

## Prologue

The night before the sale, we had walked across the city hand in hand. London seemed remade. A rare, soft night, the lights strung out along the Embankment a stream of phosphorescence in the river's tail, the still pools of shadow in St James's Park amethyst beneath the summer-heavy trees.

Later, in our bedroom, there was still the ghost of my scent on his mouth when he kissed me. I didn't switch on the light, just opened the window. I wanted to feel the watershed of the sweet, dirty London air as it met the heat of my skin. I straddled his face, feeling the spread of the lips of my cunt around his tongue. Slowly, I leaned back, arching towards the tip of his cock, his hand gripping the tense column of my neck, my bent body a comma of anticipation, suspending us, holding us there, before he flipped me onto the side of my hips so that my legs lay along his chest. He kissed the inside of my ankle as he slid inside me, moving lazily, his fingers splayed across my belly.

*'Ti amo, Judith.'* I love you.

*'Show me.'*

*'Where do you want it?'*

I wanted it everywhere.

*'I want it in my cunt. I want it in my hair, in my throat, on my skin, in my arse. I want every drop of it. I want to drink you, I want to drink your cum.'*

He turned me again, setting me on all fours with my palms against the bedhead. He grabbed my wrist and twisted

it behind my back, pitching me forward into the pillows, slammed into me with all his weight, just one heavy, dull stroke. I spread my legs wider, offering him the wet slash between them.

‘Again?’

Another.

‘Again?’

He knelt back to slide a finger into me, then two, then three.

‘I want to hear you beg for it. Go on. Beg for my cock.’

‘Please. Don’t stop. You have to fuck me. Please.’

‘Good girl.’

I was so soaked I felt him slip when his cock pushed up me again, I reached round under my thigh to cradle his taut balls as he went faster, faster, shoving into the red core of me until I came in one acute, twisting gasp.

‘Now. Turn over and open your mouth.’

Later, I felt for his face in the dark, kissed his eyelids, the sides of his mouth, the sweet hollow under his ear.

‘Can I ask you something?’ My face was in his neck, my lips on the steady, familiar throb of his pulse.

‘Anything, my love.’

‘Just when exactly were you planning to kill me?’

His heart remained quiet. No tension, no reaction. He turned on his elbow above me and set his mouth on mine, a kiss with the warm promise of a bruise.

‘Tomorrow, sweetheart. Or maybe the day after.’

# PART ONE

## PRIMING



# 1

## *Six Months Earlier*

I'd never been to the south of Italy before, and the way things were looking my visit was going to be both short and final. Mainly because Inspector Romero da Silva of the *Guardia di Finanza* was aiming his gun at my heart. We were standing on a beach somewhere in Calabria; more precisely on a concrete platform built into the churning, sulphurous sea. A boxy, rusted container ship was moored about a hundred metres out, connected by a thick rubber pipe to the low cube of the water purification plant next to us. I'd thought about swimming for it but da Silva had already informed me that the currents would have me if he didn't. And although I'd worked out in the past few hours that da Silva's ability to lead a double life made me look like an amateur, I believed him. On the other hand, I get a kick out of risk. And I could see something da Silva couldn't. Over his shoulder, the man who was moving slowly and purposefully towards us along the beach. I doubted he was a random passer-by, since he was holding an assault rifle.

'Either we stop here or you come back with me and we see if we can work together for a while.'

Da Silva's voice was as steady as his hand on the gun.

"'Work together'?" I hissed.

I could have thought, then, of all that I'd done, of all that had happened to bring me here, of all that I'd been and all that I'd become. But I didn't.

‘Go on, then,’ I answered. ‘Do it. Go ahead.’

When the shot came, da Silva looked more surprised than I did, but then this was the second time in a week that someone had tried to kill me. The bullet was not from da Silva’s Caracal, which was still aimed firmly at my chest, but from behind, on the beach. Slowly, maintaining his position, da Silva swivelled his head until he saw the figure at the foot of the cliff. The man had fired in the air, a warning. I was tempted to point out that at least someone round here meant business, but it wasn’t the moment. Faintly, I could smell the powder as it rose to the dull steel of the hard December sky.

‘The girl. Leave the girl!’ the man shouted.

I hissed to da Silva, ‘Can you swim?’

‘The currents,’ da Silva answered slowly. ‘I wasn’t joking about the currents.’

‘Grab me,’ I told him. ‘Move me in front of you. Then use the pipe.’

‘What if he shoots you?’

‘You were just about to shoot me.’

‘The girl!’ The rifle was pointing towards us now. Da Silva lunged forward, seized my shoulder, flipped me against him as he spun as though we were dancing so that we changed places, his back to the pulsing waves. The rifle was now definitely aimed at me. At least that was a change.

‘I told you. Leave her!’ The gun and the man behind it were now advancing down the litter-strewn shingle. Shielding his body with mine, his arm crooked under my chin, da Silva took a step back, then another. One more, and I felt his grip ease, then he released me and a second shot cracked over my head as I hit the concrete flat, palms under my shoulders. A splash, and a long moment of silence. I twisted my head. Da Silva had

told me just moments ago that if I tried to escape the currents would finish me off in minutes, but he'd made it to the pipe. I could just see his locked arms, crunching his body along its length beneath the scurf of the waves. The man on the beach had started running. I had maybe twenty seconds before he reached me, which didn't make for a considered decision. The pipe was to the left, I could reach it in a few strokes. Rolling sideways, I held my breath and let my body drop into the water.

Da Silva hadn't lied. The undertow was so strong I could hear it, a thick, insistent gulping in the swell beneath the thud of the pressurised pipe. The cold would have knocked the breath out of me, but the current had already done that. My heavy down jacket, already a sodden shroud, was tangled over my head. I flailed and clawed, blind with salt and the fatal tremors of panic, broke the surface in time for another bullet, straining desperately for the pipe's ridged curve. I got my leg half over, slimy rubber digging into my face, swaying on the pulse of the contained water, used my teeth to tug the jacket from my shoulder and get my right arm loose. Reaching it back under the pipe for purchase I let my left arm flop free just as a wave hit me full in the face and the musty water sucked the bastard thing off me. I was smaller than da Silva and the pipe was too wide for me to move underneath it for protection and still breathe; I had to hump along half on top, pulling my weight forward with my arms. At least that meant I could see, though when I looked up and saw the man from the beach straddling the pipe where it joined the platform, lining up another shot, I rather wished I couldn't. He fired again, but he wasn't aiming at me. If he needed to get lower, da Silva must be somewhere along the water ahead. The man moved forward tentatively, gripping the thick column Comanche-style

between his thighs. There was no sign of life from the bobbing ship. Were the three of us going to duke it out on the deck, if we made it? I hadn't got anything to defend myself with except the hairclip in the back pocket of the jeans I'd pulled on last night in Venice, when I was convinced da Silva was arresting me for murder. Back when life was relaxing. If I'd had the time, I could have felt quite wistful.

It was a Concorde clip, about four inches long, curved to fasten hair into a chignon. I flexed my icy fingers and tugged it out. *Think, Judith.* The clip was no kind of weapon, even if the gunman allowed me to get close enough to use it. He'd done his bit for chivalry; I doubted he had any profound qualms over collateral damage. I shoved it between my teeth and strained forward, a few further, desperate metres, then slid sideways towards the sea, my legs gripping the pipe, reaching out the clip as I took in a lungful of air. Eyes scrunched tight against the salt, I felt between the stiff ridges with my left hand behind my thigh, then stabbed the clip into the thick rubber of the pipe. It went in clean. Squeezing with all my strength, I pulled it loose.

The pipe cracked violently to the right like the tail of a giant rattlesnake as the compressed water shot free. It bucked me momentarily to the surface before another wave twisted me back under. I tried to reach my arms around it, but it was too thick and I had no grip; it thrashed again and spun me off altogether. A few heaving upward strokes brought me back to the air, though I could feel the insistent tug beneath me, dragging me in the direction of the roiling pipe. There was no sign of the gunman. Gasping, I trod water, hacking burning brine from my throat. The container was still about fifty metres away, but the currents were already pulling me in the



opposite direction at alarming speed. I bobbed helplessly. Any attempt at swimming was futile; already exhausted, encumbered by my clothes, there was nothing to do but drift. Float for a while. As I let my head fall back into the deep, indifferent water, I remember thinking how strange it was that I no longer felt cold.

‘Here! Over here!’

I wondered why I hadn’t heard the engine of the dinghy, but da Silva’s voice was almost swallowed by the swishing shell-song in my head. His cries cut through the odd, soft calm. *Why couldn’t he just give up, just leave me?* At least I could deprive him of the satisfaction. I stopped moving my legs then, and slipped down, into the cradle of the sea.

It was dark when I opened my eyes. That is, it seemed to be night – the clouds were charcoal against brief glimpses of a crescent moon. The cold had woken me. Inside my soaked, sea-stiff clothes, my whole body was trembling, my teeth clattering together like one of those wind-up children’s toys. I seemed to be lying on the board bottom of the dinghy, which bumped painfully against the small of my back each time it bounced over a swell. The hum of the engine drilled icicles into my throbbing ears. A row of LED lights in the stern showed da Silva sitting placidly at the rudder. For a moment, I considered the idea that this might be Hell – maybe I was condemned to cruise the Styx for eternity with da Silva for company? – but the ache in my thighs and the cloying thirst in my throat suggested, disappointingly on the whole, that I was still in the land of the living. I tried to sit and banged my head on the boat’s rear seat. Da Silva turned at the sound.

‘You’re OK, then.’

My bare right arm was stretched uncomfortably above my head; when I tried to move it I felt metal encircling my wrist, chafing the wet skin. Da Silva had cuffed me to the underside of the bench.

‘There’s some water next to you.’

My left hand groped, found a plastic bottle. The Evian tasted better than a ’73 Lafitte.

‘You fucker,’ I remarked conversationally.

‘Why?’

‘I saved your life back there! He could have shot you. He could have shot me instead of you!’

‘I saved you, didn’t I?’

I had to admit there was a certain logic there.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Shut up.’

‘I’m cold.’

‘Shut up.’

I stretched my sore legs as far as they’d go, but there was still a decent gap between da Silva and my feet. Even if I succeeded in kicking him overboard, there was no way I could reach the tiller with the cuff attached. And then? Then I had no money, no phone, no ID. If I reached land, wherever land was, I supposed I could hitch the 700-odd miles back to my flat in Venice. Which currently housed a corpse. Not the most appealing of prospects. Plus I felt appalling – nauseated from swallowing seawater, limbs bruised and aching, freezing in my sodden jeans and T-shirt in the December dark. So here I was, marooned in the middle of nowhere with a crooked Italian cop who’d planned on shooting me hours ago, a man who was himself, it seemed, being pursued at the wrong end of a rifle. Quite the little mini-break.

‘What’s with the boat?’

‘I borrowed it, OK? From the container ship. There wasn’t time to ask permission, I just untied it.’

‘Did you see what happened to our friend?’

‘I told you about the currents. He’s no longer a problem. I thought I asked you to shut up, by the way?’

‘I need to pee,’ I whinged.

‘You can piss in your clothes. I’m not untying you.’

‘Charming.’

‘I told you to shut the fuck up.’

There didn’t seem to be much else to do apart from watch the scudding skeins of cloud cobwebbing over the blackness. When I got tired of that, I watched da Silva. When I got tired of that, I somehow went back to sleep.

The second time I awoke, it was to the crunch of the boat being pulled up the beach, hard ground beneath the hard boards. Da Silva stooped over me, kindly setting his kneeling weight on my stomach, as he unsnapped the cuff. Footsteps on the shingle told me we were not alone, though my vision was blocked by da Silva’s chest.

‘You can ditch the boat.’ He sounded calm, but I could smell the salt on his skin, the sweat beneath it. He was afraid.

‘On your feet.’

I stood, gingerly. The back of the dinghy, where da Silva had been steering, was still lurching in the waves. Hands reached under my arms and lifted me clear as I peered into the darkness, trying to make out a face, but as soon as my feet touched the shingle a cloth was tied around my eyes, so swiftly and professionally that I knew there was absolutely no point in screaming.

‘You two walk her. I’ll follow.’ Da Silva wasn’t speaking Italian but a thick southern dialect that I could scarcely follow.

A grip under each elbow.

‘Come this way, *signorina*.’ Fish and onions on the speaker’s breath. My frozen legs protested as I stumbled up a steeply inclined beach.

‘Just a minute. Here we are now.’ Fish-Breath’s voice was flat and practical, as though he’d done this many times. ‘You’re going to get into the car, now. That’s right. *Attenzione alla testa*.’

Soft leather pillowed under my bruised backside. Fish-Breath leaned over and snapped a seat belt over me as the car shifted with the weight of the other men. Warm – blissfully, deeply, luxuriously warm. *If they’d just get on with it now, I could die happy.*

At first, as we drove, I tried to count the seconds, so as to know how far we were from the sea, but soon gave it up. Anti-kidnap strategies weren’t exactly relevant: it wasn’t like there was anyone to send my sliced-off ear to who cared. They were presumably taking me somewhere quiet, out in the country, where they’d shoot me and roll my body into a ditch.

‘Time to get out.’ Da Silva’s voice, as the engine stilled. We repeated the awkward perp-crouch, Fish-Breath’s hand on the top of my head.

‘Over here.’

Fear thrashed inside my chest. Forcing what was left of my strength into my limbs to quiet the wild urge to run, I heard a door being unlocked as he pushed me forward a few steps. Sharp click. I started despite myself, but they had only turned on a light, a slight shift in the blackness beneath the cloth binding my eyes.

‘Stand there,’ ordered da Silva. ‘When you hear the door close, you can unfasten the blindfold. Not before. OK?’

I managed a nod. Footsteps again, the creak of a hinge, slam, flare of a naked bulb.

The room looked like a garage or outhouse – breeze-block walls, dusty concrete floor, no windows. There was a grubby blue sleeping bag in one corner, a plastic garden chair with a bucket next to it, a towel folded with curious neatness over the chair on top of a man’s shirt. Next to the chair a flowered china plate with a sandwich and an orange. A two-litre bottle of water. Absolutely nothing else. For several minutes I shivered against the wall, straining for the sound of their return. When I was finally convinced I was alone I dropped into a feral crouch over the sandwich, gobbling it down in huge bites, gulping water to swill the dry lumps of bread and ham down my salt-strafted throat. I couldn’t remember when I had last eaten – two days ago? When it was gone, I used a palmful of the water to wash the sea-sting from my face, then peeled away the wet pipes of my jeans and pulled the shirt over me. I would save the orange for later. Nice to have a treat to look forward to.

A few laps of the concrete floor, stretching the weariness from my bones, and that seemed about it for this evening’s entertainment. Listening again at the locked door, I heard nothing, not the spark of a lighter or a muffled conversation, not the impatient shift of waiting feet. There was no handle on the inside; I pushed my palms against the door and listened for the drawn bolts. Wherever I was, they had abandoned me for the moment. Peeling the orange slowly, I broke it into segments and sat down on the floor. *Would they bother feeding me if they planned to kill me? Who were ‘they,’ anyway?* Da Silva’s

colleagues, I supposed, but not the kind who wore the same uniform of the *Guardia di Finanza*. I didn't fancy the sleeping bag much, but I wriggled into its musty warmth and rolled myself up in a corner like a larva. The bare bulb burned away the dusty shadows in the corners of the room.

Toppling between exhaustion and alertness, my brain careered in and out of sleep. When I dozed, my subconscious treated me to a montage of the past days – Alvin Spencer's skeleton crackling to the floor of my flat in Venice, da Silva's questions at the police station, the long, silent car ride down the spine of Italy. Waking, I tried to arrange my thoughts lucidly, but when Cameron Fitzpatrick walked through the door with a bunch of bloodied linen in his hand, I realised I was still deep in a feverish dream. Fitzpatrick was dead. I knew that because I'd killed him, years ago, in Rome. And da Silva had been there then too. I saw him in the dinghy, steering under a black dream-sky whose waves became the lapping water of a bathtub, cold water that smelled of almonds, gently, so gently, pulling me down . . .

My own hoarse gasping pulled me round, stiff on the concrete floor in the monotonous glare of the bulb. At first, I had no idea if minutes or days had passed. There was the faintest line of light beneath the door. I humped myself over to it caterpillar style in the sleeping bag, clutching the water, and heaved myself into a sitting position.

*I had believed that I was playing one game, to rules of my own making. Yet that game was woven into another, knitted long before, whose strands were as invisible as they were binding.*

I unpeeled myself from the sleeping bag, shook out my body, tried to force my swamy mind to concentrate. A faint skittering noise made me start – *a rat? Fuck, a scorpion?* – but it was only a beetle, fat oily carapace the size of my thumb, beating its wings senselessly against the concrete walls. I watched it for what might have been hours, until it fell to the floor, waved its legs in feeble comedy and seemed to die. I flicked the crisp carcase gingerly. Nothing. Somehow that revived me. Using a scrap of the paper that had been wrapped round the sandwich, I scooped up the bug and set it in the middle of the floor. Then I tore the leftover orange peel into lumps. My hair was a sea-damp mat; I yanked on a knot until it came free and tied it round one of the sections of peel. Judith. I placed it next to the beetle. He would be da Silva. Romero da Silva. *Who had been there all along.* Da Silva was a cop. Da Silva was a crook. He'd brought me down here to Calabria. Why? More pieces, arranged around the beetle like the numbers on a clock. On the skin side of each I etched an initial with my fingernail. Here was Rupert, my old boss, head of British Pictures at the House, the auctioneers where I had once been a junior in London. And here – I scraped another rune – was Cameron Fitzpatrick, the art dealer. Rupert and Fitzpatrick had been planning to scam the House by selling a fake painting, which I had stolen after Rupert fired me, after I had killed Fitzpatrick. I removed the 'F' section from the circle. Fitzpatrick had been working with a man I had known as Moncada, flipping fakes through an Italian bank. I hustled another piece of peel next to the 'M'. Cleret. Renaud Cleret. Da Silva's colleague in the police. I had killed Cleret. I shot him out of the circle with a snap of my fingers.

What then? I felt alert now, purposeful. I had moved to Venice, established a new identity. Judith Rashleigh vanished. I became Elisabeth Teerlinc, curator and owner of the Gentileschi Gallery. Carefully, I pulled a thread from my rotting T-shirt and tied it over the Judith peel. Then another, 'K' for Kazbich. Moncada had been dealing with Kazbich and his co-conspirator, Balensky. Another section. The pair of them had been laundering money obtained from arms sales through the art market. I flicked Moncada and Balensky out of the circle. Both now dead. What a shame. Who was left?

A feather from the sleeping bag made a little banner for a new entry: Yermolov. Pavel Yermolov, a wealthy Russian art collector. Kazbich had been trying to sell him a Caravaggio. At least, he was claiming it to be a Caravaggio. Yermolov and I had worked it out together, the connection between Kazbich, Moncada and Balensky. I left Yermolov in the ring. What I hadn't understood, had been blind to, was the presence of da Silva, creeping along in the darkness. All the time, he had been watching me. I muttered over my little rubbish tip like a voodoo priestess. 'A' for Alvin Spencer. Alvin had been . . . in the way. An art world drifter with connections to the House. A bit too curious about me. So he had to go, except that somehow I hadn't quite disposed of the evidence. I picked up the peel, set it down near the corpse of the beetle. Da Silva had found out about Alvin and made out that he was going to arrest me. Except he hadn't arrested me. I lay down and contemplated my mosaic of fetishes.

Da Silva wanted me to work for him. He had said so, on the beach. And if I didn't? Presumably it would be easier to dispose of me here than in Venice. Obviously da Silva had friends,



connections he could call upon – the men who had brought me here, wherever here turned out to be. Mafia. Rolling over seemed more efficient than standing, as my legs weren't feeling quite themselves, so I scrabbled over to the peelings, rearranged them once more around the beetle. Moncada had been Mafia; Kazbich and Balensky were connected to the Mafia too. Da Silva had been the missing link. Crazily, I waddled my peel-people closer to the beetle, like a child playing with Lego figures.

I'd learned quite a lot about the Mafia, one way or another. Though there were still many powerful people in Italy who denied its existence. As little as twenty-odd years ago, the Archbishop of Palermo had been questioned in an anti-Mafia trial. Asked what the Mafia was, he had replied that as far as he knew it was a brand of detergent. The Sicilian Church was later found to have close ties with Cosa Nostra bosses. Such official denial of the very concept of organised crime indicated the extent to which, in Italy, it had penetrated the state itself. If a bishop could be bent, why not a policeman? That would explain the ease and discretion with which da Silva had got me here, but if he was so powerfully connected, who was the man on the beach, the assassin whose body was now spiralling gently towards the coast of Puglia? My waterlogged mind gave out at that moment, and I slept again, deeply this time. When I woke, the light beneath the door was gone.

Lying on my side, my head pillowed on the sleeping bag. I must have passed out again. It was even colder than before. Night. A sense of thicker, softer stillness in the unseen world beyond my prison. My eyes travelled over the clutter of my makeshift model, its contours meaningful only to me. A pellet

of bread lay outside the circle. I pinched it, rolling it between my fingers until it was malleable, made a head, the suggestion of a tiny round body. Katherine. My sister, Katherine.

At the police station in Venice I'd confessed to killing Alvin Spencer – what else could I do, since his corpse was sitting in an armchair in my home? I hadn't been able to get rid of it, to tidy things up. And when da Silva had asked me why, all I could think of was my baby sister Katherine, who had died. In a bath that smelled of almonds.

*I never thought about Katherine. I couldn't allow myself to. Because when I did, my memories swirled and muddied, opaque as the oil when it met the water. You know what you did. But it wasn't your fault. It wasn't, was it? It was your mother's fault.*

Urgently then, I scrabbled all the little pieces together, staggered across the room and dumped them in the piss bucket, where they belonged. The beetle bobbed foully in the mess.

There was no real way to tell how much time passed while I was in that room, but I think it was three days. The second time I awoke, it was to the sensation of thumping on the door at my back. A voice I recognised as Fish-Breath's heavily accented Italian instructed me loudly to stand in the corner with my face to the wall and replace the blindfold. I scurried to obey him. Three bolts creaked before he came inside. He didn't speak. I heard him cross the room and set something down, then the slight slosh as he picked up the bucket. I was glad he had to do that, it would humiliate him. The door opened and closed again; in that brief moment I tried to smell the air-traffic fumes or olive leaves – fertiliser perhaps, or even the smell of bread – anything to indicate where I might be. All I could scent was dust. Locks clicking again, then his voice,

telling me I could remove the blindfold. I rushed to the door and listened, made out his receding footsteps, then, faintly, the sound of a car starting.

My provisions consisted of another bottle of water, a packet of wet wipes, another ham sandwich, a packet of chocolate biscuits, a small frayed towel, a banana and a strawberry yoghurt. No spoon. I did my best to wash and pulled on my damp jeans, which were beginning to give off a mouldy smell. Still wrapped in the sleeping bag, I ate the food slowly, mindfully savouring each bite of nourishment. A fag would have been nice, but it wouldn't do me any harm to have a bit of a detox. I cleaned my teeth with a wet wipe and the grainy inside of the banana skin.

The same procedure was repeated the next day. I'd passed some of the time in walking laps of the room and doing press-ups and burpees to keep warm, and the rest of it elaborately plotting my escape. The plastic of the yoghurt pot was too flimsy to fashion into a shiv, but I reckoned I could wait behind the door, swing the bucket at Fish-Breath and be out while he was still wiping the piss from his eyes. His footsteps sounded as though they were going downhill, to the left, towards the car, so I could run right – to where exactly? Even if Fish-Breath wasn't carrying a gun, there was no certainty that he was alone. I didn't even have any shoes, since the sneakers I had dragged on in Venice had been lost in the sea. If the shed, or whatever it was, was somewhere remote, which would seem to be the case from the silence which surrounded it, how far would I get over rough ground with one or more men chasing me, one of them nicely riled up from a shit bath? Could I strangle Fish-Breath with the blindfold? It wouldn't be my first attempt at that trick, but I would have neither strength

nor surprise on my side. And compared with Alvin Spencer, who had become dead in my bathtub in Venice, Fish-Breath was definitely a professional.

The other option was to greet Fish-Breath naked and offer him a fuck in return for my freedom. Even without a mirror in my quarters, I had a sense that I wasn't looking particularly ready for love, but even a rancid fuck is still a fuck, and Fish-Breath himself didn't seem overly troubled by personal hygiene. Yet even if I really went to town, I doubted I could render him sufficiently cunt-struck to defy da Silva and release me. Diverting as it might be, it was a crap plan. If da Silva wanted me dead, it would have happened by now. Hadn't he mentioned my working for him? So I had something he still wanted, something I could do, even if its value was only measured in sandwiches and bananas.

Since I've always believed that if one makes up one's mind not to be happy there's no reason not to have a perfectly good time, I objected to those days of captivity much less than might have been expected. Since there was nothing to be afraid of, fear was of no benefit to me. I just decided not to feel it. The hours were long, but since there were no contingencies to react to, they possessed an almost hypnotic quality that increased as the hours passed – a pleasant torpor, if not peace. I slept, and did my exercises, and declaimed verbs in Russian, and when I wasn't doing that, I thought about pictures. I'd heard of prisoners reciting poems, or passages from the Bible to keep themselves sane. I took imaginary walks around the National Gallery in London, the place where I had first seen real pictures. I went back to one, in memory, most often: Cézanne's *Avenue at Chantilly*. I'd looked at it many times, the composition all in greens, just a path in a wood bisected by the wooden rail of a

ride, dusty earth underfoot and, in the background, low white buildings and the pure orange ball of a rising or a setting sun. At first, it seems a tranquil, even rather stolid canvas, but then you see that the vagaries of the light are captured so mischievously that the leaves seem to flutter with your breath. So still, yet so vividly alive.



## 2

Either da Silva's Caracal had survived its swim or he was aiming its replacement at me when he eventually opened the door. Waiting obediently in the corner for Fish-Breath and today's exciting culinary surprise, I started at the sound of his familiar voice.

'You can come out now.'

After the endless electric glare, the colours of the winter landscape swirled like a Kandinsky as I groped my way outside, into an impossibly vivid medley of green and gold, blue and grey which resolved under the winter sun into a rocky hollow fringed with thin oak trees and low shrubs. Sharp scents of myrtle, leaf mould, pine. Da Silva was back in uniform, smelling brightly of shower gel and cologne. I was painfully aware of my own reeking mouth and matted, greasy hair. There was no sign of Fish-Breath. Da Silva handed me a plastic carrier.

'Happy Christmas. Go and get ready.'

The clean air emphasised the staleness of what I now saw was a breeze-block hut, a storage space with a tangle of farm machinery rusting in a corner of a dirt yard. I had a feeling we were high up. Da Silva kept the gun trained on my back as I fumbled in the bag. More water and wet wipes, a toothbrush and toothpaste, soap, deodorant, a comb. I peeled off my filthy jeans and T and began to clean up, not caring whether Da Silva was watching me or not. There wasn't much I could do about my hair, but the mint and the soap, even in cold mineral water, felt wonderful.

‘They’re not what you’re used to.’

He had provided navy sweatpants, a white cotton shirt and a shiny down jacket, supermarket underwear and a truly horrible pair of mock-leather loafers in burgundy.

‘I had to guess your size. And most places were shut, for the holidays.’ He sounded faintly apologetic.

‘They’re fine. And you can put that away, you won’t need it.’

‘I don’t think so. Are you done? Come on. Put the blindfold back on.’

He took my arm to guide me outside. A loaded gun against my heart, and yet my heart stayed quiet. Strange what one can get used to. As my feet negotiated the downward slope, I felt an odd pang of loss for the peace of my little room. A pause, and da Silva turned me to unfasten the blindfold.

‘Wow.’

We were standing on a roughly concreted track at the crest of a cliff. In front, the view stretched out for miles: first steep wooded hills, then a wide plain dropping to the bright sea, ribboned with silvery beaches.

‘It’s beautiful.’ So far, Calabria had struck me as a bit of a dump, but from up here the motorways and half-built concrete horrors were invisible to my starved eyes. Da Silva pointed to the left.

‘I was born just over there. Siderno.’

‘Is that where we’re going?’

‘Maybe. We have a visit to pay first. Get in the car.’ The secret kiss of the pistol’s nub still jammed against my ribs. *Don’t let him see you’re scared.*

‘Oooh. Will you put your siren on, Inspector?’

‘Shut up.’



‘A little conversation might be nice. You know, I’ve been a bit lonely, what with you locking me up for days.’

‘Save your breath. You can have a look at these on the way.’

He handed me a phone, but not before he had cuffed my wrists and fastened the seatbelt. I waited until we had twisted our way down the steep track and joined a road before gesturing at the device where it rested on my lap. He reached one hand off the wheel and pressed a button, lighting the screen on a close-up shot of a grey-haired man with a hole in the back of his head and quite a lot of brain on his collar. That made an ID rather difficult, but the next shot, of the man’s prone body lying across a desk with a view of swagged red velvet curtain to one side confirmed what I had suspected: this was the body of Ivan Kazbich.

I had met Kazbich early in the summer when he had called at Gentileschi, my gallery in Venice, with a request to value the paintings of his employer, the Russian collector Pavel Yermolov. The connection between da Silva and Kazbich was what I had been so fruitlessly seeking over the past months. The valuation had been a ruse; Kazbich had been cheating Yermolov and here were the consequences – the dealer shot from the back like the traitor he was in his art gallery in Belgrade. Yermolov had told me he would take care of it.

I scrolled through the next few shots of the body, letting Da Silva register the lack of interest on my face.

‘Well?’ he asked.

‘So Kazbich is dead. Do you expect me to care?’

I thought for a moment, then continued.

‘You think you’re next. Is that what that scene on the beach was about?’

‘Go on,’ said da Silva. He looked amused.

‘You and Kazbich are – were – running arms with art as a cover. Kazbich was trying to take Yermolov for a whole lot of money, but now Kazbich is dead. The question is . . .’ I paused, recalling the trash I had assembled on the floor of the shed. ‘Why did Kazbich need Yermolov’s money? Because he owed it to someone. Someone who wants it back. And now there’s only you to pay it.’

‘Very good.’

I felt absurdly pleased, like a diligent pupil who has just recited a lesson. Why did I give a shit about da Silva praising me? Had I developed Stockholm syndrome in the shed?

‘But to whom do I owe this money?’ he asked. ‘Assuming you’re right? Who do you suppose sent me these pictures?’

‘Why would I have any interest in knowing that?’

‘Dejan Raznatovic.’

‘Ah. I see.’

Raznatovic was the supplier of the weapons, the last piece of the scam.

I’d tracked him down in Belgrade, and I’d thought our encounter in his study had gone pretty fantastically, but if the chap with the gun on the beach was anything to go by, the post-coital glow had apparently worn off.

‘So Raznatovic sent our friend Rifle-Man to off you? No Kazbich, no money?’

Da Silva shrugged. ‘Yes and no. As for Mr Raznatovic, a few crossed wires. Let’s just say I needed to see you urgently in Venice.’

‘Not that urgently, since you’ve had me on the *panino* detox for three days.’

‘I am sorry about that. I needed to keep you safe.’

‘Safe?’

‘From Raznatovic. You’ll see. Things have been straightened out. Would you shut up now, please?’ he added, as he opened the window and lit a cigarette.

This time, he didn’t say it harshly. He offered me one, but though I could have murdered a gasper, I didn’t accept. The stale smell of tobacco in cars reminds me of my mother.

We were driving along the coast road now, with the sun over the sea to our right and a tatty strip of empty tourist apartments and shuttered outlet stores to our left. The light bounced off the water, giving a silvery taste to the air. I gulped it in, relishing the coolness on my clean face. Altogether, I felt quite gay. Just days ago I had believed I was looking at a considerably longer period of incarceration than a few days, and no one had even tried to shoot me for over seventy-two hours. Admittedly, I was unemployed, homeless and handcuffed, but that meant things could only get better. Positive thinking is so important.

After we had passed Siderno, the journey lasted about forty minutes. Every few hundred metres, we passed women, alone or in groups of two or three, waiting in the sight of the sparse incoming traffic. They were all African, mostly young, all dressed in bright-coloured, skintight minidresses, or hot pants with crop tops, despite the December temperature. Some sat on plastic chairs, smoking, chatting, playing with their phones, others swayed and posed as the cars passed, their eyes far behind over the highway. One girl was wearing a red satin micro-skirt trimmed with white faux fur and a Santa hat.

‘What’s with the girls?’

Flyover hookers are a familiar sight on the fringes of most Italian cities, but I’d never seen so many.

‘There’s a camp down the road. Capo Rizzuto.’

They were refugees, then, these women. Asylum seekers.

Da Silva slowed down and pulled into the emergency lane.

‘Get out.’

‘I really don’t think I’m dressed for doing business.’

‘In the back. I’m bringing you in, OK? No need to say anything.’

He holstered his gun and helped me into the rear seat.

We joined the road and continued a little way before da Silva pulled over at a gate manned by two *Guardia di Finanza* uniforms. They saluted as we drove through a compound of brown concrete office buildings to an open field with a landing strip and a sagging windsock. A dark-blue official helicopter waited on the tarmac, its blades beginning to whirl as the car drew up. Another officer jogged over to open da Silva’s door, then the two of them walked me to the steps and shoved me up beside the waiting pilot, who did not acknowledge me even with his eyes. The officer reached in and set the harness over my head, fastened it, and released the cuffs before da Silva climbed in beside me. We were given headphones and the officer handed the pilot and da Silva various papers to sign before we took off.

I knew better than to ask da Silva where we were going, even if my headphones had been wired in. He and the pilot were conducting a conversation over my head, but all I could hear was the muffled drone of the engine. We banked over the low hills beyond the coastline, then the ‘copter wheeled and set out across the sea. I twisted my mind from its tangle of questions and tried to think of something cheerful. My friend Carlotta, for instance, the party girl made good who had finally snared her old-fashioned billionaire. Carlotta had passed on several useful tips, one of which was that you should always fly private.

Without a watch, I estimated that we were in the air for about three hours. We made one landing on what appeared to be a military base, where I was unloaded and led, cuffed, to a bathroom by a self-conscious young officer. He waited outside the cubicle and then handed me a bottle of water which I drank as I watched the helicopter being refuelled. Taking off, we moved further up the coast before swinging out over the open sea. In a while, we dropped over another stretch of coastline and the pilot began speaking on the radio again, preparing to land. We flew low over jagged high-rises stuck with tumbling balconies and TV aerials like crazy, elaborate hats and came in on a roof marked with a huge white 'H'. Several uniformed men ran towards the chopper, doing that irrational head-duck that the whirling blades inspire. Da Silva helped me out and cuffed me again as soon as my feet were on the tarmac. I kept my head down as we passed through a door, descended a flight of stairs and took a shabby aluminium-lined lift to an underground garage, where a plain black BMW waited with a driver. Da Silva didn't speak until the two of us were settled in the back, and when he did, it was in English.

'Are you OK? Not feeling sick?'

'I'm fine. Why have you brought me to Albania?'

'How do you know we're in Albania?'

'Well, let's see. We left Italy, heading east. The Breda Nardi NH500 has a maximum range of 263 kilometres, so we had to refuel before getting here. Anywhere else would be too far. Plus you're speaking English – many Albanians speak Italian so English is more discreet.'

Da Silva looked slightly alarmed, but I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of an explanation. In truth, the only reason I knew about what kind of helicopters the *Guardia* used was that when I had researched a Caracal pistol I had stolen,

the same pistol Da Silva carried, I'd poked about a bit in the *Guardia's* set-up. I'd thought it would be handy to be able to recognise an Italian policeman, even in plain clothes, by standard-issue equipment, and facts have a tendency to hang around in my brain. I'd be a demon in a pub quiz. What the fuck we were doing in Albania I supposed I'd find out in good time, but I had a fair idea that it wasn't official police business, for all that da Silva's little outing was on company time.

'So you might as well tell me where we are!' I added brightly.

'A place called Durres,' answered da Silva. He seemed a bit deflated by my Inspector Montalbano routine.

'Here,' he added, reaching over to unsnap the cuffs. 'We won't be needing these now.' I might have imagined it, but his thumb remained a moment too long, massaging the inside of my wrist where the metal had rubbed a slight welt into the skin. I looked out of the window. Durres off season made Calabria look like Mustique. The car bumped wildly along gnarled and pitted streets crowded with women in grubby nylon burnouses hauling pushchairs and shopping trolleys between dingy food stalls and open drains. There seemed to be an extraordinary number of stray dogs, who ricocheted fearlessly between the churning traffic. Despite the clear fastness of the winter sky the light was murky, strained through the teetering heights of apartment blocks whose top storeys were clouded with a miasma of smog. Da Silva's face was incurious – he had obviously been here before – unmoved even when a beggar, stark naked except for a flowered tablecloth draped over his shoulders, banged on the rear window as we stopped for a light. The driver stuck his head out and shouted something that may have involved the moral continence of the gentleman's mother, and he shambled away.

Eventually we left the town and headed out on a spanking new motorway. There was less traffic, but what drivers there were seemed to regard all six lanes as their own private race track. I shut my eyes as a huge truck loomed before us, swerving away only at the last second. Da Silva patted my shoulder.

‘Crazy, right? And they say Italians are aggressive drivers. You should see the road to Tirana – always covered with bodies.’

‘Thanks for that.’

Our destination was a huge peach-coloured villa whose driveway led directly off the road. As we pulled through high electric gates topped with barbed wire, a reedy man with a watermelon paunch under an open-collared purple shirt and a beige cashmere blazer shambled busily up to the car. He greeted da Silva effusively in Italian, with plenty of handshakes and backslapping, but I sensed a wariness in his pouchy, pebble-coloured eyes. He opened the car door for me and bobbed briefly and formally over my hand, watching da Silva over my shoulder. Did he think I was his girlfriend or something?

‘This is Miss Teerlinc.’ Da Silva used my alias, the cover for what I had fondly imagined was the life I had always wanted.

‘*Buongiorno, signorina*,’ said the man formally.

I was glad we hadn’t had to shake hands. His would surely have been as slimy as the nervous sheen on his forehead.

‘Is everything ready?’ da Silva asked brusquely.

‘*Certo, certo, tutto a posto!*’

There was white spittle drying at the corners of the man’s mouth. He was really hopped up.

Da Silva spoke to the driver, who pulled the car ahead and disappeared behind the house. The three of us followed on foot along a dainty crazy paving path, into a large concrete-walled yard with a children’s swing set in one corner and a fountain

featuring a plastic swan in the middle. The rest of the décor consisted of various old Mercedes, a plastic table and chairs and a kneeling man with his hands held behind his back by two shaven-haired bouncer types in jeans and tattoos. When the man saw da Silva he started shouting, or pleading, attempting to explain in Italian that there had been a mistake, that it wasn't his fault, that he had never . . . As though his voice could stretch out the seconds. I didn't get to find out what he had never done, as da Silva moved past me swiftly, pulling out his gun as he walked, and shot the man three times in the chest.

Our host crossed himself ostentatiously and nodded at da Silva. The body was slumped between its grim-faced minders, pumping vivid gouts of blood onto the tarmac, the heart a few hideous seconds behind the brain. I could smell the sickly, ferrous tang of the blood and the powder lingering on da Silva's hand as he guided me towards the house. From the expression on his face he might just have flicked a spot of ash from his uniform trousers.

A tiny, invisible gravity between us. *You're like me.* Both of us knowing it, for a moment, without a word.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw the two heavies loading the corpse into the wide boot of one of the cars. The reedy man came up on my other side. His sallow face was pale and damp as though he was about to vomit, but he attempted a smile.

'Please, *signorina*,' he rasped, 'come this way. Lunch is ready.'