

**SARA VALLEFUOCO**

**Neroinchiostro**

**Blackink**

**Translation by Olivia Jung**

## Chapter 1

*Serra, Tuesday, July 4, 1899*

On the brink of the morning's insomnia that had been afflicting the police station of the Carabinieri Reali in Serra, someone's heels resonate down the hall pacing up and down without making up their mind on whether to knock on the door or leave. With his patience already running thin, Ghibaudo stands up.

"So, Officer Sgrelli?" he says, opening the door.

Angelico Sgrelli, a Sicilian Norman blond, had never seemed younger before. He looked like a child with smooth cheeks.

"Deputy Brigadier!" he exclaimed, clicking his heels together. "The lamplighter kid is asking for Mashal Audisio so he can report a robbery. It might be something serious." He says it all in one breath and it's clear that he would like to disappear now, vanish, liquify, under the bottom of his shoes at which he keeps staring.

"Of course it's something serious," says Ghibaudo. "You can die from pressing charges around here. Don't let him leave and don't wake up Audisio, I'll be there immediately."

Pressing charges? Around here? Who would ever dare so much?

Ghibaudo has been stationed at the Third Legion of the Carabinieri Reali for only three months, patrolling both Cagliari and Sassari. But, as far as he knows, nothing like that had ever happened at the police station in Serra, despite having dealt with homicides, one family massacre, serious injuries, cattle rustling, and lately a kidnapping case that ended up with the hostage dying and Brigadier Marasco's life hanging in the balance. There are several things about this place that Ghibaudo questions, but mostly if there is any difference between passively enduring evil and seeking justice.

While Ghibaudo absorbs the news, he puts on the light blue shirt over his dark uniform pants with a red line down the side of each leg, and he finds himself wearing someone else's clothes again: someone taller and fatter than him, someone he lost sight of on June 24, on the Night of Saint John. Some things have gotten better, sure. The noise of the shot – always one, always the same – has stopped ringing in his head, and the scars don't pull quite as much when he walks down the stairs.

The kid waiting for him in the lobby is walking on his tiptoes like a dancer. He carries a long lighting stick with him, resting against his shoulder: the pole is as thin as him, with a little hood on the end. It's clear that he is in a hurry to get out of that place. Standing in the semi-darkness, it takes Ghibaudo a few moments to realize that he is the stable boy who usually brings them forage for their horses.

"Oh, it's you. What's that?"

"It's a smoldering wick to put out the gaslights, sir. I have to hurry up and tell you what I've got to say, it's almost dawn."

"Come on in," says Ghibaudo, showing him into the interview room.

The stable boy doesn't go in.

"Mrs. Lianora told me to speak only with the marshal. There was a robbery in her home," he says, immediately regretting having revealed everything. Like an actor who misses a line, he would start everything over if he could, leaving the stage and re-entering: let's do it again from the top.

Ghibaudo starts exuding bile at the mention of Lianora's name, the widow of the hostage who was killed on the Night of Saint John. The tragic failure of his first, real mission was like a punch in the face. Since then, a voice has been constantly clawing away at him with the prospect of getting himself out of that quagmire and going back to Turin, to where he came from, doesn't matter if he has to live like a bum like his father. Anything rather than having to drown his deflated pride every morning, or having to endure the agonizing face of Brigadier Marasco every night when he closes his eyes.

"If Mrs. Lianora is asking for me, then I'm the one who should speak to the boy," rumbles a baritone voice nearby.

Marshal Audisio appears from his office, which overlooks the lobby like the wings of a stage. He is originally from the Marche region, six-foot-two, and perfectly shaved; he smells of cologne and his mustache is impeccably curled upward despite the early hour.

"Marshal, there was a robbery at Lianora's house," says the kid with one foot already out the door. Then he disappears, skillfully tilting his pole to make it pass under the doorway. End scene.

"Let's proceed. Ghibaudo, go wake up Moretti. I want to see you both cleaned up in time to receive instructions at four thirty on the dot. You will be going ahead. I will catch up with you at Lianora's house."

Ghibaudo clicks his heels feigning a vigor he doesn't possess, then goes back up the stairs dragging his boots, which have inexplicably started to hurt his feet.

## Chapter 2

The town of Serra is like any other village perched on the gentle slopes of the eastern coast of Sardinia. The buildings are scattered along the terrace like grains of coarse salt tossed by a giant. The parish where the women meet and the tavern where the men gather are like the town's beating hearts, which pump life into the peripheral circulation. As Ghibaudo learned for himself, proud self-sufficiency prevails over any sense of community here: the further a house is located from the church or the tavern, the more it insists on protecting and providing for itself.

The winds blow unopposed here and they uproot trees several times a year. The horizon spans from the mountains to the open sea, the paths open onto every possibility. From the peak of the tallest hill you can watch anyone climbing up and remain unseen, with good or bad intentions alike. It's the ideal spot for bandits to rest. There is often fog in the spring and fall, but it's made of low-hanging clouds that dissolve quickly. Audisio calls it innocent fog.

This morning, however, there is no fog.

"Marasco will make it," Moretti announced without anyone asking him. "He'll wake up and you'll thank him in front of the king and queen for saving your life. Now please, wipe that lifeless expression off your face."

"Are you really looking forward to going to hold the hand of the widow whose husband we couldn't save ten says ago? All dead, that's how she'd like to see us. But she mocks us with a stupid robbery instead," Ghibaudo replies.

Moretti flashes a big smile. He would be perfect as a model for the magazine *Domenica del Corriere* if it weren't for those dark circles under his eyes from the collective insomnia that had been afflicting everyone at the police station ever since Marasco had started sleeping for everyone.

Moretti spurs his horse and forces Ghibaudo to keep up with him down the Straight Road, which, despite the name, meanders like a listless snake all the way up to the edge of the plateau. This man has had energy to spare for ten days. It's the guilty euphoria of the survivor: that's how Marshal Audisio explained it on his way back from hunting down the bandits. The euphoria lasts for a couple hours, sometimes days, he said. Ghibaudo doesn't believe in euphoria. Moretti never believed in burning out: every week he hopes to see his handsome face

in the pages of an illustrated magazine describing the feats of men working in the Force, which end up in the hands of women and young ladies like the ones who live in his building in Rome.

“We’ve made it. Down there. Towards the valley. Past the oleanders,” Moretti says as he points. “What the heck is going on?” he adds.

Ghibaudo looks up to the sky. Moretti bursts out laughing.

“I don’t think we’ll have to hold the widow’s hand, Ghibaudo.”

“Brigadier Moretti and Deputy Brigadier Ghibaudo, at your service, ma’am. Can we tie our horses here?” Ghibaudo asks, pointing at a slender holly oak by the courtyard’s entrance.

The woman is around their mother’s age. There is something Gothic looking about her in the light of dawn, with that black shawl over her shoulders and a handkerchief covering her hair knotted tightly behind her head rather than under her chin. Her eyes look so tired that they would be begging for mercy if she had been any other woman. She is sitting on a tree stump in the middle of the clearing in front of her house. There is a revolver resting on her lap as if it were a cat. She set up her own guardpost in front of the barns. She isn’t startled at the sight of the two carabinieri, but she also doesn’t stand up to greet them.

“We’ve heard about the robbery from the stable boy you sent to report it. We are ready to listen, Mrs. Lianora,” says Moretti. Meanwhile, he reaches out his hand like a lovelorn suitor, waiting to be handed over the revolver, which, instead, doesn’t budge.

“I didn’t send him to press charges, I sent him to inform you. Now, go get rid of that man,” says the woman.

The two carabinieri look at the donkey’s barn, still dark and apparently donkey-less, without understanding who “that man” she is referring to could be.

“I’ll take care of the burglar,” says Ghibaudo as he ties his horse’s reins without waiting for authorization any further. Then, he moves carefully towards the hut reserved for farm animals.

There is a small window in the back of the barn barely larger than a person’s head. Based on what little they can see in the ashen light that heralds the arrival of the July sun, there is a man sleeping on a bed of straw. Could it be the intruder? Ghibaudo cautiously walks inside, taking one step after another.

There is a knife sticking out of the man’s chest.

It is the strangest robbery Ghibaudo has ever seen.