

The crimson wine

Prologue

9. November 1943

Milan, Lombardy

A moment of silence was interrupted by a desperate scream and a flurry of bullets. From the window a group of armed youngsters dressed in red were getting inside an abandoned train station, probably just to ensure their safety. It was clear that Partisans and Fascists were fiercely going at it.

The rabbits were squeaking and panicking. The mice were oblivious to what was going on. The cellar smelled like rotting meat, the lights were burning steadily and making a quiet white noise. The mixture that would finally win them the war was about to be tested. Syringes were filled with the fusion and animals were being prepped to be injected.

The rabbits died soon after, and the mice even faster.

I

The bathroom door was locked. The light was flickering, and Paolo was looking at himself in the mirror. The cut on his cheek was bleeding, again.

He turned the tap on and splashed water on his face. Suddenly there was a scream in the room over. Only his mother and father were there – had someone broken in?

Paolo opened the door and walked through the living room to the kitchen. There laid his mother who was alive just a few moments ago. She had turned all blue and had her hand on her throat. Everything was still in the same place as before, except for a few chairs. Her eyes were rolled up, Paolo couldn't look.

The curious thing was that his father was nowhere to be found.

II

“Have you found anything yet?” yelled Federico from the other room.

“Nothing interesting”, Kalle answered. Everything was strangely tidied up; nothing could be found.

“I’m sure somebody cleaned everything but the body up.” Continued Kalle.

“I think we should call the crime scene cleaners over, maybe the autopsy reveals something”.

Police tape and tools were scattered all over the murder scene. Only a couple of things with fingerprints could be found, but they were of the victims.

The bathroom was a different story. It was the only room where the investigators could find blood.

“Alright, should we take a sample of this and send it all to be investigated? Or do you want to continue looking?” offered Kalle.

“Uhm, we could send it all over, I don’t think we’ll find anything else.” Replied Federico.

A couple of days later the results of the autopsy and blood test came back. The cause of death couldn’t be determined. But the blood belonged to a certain Paolo Fellini.

The investigators Kalle and Federico tried their best to contact Paolo. No-one answered, or the calls wouldn't go through. Even though the system had very recently been updated with new numbers. It was weird that it didn't work.

They found out through emigration records that Paolo had left for Finland. Now the only option was trying to contact another investigator there. Kalle had some connections to Finland because of his family's history. His parents still lived there after all.

After a while they got in contact with a famous private Finnish investigator called Magdalena.

III

Magdalena was sitting in her kitchen reading the newspaper, her short black bob was messy from sleeping and she only had pajamas on. Her green eyes flickered to the phone when it rang, and she walked over to answer it.

She had gotten a mysterious phone call all the way from Italy. Some investigators trying to get her on a job. The first part was finding someone called Paolo Fellini. Thanks to the public records it was quite easy for Magdalena to find the survivor.

After sending a couple of emails with no answer Magdalena thought it was time to get to work. So, she started to look over the registered numbers to find the correct one. None of the calls would go through but luckily there was also an address.

She started up her car and started making her way down the roads towards the listed address. The roads were icy and the Fiat she was driving was giving her some problems. She hoped the car wouldn't break. After a while of operating the vehicle, she arrived at the listed house. She got up out of the car and locked the door with a key, the path she walked from the car to the house hadn't been used in a while.

She rang the bell next to the wooden door. Magdalena was tired from driving and nervous about this job. Her eyebrows were furrowed and in between there had formed some wrinkles. After waiting a while, she rang the doorbell again. This time she could hear

footsteps coming from inside the house. Soon after she heard a click and the door slowly opened.

IV

The man standing there looked young, he had brown quite long hair. A skinny frame and he looked very nervous through the small crack of the door.

“Hello”, started Magdalena” I have been looking for you.” She stated.

The person in the doorway hesitated for a short moment and then closed the door. Before Magdalena had time to start knocking again, she heard many locks being opened on the inside. The door swiftly opened, and Paolo disappeared further into the house. Magdalena started following him to the kitchen and sat on one of the dusty looking chairs.

“Uhm, so you’re Paolo Fellini, right?”

The young man didn’t answer but started to tap on the kitchen counter with a pen from his pocket. The tapping was quick, and Magdalena immediately recognized it as morse code. She started to search her pockets to find her notepad.

“Morse code, correct?” she questioned to make sure she was right, Paolo slowly nodded.

“Please do it again.” she demanded.

Paolo started tapping and Magdalena was writing with the speed of light to keep up.

“So: Yes, I am Paolo, what are you doing here, can I help you? Is what you said?”

Paolo nodded again.

“I am Magdalena, a private investigator. I was contacted by investigators in Italy, they think you have a connection to a recent murder there.” Magdalena introduced herself.

“We really need your help on the investigation, is it possible you leave with me for Italy?”

V

The way from Finland to Italy was difficult. The German troops that had been retreating from northern Finland had destroyed the train tracks and many cities, so they had to travel by car. The car ride was very dangerous because of mines that had been left by the same troops.

The trip was going alright with everything still being according to plan. Magdalena was driving carefully to avoid all the potholes and possible landmines. Paolo was sitting in the back of her car. He looked quite melancholic, and he had a nervous aura to him. Magdalena checked on him through the mirror.

They had been driving almost non-stop for a couple of days. They were finally arriving in the chaos that was Helsinki. Everything was still in shambles after the wars. The only planes flying out of Finland were cargo planes. Which meant that they would hopefully arrive in Milan without complications. Usually, the warplanes wouldn't shoot cargo planes unless they knew that they contained weapons or something else important.

Getting on the plane was organized easily with Magdalenas connections. They climbed in between the cargo boxes. Hiding in between them for the hours that were about to come. During the middle of the flight some commotion of other planes nearby could be heard. Magdalena was the only one awake at that time.

She heard some shooting from outside, she yelped and fell covering her head. Then she noticed Paolo still sitting up and sleeping. She grabbed Paolo and dragged him onto the floor of the plane telling him to cover his head.

After the shooting stopped and the plane landed in Milan they started their journey to the police station.

VI

Once they stepped out of the car, Magdalena lit up a cigarette. Outside the police station, there were a few paparazzi and journalists, who were ready to document the whole scene. Magdalena tried to cover her face as much as she could.

"Assholes" she grunted.

Paolo was thoughtful, so he didn't seem to care much. Once inside, a middle-aged man was waiting for them. When Paolo's absent gaze met Federico's eyes, goosebumps were all over his arms. He couldn't understand that reaction, but a sort of realization began to take hold of his mind. Magdalena immediately noticed Paolo's weird behavior, but it wasn't the right moment to ask questions. Federico smiled "I'm glad to meet you, Magdalena" then he stared at Paolo "Good afternoon, sir". His smile seemed forced, and Magdalena noticed a drop of sweat running over his forehead. Later, Federico led them to the interrogation room.

"I think I'll go get a coffee, I'm exhausted" mumbled Federico. And then he left, yawning for a long time.

As soon as Magdalena opened the huge iron door, Paolo's gaze immediately turned to the white table in the middle. There was a musty smell that covered the whole room, but it was not particularly annoying.

The whole interrogation room was enlightened by a cheap-looking chandelier.

"Go and sit down, I will be there in a second" whispered Magdalena.

The survivor was dramatically serene. The white plastic-made chairs looked vintage, but they seemed robust.

"So", Magdalena's face popped up from the door "What happened that day?"

Paolo was looking down and became slightly paler. Then, his trembling hand took a red pen and started tapping the white table with it. Longer and shorter time intervals were taking turns. Magdalena, as soon as she understood what was going on, immediately got closer to him, just to listen better.

As Paolo was talking through morse code, Magdalena was taking notes in her decaying notebook. The whole picture was getting clearer and clearer for both Magdalena and Paolo, who with his voice also lost his memory from the moment he drank the poison. His mind-fog was starting to disappear step by step, as the trauma he went through that night is noticeably taking its toll on him once again. Tears started flowing on his cheeks as he was trying to go on.

"We can stop for a moment if you need it. Really, don't overdo it.", said Magdalena while attempting to calm him down.

He nodded with hesitation, took a deep breath through sobs and tears, and tried to carry on with the interrogation. He resumed describing what he was doing the night of the murder in detail, and as he did so he was reviewing what he saw at the time.

VII

After the interrogation everything paolo could think and dream about was who did it, what happened, and the details became clearer every time. After a long and hard interrogation, Magdalena stopped writing, looked her notes over and started reading out loud:

"My father had poured some wine into my glass and my mother's. I believe she drank it all, while I accidentally dropped my glass and injured myself, so I only drank part of it. As blood flowed from the wound I had caused on my face, I immediately ran to the bathroom to clear my face and try to stop the blood. Suddenly I started hearing excruciating screams coming from the kitchen. That was my mother. From there on it's all blank."

After a thorough investigation into Paolo's father, the detective has realized that Federico was his father and the murderer. The detectives started uncovering all kinds of information about Federico, but he was already long gone when they found out.

That's when the true hunt began. Federico was trying his best to escape the police, but the detectives were too clever. When the hours-long chase ended, all they could smell and hear was sweat and the annoyed murderer. With the murderer in handcuffs, the detectives finally could have a break.

As they were transporting him to prison, Federico was yelling constantly. He tried to force his way out of the transport vehicle, but with the handcuffs, even for him, it was too much.

As they were getting closer to the prison, the escape attempts got more desperate. Federico managed to get the police van's back door open, but little did he know that they were already inside the prison region. The murderer tried to run, but there was nothing more to do, it was too late. The detectives caught him and put him behind locked doors.

“That was a ride.” Magdalena said after Federico had been taken into custody. The process of incarcerating him was long and difficult with lots of documents and paperwork to be filled out.

“I didn’t think we would actually catch him. This was a really difficult case.” Kalle whispered to himself while driving the car.

Magdalena started fiddling with a radio. Pulling out the antenna and starting to turn the notches to find some music to listen to. Finally, she settled on some smooth jazz. The way back went otherwise in silence.

“Federico sabotaged us more than we first thought.” Kalle said under his breath.

Magdalena looked at him for a second and started speaking:

“You’re right, he started with the public records of Paolo. He put in wrong information after he fled. And he also apparently organized us getting shot at in the plane. Good thing that nothing happened.” Magdalena was recounting the events in order.

“And he tampered with the crime scene too. All that cleaning and he still got caught.” Kalle added.

Then Paolo started tapping on the car’s window. He started with a short one and a couple of longer ones followed. Magdalena translated:

“We should burn it.”

“What?” implored Kalle.

“I think he means the recipe, the instructions on how to make the virus” Magdalena clarified.

“Yeah, sure, why not. Ya’know to make sure it doesn’t harm anyone else.” Kalle responded.

In silence Kalle took another turn than the one that goes back home. They drove a while until the urban areas and other cars started disappearing. Paolo knocked on the window twice and Kalle slowed the car down to a halt. Paolo and Magdalena got out of the car, they stood waiting for a second and Kalle joined them. On the ruins of an old building, they

started digging through their pockets. The ruins had once been a home to a family but now they would serve as the grave of the devastating virus's recipe.

Paolo held onto the slip of paper and Magdalena lit her cigarette, offering ones to the others who refused. Then she slowly moved the lighter underneath the paper. The sheet caught on fire in seconds and Paolo held onto it until it almost burned his fingers.

In silence Paolo let go of the remains of the paper, it flew with the wind away from the group. Magdalena took a last puff and smashed the cigarette butt onto the ground. Then she started walking away to the car. The others followed suit.