

Blue tattoo
by Laura Orsolini

*A tattoo artist is like a confessor.
He writes a man's story on his body.*
- Nicolai Lilin, *Siberian Education*

Chapter 1

Clara followed the line traced on her skin with her eyes, watching the needle puncture her repeatedly, releasing color. She clenched her teeth tightly, focusing on her breath, which fell into a slow, steady rhythm. She wanted to stay as still as possible.

She looked up and met Cesare's gaze, smiling at her proudly. A sharper sting than the others curled her upper lip in a grimace, but she managed once again to keep silent.

She had chosen a symbol.

"The Lover's Celtic knot represents the continuity of life, the eternal cycle of night and day, of seasons, of birth and death, just like the infinite flow of energy. It's a knot that forms four clover leaves drawn with a single, unbroken line, symbolizing the eternity of love and the continuity of life. It also stands for hope and rebirth." Cesare's explanation had convinced her to choose it as her first mark.

They had been together for two years now and had known each other forever. Their parents—lifelong friends—had grown up together. Clara spent most of her day at his house. Then love had come on its own, naturally. One afternoon, they were sitting on the carpet, their backs against the warm radiator, just like they always did after school. Cesare's shoulder barely touched hers, and that contact sparked something. They laughed, blaming it on the static electricity that sometimes happens.

"That happens when two bodies are electrically charged" she said, referencing their physics class.

He didn't answer, but he turned toward her and gently brushed her face with his hand. His hand was trembling, and he blushed with embarrassment. He wanted to tell her he had always been charged like that, ever since they were kids. That he wanted to kiss her and tell her she wasn't just a friend but the missing piece of his soul.

Instead, he said nothing and leaned his forehead against hers. He breathed in the scent of violets and searched for her lips with closed eyes.

She remained still. Cesare was her first thought in the morning and the last before sleep. He was the embrace of someone who truly cares for you. She lifted her chin just slightly and pressed her lips to his.

They hadn't expected a kiss to release that much energy. Suddenly, they understood the meaning of the word attraction.

Clara often found her mind drifting back to that first kiss, and each time she recalled the sensations it had stirred in her. She was surprised to realize that even now, as she endured the pain of a tattoo being etched into her skin forever, she felt just as electrified as she had back then.

She had chosen the symbol on her own, but only after long discussions with him. He was fascinated by the world of tattoos and had been studying their origins and meanings for some time.

She had asked the tattoo artist to add a word. Ever since starting classical high school, Clara had developed a passion for old, forgotten words—those ancient ones no longer in use. She chose *alea*, in cursive, curving the letters so they followed the outer arc of the Celtic knot.

"What does it mean?" the man had asked her without lifting his eyes from the work he was finishing on her wrist.

"I'll tell you if you stop for a moment" Clara answered breathlessly, her heart clenched by the constant spasms of pain.

Miki turned off the machine, and the harsh buzzing ceased.

“Thanks. I needed to catch my breath. It really hurts” she admitted, staring at the design already inked without moving her arm even a fraction. With her other hand, she pulled a tissue from her bag, blew her nose, and wiped away the tears that had formed against her will at the corners of her eyes.

“Do you want to continue another day?” the tattooist asked, glancing at Cesare, who was silently watching.

“No, please, finish it today. I don’t know if I’d have the strength to come back. *Alea* means risk, chance, fate. Love and life can’t truly exist without risk, chance, and fate. It goes well with the knot, it’s the forgotten word I want to read every time I look at my wrist.”

Cesare stepped closer, caught the scent of violets in her hair, and looked into her eyes, black and velvety like the night. No words were needed: the bond between them was so strong that often the energy radiating from their nearness was enough to understand each other.

“What kind of music do you listen to?” Miki asked as the buzzing of the tattoo machine filled the room again.

“I like bands. Muse, for example. Why?” Clara replied.

“Old stuff. Strange, at your age, you shouldn’t even know them.”

“My dad listens to them” she defended herself.

The man curved his lips into a sly smile, and with a quick, confident move, grabbed his phone and typed the band’s name into Spotify. Only when the notes of *Uprising* began to stir her synapses did the tattooist slowly complete his work.

When he was done, Clara admired the symbol etched into her skin.

“Happy eighteenth birthday, love” Cesare said, hugging her tightly.

“Thanks” she answered, resting her head gently on his shoulder. “It burns” she added, lifting her arm slightly. What she felt at that moment was strange: the needle had pricked her non-stop for almost two hours, whispering the mark that would stay with her for life. She had stayed still, alert. Now that it was over, her heart was pounding in her chest, and her vision spun a little.

“Do you like it?” Miki smiled at her again. He slowly rose from the studio stool, adjusted the black bandana with tiny white skulls he wore to keep sweat out of his eyes while working, and peeled off his black nitrile gloves, tossing them into the trash can. He made the shot without even looking.

The girl nodded, returning his smile. Then the two walked out of the shop hand in hand.

“You’re as pale as a ghost. Are you okay?” Cesare asked, holding her steady. He had barely finished the question when Clara felt a crushing weight on her shoulders and mind. Her body gave in, collapsing against him. He caught her just in time, gripping her tightly to keep her from hitting the pavement. Clara was as light as a blade of grass, and he had no trouble lifting her into his arms and laying her gently on a bench. He grabbed her bag and used it to raise her legs, helping blood flow back to her brain.

“Love” he said softly as his thumb traced a gentle line from the bridge of her nose to her hairline, a slow, tender stroke.

Clara opened her eyes, reached for his hand, and placed it on her forehead.

“You really scared me” he whispered, holding her head in his left hand and kissing her forehead.

“I’m okay, I’m sorry. My heart was racing, too many emotions” she said, slowly sitting up. She felt the blood rushing back through her veins, her heart pounding faster again. “We can go” she added, and together they walked home, wrapped in each other’s arms.

Chapter 2

“Vittorio, did you receive my guest list for the Blue inauguration party? Read it because the party’s this weekend and we don’t have much time left. You have plenty to do already, it’s better if I handle it myself.” Mirna moved confidently across the open-plan penthouse floor she had chosen as the headquarters for her son’s startup. She had insisted on wall-to-wall carpeting to muffle footsteps: silence was essential for her son’s creativity, especially since he should, in her opinion, be inventing a new kind of ink any day now if the company were to truly grow.

The glass walls mirrored the slow-drifting clouds passing over the City Life district in Milan. Inside the office, four young interns teetered between desks on high heels, carrying papers and whispering about which bar to hit for aperitivo after work.

She slid the notebook she was holding onto the sleek designer desk of her son, who finally looked up to listen.

“I’ve selected 140 guests, but in my opinion, we should aim for at least 500 to make sure people in the city talk about it for a long time. Let’s not forget the top journalists—they’ll need special treatment. You could gift them a printer—I saw a portable one that’s quite fitting—and we could set up a private lounge with a more refined menu just for them. That way, getting an article in *La Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera* will be a sure thing. It’d be great to have one in *Il Sole 24 Ore* too, though I’m not sure if my friend Panni still works there. I’ll text him—maybe we’ll get lucky and he’ll show up. Of course, we’ll also invite radio and TV reporters. You know what I was also thinking? We need something grand, something that makes an impact right from the start, to encourage people to buy the ink cartridges of our—pardon me, *your*—company. I don’t know, maybe a prize competition, or a challenge for the kids.”

Vittorio patiently waited for her mother to finish what, to him, were nothing more than ramblings. She had worked for years at an advertising agency before being laid off due to staff cuts. This was her chance at redemption—finally, she could return to work and put her skills in marketing and communication back into practice. It was understandable.

He, on the other hand, had been swept up by events. He had studied chemistry at university and had been selected to pursue a PhD. By chance, he had chosen to focus on ink. His initial goal was to develop a formula for ink that would be as non-toxic as possible and suitable for human skin. The ultimate purpose was to allow surgeons to use it to mark incision sites. But then he stumbled upon tattoo inks and discovered just how many on the market had caused allergic reactions and skin intolerances in people who got tattoos.

He thought he could study a solution to reduce the toxicity of these commercial products. The idea of bioluminescence came later—on a summer night by the sea, thousands of tiny lights had illuminated the waves crashing on the shore. The moon lit them up, and the result was breathtaking. That night, he thought of applying the phenomenon of bioluminescence to his research—to create an ink visible only under Wood’s lamps, which use UV light and material fluorescence.

Once back at the university, he got straight to work, synthesizing an ink that no one had ever developed before. His supervising professor submitted him to a European grant competition that awarded funding to launch a startup based on the best invention.

Vittorio won, and his mother was the one who rejoiced the most. He wondered whether she was truly proud of him or—judging by the enthusiasm she was pouring into promoting the product—

whether her happiness came from seeing this as a new opportunity to finally fulfill herself professionally.

He didn't really know, maybe it was both. The fact was, he was now an entrepreneur, and deep down he wasn't sure if that was the right path. Leaving research behind had made him feel orphaned a second time. The first, of course, had been when he realized that all his schoolmates had a father and he didn't.

On the other hand, staying in university would have meant turning down the grant and disappointing both his professor and his mother.

"We need people to know that Blue Tattoo ink is charged by sunlight during the day and can be seen in the sea—but from how far away?" Mirna asked as she drafted the text for the company's website.

"It depends on the water's clarity" Vittorio replied, barely suppressing a sigh of frustration. The pressure around the company's launch was becoming more than he could handle.

"You make two products, right? One is regular printer ink and the other is that glow-in-the-dark one?"

"Bioluminescent" he corrected her.

"Same thing" she said dismissively.

"It's not the same" he tried to explain. "Not at all. If you're sharing information about the product, it needs to be accurate—or it could be considered commercial fraud."

"Alright, no need to get worked up. I'll write the text and then you can read it over to correct any mistakes or inaccuracies. Oh, and I had the jellyfish tank installed in the meeting room."

"You actually bought a jellyfish tank?" Vittorio was stunned. Just how far was his mother willing to go for publicity?

"Of course, you won the European grant because you extracted bioluminescence from jellyfish and created an ink visible only under Wood lamps. An eight-hundred-liter tank with a hundred and eighty jellyfish floating gracefully. Go take a look, it's absolutely stunning. You need to invite tattoo artists. You should also get a booth at the Milan Tattoo Convention. You need a promoter, an influencer. Oh—and let's invite the journalists from *Tattoo Magazine*, I know the publisher. Who's the most famous tattoo artist in Italy right now?"

"I was actually thinking of getting a booth with Nicola, a tattoo artist friend of mine."

"Who's that? How many followers does he have on social media?"

"I'm not sure. But he owns sixteen tattoo shops across Europe."

"We need someone with real name recognition—someone kids idolize right now. I've got it! We could organize a giveaway, and the lucky winners would get tattooed live at the convention by a celebrity artist." Mirna was glowing, as if she'd just won the lottery. She was unstoppable.

"Mum, I'm happy you're Blue's Social Media Manager. You know the world of marketing, you have connections with all the key people in town, you're capable, and I trust you completely. You handle the party and the convention—but I'd like to have the final say on everything, if that's okay with you."

"You won't regret it" she replied, buzzing with teenage-level excitement.

"I actually like the giveaway idea" Vittorio added. "We could insert scratch cards into thirty printer ink packages, and the first ten winners would get a free tattoo. That way, we push potential buyers of bioluminescent ink to also purchase printer ink. To enter the contest, people would have to consent to share their data, so we can send them ads and offers and start building a community." As soon as he finished speaking, he added a new budget item to the event plan: funds for the contest and a celebrity tattoo artist.

"I'll finish writing the text for the website and then I'll look for a worthy name. I could subscribe to *Tattoo Magazine* and even have a tattoo done, here on my wrist—a dolphin, maybe—and post the

video of it on Instagram.” Mirna turned around, walking back through the corridor and into the last office, the one she had chosen for herself.

Chapter 3

In a small, remote, seaside town in Puglia, it still felt like summer.

The man didn't know what time it was. The sun was still high, but he was already hungry and that was all he needed to open the sliding cupboard fitted under the single basin sink, choose the can of peas, get a non-stick pan, place it on the induction plate with space for just one pan and heat it.

He then added very little olive oil, opened the can containing the vegetables and poured them in without draining them. The liquid sizzled, releasing the smell of preservatives throughout the caravan. As soon as he smelled it, he opened the small porthole-shaped window over the induction plate and turned off the heat. He didn't waste time choosing a plate: he found a fork in the sliding drawer and dipped it directly into the peas. He ate standing up, his back leaning against the worktop of the microscopic kitchen. Only when he had finished did he open a cold beer that he took out from a doll-sized refrigerator.

He put the steel tin and the empty beer can in a plastic bag and he stepped out of the trailer he had transformed into his house to throw it into the right recycling bin. Outside, the temperature was above thirty degrees. A warm air coming from the south stuck his shirt to his bony chest. The black leather pants heated up in an instant, so much so that he immediately got back into the vehicle, cooled by the dehumidifier.

He had been living this way, as a nomad, for more than twenty-two years now. The first time he had fixed up a Volkswagen T2 van by himself and had driven it around the streets of all Europe. When that legendary vehicle kicked the bucket, he had to replace it, opting for a more comfortable solution. Since work was going well, he decided to buy a used MAN Caravan Truck, that he kept clean and in perfect working order. He couldn't do otherwise, if he didn't want the NAS inspections to close down his business. It wasn't a burden to him, anyways: he loved tidiness and needed very little to live on—little food, music, books and the wand in his hand.

He had also created an area where he could receive his clients, right next to his mini bedroom. He had added a fully reclining chair, that he pulled out during the day, when he would close up his bed like a book. He didn't need anything else, as he was a hand poke tattoo artist, that is, he didn't use the electric tattoo machine but worked by hand, like in ancient times before the invention of the machine. He used a wand with a needle at the end that he dipped in ink and drew with like a true artist, by poking the skin with a series of quick movements.

The caravan was black with the Latin inscription *Fata viam invenient*, fate will find the way, made with silver spray paint.