
R. MARIN
GEMINUS
Chiara's Notebook
Volume II

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To those who stay, to those who leave.

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CHIARA'S NOTEBOOK

Chapter 1

I don't know why I'm writing in this notebook.

I used to put walls in it. Thicknesses, stone numbers, mortars. Whole pages about a house, and a few lines about the man who lived in it, written very small, so he couldn't read them.

He read them anyway. I'm almost sure of it.

Maybe he's the one who got me into the habit. He writes at the table, in the morning, with his quill. Me, in the armchair, with my pencil. We look like two office clerks who don't talk to each other.

* * *

The morning after the sea, I brought the focaccia up, he said he was hungry, and I didn't leave. I hadn't slept a wink.

I put my bag down by the door. I never picked it up again.

* * *

The bag stayed. I still went home in the evenings, behind the church. At first.

Then there was a toothbrush, in the glass in the bathroom, next to his. He didn't say anything. He pushed it over a little, so they wouldn't touch. The next day, they were touching again. Nothing to do with me.

Then a sweater, because the evenings were getting cooler. A dress, then two. My books, one

pile, then the pile next to it. As for the notebook, it never went back down at all.

One morning, on my way to get the focaccia, I walked past my green door. I counted how long it had been since I'd gone in. I needed both hands.

At my place, there's a single cup on the drying rack. It must be getting tired of waiting.

We've never talked about it, him and me. Nobody decided anything. I think that's why it works.

* * *

The first few days, we hardly went down to the harbor. My ankle still hurt. That's not the only reason. I won't say what the other one is. It's my notebook, I can do what I want.

He kisses me on the stairs, on the doorstep, in the middle of a sentence. Once, in the middle of a

measurement: I still had the tape measure in my hand. I never did finish that measurement.

* * *

In the evening, he falls asleep in the armchair, the book on his stomach, his mouth a little open. And he snores. I haven't told him yet. I'm saving it for our first fight.

* * *

One day at lunchtime, we ate at the harbor, out on a terrace, under the awning. He ordered trofie al pesto. Then dessert. Then a coffee. We talked, we lingered.

The sun moved while we were talking. It left the awning behind and came to settle on his chair. He didn't notice. I moved mine over toward the wall. It was too hot, that's all.

By evening, he was red. His forehead, his nose, the tops of his ears. He touched his nose with his fingertip and winced.

I went down to the pharmacy to buy him some cream. He grumbled for show, and let me put it on. The nose first.

* * *

The end of September came. The harbor went back to the people who live there, and the owner of the bar sets two focaccias on our table without us asking for anything.

He always takes the last piece. I let him have it.

* * *

I can't sleep.

I lie down against him. He's already asleep, his hand on my hip, and I stay like that, without moving, so he won't take it away. I listen to the

house. The shutters shifting, the wind in the fig tree, a boat down below, very far away. No use.

So I get up again, I go downstairs, and I write by the fireplace. Like now.

Upstairs, he's sleeping.

* * *

I spent the spring and the summer numbering the stones of this house. All of them. I tapped on every wall, measured every thickness, turned the archives upside down, stole a five-hundred-year-old deed. I never found anything. Not one coin. Not one nail.

One day, he went out into the garden with a shovel. He didn't go looking. He went straight to the foot of the low wall, on the fig tree side, he dug, and he pulled out a terracotta pot sealed with wax.

Inside, coins. Green, worn, with men's heads in profile.

"Roman," I said.

"I know."

He spread them out on the kitchen table, among the crumbs, and he turned them over in his fingers, one by one, for a long time.

"Are we rich?" I asked him.

I was thinking about my labels. Hundreds of them. Not a single one on that low wall.

* * *

Yesterday, Geminus told me he'd signed a deed of gift for me. Vampires are really weird.

He told me the way you'd tell someone there's some bread left. He'd gone to the notary, before the sea. The house, and everything around it. Mine.

I asked what that meant, everything around it. He waved vaguely toward the window. The olive trees, the low walls. The fig tree, I suppose. The hole at the foot of the low wall, too.

So, to sum up. The agency pays me to look after a house that's mine. I clean my own house, and they give me a thousand euros for it.

I'm even a property owner.

And so he's the one living at my place. I pointed that out to him. He promised not to make a mess. We smiled at each other.

* * *

This morning, I couldn't find my bag.

I had to go down to the library. I looked everywhere for it. On the kitchen chair. Under the armchair. In the upstairs bedroom, on the bed, under the bed. In the bathroom, next to the two toothbrushes. Geminus was writing at the table. He looked up, then back down.

I found it by the door. Where I always put it. Since the first morning, in the spring.

I'd walked past it at least three times.

Way to go, ace detective.

GEMINUS

CHIARA'S NOTEBOOK

Chapter 2

Today, I'm a doctor.

Dottoressa, actually. That's the word they said, and I heard it as if it were someone else's name.

The train, first. Him by the window, me on the aisle, my index cards on my lap. I reread them all the way to the city. He didn't say anything. The fifth time, he put his hand on them, and I put them away.

* * *

The marble staircase is worn hollow in the middle. Nobody ever walks on the edges. Generations of students, and I've added my share. It smelled of paper and cold coffee.

In the hallway, outside the room, there were the others. The other candidates, and around them, their families. Fathers in ties, mothers fixing their daughters' hair, grandmothers on the only chairs, bouquets wrapped in paper, phones held up so as not to miss a thing.

Me, I had him.

He was standing against the wall, his hands in his pockets, and he was watching all those people as if he were taking notes. A grandmother asked him if he was my brother. He said no. She asked if he was my fiancé. He said, "Not exactly." She looked as if she thought that was just fine.

Then Geminus's eyes moved over the ties, the bouquets, and stopped on me.

I said, "My parents are dead."

He didn't react.

"But I think you already know that."

* * *

My turn came.

I presented the house. The thicknesses, the repairs, the walls that sound hollow. One photo per stone, with its labels. The three layers: at the bottom, small, irregular stones, maybe Roman; above them, medieval work; and higher still. The walled-up opening. I said "maybe Roman" three times, with the caution expected of a student.

He'd taken a seat in the last row. He didn't move.

One of the professors asked if the owner had let me work freely. I said he'd been very cooperative. At the back, someone coughed.

I didn't mention that I'm the owner now. I didn't talk about what's under the wardrobe. My thesis is about the walls. The rest is none of the committee's business.

* * *

Afterward, they sent us out, then brought us all back in together, the families too. The chair read the names, one by one. When he got to mine, I looked for someone in the room. Out of reflex.

He was there. Standing, this time.

Outside, on the big stone steps, the others were being crowned. The mothers put on the laurel, the fathers took the picture, the grandmothers cried. I thought we'd go home just like that.

He took a wreath out of his bag. Laurel leaves, a red ribbon. Where he'd found it is a mystery. He set it on my head, nice and straight, like someone who knows how.

He's used to it, I suppose.

A girl agreed to take our picture with my phone. For the first time, Geminus didn't flinch. That, I'm writing down.

* * *

October's here. The harbor is almost empty. The cafés have taken in half their outdoor tables. You can finally see the yellow, ochre and red façades all the way down. It smells like salt, and not like sunscreen anymore. We go down there often now. We eat under the awning, facing the sea.

Neither of us has ever talked about that evening again.

* * *

This morning, drinking his coffee, he said to me, "So, like we said yesterday, we'll do the shutters in the spring."

I said, "Yes."

I have no memory of talking about shutters. Yesterday, we had lunch at the harbor, we came back up, I read, he wrote. I went back over the day in order, from start to finish. No shutters.

But he was so sure.

I didn't say anything to him. In the spring, the shutters. He smiled.

It's nothing. He got the day mixed up, or I did. I'm writing it down anyway.

* * *

I still can't sleep. Strange. Tonight, I thought about the lamp again.

It had happened to me once before, at my place. One morning, I woke up in the dark, fully dressed, the notebook next to me. I was sure I'd left the lamp on. Sure. I remember the lamp on, and that's it.

I hadn't thought about it since.

Maybe that's where it started.

* * *

Last night, we had a fight. The first one.

It started with a question. I've had plenty since August. He knows. When I was still limping, he told me, "Later. We have time." When is later? It's been more than a month.

I asked him who had painted the portrait.

He said, "I don't remember."

I asked him where he'd put it.

He said, "Put away."

Put away where? I didn't look for it. Well, okay, a little. Not in the cupboards. Not under the bed. Not behind the blue containers.

Since the trapdoor, he hasn't said her name. Neither have I. But she's here, in the house, with us. Sometimes I feel like I'm Clara, even though I'm Chiara.

I told him. Not this neatly. I yelled a little.

He said that had nothing to do with it.

I said it did. That a woman who'd been dead for nineteen centuries had my face, and that he looked at her every day. Or at me. Or at both of us.

He didn't answer. He said, "Later."

So I pulled out what I'd been saving.

"And besides, you snore."

He looked at me. "Since when?"

"Since the beginning."

I'd been keeping that for weeks. It was my best card. He laughed. And so did I, because it was ridiculous, and I was furious at myself for laughing.

He went up to bed. I stayed downstairs with my fight.

As for Clara, she's still put away somewhere.

* * *

I reread what I wrote on the day of the laurea.

It's pretty. It's true, too. But something's missing.

At the end of my presentation, a professor asked me to point out the walled-up opening on the floor plan. My house. The wall I've touched a hundred times, my palm flat against it. I looked at the plan, and I didn't know where the back wall was anymore.

It lasted two breaths. I found the photo, the photo gave me back the wall, I pointed, I went on. Nobody noticed a thing. The committee nodded.

In the last row, he was watching me. I don't know if he saw.

I hadn't written it down.