

The Angel in the Apple Tree

I push the gun deep into one of the pockets of my brand-new full-length mink coat and gather it tight around my body to ward off the bone-chilling November wind while kicking at the rats scurrying around and across the tops of my stiletto-wrapped feet. Emerging from the dark garbage-strewn and urine soaked alley to the not much improved avenue, I stand for a moment, soak up the depressing view and smile.

The ladies wave to me as I approach. I've been walking these mean streets and alleys for years. I know their names and their stories—one more heart-wrenching than the next. I've made it my mission to watch over them. If I don't see Mary or Shelly or Rosie or Sherrie, I search the shadowed lanes. Sometimes, I uncover their scarred and abused bodies like so much trash—brutalized and barely alive. Most often, they're never seen again. With the exception of me and the girls, nobody cares. The cops write up their report of another dead or missing hooker and, case closed.

Anytime, anywhere, if any of them make the decision to get out, they know how to find me. I bankroll their counselling, rehabilitation, housing, schooling or job training—whatever it takes. Once cleaned up, many of the younger ones dream of returning to their homes. With hope and a prayer, I pay for their airfare and send them on their way.

International law is one of my professions. I am also a whore. Unlike my sisters, prostitution is my side job and I command top dollar for my services. The thousands of hours I've spent in therapy over the years have not dissuaded me from my chosen second career. I too have a story.

My name is Branca Davidovic. I'm the proud daughter of Branco and Andjela Davidovic. I was born in 1951 in the small village of Ragodës which is located high up in the Serbian mountains. With a population of only 100 people give or take, Papa wasn't able to provide his little family with much, so he made the decision to move to America. We emigrated when I was three-years-old and settled in New York City. With Mama's skills at cooking, Papa's head for business and the help of the Serbian

The Angel in the Apple Tree

community that settled there previously, my parents were able to open their own restaurant on 10th Avenue between 21st and 40th Streets.

The business thrived. In fact, our eatery was so successful it attracted the attention of some local thugs. Those neighborhood gangsters tried to coerce protection money from Papa, but he resisted.

On April 22, 1956, as I skipped along the crowded sidewalk ahead of my Papa and Mama on our way home from church, Papa was attacked. The image of my wailing mother cradling my dying father in her arms while his crimson life-sustaining fluids flowed from his chest to wash over her beautiful white skirt is forever branded upon my heart and soul.

News of the murder spread and friends from the old country invited Mama and me to relocate to their lovely little enclave on the southeast side of Milwaukee along the shores of Lake Michigan. Not long after arriving in the tiny Serbian community, Obrad Zekic swept the beautiful Andjela Davidovic off her feet with his promise of love and security for both of us.

Obrad was an astonishingly good looking young Serb who'd lost his wife and unborn baby the previous year in a freak accident. He and his two brothers ran a thriving restaurant in Bay View. Mama had no means to travel back to Serbia and couldn't lean on the hospitality of friends for much longer. That is how Obrad Zekic became my new papa. He married Mama, adopted me and within months, Mama was pregnant with her second child.

After my baby sister Tijana was born, my childhood slid into that easy kind of progression where you hardly notice time passing. While I shadowed Mama around the dining area and behind the bar of the restaurant, New Papa would smile, push out his chest, grab me up into his arms and shout out to our friendly clientele, "Look at my beautiful daughter!" In response, they'd smile and murmur their agreement before getting back to their meals and private conversations. Every Sunday the three of us shuffled into the first pew for Mass. New Papa would look around and beam. On our way home he'd

The Angel in the Apple Tree

always say, “Did you see everybody staring at my beautiful girls? They’re green with envy. I’m a lucky man.”

There was one particular table off in a corner of the restaurant that was always crowded with grizzled old Serbs who wiled away the hours chain smoking, playing cards and telling tales of the old country. A troubadour with a saggy bronzed face that resembled a dried up, water-carved riverbed; sat on a stool in the corner. He strummed his guitar and croaked out old-world folk songs—taking breaks only long enough to suck on one of his oddly bent brown cigarettes.

That group intrigued me, but I was forbidden by New Papa to visit with them. Whenever they looked over at New Papa interacting with Mama and me, they’d frown, call one of his brothers over to the table and then gesture wildly while talking nonstop. One or the other of my step-uncles would nod their heads and attempt to placate the old men with soft words. It was obvious that they didn’t like New Papa—in fact, if I was reading their faces correctly, they hated him. Eventually I learned that two of the men at that table were the uncles of new Papa’s late wife.

Sunday was the only day the restaurant closed. It’s when the extended family gathered for dinner. These were my favorite times. The uncles and aunts laughed and played cards leaving all of the children to dance and sing to the tunes rolling off the piano. The supper table sagged with the wonderful specialties of the old country. And Mama—oh, Mama beamed during those affairs. Our new papa treated her like the treasure she was and I almost loved him for that.

Our lives took a terrible turn during the summer of my tenth year. Mama was expecting their second child when she took a nasty tumble down the stairwell. She lost the baby and her womb. This made new Papa very unhappy. He began drinking with a vengeance and treated Mama terribly. Sometimes he got rough with her and called her names like “used goods.” Tijana often came to my room for comfort

The Angel in the Apple Tree

during those confusing nights. I'd cover her ears and sing to her—trying my best to drown out the hateful words New Papa hurled at Mama.

The first time he struck Mama, my heart about exploded. Chaos ensued with Tijana wailing and Mama crying. Me, well, I went into action, leaping onto his back and pummeling his head and neck with my ten-year-old fists. He tore me from his back, carried me screaming to my room, threw me onto the bed and raped me.

After that unspeakable night, I'd become his sex toy. Mama knew what was happening but didn't have the strength or the courage to confront him. She was weak and I hated her for that. When he began abusing her and raping me, she should have packed up and gotten all of us the hell out of there. I would have run away but couldn't leave my sister behind, understanding that it was only a matter of time before he'd turn his sick attentions to her.

Every night after he was done with me, the monster known as Obrad Zekic staggered back to his bed and fell into a drunken stupor. With guilt oozing from her eyes, Mama would come to me, carry me to the bath, clean me up and try to console me. I wanted to slap her hard—wake her up—scream into her face that she needed to protect her daughters—but I didn't. Instead, I'd lie in bed at night imagining that Papa's family from the old country would somehow realize my plight, sweep into the apartment, beat the life out of New Papa and save us. But I was a smart girl and grasped the wretched fact that I was in this alone.

I thought about telling other family members, hoping they would stop the atrocities. But I'd convinced myself that New Papa's brothers and sisters would not believe me. If it was his word against mine—they'd consider me an ungrateful ingrate.

One Sunday, just after Mass concluded and while New Papa visited with Pastor Ryan and some of the other parishioners, I sneaked away and approached one of the sisters who was replacing burned-out votive candles in their holders. I touched her arm and said, "Uh, excuse me, Sister." She turned

The Angel in the Apple Tree

around and looked down at me with a beatific smile on her face that emboldened me. “May, may I talk to you about something, Sister?”

“Certainly, dear. What’s on your mind?”

I blurted out my story. The instantaneous slap to my face echoed through the hushed church. Tears stung my eyes, not from the strike but because of the horrible words that followed. “You stupid evil child—seek absolution for your sins and don’t ever speak of such things again!” She grabbed me by my upper arms, shook me hard and hissed, “If you were one of our students, I’d have you expelled!”

New Papa appeared behind her and without saying a word, took me by the hand and marched me out of the church. On the way home, his eyes sizzled at me in the rear-view mirror.

His drunken assaults continued night after never-ending night. Sometimes, he’d take a break from the restaurant early in the evening to have a go at me and then return to his business. During the horror, I made not a sound, silently vowing to myself that that monster—the man who forced me to call him Papa—would never make this little girl cry. With his sweaty hairy body obliterating mine and his hot breath stinking with alcohol, he’d demand that I look him in the eyes. Then he’d compel me to do vile and disgusting things to him. During the assaults I forced myself to disengage, go to another place—a place where there was no pain or suffering—only love and beauty. I was Heidi, hidden away in the Swiss Alps with my adoring grandfather. Sometimes I’d fly across the night skies hand-in-hand with Peter Pan, Tijana and Mama on our way to Never-Never land. No, I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of one spoken syllable, sob or tear.

My hatred for him ran bone deep and I hung tight to the venom of that strong emotion to keep myself from going completely insane. Every night I prayed for God to send one of his powerful angels to smite him and toss his sick soul into the fires of hell where he would suffer for all of eternity.

The Angel in the Apple Tree

New Papa never allowed me to leave the house without him. He drove Tijana and me to and from Trowbridge Street School. He'd not only robbed me of my innocence, but took from me any semblance of a normal life. My personality changed, causing my friends to eventually shy away from the haunted, sad-eyed girl that I'd become.

When not in school or working the restaurant, I was locked in my room. Once in a while, he'd drag me along with him on his errands—forcing me to sit in the front seat next to him—his immoral hands continually touching, touching. On those rare days out, I'd silently pray that he would stop at the Rossi Family Grocery store to pick up supplies. The men and women who worked in the store were warm and friendly people. Children ran in and out of the living quarters at the back of the place. As I stared at their apparent happiness, they'd always wave at me and smile—motioning for me to join them. In response, I'd drop my eyes to the floor.

One evening, as I gazed out of the second story bedroom window of my prison, I heard a commotion from below. A gang of kids were raiding our green apple tree and New Papa was screaming like the mad man that he was, threatened to kill all of them. The laughing, high-energy kids scattered every which way making a clean getaway.

Finally able to exhale, I pressed my forehead to the glass. That's when I heard her voice for the first time. It was small—musical. The branch of the apple tree that almost touched my bedroom window bounced up and down. I squinted through the dark foliage and spotted her perched at the very top of the tree. She munched on her pilfered fruit while lounging up against the tree trunk—her legs dangling from either side of the highest branch.

I knew who she was. Her name was Vittoria. She was one of the Rossi grandchildren. The kids at my school told stories of her fearlessness—claiming that she'd do anything on a dare. I'd heard them say that she talked to animals and even got hit by a car a couple of times as she shooed cats and squirrels

The Angel in the Apple Tree

from the middle of the street. In defense of herself or others, she'd stand up to bullies no matter their size.

One day, while eating lunch alone in the cafeteria, I heard one of the boys one table over talking about Vittoria. He spoke in a low conspiratorial voice while looking around like maybe somebody was watching him. With his eyes bugging out from his head, he said, "That girl, Veto, she can see stuff that's not there. Once, a bunch of us saw her hanging out with her cousins on her front porch. We hid across the street and spied on them. Veto saw us. She looked right at us, made her hand into a gun with her thumb and forefinger and took aim. We heard her laugh then move her hand toward a streetlamp situated right over our heads. Then she hollered, 'Bang!' The light exploded! I swear to God she did that. We saw it! My Mom told me that she's not right in the head because of some kind of fits she had when she was born. But I don't think she's nuts. I think she's a witch!"

As I stared out at the little girl perched as comfy as can be in the top of the tree, she didn't look like any witch I'd ever read about. If she was a witch—maybe she was a good one.

Vittoria looked straight at me from her roost, smiled, swiped at her mouth with the sleeve of her jacket and then waved. She motioned for me to open the window. I did. She said, "Hi! I'm Veto. It's so nice to meet you 'pretty girl in the window.' That's what all of the kids call you ya' know—the 'pretty girl in the window.' Heck, I think my cousin Johnny's in love with you. Why don't you meet me down in the yard where we can talk?"

"I can't. I'm locked in my room."

"Did you do something wrong? I get punished all of the time because I do a lot of stupid shit, but they've never actually locked me in. Anyway, don't you know how to jimmy a lock? As long as you're not bolted in from the other side, you should be able get that doorknob to turn. Do you have a bobby pin? I'll talk you through it."

The Angel in the Apple Tree

I did as she instructed and dang if that door didn't unlock. After sneaking down the back stairway, we stood face to face in the dark yard and sized each other up. When she took both of my hands in hers, an energy flowed through to my every nerve ending. "Do you feel my buzz? She asked.

I nodded and whispered, "What is that?"

She talked really fast. "Not sure. It's just me. It's what I am—who I am. I don't know exactly why I have it or where it comes from. Some people pull away from my touch, others kinda like it. Hold onto me for a minute, my energy will give you strength when you need it the most."

She grinned at me and I grinned back. She captured me with her big shiny brown eyes and I felt relief. We soon discovered that we were the same age almost to the day. She was easily a head shorter than me, but I was a tall girl and she was small for her age. Her hair was all different shades of blonde and cut in the shortest of pixies. In comparison, my long black hair hung to my waist and I'd inherited my father's violet eyes. The kids at my school called her crazy, but I was convinced she was magical.

We both jumped when we heard a rustling in the bushes. "Veto," One of her cousins hissed. "Veto, where are you? Did that crazy son of a bitch catch you? You okay? Hey, is that the pretty little girl from the window?"

"Yeah, I'm alright, Johnny. I'm always okay. Now get the hell out of here, you losers. This is girl talk."

She shined around almost every night after that—even in the rain. She made me feel special and alive again. Even though I kept my awful secret to myself, I understood that she somehow knew that I was hiding something horrible. But she didn't push me for information.

One night, Veto hadn't shown up at the usual time and I was devastated—needed to see my friend. Earlier that evening, before going back down to the restaurant, he'd hurt me bad. I began to panic. In the back of my mind, I always knew that one day she'd stop her visits and wondered if that was

The Angel in the Apple Tree

the day. And then, through the blur of my tears, I saw her tiny form waving up at me from the yard. I flew down the stairs and into her arms. She held me for a long while before gently pushing me away.

“Branca, if I tell you my secrets, will you tell me yours?”

I gulped back sobs and nodded.

She continued, “Okay, here goes. I have special gifts—at least that’s what my Godmother says. I feel other people’s pain—animal’s too. My Godmother calls it hyper-empathy. I call it the shits. The energy that you feel flowing through my body can blow stuff up—mostly anything made of glass—at least that’s how it’s worked so far.” Her voice softened. She looked down and then up and away for a moment before continuing, “Sometimes, lost souls seek me out—you know, like dead people who don’t know enough to move over to the other side. I see people’s auras—their colors—I can read their hearts. Branca, I see and feel your pain. It has to do with your Papa. That I know. His aura is scary as hell—really awful! He hurts you, doesn’t he?”

I wailed, “He’s not my Papa! My Papa is dead!” After a moment, I quieted—having made the decision to share my vile secrets with this odd little person. Once I began, I knew it was the right thing to do. Baring my soul to her came easily. She was speechless but not surprised. She understood—shared my shame, sorrow and fear.

Through her tears she promised, “Branca, I’m going to figure out a way to stop him. Trust me. Do you trust me?”

I nodded and we embraced again. While locked in that significant moment, the back door banged open with such force it smashed into the house and shattered the window. My hands flew to my ears but Veto stood stock still. As usual, he was drunk and in one of his dark rages. New Papa pushed Veto with such force, she practically flew to the ground ten feet away. He shouted, “I know you—you’re that little dago brat everybody says is nuts! I don’t like you! Stay the hell away from my Branca!”

The Angel in the Apple Tree

She brushed at the blood flowing from the heels of her hands. Without an inkling of fear and with her chin held high, she scowled back at him and said, “If you ever do that again, I’ll tell my uncles and they’ll make you disappear—if they can’t or won’t—I can and will! And by the way, Branca is *not* yours!”

New Papa took off after her but she scrambled away in a flash. Once back on her feet, she narrowed her eyes and hissed, “You’re a vicious sick perverted son of a bitch who doesn’t deserve to breathe the same air as the rest of us. One day soon, you’ll get yours, mister. You just wait and see.”

He grabbed me by my arm and dragged me back into the house. Madder than mad, he took it out on Mama and then on me.

New Papa placed a lock on the outside of my door which ended our nightly rendezvous in the yard. Instead, most nights I’d find her perched like a little pixie on the highest branch of that green apple tree, munching on fruit and staring up at the stars. I’d quietly open my window and we’d talk for hours. I missed the strength of her touch. If Papa ever found out that we continued to see each other, he’d probably kill her.

After the summer of our eighth grade, Veto went off to the local all-girls Catholic high school. I went to the neighborhood public high school. Although I didn’t see her as often as I used to, we left notes for each other under a rock in the back yard near the alley where I deposited the day’s garbage. I’d never really expected that the five-foot tall ninety pound little girl could help me, but I loved her all the same and missed her.

One day, just after Veto and I turned fifteen, New Papa, Mama, Tijana and me entered Rossi’s grocery store. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I spotted her stocking shelves and was so excited that I bolted behind the counter to give her a hug. Her uncles’ laughter boomed as they clapped their hands.

The Angel in the Apple Tree

New Papa stiffened. Veto pulled away from me and slid her eyes over to him, then grinned and said something clever which made everybody chuckle again. New Papa couldn't say anything derogatory in front of her family, so he played along, guffawing like an idiot. When Mama let out a little giggle, his face contorted and I saw him pinch the back of her arm. Mama wasn't allowed to laugh anymore—he'd forbidden it.

Veto saw the pinch. Her face clouded. Her eyes flashed fire. She reached up and touched Mama's arm—all the while staring holes through Papa. The air suddenly felt charged. The overhead lights began pulsating. As we glanced up at the whirring ceiling fans, the "open" sign in the entry door exploded. Her uncles exchanged glances. One of them placed a hand on Veto's shoulder and whispered something into her ear. Without taking her eyes off New Papa, she slid her arm around my waist and walked me to the back of the store.

The energy that pulsated through her body transferred to me, giving me a renewed jolt of strength and hope. When Veto placed her hands on my shoulders, I shot Papa a sidelong glance. He glared back. She turned me around until we were face to face and said, "Don't look at that asshole, Branca. Listen to me—you and I are much the same. You're smarter than anybody realizes and so am I. You're destined for great things. Your name means protective warrior. Did you know that? I'm a warrior too. In fact, Joan of Arc shares my soul."

Not for the first time since I'd met her, for just an instant, Veto's words made me doubt her sanity. She continued, "Be true to your name and be brave, Branca—brave and strong. I have a plan."

Knowing what I had to do and figuring out a way to do it were two entirely different things. With Veto's help, my hopes soared. After a little bit of research, Veto learned that the main ingredient in rat poison is an anticoagulant that interferes with the body's blood clotting ability which eventually causes hemorrhaging. The bleeding can be internal at first and go undetected except for maybe a little bruising

The Angel in the Apple Tree

or bleeding gums. If ingested over a period of time, like every night for several weeks, it *will* kill a human. Even though new Papa was less than human, we were convinced he'd die.

Slivovitsa is a plum brandy that is distilled in the old country and was New Papa's alcohol of choice. Our kitchen pantry was well-stocked. Mama didn't drink and if New Papa entertained friends, he did it in the restaurant. Guests were never welcomed into our home.

New Papa used rat poison in the basement storage rooms. I traversed those steps often to haul up supplies and alcohol. One of the shelves down there held boxes and boxes of the toxin so it was easy for me to pilfer one. Our plan worked. It took a little longer than a week, but patience was one virtue I still owned.

Obrad Zekic's last few hours on this earth entailed cluster seizures and the puking up of copious amounts of blood. As he lay upon the worn red and white tiles of that kitchen floor, screaming and bleeding from every orifice in his body, Mama covered ten-year-old Tijana's eyes. Me—I stared into his evil bloodshot blue orbs throughout his entire ordeal, just as he demanded of me night after horrible night. Only this time, I smiled ear to ear. Just before taking his final breath, I saw the realization in his eyes and my heart soared.

Mama informed the medical examiner that new Papa was a heavy drinker, causing the less than energetic public servant to attribute Obrad Zekic's horrible demise to esophageal varices. Lucky for me that lazy doctor never checked any further for a cause of death. It seems that God had answered my prayers after all, sending the angel named Vittoria to smite the devil named Obrad.

For the next two years, Vittoria and I were inseparable. And then, in August of 1968, just four months after our seventeenth birthdays, she disappeared. The rumor on the street was that after the death of her mother, she'd gone off the rails and ran away from home which caused her tight-knit family to go

The Angel in the Apple Tree

into a tailspin. As soon as I'd heard the news, I checked the rock in the back yard next to the alley. She'd left me a note.

Branca, you aren't the only one who wrestled with a demon. I too struggle with a fiend who is of an entirely different ilk than Obrad. Mine is just as cruel and vicious and has already murdered five people. He vows to begin eliminating my loved ones if I do not go away with him. In an effort to protect my world, I had to get the hell out of Dodge. Hopefully, we'll meet again in the near future. I'm praying that you will heal. We did what needed to be done and I'm confident God will forgive both of us. Now it's my turn to pray for an angel to enter my life to help me smite my dragon.

Veto called us simpatico. She was wicked smart and so was I. In fact, I wasn't just bright—like her, I possessed a genius intellect. After perfect ACT and SAT scores, I was administered an IQ test and the results were startling. I earned a full scholarship to Marquette University and had my bachelor's degree in no time at all. My law school admission test scores were off the charts. I was accepted and given a full ride. After earning my Juris Doctor degree, I clerked at a large corporate law firm in downtown Milwaukee—easily passing the bar and all of the written ethics exams thrown at me.

There were many fields of law for which I qualified. I chose international law so I could expand my horizons. In 1975 the glass ceiling was quite low, but my skills were mighty and my wages copious. Money didn't much interest me, but I wanted and needed lots of it for my very private charity.

Which brings me back to the present—to New York City—although not the home of my true roots, which lay buried in a mountain village somewhere in Serbia, this city is my connection to Papa. My warm albeit blurred memories of Papa survive and so do I.

I can't say the same for Obrad Zekic or for the villainous pimps who prey upon and victimize their whores. I can't say the brutal johns who treat women like animals will continue to survive.

The Angel in the Apple Tree

Tonight, Vittoria and I dance and drink our night away at a trendy discotheque—just two beautiful women warding off a never-ending string of Casanovas. Our conversations are never wasted on Obrad Zekic. He is an inconsequential memory for me and just another villainous sociopath that the lovely Vittoria and I have erased from the face of the earth. And, we continue to pray that the angel she's been searching for will one day walk into her life.