

The Last Don
Mario Puzo

A week after the death of Athena's violent, vengeful ex-husband, Boz Skannet. Cross De Lena received a dinner invitation to Athena Aquitane's house in Malibu through his sister Claudia.

Cross flew from Vegas to Los Angeles, rented a car, and arrived at the Malibu Colony guarded gatehouse as the sun began to fall into the ocean. There was no longer any special security, as there had been when Boz was threatening Athena's life, though there was still the secretary in the guest house who checked and buzzed him in. He walked through the longitudinal garden to the house on the beach. There was still the little South American maid, who led him to the sea green living room that seemed just out of reach of the Pacific Ocean waves.

Athena was waiting for him, and she was even more beautiful than he remembered. She was dressed in a pale green blouse and slacks, and she seemed to melt and become part of the mist over the ocean behind her. He could not take his eyes off her. She shook his hand in greeting, not the usual Hollywood kiss on both cheeks. She had drinks ready, and she handed him one. It was Evian water with lime. They sat in the large mint green upholstered chairs that faced the ocean. The descending sun scattered gold coins of light in the room.

Cross was so aware of her beauty that he had to bow his head to avoid looking at her. The golden helmet of hair, the creamy skin, the wax her long body sprawled in her chair. Some of the gold coins fell into her green eyes, fleeting shadows. He felt a kill urgent desire to touch her, to be closer to her, to own her.

Athena seemed unaware of the emotions she was causing. She sipped her drink and said quietly, "I wanted to thank you for keeping me in the movie business. Boz had me so terrified. I never would have returned to the set of Messalina."

The sound of her voice further entranced Cross. It was not sultry or inviting. But it had such a velvet tone and regal confidence, yet it was so warm that he just wanted her to keep talking. Jesus Christ, he thought, that the hell is this? He was ashamed of her power over him. His head still down, he murmured. "I thought I could get you back to work by appealing to your greed."

"That is not one of my many weaknesses," Athena said. Now she turned her head from the ocean so that she could look directly into his eyes. "Your sister Claudia told me the studio reneged on their deal with you to become a producer once my former husband killed himself. You had to give them back the picture and settle for a percentage."

Cross kept his face impassive. He hoped to banish everything he was feeling about her. "I guess I'm not a very good businessman," he said. He wanted to give her the impression that he was ineffective.

"Molly Flanders wrote your contract," Athena said. "She's the best lawyer in Hollywood. You could have held on."

Cross shrugged. "A matter of politics. I wanted to get into the movie business permanently but didn't want enemies as powerful as LoddStone Studios."

"I could help you," Athena said. "I could refuse to return to the picture."

Cross felt a thrill that she would do that for him. He considered the offer. The studio might still take him to court, and he had too many Mafia connections to hide for that. Also, he could not bear to be in Athena's debt. And then it occurred to him that although Athena was beautiful, that didn't mean she was not clever.

"Why would you do that?" he asked.

Athena got up from her chair and moved to stand close to the picture window. The beaches were gray shadows, the sun had disappeared, and the ocean seemed to reflect the mountain ranges behind her house and the Pacific Coast Highway. She gazed out toward the now blue-black water, the small waves rippling slyly. She did not turn her head to him when she said, "Why would I do that? Simply because I knew Boz Skannet better than anybody. And I don't care if he left a hundred suicide notes, he would never kill himself."

Cross shrugged. "Dead is dead," he said.

"That's true," Athena said. She turned to face him, looked directly at him. "You buy the picture because LoddStone wants out since I refuse to be in it anymore. Then suddenly Boz commits suicide. You're my candidate as the killer." Even stern, her face was so beautiful to Cross that his voice was not as steady as he would have wished.

"How about the studio?" Cross said.

Athena shook her head. "They understood what I was asking. Just as you did. I would never have been safe as long as Boz was alive. They just didn't want to get involved with murder so they sold the picture to you. They didn't care if I was killed after the picture was finished, but you did. And I knew you would help me even when you said you couldn't. When I heard about your buying the picture, I knew exactly what you would do, but I must say I didn't think you could do it so cleverly."

Suddenly, she came toward him, and he rose from his chair, took her hands in his. He could smell her body, her breath.

Athena said, "That was the only evil thing I have ever done in my life. Making somebody commit murder. It was terrible. I would have been a much better person if I had done it myself. But I couldn't."

Cross said, "Why were you so sure I would do something?"

Athena said, "Your sister told me so much about you. I understood who you were, but she's so naive, she still hasn't caught on about your connections.' She thinks you're just a tough guy with a lot of clout."

Cross became very alert. She was trying to get him to admit guilt. Something he would never do even to a priest, not even to himself.

Athena said, "And the way you looked at me. A lot of men looked at me that way. I'm not being immodest; I know I'm beautiful people have been telling me that since I was a child. I always knew I had power, but I could never really understand it. I'm not really happy with it, but I use it - what they call love."

Cross let go of her hands. "Why were you so afraid of your husband? Because he could ruin your career?"

For one moment, there was a flash of anger in her eyes. "It wasn't my career," she said, "and it wasn't out of fear, though I knew he would kill me. I had a better reason." She paused, then said, "I can make them give you the picture back. I understand why you didn't want to go to court when they took it back from you. You wanted to protect those 'connections.' But I can get the movie back for you by simply refusing to be in it again."

"No," Cross said.

Athena smiled and said with a brilliant, gay cheerfulness, "Then we can just go to bed together. I find you very attractive, and I'm sure well have a good time."

His first reaction was one of anger, that she would think she could just buy him off. That she was acting a part, using her skill as a woman the same way a man would use physical force. But what really bothered him was that he could hear a faint bit of mockery in her voice mockery of his gallantry, turning his true love into a simple screw. As if she was telling him that his love for her was as fake as her love for him.

He said to her coolly, "I had a long talk with Boz, trying to make a deal. He said he used to f--- you five times a day when you were married."

He was pleased that she seemed startled. She said, "I wasn't counting. but it was a lot. I was eighteen, and I really loved him. Isn't it funny that now I wanted him dead?" She frowned a moment and said casually, "What else did you talk about?"

Cross looked at her grimly. "Boz told me the terrible secret you had between you. He claims you confessed that when you ran away, you buried your baby in the desert."

Athena's face became a mask. Her green eyes went dull. For the first time that night, Cross felt she could not possibly be acting. Her face had a parlor no actress could achieve. She whispered to him, "Do you really believe I murdered my baby?"

"Boz said that's what you told him," Cross said.

"I did tell him that," Athena said. "Now, I'm asking you again. Do you believe I murdered my baby?"

There is nothing so terrible as to condemn a beautiful woman. Cross knew that if he answered truthfully, he would lose her forever. Suddenly, he put his arms around her very gently. "You're too beautiful. Nobody as beautiful as you could do that." Men's eternal worship of beauty against all evidence. "No," he said. "I don't believe you did."

She stepped away from him. "Even though I'm responsible for Boz's death?"

"You're not responsible," Cross said. "He killed himself."

Athena was gazing at him intently. He took her hands. "Do you believe I killed Boz?" he asked.

And then Athena smiled, an actress who finally realized how to play a scene. "No more than you believe I killed my baby."

They smiled; they had declared each other innocent. She took his hand and said, "Now, I'm cooking dinner for you, and then we're going to bed." She led him into the kitchen. How many times had she played this scene? Cross thought jealously. The beautiful queen performing housewifely duties like an ordinary woman. He watched her cook. She wore no protective clothing, and she was extraordinarily professional. She spoke to him as she chopped vegetables, prepared a skillet, and set the table. She gave him a bottle of wine to open, holding his hand and brushing against his body. She saw him looking with admiration when the table was laden after just a half hour.

She said, "I played a female chef in one of my first roles, so I went to school to get everything right. And one critic wrote. `When Athena Aquitane acts as well as she cooks, she will be a star.'"

They ate in the alcove of the kitchen so they could look at the rolling ocean. The food was delicious, little squares of beef covered with vegetables and then a salad of bitter greens. There was a platter of cheeses and warm short loaves of bread, plump as pigeons. Then there was espresso with a small, light lemon tart.

"You should have been a cook." Cross said. "My cousin Vincent would hire you for his restaurants any day."

"Oh, I could have been anything," Athena said with mock boastfulness.

All through dinner, she had touched him casually in a way that was sexual, as if she were searching for some spirit in his flesh. With every touch, Cross yearned to feel her body on his. By the end of the meal he no longer could taste what he was eating. Finally, they were done, and Athena took him by the hand and led him out of the kitchen and up the two flights of stairs to her bedroom. She did it gracefully, almost shyly, almost blushing, as if she were an eager, virginal bride. Cross marveled at her acting ability.

The large bedroom was at the very top of the house and had a small balcony that looked out over the ocean. The walls were covered with weird, garish paintings that seemed to light up the room.

They stood on the balcony and watched the room illuminate the beach sand with a spooky yellow glow, the other Malibu houses squatted along the water showing little boxes of light. Tiny birds, as if playing a game, ran in and out of the incoming waves to escape getting wet.

Athena put her hand on Cross's shoulder, around his body, the other hand reaching out to pull his mouth down to hers. They kissed for a long time as the warm ocean air washed over them. Then Athena led him inside the bedroom.

She undressed quickly, slipping out of her pale green blouse and slacks. Her white body flashed in the moon-ridden darkness. She was as beautiful as he had imagined. The rising breasts with their raspberry nipples seemed spun of sugar. Her long legs, the curve of her hips, the blonde hair at her crotch, her absolute stillness, limned by misty ocean air.

Cross reached out for her body, and her flesh was velvet, her lips filled with the scent of flowers. The sheer joy of touching her was so sweet, he could not do anything else.

Athena began to undress him. She did so gently, running her hands over his body as he had over hers. Then, kissing him, she gently pulled him onto the bed.

Cross made love with a passion he had never known or even dreamed existed. He was so urgent that Athena had to stroke his face to gentle him. He could not let loose of her body, even after they climaxed. They lay intertwined until they began again. She was even more ardent than before, as if it was some sort of contest, some sort of avowal. Finally, they both drifted off into slumber.

Cross awoke just as the sun showed above the horizon. For the first time in his life, he had a headache. Naked, he moved onto the balcony and sat on one of the straw chairs. He watched the sun slyly rise slowly from the ocean and begin its ascent to the sky.

She was a dangerous woman: the murderer of her own child, whose bones were now filled with desert sand. And she was too skillful in bed. She could be the end of him. At that moment, he decided he would never see her again.

Then he felt her arms around his neck, and his face twisted around to kiss her. She was in a fluffy white bathrobe, and her hair was held in place by pins that glittered like jewels in a crown. "Take a shower, and I'll make you breakfast before you go," she said.

She led him into the double bathroom: two sinks, two marble counters, two bathtubs, and two showers. It was stocked with men's toilet articles: razors, shaving cream, skin toners, brushes, and combs.

When he had finished and was out on the balcony again, Athena brought a tray with croissants, coffee, and orange juice to the table. "I can make you bacon and eggs," she said.

"This is fine," Cross said.

"When will I see you again?" Athena asked.

"I have lots of things to do in Las Vegas," Cross said. "I'll call you next week."

Athena gave him an appraising look. "That means goodbye, doesn't it?" she asked. "And I really enjoyed last night."

Cross shrugged. "You paid off your obligation," he said.

She gave him a good-humored grin and said, "And with amazing goodwill don't you think? It wasn't begrudging."

Cross laughed. "No," he said.

She seemed to read his mind. Last night, they had lied to each other; this morning, the lies had no power. She seemed to know that her beauty was too much for him to trust. That he felt in danger with Athena and her confessed sins. She seemed deep in thought and ate silently. Then she said to him, "I know you're busy, but I have something to

show you. Can you spare this morning and catch an afternoon plane? It's important. I want to take you someplace."

Cross could not resist spending one last time with her, and so he said yes.

Athena drove them in her car, a Mercedes SL 300, and took the highway south to San Diego. But just before they reached the city, she turned off onto a thin road that led inland through the mountains.

In fifteen minutes, they came to a compound enclosed by barbed wire. Inside the compound were six red brick buildings separated by green lawns and connected by sky blue-painted walkways. In one of the green squares, a group of about twenty children were playing with a soccer ball. On another green, about ten children were flying kites. There was a group of three or four adults standing around watching them, but something seemed odd about the scene. When the soccer ball flew through the air, it seemed most of the children ran away from it, while on the other square, the kites flew up, up, into the sky and never returned.

"What is this place?" Cross asked.

Athena looked pleadingly at him. "Just come with me, please, for now. Later, you can ask your questions."

Athena drove to the entry gate and showed a gold ID badge to the security guard.

Passing through, she drove to the largest building and parked.

Once inside at the reception desk, Athena asked the attendant something in a low voice. Cross stood back, but he still heard the answer. "She was in a mood, so we gave her a hug in her room."

"What the hell was that," Cross asked.

But Athena didn't answer. She took his hand and led him through a long, shiny tile hallway to an adjoining building and into some sort of dormitory.

A nurse sitting at the entrance asked their names. When she nodded, Athena led Cross down another long hallway of doors. Finally, she opened one.

They were standing in a pretty bedroom, large and full of light. There were the same strange, dark paintings as on the walls in Athena's bedroom, but here they were strewn on the floor. On the wall, a small shelf held a row of pretty dolls dressed in starched Amish costumes. Also on the floor were several other scraps of drawings and paintings. There was a small bed covered with a fuzzy pink blanket, the pillows white with red roses stitched all over them. But there was no child in the bed.

Athena walked toward a large box that was open at the top, its walls and base covered with a thick, soft pad colored light blue, and when Cross looked inside, he saw the child lying there. She didn't notice them. She was fiddling with a knob at the head of the box, and Cross watched as she forced the pads together, almost crushing herself.

She was a small girl of ten, a tiny copy of Athena, but without emotion, devoid of all expression, and her green eyes were as unseeing as those of a porcelain doll. Yet each time she turned the controls to make the panels squeeze her tight, her face shone with complete serenity. She did not acknowledge Athena and Cross in any way.

Athena moved toward the top of the wooden box. She switched the controls so that she could lift the child out of the box. The child seemed to weigh almost nothing.

Athena held her like an infant and bent her head to kiss the child's cheek, but the child flinched and pulled away.

"It's your mommy," Athena said. "Won't you give me a kiss?"

The tone of her voice broke Cross's heart. It was an abject pleading, but now the child was churning wildly within her arms. Finally, Athena gently put her down on the floor.

The child scrambled to her knees and immediately picked up a box of paints and a huge cardboard sheet. Completely absorbed, she began to paint.

Cross stood back and watched as Athena tried all her acting skill to establish a rapport with the child. First, she kneeled down next to the little girl and was the loving playmate helping her daughter paint, but the child took no notice.

Athena then sat up and tried to be a confiding parent, telling the child what was happening in the world. Then Athena became a fawning adult praising the child's paintings. To all this, the child merely kept moving away. Athena picked up one of the brushes and tried to help, but when the child did see, she grabbed the brush away. She never said a word.

Finally, Athena gave up.

"I'll come back tomorrow, darling," she said. I'll take you for a ride, and I'll bring a new paint box. See," she said, tears welling in her eyes, "you're running out of reds." She tried to give the child a farewell kiss but was held away by two small, beautiful hands.

Then Athena rose and led Cross out of the room.

Athena gave him the keys to the car so he could drive back to Malibu. and during the ride, she held her head in her hands and wept. Cross was so stunned, he could not say a word.

When they got out of the car, Athena seemed to have control of herself. She pulled Cross into the house and then turned and faced him. "That was the baby I told Boz I buried in the desert. Now do believe me?" And for the first time, Cross really believed she might love him.

Athena led him into the kitchen and made coffee. They sat in the alcove to watch the ocean. As they drank their coffee. Athena started speaking. She talked casually, no emotion in her voice or on her face.

"When I ran away from Boz, I left my baby with some distant cousins, a married couple in San Diego. She seemed like a normal baby. I didn't know she was autistic then; maybe she wasn't. I left her there because I was determined to be a successful actress. I had to make money for both of us. I was sure I was talented, and God knows everybody told me how beautiful I was. I always thought that when I was successful I could take my baby back.

"So I worked in Los Angeles and visited her in San Diego whenever I could. Then I began to break through. and I didn't see her that often, maybe once a month. Finally. when I was ready to bring her home, I went to her third birthday party with all kinds of presents, but Bethany seemed to have slipped into another world. She was a blank. I couldn't reach her at all. I was frantic. I thought maybe she had a brain tumor; I remembered when Boz had let her fall on the floor. Maybe her brain had been injured and it was now beginning to show. For months after that, I brought her to doctors. and she underwent a battery of tests of all kinds. I took her to specialists, and they checked everything. Then someone - and I don't remember whether it was the doctor in Boston or the psychiatrist in Texas Children's Hospital - told me she was autistic. I didn't even know what that meant except that I thought it was some kind of retardation. `No,' the doctor said. It meant she lived in her own world, was unaware of other people's existence, had no interest in them, could feel nothing for anything or anyone. It was when I brought her to the clinic here to be close to me that we found she could respond to that hugging machine you saw. That seemed to help, so I had to leave her there."

Cross sat without a word while Athena continued. "Being autistic meant she could never love me. But the doctors told me some autistic people are talented, even geniuslike. And I think Bethany is a genius. Not only with her painting but something else. The doctors tell me that after many years of hard training, some autistic people can be taught to care for somethings then some people. A few can even live a near-normal life. Right now,

Bethany can't stand listening to music or any noise. But at first, she couldn't bear to have me touch her. and now she's learned to tolerate me, so she's better than she used to be. "She still rejects me but not as violently. We've made some progress. I used to think it was punishment for my neglect of her because I wanted to be a success. But the specialists say that sometimes though it seems hereditary, it can be acquired, but they don't know what really makes it happen. The doctors told me it had nothing to do with Boz dropping her on her head or me deserting her, but I don't know if I believe that. They kept trying to reassure me that we were not responsible, that it was one of the mysteries of life, maybe it was preordained. They insisted nothing could have prevented it from happening and nothing can ever change it. But again, something inside me refuses to believe any of that.

"Even when I first found out, I thought about it constantly. I had to make some hard decisions. I knew I would be helpless to rescue her until I made a lot of money. So I put her in the clinic and visited her at least one weekend a month and some weekdays. Finally, I got rich, I was famous, and nothing that mattered before mattered any longer. All I wanted was to be with Bethany. Even if this hadn't happened, I was going to quit after Messalina anyway."

"Why?" Cross asked. "What were you going to do?"

"There's a special clinic in France with this great doctor," Athena explained. "And I was going to go there after the picture. Then Boz showed up, and I knew he would kill me and Bethany would be all alone. That's why I used you to sort of put a contract out on him. She had nobody but me. And well, I'll bear that sin." Athena paused now and smiled at Cross. "It's worse than the soaps, isn't it?" she said with a small smile.

Cross looked out over the ocean. It was a very bright oily blue in the sunlight. He remembered the little girl and her blank, masklike face that would never open up to this world.

"What was that box she was lying in?" he asked.

Athena laughed. "That's what gives me hope," she said. "Sad, isn't it? It's a hug box. A lot of autistic children use it when they get depressed. It's just like a hug from a person, but they don't have to connect or relate to another human being." Athena took a deep breath and said, "Cross, someday I'm going to take the place of that box. That's the whole purpose of my life now. My life has no meaning except for that. Isn't that funny? The studio tells me that I get thousands of letters from people who love me. In public, people want to touch me. Men keep telling me they love me. Everybody but Bethany, and she's the only one I want."

Cross said, "I'll help you in any way I can."

"Then call me next week," Athena said. "Let's be together as much as we can until Messalina is finished."

"I'll call" Cross said. "I can't prove my innocence, but I love you more than anything in my life."

"And are you truly innocent?" Athena asked.

"Yes," Cross said. Now that she had been proved innocent, he could not bear for her to know the truth about him.

Cross thought about Bethany, her blank face so artistically beautiful with its sharp planes, its mirror eyes: the rare human being totally free of sin.

As for Athena, she had been judging Cross. Of all the people she knew, he was the only one who had ever seen her daughter since the child had been diagnosed as autistic. It had been a test.

One of the greatest shocks of her life came when she found out that though she was so beautiful though she was so talented (and she thought, with self-mockery, so kind, so

gentle, so generous), her closest friends, men who loved her, and relatives who adored her sometimes seemed to relish her misfortunes.

When Boz had given her a black eye - though everyone called Boz a no-good bastard - she caught in all of them a fleeting look of satisfaction. But when Boz had given her the second black eye, she caught those looks again. And she had been terribly hurt. For this time, she had understood completely.

Of course they all loved her, she did not doubt that. But it seemed no one could resist a little touch of malice. Greatness in any form arouses envy.

One of the reasons she loved Claudia was because she had never betrayed her with that look.

It was why she kept Bethany so secret from her day-to-day life. She hated the idea that people she loved would have that fleeting look of satisfaction, that she had been punished for her own beauty.

So though she knew the power of her beauty and used that power, she despised it. She longed for the day when lines would cut deep into her perfect face, each showing a path she had taken, a journey survived; when her body would fill out, soften, and enlarge her to provide comfort for those she'd hold and care for and when her eyes would grow more liquid with mercy from all the suffering she'd witnessed and all the tears she'd never shed. She'd grow smile lines around her mouth from laughing at herself and at life itself. How free she would be when she no longer feared the consequences of her physical beauty and instead delighted in its loss as it was replaced by a more enduring serenity. And so she had kept careful watch on Cross De Lena when he met Bethany, saw his slight recoil at first but then, afterward, nothing. She knew he was helplessly in love with her, and she saw that he did not have that certain look of satisfaction when he knew of her misfortune with Bethany.