

Rosa Di Fiore is a fugitive — but it's the law that is hiding her. The mafia wants her dead before her story of love, lust and betrayal puts 100 of them behind bars. Mark Franchetti spent 18 months persuading her to tell her story for the first time...

THE WORLD'S MOST WANTED WOMAN

My life is easy to sum up. I was born in an impoverished small town in southern Italy. At 18 I married into the Tarantino family, a local drug-trafficking clan. My husband and most of his seven brothers were drug dealers, and for as long as I can remember the Tarantino were in and out of jail. People feared and respected them. But they had one rival: the Ciavarrella family, our town's main mafia clan.

There had been bad blood between the families ever since the day 26 years ago that the eldest Tarantino brother gunned down five Ciavarrella, including a three-year-old child. He got life, but their bodies were never found. It is said he dispensed of them in a most macabre way.

I had three children with my husband, but he was rarely home. One year he was arrested four times. Another year he was on the run from the police for months. I still find it hard to explain, but during that time I fell in love with a Ciavarrella. I knew I was playing with fire, but I couldn't stop myself. We started seeing each other secretly and, before I knew it, I had switched families.

When people found out, the blood started flowing again. My lover's father was the first one killed. They said he was shot by the Tarantino to restore their family honour — sullied by my betrayal. But I always thought it had more to do





Rosa Di Fiore faces a life in hiding after making the decision to testify against two criminal families. The above image was posed by a model

father, my lover went after the Tarantino and killed seven people in less than a year. Three of them were my ex-brothers-in-law.

Trapped in that world for 15 years, I knew the darkest secrets of both families. The drug deals, the racketeering, the murders – I had seen it all. I knew where they hid the money, the heroin, the weapons. And, on one occasion, my lover had even forced me to drive him to a hit.

I had a child by him too, but by then I wanted out. He beat me and kept me locked up. I was tired of listening to the Ciavarrella clan talking, over dinner, about their next killing. I would not allow my own four children to grow into criminals like their fathers. And I do not want them one day to start the killing again because they are from rival families.

For the mafia there is no greater crime than breaking *l'omerta*, its strict code of silence. But I wanted a new life, for me and my children. So I did the unthinkable for someone from this world. I turned against both families and told anti-mafia investigators everything I know. Now I am the main witness in an ongoing trial against over 100 people tied to both clans. My former husband, the last of the Tarantino brothers to survive, was investigated for drugs offences. My lover and his brother have been sentenced to life for murder. They are in jail – as are their mother and uncles. Even their sister was put on trial. I have testified against all of them in court.

As for me, I am protected by the state now and have been spirited far away from my home town to a secret place. I will live here, they tell me, under a false identity for the rest of my life. I tell my four children they all have the same father and will claim that he died not long ago – of cancer.

My name is Rosa Lidia Di Fiore. They call me Rosa. I am 33 years old.

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I was born in Cagnano Varano, a village of only a few thousand people. It's a poor place where most people live off the land. When I was three my parents left to work in a factory in Germany. They put me and my sister into a boarding school run by nuns, away from my region of Puglia.

The family went back to Cagnano when I was 11. After my compulsory education I signed up at the art institute in the town next door, Sannicandro Garganico, a 20-minute drive from us. There I first met Pietro Tarantino. I was 14.

My parents were hard up and I was forced to drop out of art school less than a year later to pick vegetables. I earned less than 10 pounds a day. It was backbreaking work. I started seeing Pietro. He was 17, the youngest of 13 Tarantino brothers and sisters. He was cool and drove cars and motorbikes. He had money and people treated him with respect and fear – because of his name. For in Sannicandro, everyone knew La Famiglia Tarantino. I soon found out why when my girlfriends told me about Giuseppe, the eldest of the Tarantino brothers. “*E un ergastolano*,” they’d say. He’s a boss serving a life sentence – for five murders. It happened in 1981, when Giuseppe was 25. The Tarantino were big



Top: crowds of onlookers gather near the body of Antonio Tarantino, gunned down in Sannicandro Garganico in 2003. Left: the body of the local underworld figure Daniele

Scanzano, who police say was murdered by Matteo Ciavarrella (above). Rosa Di Fiore, Matteo's mistress, says she drove her lover to the hit. Above left: Pietro Tarantino, Di Fiore's husband

They killed his wife and three of their children, including a baby girl. I heard they were fed to the pigs

landowners. They had hundreds of hectares of fields and large goat herds. Their farm borders that of Sannicandro's other big local landowners – the Ciavarrella. For decades the two families lived in peace, but then something happened. Nobody really knows what caused it, but relations soured. Years later I heard there had been some dispute over land. In a fit of rage, Giuseppe killed the head of the Ciavarrella family, his wife, and three of their children, including a little baby girl. Their bodies were never found, but I heard they were fed to the pigs – as they are said to be so ferocious once they taste human flesh that they leave no trace behind.

“Stay away from the Tarantino,” my girlfriends used to say. But I was only 14 and I guess I was

attracted by the fact that this was a family people took seriously. When people heard I was the girlfriend of a Tarantino, they treated me with greater respect. It made an impression on me.

I was too young to ask myself questions about Pietro's lifestyle, but I soon realised he was a drug dealer. I began spending time with all sorts of shady characters. People around me talked about rates, grams and “cutting”. I was 15 when I first saw heroin. Before I knew it, Pietro started taking me with him when he'd drive out to buy the latest consignment. He used to give me heroin and cash to hide on me in case the police pulled us over, as they were less likely to search me.

When I became pregnant, Pietro and I were quickly married, because where I come from premarital sex is not something you flaunt. I moved to Sannicandro, into a building owned by the Tarantino. We lived upstairs while his brother Antonio's family were downstairs.

The Tarantino was a large clan, but two things united it: hatred of the Ciavarrella and deep respect for Giuseppe – *Pergastolano*. The animosity between the two clans was such that once the Tarantino women – my sisters-in-law – ➤➤➤

came to blows with the Ciavarrella women in the centre of Sannicandro. Both families were feared and equally powerful. Everyone knew it. You didn't mess with either of them.

As I was not from Sannicandro, it fell to my sisters-in-law to educate me. Whenever I went out with the Tarantino women they would point out anyone related to the Ciavarrella, to teach me who to avoid. It was like an initiation ritual.

I had three children with Pietro. His heroin business grew and we were well off. Later we sent our children to a school run by nuns. We paid for it with drugs money – it seemed normal at the time. But soon Pietro was arrested. It's what I remember most of my years with him. He was always in and out of jail, on the run or under house arrest. So were most of his brothers. Drug trafficking, racketeering or armed robberies.

I told Pietro to stop dealing. We had a better life than most in town and there was no need, but he liked the life. People feared and respected him. I used to visit him in jail, but it was tough being alone. I had money, but too many problems and too little support from the Tarantino clan.

Once, a few years earlier, during my engagement to Pietro, a girlfriend pointed out a young man as we strolled in Sannicandro. "That's Matteo Ciavarrella. He's going places. Real cute, don't you think?" Yes he's cute, I thought.

I next saw him long after my wedding when he came to see Pietro at the *masseria*, our farm. He was in his twenties. I was surprised to see him there, considering the relations between the families. But somehow Pietro and Matteo were the only members of the clans not to be sworn enemies. It was a situation both families disapproved of.

Matteo was the eldest of four siblings. The five Ciavarrella who died at Giuseppe Tarantino's hands were his grandparents, uncles and aunt. Even to me it was mystifying that he should have no problem spending time with the brother of a man who had wiped out half his family.

I didn't trust him, and warned Pietro, but he truly believed that the two could have amicable relations. They had one thing in common: drug trafficking. They didn't do deals together as they belonged to rival clans, but the "*piazza*", the drug turf, was big enough for both. I was mistrustful, but there was one thing I liked about Matteo. He always looked great – a trendy dresser – the ultimate narcissist. And very handsome.

Pietro was on the run from the police for most of 2002. I used to go see him in his hide-out, but our relationship soured. This was no life, and I wanted a divorce. It was during those difficult months that one day a girlfriend of mine gave me a mobile-phone number scribbled on a piece of paper. Matteo wants you to call him, she said. He wants to get to know you. I knew I should not call. But I was curious, so I dialled his number.

"Meet me outside the village. Nobody will spot you there," said Matteo. In my part of the world that could be enough to start a blood feud. A married woman has no male friends. Unless he's family, you do not go out with another man alone. And if you are the wife of a Tarantino, you



MARRIED TO THE MOBS

It took over 18 months of negotiations with Italian authorities to secure a meeting with Di Fiore. Not even her lawyer is allowed to know where she is living under her new identity. She was escorted to our interview in a bulletproof sedan by two armed policemen and three carabinieri in a second car. When she is called upon to give evidence in court she does so via a video link. Her face is hidden.

She has strong features. Dark hair and thick black eyebrows. But her eyes are strikingly blue. She is down to earth and streetwise. And hard. Someone who's suffered and seen it all.

Di Fiore is not the first woman to put her life on the line by breaking ranks with the Italian mafia. But to betray one family for its rival clan, and then turn against both by denouncing them to the police, is unheard of. It breaks the most sacred unwritten rules of Italy's criminal clans: loyalty, obedience, secrecy.

A hit man has also testified, but she is the only insider to know so much to speak out. The mafia prosecutor in the trial described her as 'priceless' and as one of the best witnesses in his career. Her choice comes at a price, though. It is not just the mafia death sentence hanging over her head. So honest was her testimony that she implicated herself as well as the Tarantino and the Ciavarrella. Prosecutors had no choice but to charge her, when hearing that she had driven her lover to a hit. Di Fiore will almost certainly face a reduced prison sentence.

do not want to be seen alone with a Ciavarrella man. But I couldn't resist. I'll meet him just the once to see what he wants, I told myself. We drove far away to reduce the risk of anyone seeing us. Matteo parked on a cliff overlooking the sea. Then we kissed for the first time.

We started seeing each other, secretly. We knew it was dangerous, but we fell in love. Matteo made me feel attractive again, and after all those difficult years with Pietro, I loved the attention. I knew he came from a powerful family, the kind people talk about in hushed tones, but it was only later that I truly understood what sort of people the Ciavarrella are. We were very careful, but in a small town like

ours it was inevitable – sooner or later people found out that the wife of a Tarantino was having an affair with a Ciavarrella. Even Pietro, who was in jail again, learnt of the affair.

I received no threats, but the Tarantino clan began to shun me. Instead of confronting me or Matteo, they went to Antonio Ciavarrella, his father and the clan's *capo famiglia*. A small delegation of Tarantino women complained to him about the relationship and demanded he put a stop to it. It was a matter of honour, they said. He ordered Matteo to break off the affair, but his son was impulsive, hot tempered and emotional. He refused, and the two had a row. We kept on seeing each other, discreetly. But the die was cast.

I started spending time in the Ciavarrella household. Matteo lived with his parents, brothers and sister. It was a close-knit clan. It was clear from day one that his mother, Maria Cursio, was a tough woman who had much influence over her children. Matteo, her eldest boy, was her favourite. When she spoke, the clan listened.

This was a criminal family. One of Matteo's uncles, a fat guy known as "Michele the Cow", was in jail for trafficking. At home everyone knew of or was involved in the heroin trade. Drugs and money were kept hidden behind the central-heating control panel. Matteo kept his handguns concealed in the dog's kennel and the shotguns and rifles in the garage. Nobody seemed uncomfortable about the heroin stash. You could come into the kitchen and see Maria helping her sons, carefully cutting and weighing the stuff and dividing it into single hits ready for sale.

In Sannicandro, Matteo's authority was growing. There were stores where he shopped for free, and if a car was stolen the owner would pay him a fee to help retrieve it. He forged links with other mafia groups. They did drug deals with Matteo and would later even swap assassins.

Life changed for good on November 27, 2002. I was still living at Pietro's, when Matteo rang hysterical. "*L'hanno ammazzato*" – "They've killed him." "*Hanno ammazzato Papa*," he screamed.

Antonio Ciavarrella was shot several times, and it was Matteo who found his dead body at the gates of the family farm. His body was left sprawled across the border between the Ciavarrella and Tarantino lands. For Matteo and the clan there was no mistaking the message: it was a declaration of war. Everyone agreed: Antonio Ciavarrella had been killed by the Tarantino to put right the offence to their name Matteo caused by "stealing" the wife of a Tarantino. As the *capo famiglia*, people reasoned, it was Antonio who had to die. I thought there was more to it, but my doubts were irrelevant. What mattered was that the Ciavarrella firmly believed the head of the family had been gunned down by the Tarantino – just like his parents and siblings.

From then on, Matteo was a man obsessed with one thought only – vendetta. His entire family supported him – mother, brothers, sister, uncles – everyone was calling for revenge. One night, only a week after his father's murder, Matteo showed me several rifles rolled ➤➤➤

ROSA DI FIORE: continued

up in a blanket. "Tomorrow, I am going to kill Carmine Tarantino," he said. He told me that on the day of Antonio Ciavarrella's murder, Carmine was spotted walking around Sannicandro in a white T-shirt. Matteo took it as a message that he was rejoicing at Antonio's death.

I was taken aback, but I didn't believe he would kill him. The Matteo I knew was a drug dealer, a racketeer, a mafioso. And yes, he had weapons and could be violent, but he wasn't a cold-blooded killer. Or so I thought until the next morning, when I heard screaming coming from Antonio's home downstairs. There was no need to explain. I knew what had happened. When I saw Matteo that night and asked him if he had killed Carmine, he didn't hesitate. "Yes! *Me lo su manjato*" – I ate him – he said, triumphantly. He told me that he had blown his victim's face away and that he had licked Carmine's warm blood.

I became increasingly scared. The man I loved was a callous murderer. I thought of leaving him, but feared he would kill me. I tried reasoning with him, as I was convinced that his father's death had more to do with the drugs business than our relationship. But he wouldn't listen, and over dinner the Ciavarrella clan discussed Carmine's death. The consensus was that now the guns had started firing, they'd have to fire again and again. Matteo's mother was resolute and relentless in her thirst for more blood. "You see," she told her son. "They put your father in

between four wooden boards while they go to the bar, all happy. They must die. That way they will weep just like we are weeping."

My objections only made my situation worse. "Of course she's against it," Maria shot back. "She's the wife of a Tarantino." I also overheard Matteo's uncle tell him he should keep me as a matter of principle, to test the Tarantino's mettle.

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March 16, 2003 began as a normal day. It ended with me taking part in a murder. I was with Matteo when his brother Marco called. He was at La Dolce Vita, a bar in town where he had bumped into Daniele Scanzano, the right-hand man of Antonio Graziano, a vicious local criminal. Both were close to the Tarantinos, and Matteo was convinced they had a part in his father's killing. "He's looking at me in a funny way", Marco had said on the phone. That's all it took. Matteo was out of his mind. We sped off to his house where he retrieved a gun and a balaclava. "Get behind the wheel," he shouted. He had me drive to a street close to La Dolce Vita. Matteo got out, loaded his gun and slipped on his hood. He told me to wait by the cemetery. Then I heard shots. I could not believe what was happening. I had carried heroin and drugs money. But murder was a different ball game.

Not long after Scanzano's murder I found out that I was pregnant by Matteo. With every passing day I was digging myself into a deeper

hole. I moved in with Matteo, but our relationship went from bad to worse. Crazed, he began to see me not as Rosa Lidia, but as the wife of a Tarantino, and he increasingly sought to make me his accomplice. When he planned a murder he'd tell me in advance and fill me in with the gruesome details of how he'd carried it out. One night we had a row and I told him I wanted to leave him. He cocked his gun and pointed it at my face. He told me that until I gave birth to his child, I wouldn't be going anywhere. He started to beat me and soon began locking me at home when he went out. I had become his war booty.

Less than two months after Matteo killed Scanzano, his boss, Graziano, was gunned down in Cagnano. Matteo carried out at least one hit on behalf of a mafia clan he had links with. Another time he came home agitated. "Quick, let's go for a walk. I need people to see me in town," he said. Later I heard on the news that a couple had been shot dead in a village nearby. Matteo had driven the killer and acted as backup.

After every murder his mother was there, asking him if everything had gone to plan, helping him wash his hands with solvent, making up an alibi. She handled the drugs money, as did her daughter Incoronata. Many times I saw Matteo hand his mother tens of thousands of euros in cash, which she would pay into the bank. Most of it was used to buy more drugs. Once, during a family dinner, she demanded that



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Matteo kill Antonio Tarantino, Pietro's brother. She wanted more blood. "Look at them, those sons of bitches, enjoying life while your father is six feet under. They must die."

Relations between me and the Ciavarrella were odious. To them I was a Tarantino and my sole purpose was to give birth to Matteo's son. Matteo kept me locked up and wouldn't let me see my children, who were at my mother's in Cagnano. He confiscated my money, my ID and driver's licence. He threatened to kill me and the children if I tried leaving him before his child was born. The beatings became more vicious. One night he roughed me up so badly I had to be rushed to hospital. My placenta was damaged and I gave birth more than eight weeks early – to a baby boy the Ciavarrella named Antonio, in memory of Matteo's father. I was still in hospital when Matteo told me that Antonio Tarantino, who for years had lived with his family one floor below me, would be next to die. I told him he was the only Tarantino to have lived an honest life and I was fed up with all this killing. He hit me in the face and called me a "*puttana*" [whore] who's unfit to be the mother of his child. I filed a complaint with the police, who came to interview me in hospital and took pictures of my bruises. Antonio Tarantino, husband and father of three, was gunned down in Sannicandro on November 1, 2003. I have since been asked many times why I did nothing to warn him. But it would have

meant signing my children's death warrant.

Matteo took little Antonio away to his mother. To be with my son I had to move in with the Ciavarrella. Maria did not want me to bring up my own child. She feared he'd grow into a Tarantino. Little Antonio was to be a Ciavarrella through and through.

In less than a year Matteo had killed seven people and by then the police were onto him. His arrest came days after Antonio's murder. The young killer who pulled the trigger on Matteo's orders was arrested and offered a plea-bargaining deal. Matteo was picked up and charged with Antonio's murder but pleaded innocent.

After his arrest his uncle Michele took over the business. The other family members lent a hand, but times were tough and soon their "*piazza*" had to be rented out to another dealer. Maria never let me out of her sight and seeing my other children became hard. In the end, however, that's what saved me. Someone seeking to undermine me during my divorce from Pietro filed a complaint accusing me of abandoning my children. I went to the *carabinieri* to ask about a judgment pending against me and they told me I risked losing custody. I had my back against the wall. I stayed up all night, thinking. I weighed up my life and looked back on the past 15 years. I may not be the best mother. I have made many mistakes, but I love my children. I was tired. I had only one thing on my mind,

one burning desire. To get out. I couldn't take all this killing any more, listening every day to the Ciavarrella talking about their next murder. This was no life for my children. Unless I got out, that is what they would grow into; more Ciavarrellas and more Tarantinos slaughtering each other. I could not allow this to happen. I wanted a new life.

My chance came on March 24, 2004, my eldest son's birthday. For once Matteo's mother relented, allowing me to take little Antonio with me to my mother's for a few hours. Later, the children, my mother and I would be taken into protective custody. I went back to the *carabinieri* and told them I wanted to meet with the region's anti-mafia prosecutor. "I am Rosa Lidia Di Fiore. Wife of Pietro Tarantino. Mistress of Matteo Ciavarrella. I want to talk."

And that's what I did, for days and weeks. I told them everything. At first it didn't come easy – after 15 years on the wrong side of the law, trapped in a world of mafia clans, *l'omerta* becomes second nature. A wave of arrests followed and I gave evidence against both clans.

My life is not easy now. I still have fears. But they are not about the Ciavarrella or the Tarantino. Instead, these are the fears of any ordinary single mother. What will become of my children if something should happen to me? That's the only thing I worry about. My only true fear. As for the Tarantino and the Ciavarrella: they can go to hell ■