animal, “come on now, follow me.”

Cesare suddenly looked to his left, even though nothing was there, and complained, “oh shut up Juan,” then he laughed loudly, almost hysterically.

“I swear,” he grinned at the empty space, “I like you more now that you’re dead than I ever did when you were alive.”

Lucrezia paled, shooting a worried look to her father. She still hadn’t processed that Juan had been
killed and she had had no chance to warn father.

“Papa,” she muttered.

Rodrigo had gone very white, and then very red.

“What is this Cesare?” he said, his voice hoarse. His eyes had a dangerous look in them.

Cesare looked back at his father. His eyes were dark and spiteful.

“Your favourite son,” he said in a slurring voice, “he’s dead.” Cesare began to chuckle darkly, “I killed him. Sorry. I owe him one,” he began to laugh, “I had to do it. I needed to see. And find Micheletto.” He began to laugh in earnest then, cackling like a witch.

“Papa no!” shrieked Lucrezia as Rodrigo suddenly launched himself at Cesare.

She jumped down the stairs, grabbing her father around the middle and holding him back.

Cesare swayed slightly, “oh what’s he going to do? What are you going to do old man? You can’t do anything without fucking up!” He stood up on shaking legs, “couldn’t be a decent husband, couldn’t raise normal children. It’s hysterical that you are a psychiatrist! A cosmic joke!”

“Cesare stop it!” spat Lucrezia, blue eyes full of fire and anger, “just go away! Got to your room or something!”

“Juan,” whispered Rodrigo, bewildered and horrified as he stared at the monster that had once been his oldest child, “where is he?”

Cesare began making his way upstairs, gripping the banister for support, “in the basement,” he answered without looking back, “if you’re brave enough to go down there. He’s in the basement.”

She waited for a moment until Cesare had disappeared on the first floor, before she turned back to Rodrigo. He looked stunned, a horrified look frozen on his face.

“Papa,” she said, “papa!” He looked at her, his eyes soft and full of hurt.

“You mustn’t go into the basement. Everyone who goes down there is changed.”

He ignored her, walking towards it. She shifted her hold on him, making it tighter to slow him down.

“Something is down there!” she cried, “something inhuman and not a ghost! Don’t go!”

“I have to,” he said, tears streaming, “what if Juan is hurt down there? What if…I have to go!” He pulled her hands off from around him and went to the basement door.

Before he opened it he looked at her, his hand on the door knob.

“Take the baby,” he said, “take the baby and run next door to Catherina. Stay there. I love you.”

She felt her chest hurting.

“I love you too,” she wept.

He opened the door and she ran into the living room. Mama was still dancing to a French song, Gio by her side bouncing his knees in a toddler’s dance. She scooped up the little boy who chuckled
and ran out of the living room. Vanozza didn’t even notice.

Rodrigo stepped down the stairs to the basement slowly. He had searched for a light switch before his descent but hadn’t found one.

His mind was screaming at him to leave, to get out of the house, to leave Cesare and Vanozza there and escape with Lucrezia and the baby. But he couldn’t without knowing what had happened to Juan; he wouldn’t risk his child being alive but injured at the hands of his mad, jealous brother. Rodrigo had already lost his youngest child and Vanozza was surely a lost cause at this point. But if he could keep Lucrezia and Juan safe, as well as his adopted baby, he could perhaps salvage his family. Move away, start again, a new life maybe. He had dreamed of such things with Giulia for a while, but of course that had been stolen away from him as well.

He had never been in the basement before. With almost constant drama since their arrival, he hadn’t been able to see much of the house let alone decorating or investigating any of it. The basement was light, as it was day and the small, rectangular windows at its peak allowed in the weak sunlight.

There was a table in the middle of the room, laden with odds and ends that were covered in a heavy quilt of dust and spider webs. The rest of the room was almost like a library; large cases of shelves that were covered in what mostly seemed like jars, glass bottles and books.

In any other house those items would be filled with jam and marmalade and homemade lemonade or old stock wine. Instead, he saw on closer inspection, the jars were filled with bits and pieces of organs inside a clear liquid. Some of the organs were clearly human.

The floor was clay and dried brown with centuries of various blood spills that were never cleaned. It stank of death. Enough to make a normal person retch, as Rodrigo had a few times since his arrival.

‘Cesare would spend hours down here,’ his brain reminded him. A flash of anger burned in his gut for a moment at the image of his dark eyed child. But then, immediately after, came guilt. ‘Cesare would spend hours down here,’ his brain chastised, ‘and you let him. You left him on his own. You knew he was obsessed with Lucrezia, but you never did anything about it. You knew he was jealous of Juan…but did nothing to stop it.’

He put his hand over his mouth, a wail threatening to be released. There’s no critic as vicious as your own internal one. He took a few shuddering breaths, tears falling from his eyes. He wanted to call out Juan’s name, but he didn’t trust that he would simply start screaming.

There was a fresher layer of blood dragged across the floor. He followed it, his body numb and cold, until it led to an ottoman leaning against the wall.

His heart stopped for a minute as his mind became white-noise with internal panic.

He walked towards it, his legs moving slowly as if through water.

‘Don’t do this to yourself,’ a part of him whispered to himself. But he had to. He couldn’t allow himself to take the easy way out. The image of Juan, young and full of bright laughter, hung in his mind. He had to know. He had to.
He lifted the ottoman.

Two bodies.

One of them fresher than the other.

Rodrigo dropped to his knees weeping. Cesare had killed his child, stabbed him to death, and crunched up his body in this dusty old box with some other dead child. The bleeding had continued after death and so the bodies were slightly submerged in blood.

He silently sobbed for a moment before suddenly it came. Rodrigo let out a wail of despair.

November 1981

Rufio awoke.

He was strapped down onto a table in a cold place. There were shelving units all around with various jars on them. The floor was concrete. It stank.

The room was lit well by candle light. A man, handsome in a cold sort of way, with wavy auburn hair stood in front of him. He was dressed in an old-fashioned suit and a bloodied apron. He seemed to be sniffing something out of a snuff box.

“Well then,” the man declared, “let’s open you up and get a look inside.”

Rufio began to struggle against the bindings to get free, but he couldn’t.

The sound of a saw began to burr as Rufio started screaming. He survived one agonising minute with the original owner of the Murder House before dying.

Outside of the basement, Vittoria lay with a broken neck at the bottom of the staircase and Pascal lay hacked to death just by the front door.

The bodies of the three children would be found a week later. They’d be laid to rest and the whole ordeal would be blamed on teenage gangs dabbling in Satanism, no doubt due to listening to too much metal and rap and watching too many slashers.

Their spirits had watched the horrified police taking their bodies away. Vittoria had wept bitterly, knowing her family would be devastated at her death.

The brothers had remained impassive, Rufio turning to Pascal and asking, “was it you who pushed me down the stairs?”

Pascal just shrugged and smiled.
This is Francesca's diary; the one Lucrezia has been reading from. It's only a select few entries.

A few select chapters from Francesca’s and Sancia’s shared diary.

15th September 1895

These are the words of Francesca Calederon. I was born in Campania though now I am writing from the Papal States. This is the fourteenth diary I have written in! My mother went through great pains to make sure that I knew how to read and write, but in my life as a maid, I find that keeping a diary is the only way I can keep up my skill.

I think this diary may be more interesting than my last few. Of course, in every great house in which I have served I have been witness to many scandalous happenings and I find that my desire to gossip and laugh about such things is helpfully repressed by my writing them in my notebooks (heaven forbid if anyone should find them – great families would be ruined!) However, this mansion is already so strange. It shouldn’t be. It is much smaller than my previous placement; though before I worked in a palace. This is a mansion of five levels if one includes the below the house and the loft. The staff is much smaller here. Before I was lost in a sea of servants. In this family I am just one of six!

There is the Butler, who is very handsome with light brown hair and pretty grey eyes, and I already suspect that the cook and under-cook are quite in love with him. He lives in the attic rooms. There’s also a valet. He’s a very tan man, I think he may be a moor or of Moorish heritage. It’s strange to think he made it to a valet, but he must be very good for the Master of the house to not be concerned about his dark, sinful, sultry looks. He is handsome too, in a manner new to me, but I blush to think about it so I won’t write any more on the subject.

There is a Cook, Mrs. Colombo and her helper Chiara. They do not live with us, but have moved to the outskirts of the village. There isn’t enough space for them here, but the home they live in is on Trastamara land and so they have it for free as their work here includes their room and board.

Likewise there is the driver Fabiano. He too had had to move into a small cottage nearby the house. His is further from the village and so likely more associated by the villagers with us.

The Head Housemaid is terrifying. She is to be the personal maid to the Lady of the House. It’s all very strange, but I have heard that now many noble houses are doing this; making their homes smaller and hiring less servants. It’s strange to think servants are falling out of vogue, but there it is. Maybe one day it’ll be popular for the nobles to clean their own houses and put on their own clothes! “How very drole, cleaning my own toilet!”

Forgive me, I am wicked sometimes.
The Lady and Master of the House are not here yet. I am excited to meet them. Ferdinand Trastamara is to be my employer and I am thrilled because...he is the bastard son of Trastamara Sr.! He has been accepted by his family. That is why he has their name and he was raised somewhat in high society, if a little on the periphery. No one knows who his mother is, but rumours abound of her being a village girl or a maid or even a noblewoman who his father wickedly seduced. His inheritance is smaller than his siblings, but he has married his childhood friend Bianca Gonzaga and she is related to royalty. She is such a noblewoman she has improved his social standing significantly.

After only serving thoroughbred nobles, I’m entranced by this modern new coupling. I feel like I am part of the future.

The Head Housemaid’s name is Mrs. Russo and she looks like someone who was very attractive when she was young, though she is heavy set and somewhat wrinkled now. I hope when I am old I shall no longer need to work. I hope to…

Well I shall say no more on the matter. What good is there for a girl like me to wish for anything?

I shall speak of things people care about; in history we read about generals and heroes and the great houses an castles and palaces. And so I shall write about the house.

It sits alone in a great desolate plane of grass. Just half a mile north is a river from which we will get our water. There is a village a mile south, and my Master will be their landlord. It is where we get all of our daily supplies. I passed it on the way here, it is pretty, with a dainty fountain in its centre of which the villagers are clearly very proud.

The village is very modern. Most of the houses have a tap and an outdoor toilet, they are much luckier here than the poor souls in the cities. The mansion is modern also, with advanced plumbing and even contains two indoor toilets. There is an outside one, for the groundsmen. We servants are permitted the downstairs toilet on the first floor. It’s a luxury and a kindness. The family have a grand bathroom and toilet on their floors.

It must be annoying for the men, coming all the way downstairs for the toilet. They still will use chamberpots I believe. But us women sleep in the below the house. It’s where I am now. It’s very spacious. We don’t get our own rooms, back in the Imperiale I had my own little attic room, but there isn’t enough space here. Still, I don’t mind.

I believe I shall be very happy here.

18th September 1895

Well today was very exciting! I saw the village only in passing as I made my way to the Mansion a few days ago. But today I went on an outing with Mr. Dantonio (the Butler) and Mrs. Russo (the Head Housemaid.) We needed to get supplies from the village as the Master and Lady of the house are due to arrive on Monday.

The village is quite small, but apparently growing larger as Rome’s cities extend outwards. The people are excited by the mansion, some hoping that it’ll bring more wealthy landowners which will help bring more money to their shops. Apparently, long ago, most people here were farmers. But as the debts rose and the banks took back land, the people turned their attentions to shops and trade. So the more people who come to live out here, the better.
Of course, there were a few who were bitter about it, but they mostly kept to themselves with only some grumblings and dark looks. I was tempted to ward myself against the Evil Eye but I know such things are superstition and our Priest has always taught against such things, so I didn’t fall into the trap. These bitter ones were the sons and daughters of farmers who lost their lands but were never able to get into trade, or the remaining farmers locked in a constant battle with debt and poverty. It seems very unfair that they would be cross with ourselves or the Master and Mistress, as it was none of us who dispossessed them, but sometimes people just need someone to blame for their misfortunes.

I stayed close to Mr. Dantonio, who was utterly charming and even allowed me to put my arm through his own. I felt like I was part of a married couple, walking through the streets with him. If only Mrs. Russo wasn’t there. Perhaps she looked like our grumpy mother in law. But Mr. Dantonio is much too handsome for a simple girl like me. I won’t go on, but I am a very ordinary looking woman with light eyes and light hair. I look like most girls, a few pock marks from childhood, a few pimples that appear now and then, a bit too tan but I am slender and am told that I have a nice smile. Not many servants get married, though that too is changing over time. I know that should I ever marry, it’ll be for sensible reasons; a man who is in a stable job and has a kind heart to help me watch and raise little ones. I can’t be connected to someone rash, or brutish, or bad with money, or who drinks too much. I can’t afford to make a bad marriage choice. I have seen other girls who have had their heads turned by charm or good looks, but without the aforementioned qualities, it means very little in the long run. Charm is superficial and loses its power over time, and beauty eventually fades; muscular tall men will shrink and bend, light skin spots and wrinkles. But a sensible mind and a kind heart can last a lifetime.

22nd September 1895

It’s been a busy and tiring week. All the furniture needed airing out and cleaning. Before, in the Imperiale, we only had to open part of the palace for the family. But as this is a mansion, the whole of it will be in constant use.

We frequently use the grand stairs, the same ones the family will use, which I find very strange and daunting, but the mansion wasn’t built with servants’ stairs (barring the ones to the attic and our one to the downstairs level.)

With everything scrubbed and cleaned and my legs shaking with tiredness, we had a restful sleep last night. Today, the Master and his Lady arrived.

He’s a very handsome man, with a noble visage. His hair is long locks of curled auburn, the same colour as a very fine moustache. He is quite short for a gentleman, but he’s also slender with high cheekbones and a prominent nose. It’s lucky he was accepted by the Trastamara family because there is no denying his relation to them.

His lady is even finer. Like him she is appropriately fair skinned, but with very black hair pulled up in the finest hairstyle. I hope Mrs. Russo can keep up with whoever had been doing my Lady’s hair beforehand, for Mrs. Russo is quite old and old fashioned, but my Lady’s hair is absolutely modern. She wore a thick dress of rich dark green which matched her obsidian eyes.

She’s quite intimidating really, but that’s how nobility should be and, frankly, is what I am used to. I could tell that she didn’t quite like the house, she had this funny looking frown on her face as she looked at it. She was no doubt used to grand palaces, and I know she even spent a summer or two
in the Palace of Fontainebleau, at one point meeting the King of Greece! No doubt this was nothing to what she was accustomed. I felt a little bit sad for My Master, as she must have known that he would not be able to keep her in some great Castle. He was very pleasant, while she stared at the house, he smiled and nodded at each of us, learning our names and saying how happy he was to have us as his staff and how we had all been handpicked!

I was so grateful. All my hard work at the Imperiale paid off and someone must have noticed me, in order to put my reference forwards!

But there was an interesting conversation that I overheard. I was building up the fire in the Master’s bedroom, but I could hear the Master and the Lady conversing in the adjacent room. And by conversing I mean arguing. Or arguing in a manner of speaking.

At first I thought she was perhaps expressing her distaste of the house. And, forgive me Lord, but I did become quieter and slower in my duty so that I could overhear.

The Lady of the House was saying that she had heard talk in the village. That the people there were superstitious. That this house had been built on land that was sacred.

The Master however assured her that this had not been the case; there was no evidence of anyone living on this land in the five hundred years it had been owned by the Trastamaras. Even upon building, no one had come forward with a complaint.

She then argued that many disasters had happened during the time of the house being built, that the people of the village had not worked on it despite their being the offer of good wages, because they were scared of it being cursed.

Honestly, it’s quite silly really. How can a house be cursed? Especially one as beautiful as this? But they are country bumpkins, tightly attached to our angry Pope and mother always taught me that in difficult times – such as our own currently – people cling to ideas of the past.

I made sure the fire was lit properly. I believe My poor Lady was suffering, being in a small home and so far away from home, and as such was listening and giving too much credit to these wild tales. Sometimes, a nice warm room and a good night’s sleep is what one needs.

23rd September 1895

Today the strangest thing happened. We were all lucky enough to have an early night yesterday. The Master and Lady were quite exhausted from their long journey and all the travelling and because Mrs. Russo was so ruthless with all the cleaning the week before they arrived, there wasn’t too much to do after the Master and Lady retired.

In short, I was able to go to bed before midnight. Before midnight! Such luxury!

I do love this house already. Handsome Butler, interesting employers, my own bed and toilet…

However. Perhaps it is because I had more sleep than usual and so I began to dream. Perhaps it was the odd conversation between the Master and my Lady…but I saw the strangest thing early this morning.

It was still dark. We all wake up early but I, being the lowliest, get up first. So it was five O’clock
and I was starting up the fires in the living room.

I started the morning by splashing cold water on my face and washing my hands, to make sure I was presentable. And as I looked up, there in front of me was a mirror and I swear for a moment I saw something moving behind me. I turned to look but all I saw was the bathroom.

Well I ignored the peculiarity as merely me seeing something in the corner of my eyes. I went to the living room and stoked up the fire, nice and toasty.

Then, as I stood up dusting myself off, I saw a tall shadowed figure watching me from the doorway. Well, I just went cold all over. Even though I couldn’t see its eyes there was a sinister aura about the figure. I just felt the hate rolling off it.

I wanted to believe that perhaps it was Mr. Dantiano, or maybe the moor Gildo. But I know it wasn’t. It was too tall and too slim.

I fell backwards and gripped my rosary, reciting the prayers against evil.

The figure continued to stare for a few more moments before stalking away on long legs. I was wet with sweat, my whole body cold but shaking. After a few moments of being too scared to move, the warmth returned to the room and I wondered if I hadn’t imagined the whole thing.

But it was so terrible! Even now, when writing this, I clutch again at the blessed beads of my rosary and pray that by writing my experience, I haven’t invited evil to return to me or this house!

I eventually moved, I had to. I continued cleaning the grates and lighting the fires for the rest of the house before getting on with scrubbing down the master bathroom before they used it. The Master and the Lady are mucky pups. Somehow they’d gotten earth spattered all over the bathroom. Heaven knows how.

I worked until eight O’clock when the Master and his wife woke up and had their breakfast. Then I was allowed my own breakfast and a cup of coffee. I needed it, for I was still so scared of the early morning apparition.

Gildo and Mr. Dantiano were serving the Master and Lady, but I had Mrs. Russo with me. She was tearing into some hard bread whilst reading a newspaper bemoaning the liberal state of our government.

I was cautious, but asked her if anyone else lived in the house.

She asked me what I meant in an annoyed sort of way, without dropping her paper. So I said that sometimes rich people hid away extra family members in their home.

Then the paper did come down. She gaped at me before saying that whatever shenanigans went on at the Imperiale most certainly were not happening here and that my employers were honourable people. Of course, I became quite frightened now because I am fond of the Master and Lady, little that I know them, and I am very fond of having a job.

I then told the truth; explaining that I only asked because I saw someone this morning, but as far as I knew it wasn’t a thief because nothing had been stolen. I said how strange it had been and how scared I was.

She took some pity on me then, but chastised me for not saying anything earlier. She said that it was likely no one had been there, but I was tired and young and had a vivid imagination. However, she did say she’d bring it up with Mr. Dantiano and he could discuss the matter with the Master. It
could have been that some villain was scoping out the house to pillage at a later date.

I sipped my coffee and settled a bit. But now, in bed, I cannot help but wonder if it wasn’t something more sinister and strange.

24th September 1895

I believe the Lady and my Master are growing restless in this house. No one wishes to visit, all of their invitations are ignored. They’re surrounded by only us servants and the villagers. I suppose humble people like us are not considered company enough. I know they are of superior stock, but I cannot help but feel a little hurt by that.

We may be less learned, but we are all human. We have our own opinions and ideas and dreams and hopes. They may even find us interesting, if they got to know us. For all this talk of a new age and a new way of doing things, I suppose certain things never change!

And speaking of things that never change, the indiscretions of the upper class seem to be the same.

Early this morning I cautiously walked through the house tidying. Of course it was very early, as it always is when I have to get ready. I crept about the house, tidying and lighting fires so it’d be warm by the time they were about.

I went into the Master’s room to open his windows and light his fire and…

Please prepare yourself. It is shocking to write and it makes me blush.

But the Master lay in his bed, the blanket was not tucked under his chin, as usual, which is the right way for them to sleep. Instead, it was cast halfway off in a quite suggestive manner. His eyes were closed so I am certain he was asleep. But he was groaning softly in his sleep, and writhing just slightly. I was transfixed, his body very fair and very slender. He looked like he belonged in one of those unsuitable paintings. One arm was draped over the bed, hanging off slightly. The other was beneath the covers, moving slightly. I felt as if I couldn’t breath!

I moved away quickly, whispering a prayer for strength. I opened the curtains and, gulping, went over to the hearth. It was then that I heard him moan a name.

It was Maria.

Over and over he whispered her name.

But here’s the thing; his wife’s name is Bianca. So who is Maria?

I could scarcely look at him for the rest of the day. Luckily I was kept extremely busy. Sara, the other maid who is just a bit higher than me, was complaining of a fever and so I had all of her chores on top of my own! It wasn’t very fair, but there’s nothing else for it. She could hardly work whilst ill, what if she infected the Master or his Wife?
That is how I know that the Trastamara’s are frustrated with country life. I had to take in a tray of cakes and coffee to them just after the riposa. They were complaining of the lack of things to do and people to speak to. I put the things on the table. He seems a little more content than she, perhaps because of his humble heritage. Then they asked me, suddenly, why I was there and not Sara.

So I told them how she was poorly but that I was going into the forest to collect some items to make for her a balm. Well, My Lady’s eyes did light up!

A walk in the forests, how splendid! She said that she would come along. She fair invited herself, though I did wish for some time alone, but far be it from me to tell her Lady where she may or may not go. It’s an honour really, so I shall not be ungrateful. And, of course, she is interested in plants, making for herself quite the vast little garden.

An hour later, I met My Lady by the front door. She always looks elegant, this afternoon in a black cloak that reached her ankles. She’s so beautiful, I cannot believe My Master dreams of another!

We went out and she asked me a plethora of questions about the plants we were picking and the nature of the concoction I was going to make. She even asked me if it was Old Medicine! I blushed, knowing she meant magic.

I told her that I was not a witch, but a true Catholic. She seemed to want to calm me, though my alarm was justified. She said she didn’t believe I was a witch but knew that many Italians without the ability to go to the doctor (which is most of us) had to rely on The Things We Do That Have Always Been Done. I was a little suspicious, but I began to tell her anyway. It’s supposed to be bad luck to tell others of your powers, but I see no harm in it. It isn’t powers anyway, just simple herbs and incantations invoking the saints. The power is God’s.

A Balm for a headache

Five branches of wormwood
Seven leaves of mint
Five Rue flowers and stem, in bloom
Three tablespoons of olive oil
One cabbage leaf
One cup of stream water

Put the wormwood, mint, rue and olive oil in one bowl and mash together, adding the water until it becomes a paste. Then put it inside the cabbage leaf. Make the sign of the cross over it before placing it on the forehead or wherever the headache feels worse. Make sure you keep it on, whilst holding the rosary in one hand.

The potion will cool your head and the blessings will pour onto you from our Lord.

I told all of this to My Lady and she was fair interested! She told me that her ‘dear Maria’ would so adore this way of life. Of course, my heart then leapt into my chest.

I asked her who Maria was and she told me, with a soft smile, that she, My Master Ferdinand and Maria had all grown up together.
She told me that Maria was none other than My Master’s very own sister!

26th September 1895

I am sorry, I weep and it stains the page. Oh poor Sara, my sweet, precious Sara. She was a simple girl, but one who deserved so much better. My only comfort is that she is now in the bosom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The poor girl died tonight.

So strange! She died so quickly, and so mysteriously!

She died peacefully, Saints preserve us. She looked like an angel, with her skin so pale and her hair fanned out against her white pillow.

Oh, I am quite overcome!

My dear friend is gone!

28th September 1895

Today we buried Sara.

I feel numb. For someone to die so young. I know it happens, but I have been sheltered from it. Even though I am poor I have been raised in service, and so have always had a roof over my head and food in my belly.

The funeral was full of people, all the servants of course, My Master and Mistress who both sobbed uncontrollably. Mrs. Russo was there though she hardly had a tear for the girl and sent us all back to work as soon as we arrived home!

Mr. Dantonio was very lovely. He offered me his handkerchief and said the sweetest things about how Sara had always looked up to me and admired me so. I never knew! I wish I had been a better friend to her. I feel awful. I swear to be kinder from now on, to everyone.

When we returned home, My Master and Mistresses tears turned to shouts of laughter and joy when they received a letter saying that the one and only Maria was coming to visit.

I thought it was a touch callous, how they went from one emotion to another, but I know that those of a higher caste can hardly care about the likes of me.

No one cares about a maid. I hardly know who I write this diary for. I suppose myself. But it is a shame.

I made a potion to soothe my stress and anxiety this evening.

A cure for stress

Two peppermint leaves

A teaspoon of Olive Oil
Boiled water (one cup)

Two heads of Valerian (white flowers)

Pray twice to Saint Dymphna, a smile on your lips. Then sip the tea slowly.

1st October 1895

Oh, the stress of this house seems to be getting to me! I feel eyes on me in the morning as I go about my chores in the darkness. I am afraid of the Tall Man coming to me again.

Mrs. Russo is more unkind than ever. I have so much work for no one will replace Sara from the village. They say the house is built on cursed land! But how? No one lived here before!

Oh my. I am tired. And further, My Master continues to dream. The way he moves in his bed, the way he writhes and sighs…gosh I’m so hot! I feel so tempted. Why does he not lie with his wife? Surely that would help him spend some of that energy?

I’m just a girl, as lusty as any other though I do my best to resist for the sake of my Lord and Saviour. He is a married man, and above my station, and possibly tempted himself by incest.

Oh, what a den of iniquity we are becoming!

6th October 1895

Today in Church a lot of questions were answered. During the sermon the Priest, who is a tall pale man with very light blue eyes, he told the villagers that they needed to stop mixing the Old Ways with the Way of the Lord. He said that the Old Ways had no use for us, because to be ill and suffer is to suffer for God and to even die is to go to Heaven. He said that by going to the healer (see, witch) in the forests, that they were going against God’s Law. He said that he didn’t care if the Vatican allowed some of these Old Ways, he was our spiritual leader and he knew that it was wrong because the Lord spoke to him through his Holy Spirit.

I must admit I felt rather smug for a while. These villagers spit at us and give us the most frightful looks as if we have done something wrong! By what I can tell our only sin is not being local, and the people are terribly nationalistic. However, Italy is now as one and they should accept us! We are all Italians! Why, I would go as far as saying that even Gildo is, for all his skin is bronzed. He was born here, he confided in me, and he is a Catholic. He is more Italian than any of the Protestant or Muslim!

But then, pride cometh before a fall. For then he began to preach about the witches who lived in the fields and forests on the outskirts of the village. How they had danced naked in the night. How they cast spells that damaged crops. How they ate babies. How they worshipped the Goddess Diana and her lover Lucifer the Morningstar.

I saw My Lord and Lady casting each other a glance in the row before me, and I realised, the land the Priest was talking about was the land the mansion was built upon!

The mansion did kick people out of its realm; the witches!

I then realised, with growing dread, that the Tall Man I had seen may have ben Lucifer himself!
After all, what kind of darkness had the witches invited to this part of the world? I began to sweat and shake, thinking of Sara and her pitiful death, how no one had understood how a healthy woman had become ill overnight.

But alas it became worse. Just as Mrs. Russo told me to get a hold of myself, the Priest said that witches were anyone who engaged in collecting old herbs and making potions and medicines. And I swear I felt so many eyes upon me then!

Then Mr. Dantonio leaned over to Gildo and whispered, quite loudly so that a few of us heard, that I had made a draught for Sara just before she died!

Well then I became very pale and then in turn very red.

I couldn’t believe it! What he was insinuating, in Church in front of our Lord of all places. I wanted to run out of the Church screaming. I wanted to profess my innocence to everyone in ear shot. But I couldn’t, I had to just sit there with all those eyes looking at me.

Good Lord please preserve me, what if the people take it into their minds that I am a witch? What if I am burned?

It is a little later now. I wrote that extract just after we returned from Mass. I was very distressed, but I am calmer now. I feel very coldly towards Mr. Dantonio. I have decided I shall make no more draughts or concoctions for anyone, regardless of how much their head aches or how their nose runs! For I shall not be accused of being unseemly.

8th October 1895

Another frightening phenomenon occurred. I was sitting in the kitchen. As the undercook, a young sallow girl named Chiara, cooked the best stew she could with our meagre ingredients from the village, I sat at the table darning buttons back onto shirts.

We sat in comfortable silence. The kitchen, as always, was warm. Outside, rain pattered against the window. Inside, the stew was bubbling merrily. In the distance, we could hear My Lady quietly playing one of Bach’s Arias.

At first I ignored it, carrying on with my work as creaks are not rare in this house. However, the creak happened again. Like a door opening. Then I heard Chiara gasp.

I sat up and looked at her. She was staring, brown eyes so wide you could see the whites all around her irises. Her mouth was open.

With dread I turned in my seat and saw right behind me one of the large dresser’s doors was open. This in itself was not so alarming. But what was alarming was that there appeared to be someone or something inside. You could see, in the shadow, some pale skin of a thin limb.

I felt the tension rising.

Who was small and thin enough to fit into the dresser? And why were they in there?

I stood slowly, feeling frightened. Was I to run forward and rip it open? Or to run away, grabbing Chiara by the hand and fleeing the room?
The thing inside shifted slightly.

A hand, thin and white with too long fingers, slowly exited the shadows and gripped the door.

I heard whimpering behind me. Chiara was whispering the prayer of St. Theresa of Avila in a halting, fearful voice.

The hand opened the door a bit more, revealing now a very black eye. It was not the faux black of a human’s dark brown eye, but actual deep, inky blackness.

I fled.

In that moment I did not think. I did not think of Chiara, I did not think of what others would say. I just ran. I knew I needed to be out of that room for something awful was about to happen.

As soon as I got to the door I heard a loud slapping noise as something fell hard against the floor. Then Chiara let out a mighty scream that ruptured my ears. I was in the foyer running.

My Lady Bianca ran out of the living room crying out what was the matter with me. I realised that I was screaming myself, crying in terror. I could hardly hear anything, Chiara’s scream having been so loud.

Hysterical, I fell to the floor, tipping onto my rear and pointing at the kitchen. Gildo and Dantonio ran from upstairs into the kitchen.

I was screaming, “no! no!” But they didn’t listen. My Lady Bianca had to drag me into the living room. She slapped me once around the face whilst My Master – who appeared out of nowhere – pushed a brandy into my hands.

They asked me what had happened and I couldn’t get a word out, I was so frightened, before Gildo entered the room. He looked frightened and there was blood on his shirt. He and the Master spoke outside of the room for a while. They then took me to my bed downstairs. They wrapped me up in more blankets than I’d usually have, which was fine as I felt unusually cold.

That was last night.

It is morning now. Mrs. Russo has gone to work. I am alone and so, so frightened. I still do not know what has happened to Chiara.

10th October 1895

I was allowed rest for a few days. Mrs. Russo was careful not to tell me anything, worried about my state of mind, though I must confess that not knowing anything made me more anxious.

But today I was told to get up and get ready. It makes sense, with no Sara, I am the only Maid. And the housework still needs to be done. Mrs. Russo cannot do it alone.

And so I obeyed, washing and dressing without much thought. However, I was allowed up later than usual and when I went upstairs I found the Master and Mistress waiting for me in the living
They told me that Chiara had been found with terrible injuries. They had tried to help her, the Master sending Gildo to collect the Priest and Mr. Dantonio and Mrs. Russo doing their best to bandage and heal Chiara.

However it was too late.

She died of her injuries.

They asked me what had happened, as it looked like some sort of animal had attacked her but no one could figure out what type of creature.

I told them, in a small voice, that they would not believe me. However, I told them what I had seen anyway.

Luckily, I was wrong. They did believe me. But they were unhappy. They decided to use the Priest to cleanse the house, using an exorcism. They asked if I could continue my duties until he could do so and I said I would because I really had no other choice.

13th October 1895

Today we had the cleansing.

We all, servants and Masters, stood in the foyer. The Priest was leading the Blessing whilst the Deacon read from The Holy Bible.

We went from room to room, blessing the house by flicking Holy Water and reading from the scriptures and engaging in prayer with our Lord. We spent a lot of time in the kitchen, though I wonder if it would have been sensible to focus sometime in the bedrooms of My Master, considering what he dreams about.

We went up into the attic, and I must admit I was curious about how the men lived! Like us the men shared a large open space. Gildo’s bed was very tidy, made up neatly. Mr. Dantonio’s was a mess, the mucky pup! I did think it was quite bad that Gildo had no pillow on his bed, where Mr. Dantonio had two. But no one else mentioned it, even if they looked, so I suppose it’s not my business.

When we made our way back to the foyer we all kissed the cross the Pastor had bought for us before putting it above the front door. It looked suitably regal there.

The Master was happy. He proclaimed the house clean, just in time for his sister’s visit!

21st October 1895

Maria Trastamara is a real beauty! She and Ferdinand Trastamara share both of the same parents, I was told by Mrs Russo. So the same prestigious father and not so prestigious mother!

They grew up quite close because they understood each other so well and it seems they were both considered different. I feel for them. They must not have fitted in with their mother’s family, being too high-bred with a good education and a polite Neapolitan accept. But then they didn’t blend in
with the blue-blooded royal children who were legitimate in every way, who could trace their heritage on both sides in the history books.

I can see how they became so attached.

At some point, Bianca must have joined them and there they were, a jolly threesome. Two ladies. One gentleman. I wonder if the girls fought for his attention, the younger sister and the beloved fiancé then wife?

The women get along well by what I can see. There were tears and hugs. Maria and Bianca gripped each other for such a long time, whispering now and then to each other before the siblings could finally hug. They kissed on the lips, the brother and sister, which I found a bit odd but I know some families are like that.

Maria took us all in and was surprised by how few of us there were. My Master and Mistress became quite dark then, muttering about their misfortunes as they went into the Mansion.

Their misfortunes were losing two members of staff. For me it was losing two friends.

30th October 1895

I’m sorry I haven’t written in so long! It’s been a lovely week. Nothing strange has happened. Mrs. Russo is being much kinder to me since the loss of Chiara and Sara. Mr. Dantonio hasn’t said anything rude about me that I know of, though I do see him and Gildo whispering together a lot. They’ve become very close recently, or were they always close and I just never realised?

The Lady Maria is just wonderful! She’s beautiful and accomplished! I can see why both My Master and Mistress love her so! She seems to light up every room with her charm and wit.

The weather is getting worse as winter comes in. The villagers suffer with the bad season, but in the house, despite all our calamity, things seem much better with the Lady Maria here.

How happy I am!

31 Oct

Oh God! He’s gone mad! He

1th November 1895

Where do I begin?

The terrors that have come into this house. I cannot… I cannot bear it. My Master, Ferdinand Trastamara, has become quite…angry and unpredictable.

I shake as I write, forgive my scrawl. I cannot fully control myself. The fear which I now live under.

Yet still, never have I loved Ferdinand Trastamara more.
For all of this is his wife and sister’s fault. They have betrayed him so abominably.

I did not realise it at the time. I was tidying downstairs when I heard a terrible bout of screaming and shouting upstairs. It was extremely late. The Master and Ladies had gone to bed two hours before. The servants were up because we always are, our roles go on late into the night.

I ran to the bottom of the stairs in the foyer. I could hear Mr. Dantonio crying out for the Master to please calm down.

Then the Master himself, in a state of undress, came running down the stairs, tears streaking his face.

Being a woman, I could not help myself. I took his hands into mine and led him into the living room. He sat on the couch, pale with shock, eyes soft with weeping. I could not sit on the chair, being of lower class, but I knelt at his feet, like Mary Magdalene sitting at the feet of Jesus. I kept holding his hand, hushing him as he cried silently. His face was stone, only the tears moved. Oh it was terrible.

Then the Ladies came in and that upset everything. They looked wild, their hair unkempt, their underclothes askew. It was quite shocking and not becoming ladies of their rank. I tried not to let my distaste show but to a point I couldn’t help it as I got to my feet and moved away from the Master. I put down my head so they couldn’t see my disgust.

Maria was crying and asking his forgiveness. Bianca was telling him that it was not as it seemed. She then looked at me with such spite! She screamed at me to leave the room. I nearly fled, she frightened me so, but my Master bade me to say, cursing her for speaking to me in such a way. He proclaimed that I was the only honest girl he knew.

They all began to argue then, back and forth, over-lapping one another. I did not think I should bear witness to such a display and slunk out of the door. Outside, I saw Mr. Dantonio and Gildo on the stairs. They were stunned. By the kitchen door was Mrs. Russo, shaking with horror.

But then, just as I left, the argument reached its highest point.

My Master began to scream that they were the reason God was not watching our home, that they were the reason we had suffered so many peculiarities. He called them ‘tribads.’ I have no idea what it means but it’s something shocking as Mrs. Russo fainted!

As we fusssed over her, he dragged his wife from the living room and up the stairs. Lady Maria followed after them, like a dog, weeping and holding onto him. He is a slim man but anger gave him added strength and he bore both women, dragging them up the many stairs screaming that his wife was to be locked away for all time!

Just as we had managed to rouse Mrs. Russo, Lady Maria had returned to us.

She begged Mr. Dantonio to go get help lest he murder his wife, and Mr. Dantonio quite rightly asked who was going to have the authority to stop the Master? There is no law out here.

After a moment’s pause she mentioned the Pastor.

Suddenly, there were screams from upstairs. Terrible, terrible screams!

Mr. Dantonio wasn’t happy to leave us, so instead asked if Mrs. Russo was able to get to Fabiano’s cottage, which was a quarter mile from the house, and after rousing him together they would go to the village to collect the Priest.
She was desperately frightened, but with the pained shrieks coming from upstairs, her duty to her Lady overcame her fear and she agreed to go.

As I watched the old lady bustle out of the door into the pitch-black night, I felt nothing but the deepest terror for her.

She should not have gone! Oh if only I had spoken up to stop her!

We ran upstairs as soon as she left. On the second floor, in the Master bedroom we could hear a slapping sound as well as corresponding cries. Tumbling into the room, I was horrified to see my Master whipping poor Lady Bianca with a wide belt! He had pulled up her nightdress, showing off her back, buttocks and bare legs. Gildo and Mr. Dantonio, ever gentleman, scarcely blinked to see her in such a state of undress. Instead, I believe we were all drawn to the terrible welts that covered her tan skin.

Oh it was horrible!

The poor woman was weeping, her nose running and her face red. Terror was in her eyes as he beat her again and again, that cold mask of fury on his face. It’s like his mind completely snapped!

Lady Maria was screaming at him to stop, but it took Gildo and Mr. Dantonio wrestling him away from her to stop the woman from receiving any more whips.

Lady Maria ran up to Lady Bianca, holding her face and kissing her softly.

My Master seemed to want to weep once more. He kept asking why she had ‘chosen her out of everyone?’ in this terrible, broken manner.

But then he hardened again. He dragged the women apart, throwing his sister on the floor once she was out of the room and then ordering the rest of us out. His wife began to beg for him to calm down, but he slammed the door shut and ordered Gildo to stand guard. The Lady was not to be allowed out. Mr. Dantonio was ordered to get the key.

Inside the room, she was threatening to leap out of the window. This caused Lady Maria to wail, but he cried out for her to do it.

He then grabbed Lady Maria once more, the poor girl must have been bruised and covered in carpet burns for how much he had dragged her about! And he pulled her into the dressing room opposite, slamming the door.

I ran to my room and managed to write that tiny piece in my diary before I was interrupted.

The villagers had come to the house bearing torches. They were angry, proclaiming that witchcraft was going on in the house and that we had bought the devil to them.

Oh it was so frightening!

In that moment, I thought of the lies that Mr. Dantonio had said about me, the accusations regarding Sara.

I heard them all upstairs, threatening to break into the house.

So I decided to hide. There is a small cabinet in which the house supplies of sugar, cinnamon, coffee and tea is hidden under lock and key. I, of course, know where the key is. I fished it out of Sara’s pocket, her dress still hung up, and allowed myself inside. I felt like a heathen going and
standing on all those expensive items, but I feared for my life.

I shut the door and stayed in their all night.

I could hear noise constantly. There were shouts and screams. I could hear crackles of a fire. I could recognise some of the voices, my Master shouting loudly, the cheers of the villagers, screams of women…

Eventually it all died down. I sat in the darkness for some time. At one point, I heard the door to the basement opening. Loud footsteps came down the stairs, so loud it was almost like the steps of a horse; sharp and precise. What kind of shoe was that person wearing?

I could hear the individual moving about in the darkness. I was so scared I couldn’t even breathe, instead I held my breath and scarcely blinked.

There was then the sound of long nails against the wood of my little cabinet. I gripped a rosary wound round my wrist and began to pray to the Lord in my head. Then slowly, it became a protection song to Diana. I’m not sure where I learned it from, but it seemed to work. The being outside the cabinet moved away. I didn’t hear it clopping back upstairs though, so I remained hidden and still.

Eventually the morning light was shining through the cracks of the door. Assuming nothing evil would be in the day, I cautiously opened the door. I then fell out, my whole body numb and cold from staying still for so many hours. I whimpered, the pain stinging my senses. Eventually I warmed a little and was able to shakily get to my feet. I went up the stairs and outside.

The house was… a mess. Mud and leaves were all over the floor. Furniture was smashed. I cried, praying to the saints for it was All Saint’s Day.

Surely, this was a day to be blessed?

I daren’t go upstairs, but I went out of the pantry and outside the back door.

Diary… I cannot… I cannot describe for it was too horrible.

I fainted on sight.

I

I saw

Mr. Dantonio and Gildo had been murdered in a most cruel manner. They had been burned.

Like witches.

I do not know where the Trastamaras are. When I woke I went downstairs and wrote this diary. I shall leave it in this mansion, as I cannot bear to take these memories with me. I am to find my nearest relative and stay with them. I pray the villagers do not find me.
Originally this was going to be longer, but I’m just too tired. Italian details are mainly from wiki so most might be wrong (let me know in comments or pm).

**Halloween II**

**Chapter Notes**

**Halloween II**

**Last time:** Rodrigo returned home to find his wife and son had become seriously mentally unhinged. Cesare admits that he killed Juan, Rodrigo finding him in the basement. Lucrezia took Gio and ran next door to Catherina’s house.

**1895**

**The Beginning**

God turns his face away from The Murder House. It is a den of sin; incest, rape, abuse and cruelty. But, just like in the Garden of Eden, the original sin of the house was small.

It was the sin of a lie.

~

The first impression Mrs. Russo had of Francesca was that she was beautiful but cold. Even her looks were icy, with light blonde hair pulled back demurely, light skin without make up and dark blue eyes. In the interview Francesca’s lips were pinched and she sat upright in her chair. She had come with excellent references from the Palace Imperiale.

Mrs. Russo told her so and the girl simply nodded before, “I take a lot of pride in my work Madam.”

“Oh, Mrs. Russo, a ruddy happy woman with honey-brown eyes, “and it says also that you were the pinnacle of discretion. That is what I need for this house, on top of a good, strong work ethic.”

“I think my work speaks for itself.” Francesca’s voice was low, almost a hiss at times.

Mrs. Russo wavered a little. How would this prim and proper woman fit in with herself, who was loud and jovial, and sweet little Sara who was always giggling and flirting with boys? Though, perhaps this sort of woman was exactly what they needed. No doubt the Master would be fine with women like Mrs. Russo and Sara, but would not his Lady wife find someone like Francesca more acceptable according to her rank?

“May I ask,” began Mrs. Russo, “why you choose to come work at this house? You’re used to working in palaces in the great cities of the Romagna. What brings you here to the Papal states?”
“My aunt is unwell,” she responded promptly, “it is important for me to be near her as her life comes to a close. I know that I will not have much time off, but the time I do get I shall be able to visit her easily.”

“Oh!” Mrs. Russo warmed to the girl a little, not expecting such kindness from the pretty little icicle, “my, my! Your poor aunt, my condolences. Does she live in the village then?”

Francesca shifted in her seat ever so slightly. “In the wood madam.”

“I see,” (odd) “very well. I see no reason for us not to welcome you aboard our merry little team. It’ll be hard work but we shall get through it, working together!”

Francesca gave a small smile – more like a smirk – and it chilled Mrs. Russo to the bone.

Present Day

Catherina flew down the stairs when she heard someone banging on her door with their fist. Opening the door, she saw a sobbing Lucrezia holding Gio’s hand as he stood next to her.

“Come in, come in!”

Catherina settled the girl down on a chair in the living room, getting her a warm drink. Lucrezia watched the attractive woman fuss over Gio, complimenting his dark hair and soulful eyes. The toddler giggled happily.

“Here,” she offered him a brightly decorated rattle, “this belonged to Ascanio. Now it’s yours.” She kissed him on the head before settling down on the settee beside him, facing Lucrezia.

“My dear, what happened?”

Lucrezia let out a shaky sob. She felt pathetic, sitting in her neighbour’s house and crying like a child. Borgias were strong and hot-headed and showed no weakness. Yet here she was.

“Cesare,” she began, “he’s…not himself. I thought I could…I don’t know, maybe make him better? Maybe we could recapture what we once were but I didn’t. He’s even worse than before.”

“Are you safe around him?”

Lucrezia paused. Before she would have said that she was, absolutely, for no matter how angry Cesare got, no matter how vicious, she always felt like he would never hurt her. But now?

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly, not wanting to go into that thought process any further. She began to wipe away the tears. She needed to get a hold of herself. She looked at Catherina imploringly, “may I and Gio stay here? It doesn’t need to be long. Just for tonight? I can call family back in Spain in the morning and arrange to go and stay with them.”

“Nonsense,” stated Catherina serenely, “you will both stay here with me for as long as you need.”

“Is Alfonse here? And your other children?” Lucrezia had to admit, she had been curious about the Sforza clan, especially as she had Sancia Sforza’s diary and knew that the Sforzas had once lived in the Murder House. How had they survived? And Catherina had never bought up this fact. The knowledge of this reminded Lucrezia of why her family had avoided Catherina for so long. And now here she was, ready to spend a night in the lady’s house.

“No,” Catherina responded, “they are not. Now, tell me what you did try and bring Cesare back
to his usual lovely self. Maybe we can try it again?"

Lucrezia blushed horribly and glanced away. Her feelings in that moment were confused; fear, shame but also a rush of defiance and arousal. She didn’t feel bad about what she had done with Cesare, but her lack of remorse was what was making her feel ashamed.

Catherina leaned over, closing the space between them, and grasping Lucrezia’s slim hands in her own. “Lucrezia, you must tell me,” she said with some urgency, “the time of keeping secrets is over; keeping them hasn’t helped your family so far.”

“You must not judge,” Lucrezia said conspiratorially, “You will judge.”

“I won’t, I swear.”

“I … kissed him,” she half-lied, “not like a sister. He’s sick, like I said. The last few months he’s been developing these strange thoughts towards me. He never said anything, never forced me to do anything. He never even suggested. But I could tell by the way he looked at me. The way he spoke to me and touched me. And I thought if I gave in…just a little…it would quench his thirst but…” She shrugged, glancing anxiously at Catherina whose face was carefully blank.

“Your brother…” Catherina trailed off, staring blankly. After a moment’s silence she seemed to rouse herself out of her state of shock, “are you certain you were never forced? You were not coerced? Predators are not always old dirty men, they can be young and handsome. And grooming isn’t always obvious.”

“No, Catherina, never! He isn’t like that. I swear,” Lucrezia took a deep breath, “I don’t know when it all started. When he started seeing me as something other than a sister. He was always,” she shrugged, “lonely, I think. He finds it hard to relate to other people, even in our family. People don’t like us. They don’t like Cesare. They might fear him, or fancy him…but few really love him and…I don’t know…maybe somewhere all the different types of love that exist bled into being one for him. There’s no boundaries between them.”

Lucrezia looked at Catherina, trying to gauge her thoughts. She felt like a damned traitor taking about Cesare this way. Borgias stuck together no matter what; even if they hated one another, even if they needed outside help, no one went outside of the family. To divulge such damning information about a relative was a disgrace, but she was so desperate.

“Well,” said Catherina, “that is very sad to hear. He did seem like a lost soul on the few occasions I met him, and very passionate too. I can imagine that that is a toxic combination. But you know, it may not have been his fault. That house has a way of twisting beautiful things into something strange and unnatural.”

“I heard,” Lucrezia replied carefully, “that you used to live there. With your family.” Lucrezia paused, a thought occurring to her. And now she thought of it, she realised how obvious it was. “I’ve never seen any of your children…apart from Alphonse and he’s only ever in our house.”

Catherina smiled then. And for the first time it seemed to be a real one. It was dark and sardonic. “I was wondering when you would all notice, but it’s been a very stressful couple of months, so I understand why you didn’t. Yes, I used to live there with my children back in the nineties.” She took a photograph, the one Micheletto had been looking at on the day he died, and handed it to Lucrezia. “I had four children,” Catherina continued, “Benito, Sancia, Alfonse and Ascanio.”

Lucrezia stared at the girl. She had seen her before. In fact, it had been the first ghost she had seen in the house. She had been on Lucrezia’s bed, blood on her white nightgown. Blood on the crotch
area. She also knew Sancia had written an entry into the back of the diary she was reading. She then glanced at Alphonse. He looked exactly the same as now as he did in the photo, only the photo had a much younger looking Catherina.

“They all died,” realised Lucrezia, “Alfonse is a ghost…”

“Yes,” Catherina confirmed, “my daughter is little more than a poltergeist, though she has calmed down in the last few months. Benito and Alfonse haunt the house. On the night of the fire, I managed to escape with Benito and my baby, Ascanio. But Ascanio died outside of the garden, the smoke got to him. He’s spirit is gone, I haven’t seen him since his death.” She smiled without humour, “I didn’t leave the house soon enough. Before the fire, my two nephews and my husband were killed. It wasn’t enough for me to take the house seriously. My nephew and Benito both went mad. I got Benito out of the house during the fire, but it was too late. Once the madness of the house infects their minds, there’s nothing you can do. They’re part of the house now.”

“How do you know Benito couldn’t be saved?” pushed Lucrezia, her body turning cold at the thought of Cesare dying mad and alone in the Murder House.

Catherina sat back in her chair, a bit of an attitude showing, “because, my dear, when I finally got him out of the house and into some sort of normal routine; going to school, watching tv, accompanying me to the shops and so on; his madness grew until he somehow got his hands on firearms, he went into school, and he killed over twenty of his schoolmates.” There was a pause as Catherina let that sink in for Lucrezia. “He wasn’t bullied, he wasn’t angry. He just did it, because it was the winter months and the house demands blood.”

“I heard about that shooting, they still talk about it in school.”

“He was found hours later in the Murder House,” continued Catherina. “He tried to attack the police, so they had no choice but to kill him. The newspapers reported that it was the influence of America’s gun-culture on our young people, but I knew better. It was that house. It claimed every one of my children.”

There was silence then, apart from the sound of the clicking clock and Gio quietly humming to himself.

Catherina put on a bright, fake smile. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to worry you. But this is serious.”

“Why didn’t you warn us?” bit out Lucrezia, angry now, “if you knew all of this, why didn’t you say anything? We could have moved out earlier…Joffre and…he may have lived!” She almost said ‘Juan,’ but luckily held it in. She didn’t want Catherina knowing the full extent of Cesare’s insanity.

“But I did,” argued Catherina, “on the first day I intruded on your family. I told them that it had a dark history and that it was cheap for a reason. I even bought up ghosts, but your family didn’t believe. The most I and Alphonse could do was make you curious enough to check yourselves but,” she shrugged sadly, “it seems the only ones who looked into the house were Cesare and to a lesser degree, yourself. Your parents didn’t. I think they were distracted by each other, and then by your sad loss of Joffre. After I kept an eye on you all. I could tell Cesare didn’t quite trust me and I didn’t want to keep pushing myself into your family. There wasn’t much I could do. But you’re here now, and that’s why I’m being so very honest with you about my own tragedies.”

Lucrezia nodded, “I understand,” she commiserated, because though she wasn’t convinced that Catherina had done everything in her power, she did feel that the woman had suffered very badly and was a potential ally. After all, it was becoming a distinct possibility that soon Lucrezia would
be alone in a different country with only a mad brother, mad mother and baby brother… if she was lucky. Lucrezia would need a friend, preferably a rich adult who had a house with spare rooms.

Catherina smiled, patted Lucrezia’s knee and went off to make them both another hot drink to soothe their nerves. Lucrezia thought desperately; how could she convince Catherina to allow her to bring Cesare, if not both Cesare and her parents, into the house? Perhaps papa, if still alive and sound, could charm her? He seemed quite attracted to Catherina, and mother was too far gone to be jealous. Plus, perhaps Roberto was correct.

Catherina returned, handing Lucrezia a drink before settling back down. “You may stay in the room upstairs. I think the one beside the bathroom is best, it looks out to the street. The one opposite face your house. I think if you can see the house it will draw you back to it, and I would not want that to happen.”

“About my father…”

“If he was meant to arrive here,” interrupted Catherina, “then he will. If he doesn’t make it out of the house, then he won’t. Tonight is Halloween. It’s the most dangerous time of the year.”

Lucrezia thought of her diary. “Right, the realm between the living and dead is thinner.”

“Exactly. You must stay out of that house tonight. If you go in, I won’t chase after you. And I’m not sure, if you survive, if I’d let you back in to my home.”

Lucrezia gulped. She was going to have to choose between herself, and her father and Cesare. Self-preservation was always the first and foremost Borgia instinct.

“I’ll stay here,” she promised. “But if papa can make it here before night, can you let him in?”

“I will.”

Lucrezia allowed herself a small amount of relief, “and Cesare?”

“I don’t think Cesare will be leaving that house now. But I will offer you this, I shall go into the house with you tomorrow to see if I can help your mama, who is now a dear friend of mine, and anyone else who is alive and well in there.”

“Thank you, so much.”

1895

The village was desolate.

The farms were barely thriving. The people were impoverished and starving. Whereas the rest of Europe seemed to be slowly but surely moving forwards, entering the 20th century with a new sense of fairness to all, the poor country-side dwellers were still essentially trapped in serfdom.

But the people were proud, sticking to their traditions and festivals. They were nationalistic too, and they did not appreciate the idea of a unified Italy.

“They feel that it’s taking away their individuality. Their customs and culture and making them homogenous with this idea of Italy as a country.”

Francesca was in a carriage with the Butler, Mr. Dantonio. He was explaining to her the will of the people, preparing her for hostility, as if she were some sort of idiot who had been living under a
rock for the last decade or so.

“They should have sent us to the village in something less conspicuous that this,” she answered, “an old-fashioned trap, pulled by a horse or two.”

“I wouldn’t know how to drive such a thing,” he sniffed, “I grew up in the city, so traps were a waste of time. It’s faster to walk, or to use an automobile.”

This caught her attention, she turned to him, “you’ve driven one?”

He smiled, glad to have her looking at him now, “yes. My father had shares in a company. They expected to sell many, but with the economy and everything,” he shrugged, “maybe one day they will be common.”

She turned away, looking out of the window to the gloomy countryside. A fog had rolled in, tainting everything with a blue-ish hue. The land looked haunted.

“How will the villagers react, I wonder?” she began, “on finding out that the Big House recently built is owned by two Napolitano’s?”

“Furious,” he answered without feeling, “but when are people ever not angry nowadays?”

“We bring money and trade. Perhaps they will put their xenophobia aside as long as they gain to profit?”

He laughed then, “what a funny woman you are! You are very cynical. It doesn’t suit how pretty you are. Mrs. Russo usually likes her girls to be gay, like Miss Sara.”

Sara was the scullery maid, slightly lower than Francesca. She had dark brown hair and eyes of a fawn. She had half a brain and a loose tongue.

She turned to Mr. Dantonio once more, gracing him with a sweet smile. His instincts were not as good as Mrs Russo’s, so he simply smiled back at her with good humour.

They entered the village, with its dirty hovels masquerading badly as cottages. The people were thin, watching the carriage with narrowed eyes. It was so tense that Mr. Dantonio made a sign against the evil eye.

The centre of the village had a lovely centre-piece, a fountain that was covered in moss. The fountain wasn’t working, but rain water pooled at its bottom, scum floating at the top.

The carriage stopped and they got out, the driver taking it off to get the horses a drink at the nearest establishment for such things. He would have let them drink from the fountain, but the water looked unhealthy. Inside the water were various knives and even a sword or two. They were rusted and old.

“Gifts to Hercules?” she asked, looking at the charming Butler, “are the people here quite connected to the Old Religion?”

“Everyone is devotedly Catholic,” he said simply, hooking her arm in his and striding towards the butcher’s.

They bought the best of what could be found in the small village before going into the pub for lunch. Fabiano, the driver of their carriage, was in there already with half a pint.
They sat at a table. The pub was sullen and dark with most of its punters loitering either at the bar or around a small hearth which held within it a weak fire.

“The goose we bought has barely enough fat on it to roast the potatoes,” Francesca muttered quietly.

“How sorry you both must be,” sneered Fabiano, “coming from the wealthy cities of the south to this place.”

“I’m a Roman,” argued Dantonio defensively.

Fabiano shrugged, his watery blue eyes turning to Francesca. She stared back at him. She had no issues with who she was or where she came from.

The landlord came to take their orders. Almost nothing from the menu was available so in the end they settled for some bread and a bowl of testaroli.

Before he went away with his orders, Francesca asked, “Sir, is there a physician in the village or nearby?”

“Are you sick madam?” the man asked, his eyes roving over her body.

“No,” she smiled charmingly, “but I find it is good to be prepared for these things. And as a newcomer here, I wish to know everything about this place.”

“There’s no doctors,” he answered bluntly, not taken in by her amiable sentiments, “does this look like a place where we would have such things? There is a strega in the woods. She heals. If she wants to. You go to her. Your Master, is he interested in such things? He needs a healer?”

“My Master is very well,” she said. The conversation was tense now. Fabiano and Dantonio were sitting up straight in their chairs, the former even ignoring his beer for the moment.

“He should be wary,” the landlord continued, “many will be envious of his position. The last Land Owner we had, he died. Typhoid. We didn’t have to pay taxes for a while. All was chaos as the government took ages to sort it all out.”

“Our Master does not ask for taxes,” she replied coolly, “he wishes to live in peace with his wife. We have bought food locally for him. He does not consider himself above this village. We bring commerce.”

The Landlord grunted, walking away with their orders.

“Why did you mention the Master having a wife?” hissed Fabiano at her, “do you want them both cursed?”

“Come now,” Dantonio tried for affability to lighten to mood, “you surely do not believe such things? We’re passed all that now.”

Fabiano took a sip of his drink, leaning back and watching them with intelligent eyes, “we’re out in the country now. These people have their own ways. Better to learn their rules.”

Present Day

“Papa is sad.”
They were in Lucrezia’s room. Cesare was lying on her bed. Where was she?

“I don’t care,” he said to Juan, who was sitting at the end of the bed watching him. Joffre was peeping through the wooden boards on the window to look outside and Micheletto was looking through Lucrezia’s CD collection.

“Do you really not?” asked Juan, annoyed, “he just saw me and Chatty Cathy over there,” (he gestured to Micheletto, who just levelled a stare at Juan in response,) “in a fucking ottoman in the basement. Like, rotting and dead. My blood is everywhere.” When Cesare said nothing he rolled his eyes and muttered, “I still can’t believe you stabbed me to death!”

“Why are you all here?” asked Cesare, lifting himself up. “You’ve been following me around all day.”

“We’re haunting you dickhead,” sneered Juan, “me and Joffre are stuck to you. I don’t know why he’s here.” He gestured at Micheletto again.

“Shouldn’t you be scaring me then?”

“I can’t scare you. No one can. You’re fucking crazy.”

“No I’m not,” frowned Cesare at the same time as Joffre cried out,

“I don’t want to scare you! I like you Cesare!”

Cesare grinned, “that’s why he’s the one everyone loved,” he informed Juan, who first scowled before an evil grin appeared on his face.

“Why don’t you kill yourself Cesare?” he suggested sweetly, “then you can stay with Joffre forever.”

Joffre jumped up and down, nodding excitedly.

“No,” sighed Cesare, “I couldn’t leave Lucrezia all alone.”

“Can’t she come too?” asked Joffre, now sitting on the bed beside Cesare. Juan crawled up so all three brothers were sitting up at the headboard.

“You wouldn’t want her to be killed would you?”

“I guess not,” Joffre allowed.

The door to the bedroom opened.

Rodrigo stepped in. His eyes were red and his cheeks wet with tears. Cesare felt something then, not guilt for what he had done, but regret for doing this to his papa.

“Did you really do that?” whispered Rodrigo, “did you truly kill your brother?”

Cesare got to his feet slowly. It felt wrong to be lounging on the bed of his sister.

“I did,” he said at last, though part of him wanted to lie.

Rodrigo slumped against the doorway, looking horrified and defeated.

Cesare felt his temper spiking. “It’s not a big deal!” he shouted at his father, “Juan’s fine. He’s
right there!"

He pointed to Juan.

“Cesare,” his father sounded old and weak, “there’s no one there.”

“There is!” Cesare shrieked, “he’s right there. And Joffre is here and Micheletto! You’re making a fuss over nothing!” He looked to Juan, “show yourself to papa!”

Juan made a rude gesture that meant go fuck yourself.

Rodrigo slumped to the floor, putting his head into his hands. How had this happened? How had his family fallen apart so quickly?

“You wouldn’t be like this if I had been the one who died,” spat Cesare, watching his father with anger, “you would be fine. But only because it’s your favourite! You weren’t this upset when Joffre died!”

Rodrigo raised his head. His eyes were watery and angry, “how dare you!” he hissed, “how dare you! You! Who weep for no one! I didn’t see you caring too much when your baby brother died! Did you even shed one tear? I saw you hugging Lucrezia though, that was your main concern!”

Cesare took a few steps back, stung and a little shocked.

He could hear Juan giggling, “ooh, he got you there. Exactly what I said, you care more about Lucrezia than the rest of us. But I warned you, remember? I said –”

“Shut up Juan,” he muttered.

This served to enrage his father more-so.

“I should have seen this coming,” Rodrigo said, pulling himself back to his feet, “all that time spent alone in your room or that damned basement. The obsession with your sister. Your need to control everything and everyone. Your lack of emotion and compassion. Your inability to make friends. God, you’re a psychopath. I’ve raised a psychopath.”

“How am I a psychopath?” spat Cesare, “when I feel more deeply than you ever have? I might not make a big show of my emotions but I do care about this family! I care about them more than you ever have. I would have never betrayed us like you have. I would never use the others as pawns. I might use others, outsiders, my friends, but never my family.” (He ignored Juan’s ghost shouting, “liar!”) “I’ve never cared about what the neighbours think of us or the Italians in general. I never would have cheated on mama, I never would have bought us to a dangerous house like this and then kept us here because I would never put money over our well-being. I didn’t bring us here. I didn’t cause the situation that we had to leave Spain. I didn’t send mama mad. I didn’t cause two innocents to be bought here to live. I didn’t kill Giulia. You can’t blame me for any of this. I’m not a psychopath. But you are right about one thing, you did raise me. I am a product of you.”

They stood for a while when Cesare was finished, father and son, staring at each other.

Rodrigo didn’t even look angry. He just looked tired. Defeated.

He nodded, rubbing his hand across his mouth. He walked across the room, Cesare backing away, and sat on the bed.

“You’re right.” He said, “I’m your father. And I should have seen this coming and I should have
done something about it. I realised that earlier, when going into that horrible basement; I should have been suspicious of you going in there all the time. I should have gone down and I would have seen…seen all the stuff down there. That alone would have told me about your mental state.” He put his head in his hands, “but no. Not even then. Before, years ago, I was picking up the signs. Your inability to make friends…how lonely you were. How much you relied on…on your sister.”

Cesare was huddled by the wall. Micheletto had vanished, but Joffre was crouched on the floor looking mournful. He couldn’t see if Juan was still around.

“I’m not stupid,” Cesare sniffed, “I know how it’s weird to be in love with your sister. I tried, father, I really did. For a long time. Not to love her the way that I do.” He walked forward, his arms still wrapped around himself, until he faced Rodrigo. “I would go with other girls. Ones that looked different to her. Ones that looked the same. It didn’t help. And you are right, I can’t connect with most people. It’s not that I’m a psychopath I just…”

“You never learned,” sighed Rodrigo.

Cesare shook his head slowly. “You kept me hidden away,” he said accusatorily, “when I wanted to join the football team as a little boy, when I was desperate to join, you sent Juan in my place. I had to stay at home and learn English until I was fluent. I didn’t get to go to Summer Camp with my friends, I had to go to that one with the Church even though I didn’t know any of them because you needed to impress the Priest. By the time I returned in September, all my friends had moved on without me. Juan had been allowed to go. Some of them became his friends. And I was alone all school year.”

“It was because I knew I could rely on you,” Rodrigo argued softly, “you were clever and could be diplomatic…”

“I know,” answered Cesare, “I understand the logic. But you see, there was a price to pay. And that price was me. In the end, the only person I had was Lucrezia. I resented Juan. I was jealous. Because I wanted his life and felt that I would have run it better. And Joffre, as much as I love him, was much, much younger than me! All I had was Lucrezia. Mama always preferred Lucrezia and Joffre. Juan was your favourite. I had no one other than this little blonde girl who thought the world of me. She didn’t think I was up-tight like you did, or cold like mama did, or wicked like Juan, or too old like Joffre. She saw me as…as how I want to be I guess,” Cesare blinked a few times, surprised to find his eyes full of tears, “she would look at me and think I was kind and brave and good. And I so badly wanted to be that for her. Even now I’d protect her from anything. And it became the wrong kind of love because what other chance did I have? Who would ever love me like she would? My own family can barely put up with me. I’m a useful tool to you, but nothing else. You don’t enjoy my company. I got all twisted up papa. Now I’m this thing,” he looked down at his hands, “she’s worried about me. I know that the person she needs protecting from is me. You have any idea how that feels?”

“I do,” answered his father, making Cesare look up at him in surprise, “I know what it is to be the worst thing that could happen to those you love. You know I love your mother, and look what has happened.”

“But those were your choices,” Cesare argued, “you choose to cheat on her.”

“And are not your actions chosen?” Rodrigo stood, “choose not to hurt her newest boyfriend. Choose to allow her to be happy with him, or anyone that she dates in the future.”

“The house,” Cesare’s voice shook, “it’s making me worse. More jealous…”
“I’m going to take you away,” Rodrigo put his hands on his son’s shoulders. They were the same height now, but soon Cesare would be taller. He was still growing. “I shall take you away and you will get better. We can get past this. I will always love Juan and Joffre. But we can get through this.”

Cesare watched his father with dark, inky eyes, “will you be able to forgive me? About Juan?”

Silence.

“I can love you,” Rodrigo eventually answered, “I shall always love you.”

Cesare lay in Lucrezia’s bed. He didn’t know what time it was or what day it was. He felt ill and dizzy. The conversation with his father had left him shaken. They’d never been so open with one another. People joke about the Spanish being emotional and emotive, but for how loud his family got, they weren’t very good communicators. The whole honesty thing had been daunting and left him drained.

He felt the room becoming cool.

Cesare sat up, expecting to see perhaps Micheletto or one or both of his brothers watching him.

Instead it was two young men, both a little younger than himself. One had a mop of brown hair and big dark eyes. The other was a middle-eastern boy with beautiful eyes and black curly hair.

Cesare felt a certain knowing then. These boys knew his sister.

“You both,” he said, his voice hoarse, “you look after my sister.”

“Yes,” they answered.

“I’m Djem.”

“I’m Paolo.”

Cesare grimaced but remembered his father’s words. Maybe this would be good practice in being polite to Lucrezia’s current, living boyfriend.

“Hi,” he said, “nice to meet you both. Thank you for taking care of her.”

“Taking care of her means taking care of you too,” said Paolo, the pair moving closer to Cesare.

“I don’t swing that way, but thanks all the same.”

The boys smirked. “Not like that,” said the one called Djem, “your father isn’t being entirely open.”

Cesare’s heart sank a little, “what’s new? Ok, so what is he not telling the whole truth about?”

“He’s talking to someone now,” said Paolo.

“To someone from an asylum,” said Djem.
Moments later, Cesare stormed into his father’s office just as he’d put down the phone.

“Where are you sending me?” Cesare demanded.

Rodrigo held up his hands in surrender, “now calm down Cesare…”

“Where? You said you were going to take me away! I thought you meant with you and Lucrezia! I didn’t want to leave my family here! Micheletto and Joffre! And Juan! But you said and I thought…” he struggled for a moment before biting out, “I thought I could trust you!”

“You can. I’m arranging for you to spend some time in a place called Briarcliffe.”

“We agreed I wasn’t a psychopath!”

“But you can still be ill Cesare. It’s in Naples by the coast.”

“No!”

“You won’t be there forever.”

“No!”

“You’ll be with specialists. We’ll visit you, me Lucrezia…”

“NO!”

Cesare flew at his father in a rage. They slammed into Rodrigo’s desk, Rodrigo hitting his back against it hard. They thrashed around, Rodrigo reaching out and eventually grabbing a lamp. He smashed it over Cesare’s head to little avail. Cesare clawed at his face, his eyes wide and dark like an animal’s. Rodrigo cried out in pain, smashing the lamp against his son’s head again and again until at last the boy slumped to the floor, his head bleeding, the lamp smashed to pieces.

1895

Ferdinand Trastamara arrived at the house, his lovely wife Bianca by his side.

“I know it’s a change for you,” he said, “being all the way out here.”

“I told you I’d support you no matter what,” she smiled, “and I mean it. It’s a new day for us, these people will have to get used to being Italians, and to seeing us as allies.”

“Still, poor people are proud.”

“We won’t take that pride away from them, don’t worry Ferdinand, all will be well.”

He nodded and smiled at her.

They arrived at the mansion. It was small by her usual standards, but she made no criticism. It was raining lightly, but the servants were still lined up outside. A Butler, two maids, a housemaid, a cook and under-cook and a footman. It was small, but this was the fashion nowadays anyway. Plus, Ferdinand had a small fortune and he didn’t want to fritter it away on dozens of unnecessary staff. Most of his inheritance had gone into building the house, which had been beset with bad luck, many of the contractors injuring themselves and the building process meeting so many problems that it took a lot longer for the mansion to be built than expected.
He and Bianca were kind to the servants, sparing them each a smile and a nod, even the moor Gildo. Mrs. Russo received an extra friendly smile from him as he knew her already. She went bright red and giggled like a school girl, that very nearly set off him and Bianca. They’d always considered Mrs. Russo to be hilariously inappropriate for a servant.

“Please, everyone,” he said, “get inside and get warm. I would not wish anyone to get ill. My wife and I would like an early night, as I’m sure all of you will, and so after supper we shall go directly to bed.”

The servants curtseyed before hurrying inside, relief on all of their faces.

It was an unusual household to be sure; two giggling maids, a moor, only six members. All of them from different states of the once ununified Italy. But it suited them.

He kissed his wife at the front door gently on the cheek.

“It is a new day for us,” he confirmed, warming at her smile.

As they closed the door, the image above the door, made out of stained glass, was of a sainted woman holding a bow and arrow facing up to the moon.

The meal they ate was rather sparse. The Butler, Mr. Dantonio, looked a little embarrassed.

“The village is the only place we could get supplies,” he explained, “and the people there are very poor. A typhoid epidemic ran through a few years ago, and with the added misfortune of a few bad seasons…”

“I understand,” Ferdinand smiled, “this is fine. But we should try and help the villagers. During the typhoid, what did they do for medical care?”

Mr. Dantonio became visibly uncomfortable, “I believe the people here subscribe to doing things The Way They’ve Always Been Done. A sort of ideology that merges the True Religion and the… older traditions.”

Ferdinand, for the first time, looked angry, “witchcraft!” he gasped, putting down his knife and fork, “surely not! In this day and age? With the True Religion? Surely that is heresy?”

“The Church is still in discussion,” said Bianca, trying to calm her husband, “it is not yet decided. Though a real doctor is necessary. Perhaps if we sponsor one to come, pay his wages for some time?”

Ferdinand drank deeply from his glass of wine before answering, “yes perhaps. My family do not have a good history with witches Mr. Dantonio. Please make sure that the staff know this. I do not want anyone getting any strange ideas from the villagers, and I know how this sort of ideology can be insidious, attractively showcasing itself to the weak willed. Our Lord is against witchcraft, and we are a Catholic household.”

“Of course sir,” Mr. Dantonio bowed, “all your servants are part of the Faithful Flock.”
They went to bed early, as they promised the servants.

“My dear,” began Bianca, a warning tone.

Ferdinand sighed, “yes?”

“I don’t think you handled tonight that well.”

They were in his bedroom. She had her own room next door, but for appearances sake they thought it would be a good idea to spend tonight together.

“The people here,” she said, looking at him now, “what choice do they have but engage in this sort of magic? With no doctor and illness running rampant?”

“They have their church,” he hissed.

“And they used their church!”

“Alongside magic!”

“It’s one and the same to them.” She argued, “they don’t see it as magic, or breaking God’s law. They see it as no different to what the Saints do or the Apostles when healing the sick. You cannot insult them for being ignorant. Even the Church has not spoken out about it.”

He sat at the end of his bed, “witchcraft in all forms is dangerous.”

She joined him by sitting next to him, “you said your family had experiences with witches? I have never heard about this with the Trastamaras?”

“My family is not just the Trastamaras.”

Ah, this was dangerous territory, talking about his low-born family side. His father was a rich and powerful man. His mother had been a maid, barely old enough to have started her monthly bled before Trastamara Senior had his way with her and got her pregnant.

She remained silent, waiting for him to tell the tale at his own pace.

“The Trastamaras were from Naples, but my mother’s family were from a city nearby. The city of Benvento. They lived near the Sabato river. My grandfather, my father – who was then just a child and his little brother, were walking home after a long day’s work. It was night, but the moon was full and round and bright, lighting the road. As they walked, they began first to hear music. Then, the words of a strange song. It was sung by women, interspersed with loud cackles of laughter and the spits of fire. My father and uncle, being just boys, wanted to see what the merriment was all about and were keen to join in, their aching feet and tired eyes forgotten about. But my grandfather was wiser, having heard the stories of the Janare. So he hid them behind some trees and carefully they crept forwards. Eventually, they saw it. A hoard of women, naked and filthy, with long wild hair and sharp nails, all dancing around a gigantic walnut tree. It was larger than any walnut tree seen before, always green, even in winter. There were fires around the tree in which the witches danced. And in those fires…” he paused, putting his hand over his mouth. He was sickened. She grasped the hand that still lay on his lap, “and in those fires,” he continued, “were the burning bodies of babes. When they were done, the witches ate the babies’ flesh and pummelled the bones and fat into a pumice which they rubbed onto their skins.”

He got up suddenly, wrapping his arms around himself, “my grandfather took his children in his arms and ran. They ran home. Terrified. But my uncle, he became ill. Becoming thinner and
thinner, no matter how much they fed him, until at last, nothing but skin and bone was left. He
died. Thin and desperate. Just a boy. My grandfather went out with a number of men from the city
and cut the tree down, burning it afterwards and putting blessed mud on top of the earth. It keeps
growing back, but my father as a man cut it down and no doubt my half-siblings on that side will
do the same. I might be adopted in by the Trastamaras, raised as one of them, but I still harbour the
witch-hunting side of my other family. They may be lowly, but they are good people. Hating
witches is in my blood.”

He made the sign of the cross, as did she.

“It is why I fight so hard against temptation,” he said at last, “because I do not want to be put into
their ranks. I do not wish to be damned.”

She came up behind him, wrapping her arms around him so he didn’t have to self-sooth. He put his
hands on hers and they stayed together like that for some time.

“We might not be in love,” she said at last, “but I am and will always be your dearest friend.” She
kissed the back of his neck. “Shall we sleep separately tonight, allow you some space?”

“Thank you,” he turned to her, kissing her forehead.

When she went into her own room, adjacent to his, she saw the maid cleaning the hearth. A pretty
girl, with pale lips and blonde hair. Cold blue eyes.

She stood and curtseyed. Her face gave away nothing but she must have over-heard their
conversation. This servant reminded her of the ones in the castles and palaces she had lived all her
life; remote and cold and distant, but knowing.

“What is your name?” Bianca found herself asking.

“Francesca My Lady.”

Bianca nodded, unsure of what she wanted to say. The girl left, brushing past her.

The room felt too warm. Overheated, Bianca pulled off the thicker blanket from the top of her bed
before settling in. She had expected things to be strange in this house, a new way of living. Italy
was changing all over right now. But this…element of the supernatural was not what she had
anticipated. She closed her eyes. It would all be normal again tomorrow.

Present Day

Someone was knocking on the door urgently. Lucrezia put down the diary and ran down the steps,
part way down the stairs when Catherina opened the door to Rodrigo. He looked a mess, streaks of
dried tears and scratch marks down his face and filth all over his trousers.

“Papa!”

“Oh thank god,” he slumped by the door at seeing Lucrezia alive. He turned to Catherina, “thank
you so much for taking her in.”

“It’s not a problem. Rodrigo what happened to you? Come in-”

“No, I must go immediately,” he said, “It’s Cesare…he’s…very bad. I’m going to go and get him
some help.”
“What do you mean?” asked Lucrezia, sinking down to sit on a stair.

“Lucrezia, he cannot be kept in that house. He,” he looked at Catherina for a moment before deciding that the truth would eventually come out anyway, “he killed Juan. And I think Micheletto too. He isn’t safe around people;” he continued as Catherina swore and then made the sign of the cross. “There’s a place called Briarcliff. It’s near the sea. He’ll like it. He can recover there. But I need to go now.”

“I shall take care of her-”

“-wait-” interrupted Lucrezia.

Catherina barrelled on regardless, pushing Rodrigo out of the doorway, “And Gio too. Come back as soon as you can.”

“Of course, of course. Good bye Lucrezia!”

And he was gone.

Lucrezia was now at the bottom of the stairs. “He could have just called them up,” she cried incredulously to Catherina, “he looked hurt. You should have let him in.”

Catherina turned to face her, her expression curiously cold, “It was clear that his mind is made up. Trust me, it’s better to let him go. Think about it, if he is out there, driving all night to Briarcliff, then he will not be in the house during Halloween. Cesare was never going to leave that house, so if he survives tonight, Briarcliff will be the best place for him.”

She shut the door, Lucrezia noting that she had several locks, and that she locked all of them.

“What is Briarcliff?” she asked.

Catherina looked back up at her, “it’s an asylum.”

Lucrezia stared. Asylum. Not mental health facility or well being centre. Asylum.

“I don’t want him to go there,” she breathed.

“My dear,” Catherina sighed long-sufferingly, “he may not have a choice.”

In the house, Cesare opened his eyes. He felt groggy and unwell.

It took a moment for him to realise that he was tied up. He head was bandaged (sloppily) and throbbed with pain. His arms were tied around his back. His ankles were tied up also.

Around him was a line of white stuff. Salt. A circle of salt around him. He grunted in confusion. What in the hell?

Then, to make things more annoying, he heard someone tapping.

He looked up and saw Alfonse sitting with his phone in his hands.

“What are you doing with my phone?” he hissed angrily.
“Just inviting a few people over,” sang the boy merrily, “we all heard your sad story about having no friends.” (Cesare blushed horribly.) “So I thought I’d help you out!”

“We should get Micheletto.”

Cesare jumped to the sound of the soft voice being so close to him. He turned to see a hockey mask with a smiley face drawn on it looking at him. The person behind the mask chuckled lightly before pulling the mask to the side of their head.

It was the annoying boy with the black curly hair and pretty eyes. Pascal.

Cesare rolled his eyes. Bound and surrounded by two people he disliked. Great.

“So,” he began, looking back at Pascal, “are you in cahoots with the spirits here?”

Pascal looked at Alfonse and grinned.

“Haven’t you worked it out?” he asked, looking back at Cesare with those horribly blank eyes, “you saw the newspaper article. All those weeks ago. About this house. The Murder House.”

Cesare could hardly remember. It seemed years ago.

“I’m a ghost,” stated the boy slowly, as if Cesare was an idiot. “I died here back in the eighties. The best era, by the way, though everyone thinks that about the time they died. Alfonso died too, back in the fire.”

Cesare looked up at Alfonse, flinching slightly as he now saw that Alfonse was covered in burns.

“I don’t show you this side of me,” he said, his mouth a gaping maw between sizzling red and black skin, swollen with blisters, “and this isn’t me at my worst. My eyeballs melted in the fire originally,” he giggled, “so before I could control my appearance I was pretty scary to look at! Mama still loved me though.”

Pascal nodded, “Rufio was impressed by her unwavering love. Very maternal.”

“Jesus,” muttered Cesare, leaning his hot, pained head on the cool floor of the foyer.

“Your friends are coming,” smiled Alfonse, his face back to normal, “they’re bringing as many others here as possible. Everyone wants to be brave enough to visit the Murder House on Halloween!”

Cesare lifted his head again, “why? What are you planning?”

“This is the best night for us,” answered Pascal, “we get to be almost alive for a night. People can see us!”

Suddenly, Cesare heard a door open. The two boys scrambled to their feet.

“Get the fuck out of here!” roared a male voice.

The boys ran, both giggling hysterically as they fled upstairs.

Cesare watched as a pair of feet clad in trainers came up to him.

The person bent over him and began to untie him, the salt circle doing nothing to stop him.
Eventually Cesare was free.

He stood and saw a small man with light brown hair.

“Thank you.”

“Your welcome. My name’s Roberto. I live in the kitchen.” Roberto looked up. Cesare followed his gaze and saw the balcony was littered with people watching them.

“Micheletto’s in the kitchen too,” said Roberto, “come on…come with me.”

1895

The months crept along.

Ferdinand walked into the lounge to find Bianca staring out of the window. He repressed a sigh and was about to quietly leave when she asked, “am I really such a burden to be around?”

“No,” he answered slowly, caught now, and turning slowly to look at her. She was staring at him, her eyes ringed with darkness and her skin pale.

“I just think we’re getting a bit tired of one another,” he said, “it’s perfectly normal. After all this time, with just each other to talk to.”

She sighed, “it has been hellish. I love you to pieces but my god, we could do with some different company! I cannot see why we are being ignored! I may ask again if our letters are being delivered. We’ve done nothing to offend anyone, why won’t they come?”

Ferdinand leaned against the couch, “maybe go outside for some fresh air. Tend to your garden.”

“I told you before,” she said with frustration, “nothing grows! I can understand why the farmers are damned. How can they grow crops when I can’t even grow daisies?”

The door was knocked politely. They turned to see Francesca standing there politely, a tray of small cakes and coffee at the ready.

“I was told refreshments would be desired.”

“Yes, of course, thank you Francesca.”

She wheeled in the tray quietly and began arranging the things at the table. The couple sat, settling into their usual places on the couches.

“We should maybe go to them instead,” he suggested, “the city is not so far. We should go there for a few days. Take a break from all this quiet country living.”

She smiled sweetly, “that would be lovely! A little bit of hustle and bustle!”

“We could reacquaint ourselves with the newest fashions,” he met her grin with his own.

They sipped on their coffee, and he realised suddenly how quiet, more so than usual, it had been that day.

“Francesca?” he asked.

“My Lord.”
“Where is Sara? She’s usually out and about giggling with Mrs Russo!”

Bianca chuckled, as Francesca drew herself up primly. They were both respectful of Francesca, appreciating that she was a professional, but they both couldn’t help but find her a little bit funny. She was fantastically up-tight. It was only when Mrs Russo privately told them that her family member nearby was ill, hence why she was in such a small home, that they felt they understood her a little.

“She’s ill Sir.”

“Oh,” he and his wife shared concerned looks, “nothing too serious?”

She smiled tightly, “no. Just a headache. I am going out this afternoon to collect items to create a balm for her sir. As soon as my chores are done.”

“You must be working very hard today,” said Bianca kindly, “to hurry through your work and then going out to help your friend.”

“It is nothing My Lady.”

Bianca smiled softly at the icy maid. “You will permit me to accompany you today? My garden bears no life, so perhaps if I see what grows naturally I can think of what would survive the soil in my garden?”

“Of course, I’d be honoured My Lady.”

“Should we not get a doctor?” asked Ferdinand, looking at the Maid strangely.

“What?” scoffed Bianca, “over a simple headache? By the time we get one from Rome she’ll be healed. No, no, a balm is most sensible. Let me get ready and I shall meet you this afternoon!”

The bargain set, the women both left the lounge, leaving Ferdinand alone with his concerns.

Later that day, Bianca found herself out in the forest with Francesca.

The air smelt sweet with late summer blooms. It had been a cold summer, overall, and nothing had grown right, but that afternoon was at least pleasantly warm.

“Have you always been fond of gardening My Lady?”

Bianca thought of her time back in her family home, “yes. I started properly when I was around fourteen or so. But even before then I loved flowers. Whenever the weather was good outside, or even passable, I would insist on Master Ferdinand or Lady Maria joining me in playing outside.”

“Lady Maria?!?”

“Yes,” Bianca gave Francesca, who had turned a light pink, an odd look, “Maria is Master Ferdinand’s sister. We all grew up together.”

“Oh…I see…” The pink blush grew to a deeper red.

“Is there a problem Francesca?”
“No My Lady. Here, there are bountiful amounts of rue.” She began to pick the wild, yellow flowers, placing them in her wicker basket.

“Francesca, I would like to know what has bothered you so much. Please, as your Mistress your welfare matters to me.”

“I thank you kindly My Lady. It is nothing at all. I just…hear his Master sometimes talking in his sleep as I clear the hearth in the mornings. He calls out for his sister.”

A pause.

“Well he loves her very much,” Bianca said awkwardly, “he misses her so he dreams of her.”

“Of course, I agree My Lady. A devoted brother and husband.”

But both ladies knew that wasn’t quite true.

That night, Bianca slept uncomfortably. She dreamt of Maria, with her inky black eyes and long brown hair, a riot of curls like her brother. Unlike her brother, she looked less like a Trastamara and more like the lower rank family. But it made her exotic. She dreamt of Maria’s slim, tan legs, of her red lips and wicked grin.

And as, in the early hours of the morning, she gasped and moaned Maria’s name, in the corner of her bedroom Francesca stood in the shadows, watching her coldly with dark blue eyes.

The following morning bought pleasant surprises.

“Cancel the trip to Rome,” cried Ferdinand, coming into the Breakfast room where Bianco was sipping her morning coffee, “we have a response at last, and from a dearest friend!”

He placed an envelope in front of her. She took out the letter and saw that it was none other than Maria saying she wished to visit and stay over the winter season.

“How wonderful!” she cried, leaping to her feet and hugging him tightly.

“The three of us,” he smiled, “together again! How it should be!”

As they hugged, she opened her eyes and saw Francesca in the hallway watching them. The girl moved on when seeing she had been caught.

Bianca pulled him to her a little more tightly.

“Ferdinand,” she said, “be careful. I don’t want those ugly rumours spreading again.”

He broke the hug suddenly, his hands on her shoulders as he peered at her with a frown on his face.

“Why would you say that now, so suddenly?”

She bit her lip, “one of the servants heard you cry out Maria’s name in your sleep,” she whispered.
He rolled his eyes and walked away, “so what? It just means I dreamt of her. Nothing so sordid. Only people reading too much into it are sordid!”

“I agree,” she said, coming to his side and kissing his cheek, “but you know how these things are. Be restrained. At least in public.”

Poor Sara did not heal from her malady. Day by day she grew worse. No one could figure out what was wrong with her. Despite how much she ate, she seemed to get thinner each day. Her once pretty, creamy skin became blotched and dry. Her lovely dark eyes grew dim.

One morning, Sara did not rouse from her bed.

The screams of a horrified Mrs. Russo echoed through the mansion.

She was buried a day later.

Mrs. Russo sobbed heartily, comforted by Mr. Dantonio. Ferdinand and Bianca were suitably mournful, but did not cry as that was not befitting members of their class. Francesca stood by Gildo.

“Are you well Madam?” he asked quietly, the first words he’d ever said to her other than relaying orders from the Master and Mistress.

“A little shook up,” she responded, looking at him coolly, “but yes, I am well. Poor Sara. If only we had a doctor.”

He made a *hmm*ing sound of agreement. “The people complain that she should have gone to the healer in the woods.”

She was a little surprised that the local people spoke to him at all, considering his appearance. But perhaps he wasn’t any more exotic to them than any of the people that lived in the Trastamara Mansion. Perhaps, with his low birth rank and the suffering his kind went through, they related to him more than even the Trastamaras.

“The Master would never agree,” she said. “He hates anything connected to magic. I suppose your people believe in such things?”

“I was raised in Sicily and came to Rome as a young adolescent. I only know this culture. I do not know what ‘my people’ would have believed.”

She looked back to the coffin, which lay deep in the ground. “Poor girl. She was so young. Quite taken with you. She always sighed over you rebuffing her.”

“I’m a professional,” he said stiffly, but she saw him glance over to Mr. Dantiano.

And Mr. Dantiano looked back at him and smiled ever so softly.

Francesca allowed herself a slight smirk.
“Didn’t Lucrezia say she could not come to tonight’s party?” Frederigo asked Alphie.

They were both in the bathroom, preparing their make-up for the night’s activities. Frederigo was going as a bloodied Butcher, Alphie as a Frankenstein Monster.

“Yes,” Alphie responded slowly, a question in his tone, “some sort of family emergency.”

“Well, Cesare has just sent out a mass invite to his house. It’s spreading like wildfire. Everyone wants to go, just for a little while. Get a load of this scary house. See what fucked up Collona so badly.”

Alphie lowered the green stick of paint he’d been using on his face, “she lied to me…”

“Most likely,” sighed Frederigo with no sympathy, “and now he’s rubbing it in our faces. No one will come to our party now, or they’ll come late.”

“There must be more to the story! She wouldn’t embarrass me like that. She isn’t that kind of girl. Cesare though… he’s slippery.”

“You’ve only known her a couple of weeks and yet she’s got you wrapped around her little finger,” sneered Frederigo, “it’s pathetic!”

Alphie felt the sting of that. He was aware that he was coming on too strong, that it made him look stupid and that it was even annoying her a little. But he couldn’t help it. She was the first girlfriend he’d ever had. And she was the girl of his dreams. Beautiful, fair-haired, blue-eyed, slim, funny and clever. How he even attracted her was a mystery. And he didn’t want to lose her! Especially to…

“There’s something weird with that family,” mused his brother, “something odd. Him and her. Cesare and Lucrezia. They’re weird together, you must admit.”

Alphie turned to look at Frederigo, “so what do you want to do?”

The older Trastamara smiled nastily, “I want to go to that house. I want to see what she has to say for herself. I want you to grow a spine and stand up to Cesare. And even if you don’t, I will, he’s making all the Old Families look foolish. Then, we come back here and finish the party at ours.”

Alphie took in a deep breath, “ok, fine. Let’s go.”

Though Alfonse had only texted a few people off Cesare’s phone, the invite spread to the young people of Burckhardt’s School of Excellence. Old Families, New Money Families all received information. Party at the Infamous Murder House. Cesare, feared by many and lusted after by more, was hosting. His sexy sister was bound to be there too. And maybe even the equally sexy and dangerous Juan.

Danger and sex, two of the biggest sellers to teenagers.

And so, dressed up and with the sun setting, dozens of teens began to make their way to the Roman neighbourhood, to the house where the ghosts were waking up, to where they were now at their
most powerful, and where they could now be seen.

End Notes

This story isn't beta'd so please point out any errors in grammar, spelling, continuity etc.

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