



# Romeo and Julian - Free Fall

By

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Milan, Italy, summer 1940

“Ro, come to me!” his mother’s voice called to him from the spacious kitchen at the back of their house. He went to her and knew that now, at last, he would learn what was to become of him. The elders of his family had gathered after church the previous day, and he had waited impatiently to hear their verdict. As the youngest son, he was the only one not in the fascist military or working underground for the communist party.

Maria Luisa Cantone was a matriarch to be reckoned with, a mother of fourteen children, and part of a huge family herself. Her highest priority—deeply ingrained—was the protection of her family. Therefore, despite being stout communists, all of her elder sons were soldiers for Mussolini, Il Duce, the fascist leader of Italy. Romeo expected to join them, now that he was finally done with school.

She pointed to the chair next to hers at the big oak table, took his smooth hands in her callused ones, and looked him in the eyes. He was shocked to see her expression softening, her gaze almost tender.

“Ro, we discussed your future yesterday and you will not join the army.” He gasped and wanted to protest; he was sixteen and longed to become a hero like his brothers. Although his parents worked hard to counteract the relentless propaganda of the newspaper

and cinemas, no-one—especially an adolescent boy—was immune to the brainwashing, and he wanted to join the army.

“You are small and unremarkable, an easy-to-forget average boy—you are the perfect choice as an informant for the Resistenza. Uncle Pietro will be your contact. You will do as he says and be his apprentice.” He sighed. An informant?

“But mother, I want to become a soldier like Luigi, Micha, and...” Her hand stroked his cheek, and she smiled.

“I know you have the courage,” she said gently, “otherwise I wouldn’t have agreed to this. But I also know that it would be too dangerous for you to join the army. All those men, living together all day, sleeping together in close quarters at night...” He swallowed hard, his eyes widening in shock. “I know, my son, I know.”

He closed his eyes in shame and hung his head. Romeo had been so sure that he had cloaked his desires completely from everybody.

“How...how?” He stuttered avoiding his mother’s eyes while a deep blush painted his cheeks.

The wise smile of generations of parents before her played around her lips. “Because I know you my child and because my younger brother, your Uncle Anton, is like you. He lives with cousin Paolo on their farm in the Tyrol Mountains for a reason, you know. I always pray to the Madonna to keep them safe, and I will pray for you, too.”

And so he went to work as an apprentice for Uncle Pietro, officially as a toolmaker—one of the few professions that were excluded from the military draft—unofficially as an informant. In between, he worked as a waiter, a shoeshine boy, a mechanic, and anything else necessary to get him close to the sources of information his uncle needed. His mother had been right, he blended into the background, nobody took notice of him, and he was never caught.

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Three years later, he found himself northeast of Rome in the ski region of the Abruzzo Mountains. Rumour had it that the deposed Duce had been brought here under heavy guard. The new Italian government, led by the king, had been shuffling him around the country to prevent his followers from rescuing him and re-establishing his kind of fascist regime. Romeo was insignificant enough that the Resistenza could afford to send him on such a wild goose chase. He had arrived yesterday in Assergi, a small village at the foot of the mountains, and had slept in a barn. As usual on assignments in remote areas, he had his tools in his backpack and introduced himself to the villagers as a wandering mechanic and toolmaker, offering his services. The people talked freely, and he heard a good deal about the large number of Carabinieri recently stationed at the Hotel Campo Imperatore farther up the hills. The villagers were accustomed to soldiers at the hotel, but the gendarmes of the Carabinieri were uncommon. Romeo smiled and talked and repaired tools all day, bartering with the locals for the food and supplies he would need. To dispel any suspicion, he announced that he would walk to the next village, but would take his time and enjoy the last warm days of September. Hearing this, one farmer offered him a sheepskin rug so as not to “freeze your ass off in the night.” Early next morning, he went up the mountain and began his surveillance of the big hotel on the high plateau.

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Above the Adria, September 12, 1943, Late Morning

The sound of the plane’s motors hummed and vibrated through his body as he sat with his fellow soldiers in the small compartment. Julian von Stein, twenty-seven years old but feeling ancient, member of the First Paratroopers Battalion, closed his fists and tried his best to feel something—*anything*! He had no fear of the jump. He had no fear that the

young, inexperienced jumpers in his charge would fail. He was not afraid of committing suicide. He hit the back of his head against the rattling aluminium skin of the plane, and closed his eyes, remembering.

His mother and father in the opulent living room full of dark oak furniture, Persian carpets and crystal chandeliers, beaming at him as he wore his paratrooper uniform for the first time. “You will make a difference, my son!” He heard the pride in his father’s voice. Gone. He saw the gleam of adoration in his mother’s eyes. Gone. His younger siblings gathered around, staring at him in awe—all those angelic innocent faces, all those bright promising futures—all gone!

He could also hear the sympathetic voice of his lieutenant.

“I am sorry to tell you that your family has perished in the firestorm in Hamburg. The whole Alfredstrasse has burned down between July 27 and 29—there were no survivors. Your inquiry at the missing person office has been negative. Please accept my condolences.” He remembered the strange coldness inside him, the absence of any pain.

It was the same feeling he’d had just two months earlier, at the end of his furlough. He had spent the entire fortnight searching for Klaus—his best friend and secret lover—but had found nothing more than rumours of him touring with the troops, playing his beloved piano to entertain soldiers in the field. The day he was to rejoin his regiment, he’d turned in desperation to Klaus’ mother. Her slumped posture and hopeless expression as she sat at her kitchen table had caused his gorge to rise, but he needed to know—needed to know Klaus was safe. She had looked quietly at him for a while, then turned around and picked up an old cookbook. A plain postcard was stuck between recipes for Strudel and Lebkuchen. He took it from her trembling hand. “We regret to inform you that your son, Klaus Schulz, prisoner #22755, has been shot during an attempt to escape. His remains have been buried, his

personal effects will be sent to you. Sieg Heil! M.G. Weiss, Concentration Camp  
Commander, Neuengamme/Hamburg”

The card had fallen from his listless fingers.

“Why—” he cleared his throat—“why was he sent to Neuengamme?”

There was no feeling in her voice, no accusation in her eyes as she said,

“You should know...”

He had jumped up—upsetting the chair—and run out of the familiar flat, his heart racing in fear, his throat choking in grief. On his way to the train station, he had made a huge effort to bury his horror and anguish and mourning—along with his fear of discovery—deep, deep inside his body, showing the world only the cold face of an arrogant paratrooper.

Soon, he got back to his personal hell. He’d returned to training, briefings, working as usual. He ate and drank but he felt nothing—no grief, no fear. He was indifferent to everything. It was a terrible condition, but it had somehow softened the blow when he’d received the news of his family’s demise.

His only resolve was to end it, here, now, forever. He opened his eyes.

The light above the door changed to yellow: *Prepare for jump!* He checked his knife. It was in easy reach. He stood, joining the end of the line. Red light flashing: *Jump now!* And he dove out of the airplane, feeling nothing.

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Abruzzo, September, 12, 1943, Midday

Romeo had walked the perimeter of the hotel; the high plateau was barren, no hiding place at all aside from the outbuildings. He didn’t dare approach the house itself. The situation was nebulous, so he remained outside, hidden. He ate his lunch in a small hollow

that provided good cover. The sun's heat felt cozy, so he lay back on the sheepskin and closed his eyes, daydreaming. Aged nineteen now, Romeo's libido raged, and he stroked himself to completion every morning and night. Yet he knew he wanted more. Twice he had met men like him, resulting in quick fumbles in the dark, his heart racing and fear shooting through him at the slightest unexpected sound. These encounters had satisfied his body, but left his mind deprived. Yes—he knew he wanted more! How would it feel to be with a man for a whole night, touching him—tasting him? His member stirred to life as he tried to imagine the things he wanted done to him, and the things he wanted to do. A distant sound interrupted his fantasies, and he rolled over onto his stomach, putting his binoculars to his eyes. Ten planes high in the air approached, not bombers by the sound but transporters. Soon he could make out the swastikas on the sides of the machines. As they closed in on his position, he watched the air fill with tiny white mushrooms raining down—paratroopers. His heart rate picked up. He tried to count and made a mental note, checking his watch: two pm. This would be interesting.

The first units that had landed on the plateau were already packing their gear and preparing for a quick advance to the hotel, when the last mushroom gliding down from the last airplane caught Romeo's eye. This paratrooper seemed to struggle, his parachute out-of-form. His descent was far more rapid than the others, and he hung at an odd angle in his harness. This guy's luck was really bad; instead of landing on even ground he vanished into a deep ravine, missing the plateau completely. Some members of his unit ran to the edge of the ravine and shouted down, but were called back and strode off to meet with the other troops. They ran towards the hotel entrance. Romeo perked up his ears, but heard no gunfire. Instead he picked up the very low hum of another plane, a small one, which flew very slow and low until—to his amazement—it landed next to the hotel. A group of German soldiers emerged from the hotel, surrounding a man who was dressed in civilian clothing. They walked this

man to the small plane, its engine still running. The civilian and one soldier climbed aboard and the plane turned around and attempted taking off. It was a troublesome ascent, but a minute later the plane was gone and the soldiers vanished back into the hotel. Half an hour later the Germans came out again, this time with a large group of Carabinieri in their midst. They headed off down the path to Assergi.

All that remained was an eerie silence. Romeo was flabbergasted; he surmised he was the only civilian witness of the liberation of Il Duce. Should he make haste to the nearest phone, contact his uncle? But he knew that this military act would soon be public, the fascist Germans would try to reinstate Il Duce and would show him to the world as soon as possible to demonstrate their triumph and destabilize the present Italian government.

Keeping an eye on the hotel, he scurried to the edge of the plateau where the lone paratrooper had vanished. He peered carefully over the edge. A white speck down below caught his eye, nothing moved, the soldier appeared dead. Romeo assessed the ravine and saw that the opposite side had a gentler slope, it would be possible to descend there and take a look at the soldier—maybe he was carrying papers of interest?

Two hours later Romeo stepped cautiously toward the unmoving body which was still connected to the parachute. He saw blond hair, a clean-shaven face with dried blood covering one temple and the side of the face, down to the collar of the jump suit. He stooped and picked up a pebble, which he threw hard—hitting the man in the belly—but there was no betraying jerk, no reaction at all. Fixing his eyes on every movement, he closed the distance to the body. Romeo knelt beside the soldier and removed his machine gun, then pried the gravity knife from the right hand. And there he felt the heat of the paratrooper's skin—this man was not dead! Further investigation revealed no obvious injuries other than the head wound. Romeo stowed the weapons and the few papers he'd found in his backpack, then cut the harness from the man's body and used some loose cords to bind his hands in front of him.



Dampening a corner of his towel with water from his canteen, he carefully wiped the dried blood and dirt from the face. As he sat back and reviewed the form before him, he sighed. This was a beautiful man, his features well-proportioned, straight nose and full lips with a soft cupid's bow.

A daring he'd never experienced rose within Romeo. Here he had, at last, a man he could touch and explore—as long as he gave no sign of consciousness... After a swift check of his surroundings, he reached out to touch those rosy lips but stopped short, unsure of just how bold he was prepared to be. Gathering his courage and ignoring his wild beating heart, he allowed his fingertips to stroke the soft—oh, so soft!—mouth. There was no reaction from the soldier. Encouraged, he let his hand glide over the light stubble on the chin, down the throat to the top of the collar. He had to focus in order to keep his hands steady as he undid the buttons on the uniform, revealing very white skin, a dusting of dark hairs over the pectorals and—pulling the shirttails from the trousers and spreading the front open—small, pink nipples. He brushed through the sparse hair, glided over the ribs, down to the stomach, then returned to the throat. It felt incredible; hard muscles under pure silk. He lowered his face to the skin he had revealed, inhaling the odour. No animal tang clung to this body; no traces of tobacco or sweat marred the clean smell of citrus and man. He couldn't resist and licked over the skin again and again, following the path between the nipples. The little nubs piqued his curiosity and he played with them, rolling the points with his tongue, biting carefully and worrying the flesh until they stood up like tiny bullets. Suddenly, a groan emerged from the soldier. Then he stretched his body, unconsciously allowing his opponent easier access to his torso. His eyes remained close, but he licked his lips and murmured in a dreamy voice, “Klaus?” At the sound of the German's voice, Romeo froze; his heart began to race, and he discovered he was holding his breath when he heard the soldier mumble. “Klaus come on, don't tease—kiss me!” A tumble of thoughts raced through Romeo's head. This man was

another man like him and he was obviously experienced, he was bound and unconscious, maybe he would stay that way if he thought Klaus was kissing him. Romeo leaned down and, for the first time in his life, kissed a man. Letting his lips wander over this beautiful mouth, increasing the pressure, licking over the cupid's bow, nibbling on the lower lip, he indulged in things he had only dreamed about.

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Julian drifted through a cloud of delicious feelings; soft caresses filled his senses, tender lips met his, and an eager tongue probed at his clenched teeth. This was what he needed, craved. He groaned his approval and opened his mouth, inviting that tongue to join his own, licking and stroking. One after another, his senses came alert. He heard a small sigh above him, felt bristles scratching his chin, and smelled sun and sweat and sheep on the man leaning into him. Should he know this man? Slowly he opened his eyes and saw a face with closed eyes he didn't recognize, the unfamiliar but soft mouth indulging his senses with a toe-curling kiss. "Um?" He couldn't check the questioning sound.

His opponent's eyes flew open and the man pulled away, a deep red painting his scruffy cheeks. Julian wanted to restrain his unknown companion from possible flight and tried to hold on to him, noticing only then that his hands were bound. Uncomprehending, he turned his face despite the splitting headache and saw the familiar white cloth on the ground near him, covered with cords and straps: his parachute. And then everything came crashing back: his family, Klaus, the last jump.

In that moment, helpless to prevent it, the full force of his suppressed emotions rushed through his body. His throat closed, his stomach felt like a ball of lead, and he shut his eyes against the overwhelming pain scorching through his breast. "Aaargh!" Turning onto his side, he curled into the fetal position. He pressed his bound hands to his throat and allowed shuddering sobs to wrack his body. The control he'd managed for the last two months

evaporated in an instant and animal-like groans and whimpers escaped him as he cried like he'd never cried before. He cried for his family, for his lover, for his life.

An eternity later, his eyes stinging from the strain, his whole face wet with tears and snot, he lay there exhausted, feeling completely empty. When the man pressed a small wet towel into his hand, he whispered, "Grazie," one of the few Italian words he knew. He cleaned himself up. Aching, he turned around and rose on one elbow, taking in the full view of his company for the first time: a very young Italian in civilian clothes with the dark complexion of a man who worked in the sun. He had dark brown eyes, a tumble of black curls on his head, and it appeared he'd gone several days without a shave. There were no weapons visible and only an old, battered backpack nearby completed the picture.

"Do you understand me?" Julian asked slowly in German.

"Yes, my family originates from Tyrol," the young man answered in the same language. "I am Romeo Cantone, a wandering toolmaker and mechanic," Romeo extended a guileless hand, but when Julian raised his—still bound together—the Italian cast his eyes down, a renewed blush rising to his cheeks. "Sorry for binding you, but I didn't know what you would do when you woke up."

"You did a good job waking me—" Julian smiled—"somewhat Sleeping Beauty style..."

"I...I..." blushing more than ever, Romeo stumbled for words. His explanation rushed out in such a confusing mix of Italian and German that Julian's eyebrows climbed toward his hairline as he tried to process the message. He was fairly sure he had caught the words trying, never, beautiful and lust. When Romeo at last fell silent, Julian sorted the jumble of speech in his head and came to the astonishing conclusion that he had just been propositioned. His first reaction was: *No way! I can't!*

But all of a sudden Julian's mind raced: He was free for the first time in his life, no school, no meetings with the Hitler Youth, he had no more family—that gave him a jolt of pain—and he had no reason to return to his unit, which obviously had given him up as dead. That left him in the company of a sweet and flustered—probably inexperienced—young man, clearly intent on having a sexual encounter. He realized there was no longer anything holding him back from following his deepest desires. He struggled to kneel, took a deep breath and looked the younger man in the eye. Carefully he asked,

“You want to have sex?” Romeo nodded.

“You want to have sex...with me?” Julian enquired further. Another nod. “I might be a terrible person—a murderer and sadist, how can you ask me—a complete stranger—to do these things with you?”

Humbled by that frank—if naïve—response, Julian nodded. A sensual smile hovered on his lips as he held out his bindings.

“Free me.”

And Romeo did, in more ways than one.

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Brixen, Tyrol, May 1945

Office of Registration

Release of new identification papers for:

Julian Cantone

Form of identification:

Birth certificate: None

Marriage certificate: None

Other means of identification:

Witness 1: Romeo Cantone

Witness 2: Anton Cantone

Witness 3: Paolo Cesare

By the authority of

J. Schmidt, appointed by US Headquarter