

NICOLA ROCCA

# DEATH BRINGS GOLD

THRILLER



**EMMEERRE**





Nicola Rocca

**Death Brings Gold**

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2015

For Daniel,

to give him courage

and to tell him that I am here

whenever he needs me!

And that tomorrow will always be a better day!

Mankind invented the atomic bomb,

but no mouse would ever construct

a mousetrap.

Albert Einstein

(1879-1955)

Serendipity is looking in a

haystack for a needle

and discovering a farmer's

daughter.

Julius H. Cooe

(1911-1984)

PROLOGUE

A deep breath. The man wakes up.

Something is not right. He feels weak, numb. His head is spinning, as if waking from a massive hangover.

Actually, it hurts. At the back, right above his neck.

By instinct he tries to lift one hand to reach the tender spot, in an effort to massage it. But he can't, his hand is locked. A metallic sound reaches his ears. He pulls harder.

What on earth?

His eyes widen in fear. Sweat begins covering his forehead.

He is sitting on the floor of his living room. He recognizes his home, his furniture, and his curtains. He looks around, trying to forget that his hands are handcuffed to the heater.

He gives another tug, but all he gets is the clinking of a chain and a sharp pain in his wrists.

His sweat now leads to anguish.

Before his mouth lets out a cry, a voice materializes.

Welcome back, Alberto.

These words are followed by the sound of muffled footsteps.

What the fuck!

His curse dies on his lips as he sees a man standing before him. He has never seen this thickly bearded face before.

“Finally you’re with us,” the man says.

His voice is kind and polite - almost caring - and this is what churns Alberto’s gut with terror.

A choked sound emanates from the prisoner’s mouth. He gives another tug with his arms trying to set himself free, ignoring the sharp twinges of pain.

“It’s no use,” the man calmly points out, caressing his beard. “Those chains can’t be broken.”

Alberto tries to shout, but his voice comes out like a hoarse whisper.

“Who are you?” he asks.

The man narrows his eyes, as if boring into the soul of the one before him.

“It doesn’t matter *who* I am. But *what* I am doing here.”

Alberto knows that he can’t dictate the rules of this encounter, but he tries to hide his desperation.

“Listen, friend! I don’t know what you want from me. You’ve got the wrong person.”

The man answers with an amused grin.

“Quite the contrary,” the man with the beard says. His tone of voice is now cold as ice. “You are exactly who I was looking for. You really don’t remember me? Don’t worry, you’ll get your memory back. Soon.”

“I don’t give a fuck who you are. Or what you’re doing here,” the prisoner gasps, still straining against the chains. Another dizzy spell forces him to close his eyes. Exhausted, he leans back against his prison.

Ignoring the words, the other man moves one step closer and stares right into the eyes of his prey.

“I’ll give you a little clue,” he says.

And finally the words that had waited silently for decades in his heart were spoken.

“Morning brings gold.”

The phrase remained there, hanging in the air. Then, like a sharp blade, it plunges into the captive man’s mind, telling him that in this game he is the victim; the other man executioner.

He pretends not to understand. With difficulty he opens his eyes and his voice, now accompanied by tears, has become a wheeze!

“I don’t know what the stupid phrase means.”

The killer unfastens, one by one, the buttons of his raincoat, takes it off and places it neatly on the back of a chair.

The victim recognizes the suit the man is wearing. And he feels the fear growing inside him.

“There must be some mistake,” he says, whimpering. “You really have the wrong person.”

The killer doesn’t pay any attention to the pathetic plea.

He strokes his beard and takes a step towards the victim.

“They say that revenge is a dish best served cold,” he declares. “Well, I’ve never believed it,” he pauses, hesitant, “but I had no other choice than to wait. And with each passing year, my anger, instead of disappearing, increased. It is now time to unleash it.”

The victim feels his heart tightening up.

“I have nothing to do with it,” he moans, his cheeks damp with terror and desperation.

The killer takes another step towards the broken man. He stands there observing him, like a scientist would do with a laboratory animal.

The victim recognizes in those eyes a look he has seen before –older now, but identical to the one he had seen many years before. He would like to ask for mercy and forgiveness, but the words stick in his throat with fear.

The killer speaks again.

–You’re a dead man. He smiles, his face lined with fine wrinkles. The kind that pain carves into your face while you’re still young and vulnerable. –Just a stupid dead man.

The words seem to float around the room indefinitely.

The killer moves closer still, ignoring the prisoner’s groans. Barely breathing, he reaches into his pocket and slowly slips out the weapon that will kill him.

## CHAPTER 1

Umberto Visconti stood there and stared at the casket being lowered into the ground. His face was wracked with grief. The only loved one he’d had left was leaving like this.

David Walker was watching him cry. He stood still and stared at the line of people queuing to show their affection to their tearful friend. Then, when the man was alone, Walker approached him.

–My condolences, Umberto, he said, taking and squeezing his cold hands.

Visconti forced himself to smile. He blinked his eyes a couple of times in an attempt to clear the tears that were clouding his vision. Losing a parent, even if they have reached the farthest edge of old age, always breaks your heart. Umberto knew that pain; he had already experienced it.

–Thank you very much, David, he said, hugging him.

David never liked these moments of sadness, but he didn’t want to be the first to separate from the embrace. He was hoping Umberto would do it. While waiting for that gesture that never seemed to come, he stood still and felt sorry for the other man’s sobs. Because Umberto Visconti, as well as being the medical examiner that worked with him, in time had also become a valuable friend. And for David, a friend’s pain was also his pain.

Finally, David felt Umberto detach from their embrace -his lips moving close to his ear. His breath was warm and his skin smelled like aftershave.

–Thanks again for coming, my friend.

In the last weeks they hadn’t met or called each other much. Visconti was often unreachable because he had to look after his mother during the last stage of her life; Walker, on the other hand, was busy hunting down a guy who liked to rape, rob and kill high-class prostitutes. In the end he managed to catch him and close the case, even though a bullet cost him a couple of days in hospital. At least, he had arrived on time at the funeral. His shoulder was hurting like fuck, but he was there.

–I had to, Umberto, he replied, in the most comforting voice he could offer.

The two men stood staring at each other.

–I’m really sorry, Umby, he said, regretting almost immediately the banality of those words.

The other man stared at him, and Walker had never seen such a sad look on his friend’s face. He was nodding his head and looked like he was suffering from one of those awful tics that come with old age.

–She was a good woman, he said. –I’m not saying it because she was my mother. I’m saying it because it’s true.

David nodded repeatedly, and for a moment it looked like the other man had passed that annoying nervous tic onto him...

–I’m sure, he replied. Not that he had ever met Umberto’s mother – he had seen her only once – but he was convinced it was true. He had been working with Umberto Visconti for some time and over the years he had found in him a good person. Polite, refined, and professional. The kind of person that must have been brought up in a respectable, principled family.

–She suffered so much – Umberto said, muffling the phrase with an expression of anguish.

“I’m sorry,” the other repeated, almost under his breath.

“She didn’t deserve all that suffering, David.”

This time the Inspector didn’t reply. He thought that no one deserved such a terrible ordeal of pain. No one. He kept the thought to himself.

“She was torn apart by that terrible disease, David. It was as if—as if someone had decided to measure out her pain little by little. To eradicate her from this life with brief painful jabs.”

The man paused, then he continued with a voice—which although calm, also carried an edge of anger.

“I hope I won’t go like she did. I hope that one day I won’t end up like my mother. A slow agony. I hope that when my time comes, it will be something quick, fast, and painless. I couldn’t bear to be trapped inside the prison of a long illness. Because being ill is like being in jail.. The fact that you are bedridden, that you are not self sufficient anymore, that you have to depend on others—that is, all of this is the same as serving a life sentence for a crime committed. Actually, it’s worse, far worse.”

He stopped. He took a breath and stared in the direction of the ground under which his mother had just been buried. A tear ran down his cheek.

“Because the only *crime* attributable to my mother is that she was victim of that damned cancer. That’s why I hope that when my time comes—”

“Don’t think about it now, Umberto,” the Inspector said, bringing the other’s words to an end. “You’ve got an entire life ahead of you. You must think about overcoming this test. The love for your job will save you, you’ll see. It was the same for me, too.”

David thought he had been convincing, but his friend replied with bitter resignation.

“Do you think so?”

The question hung between them, illuminated by the headstones candles. David didn’t bother replying. And what could he have said to his friend to console him? More pointless words?

“I think not,” continued Visconti. “Now I am alone. My life will never be the same again.”

David understood that the recent loss of a loved one takes away one’s will to go on, to pick yourself up again, to move forward. To live. He had known it too. But he also knew that time would set things right again. In these circumstances, the passing of time is the only remedy to heal the wounds that everyone carries in their hearts.

“Be strong, Umberto,” he said, putting an arm around his shoulders. “You’ll see, it’ll get better. I, too, have gone through this.”

Visconti gave a hint of a smile; in an attempt to reassure his friend—who was trying to comfort him—that his words were appreciated.

But inside he knew now that his mother was dead, depriving him of the last love he had left, his life was going to change radically.

David did get one thing right, though, when he said: the love for his job was going to save him.

That was true. Even if Walker and Visconti didn’t see it the same way.

## CHAPTER 2

He was pleased with himself for deciding not to drive his car to the church. First of all because, due to the traffic, he never would have made it on time to the service; and then because he also would have had to do some walking. He kept seeing Umberto’s dismayed face and it reminded him of his own similar pain. He, too, had lost both his parents. And although his mother had been gone now for five years, her memory was more vivid than ever.

This thought veiled his eyes with melancholy, while the stinging cold continued to vehemently stab his face. He slowed his pace to a halt and the echoing of his footsteps seemed to continue for another second before stopping. He slipped his hand into his overcoat pocket, searching for the package.

When he found it, he opened it and extracted a Marlboro. He brought it to his lips and rolled it from one side of his mouth to the other. He returned the package to his pocket and resumed walking, taking deep draws from the still unlit cigarette. He had always liked smoking. His only vice, and he clung to it dearly.

Then, his mother's face instantly appeared.

It was the face of a woman with only a few days left to live. Ashen, framed by dishevelled hair that time and illness had turned grey. Her eyes were lifeless, sad, and were struggling to see.

Alzheimer's and a metastatic carcinoma were taking her away. That poor woman had been unable to utter a word for days and, according to the doctors, her brain couldn't understand what was going on around her anymore.

The day before she was gone forever, she made a sort of recovery; a moment of clarity. She had her eyes wide open and was trying to keep her head still which until then had been a weight dangling from side to side - still.

"Mum?" he called in disbelief.

Then he turned to check if Carolina, the nurse that was looking after his mother, was still there. She wasn't.

His mother had lifted one arm, trying to extend it towards him and that gesture was draining her of all the energy she had left. He had welcomed her hand between his and stood there staring at her, confident that something extraordinary was going to happen.

The woman blinked her eyes several times, trying to focus on the images in front of her. Her mouth opened in a grin and her hand started to tremble, while her breathless voice was coming through with difficulty.

"David, m-mhy d-d-hear!"

Distorted words were coming from her twisted lips.

"ss-h-k-keep on sshmoukeeng, if hhyou c-can't do it without lemme!"

At that point she had had a small breakdown and a snarl of pain deformed her face.

He had squeezed her hand, to make her feel his presence and at the same time to encourage her to continue.

The woman's head had fallen forward.

"Mum?!!" he called out loud.

His mother had raised her head again and she had started blinking her eyes again.

Then, certain that sight had abandoned her, she had closed her eyes. Defeated.

He stood there staring at her for what seemed an eternity. Then, the woman's distorted voice had come back.

"But please it's for u hoo! art a mmy! I whuont hhee you sttleouwn!"

"What?" he asked her.

The woman had stuttered some more, but they seemed more like moans caused by her pain than contorted phrases.

"What did you say, mum?" he repeated, placing his hand on her shoulder and shaking her lightly, but the woman's head was now dangling again.

He stood there looking at the bed sheets moving slowly with the rhythm of his mother's weak breathing.

Then, Carolina's silhouette had peeked into the room.

"What's going on?" she had asked. "I heard you shouting."

He didn't think it necessary to tell her what had happened. That was the last dialogue between mother and son and, even though he hadn't understood some words, certainly he was not going to ask advice of others. He was convinced that his mother had woken up with the help of some kind of divine intervention in that precise moment, because they were alone in that room. And because he was going to be the only recipient of those words.



At that point he had brought his mother's gaunt hand to his lips and kissed it. Then he had stood up from the bed and gone into the living room. He had taken a biro and written those last words his mother had reserved for him on a post-it note. He was convinced that they meant something important. Not so much because they were her last words, but mainly because saying them had been so extremely hard for her.

When he came back from that memory, he realised that he was almost near the Metro station. He slowed down and felt his trousers back pocket. Touching his wallet reminded him of the treasure inside it. He felt some kind of relief and lit that cigarette, now soaked in saliva. He inhaled the smoke, kept it in his lungs for a moment and finally let it out to mix with the icy-cold air.

When his mother was still alive not a single day would pass without her telling him to stop with those damned cigarettes. And then, on her deathbed, she had told him the exact opposite. Who knows why.

He wondered if one day he was going to be able to decipher her last words. Since then almost five years had passed and he hadn't succeeded yet.

He took his last drag of poison then, flicking the cigarette butt with his two fingers, he tossed it away. He took the stairs leading to the Metro Red Line. When he arrived at the platform, he saw the train leaving. He stood and watched it until it was swallowed by the dark tunnel.

He looked around and realized that he was alone. A lonely man.

That thought provoked in him a smile, but, at the same time, a sense of emptiness. For the first time in his life he was afraid. Not for what might have happened to him. But for what he was.

A lonely man.

### CHAPTER 3

The man saw the girl with the apron approaching. He stood and stared at her, while he was enjoying the alcohol flowing in every nook and cranny of his brain.

"Your whisky, sir," said the waitress, placing the glass on the small table.

Raffaele Ghezzi thanked her with the wave of a hand, but didn't bother to waste a single word. He sat and looked at the blonde's curvy body leaving with an empty tray in her hand.

Then, with his gaze still fixed on her round butt, he grasped with ostentatious confidence the half-empty glass and gulped down its content.

He gritted his teeth and grimaced instinctively for the burning sensation of the liquor in his throat.

He wiped his mouth with his hand. He grasped the glass that had just been delivered to him and toyed with it, spinning it slowly. He liked the clinking sound of the ice cubes against the glass. It had been a while since he had allowed himself a heavy drinking session like this one.

These recent months had been difficult ones; during which he had had to be financially responsible for the running of a house, while supporting both himself and a wife he no longer got along with. A wife that no longer loved him. And a wife who was cheating on him with another man.

His reason for hiring that Formenti guy, a private investigator specialising in marital infidelity cases was a gnawing suspicion that he had for some time. And the bill he'd had to pay in instalments was filed under *unforeseen expenses*. Another heading of the family budget, he thought, noticing the irony of it.

In the end it had been worth it-because exactly one week earlier -Formenti had brandished right in his face - pictures of his wife with a mystery man. In the car, exchanging displays of affection-canoodling disgustingly like teenagers- in a park and even at both the entrance and exit of a motel parking lot.

That was the reason why, after a long time, Raffaele was indulging in one of those hangovers that would go down in the annals of betrayed men seeking revenge.

For some time Martina, the bitch, had been asking for a separation and was exploiting any little thing she could to blame him for their crisis.

Him! When the only thing he did was work hard to earn their daily bread.

And now, with this compelling evidence obtained by Formenti, he could with certainty separate from that slut, and without owing her any kind of financial support. So long as the Italian justice system didn't pull any fast ones, because as it is widely known in the case of a failed marriage, men are always the ones who pay. That was the question. Any run of the mill Martina type can come along, screw around on her husband and then ask for a separation, settlement and alimony.

Yes, that's how it goes in the vast majority of cases, Raffaele said to himself, savouring the intense taste of his whisky.

But he was smarter than other men. He wasn't going to be fooled. He had proof. He was going to nail the bitch.

He had already given her a taste of his forthcoming triumph. A few days before Formenti had given him the pictures, he had *promised her* that he was going to catch her fucking around. Yes, yes, that's exactly what he said to her *dicking around*. How he'd enjoyed saying that!

Martina hadn't believed him. She'd scoffed at him and gone on her way.

The way of the whores, said Raffaele, in a whisper, despite himself.

Then, with his head spinning, he observed the space around him. The pub was semi-deserted, there were only three other people there. At a table to his right, there was a couple of sweethearts; while at the bar, perched on one of the fake-leather stools, there was a guy - he must have been about the same age as Raffaele - getting plastered all by himself.

Ghezzi wondered if he too had something to celebrate. He took a sip of whisky and thought about that for a moment, while savouring the strong taste of the alcohol.

At the exact moment he swallowed, the answer came to him unexpectedly. Perhaps the man was getting drunk to celebrate some success of his own, though it could never compare to *his* success, he thought. No, because he was Raffaele Ghezzi, the smartest of the smart, the one who had not allowed himself to be fooled by a wife who fucked around on him. He had caught her *dicking around* and couldn't wait to nail her for it.

He smiled, grabbed the glass and, in one gulp, he finished the last of the whisky.

He was so drunk that even walking was a struggle.

He told himself that taking his car to the mechanic had been a great idea. If he'd had to drive in that state, he would have crashed into the first wall available.

Into the first wall, he mumbled, sniggering.

He was even having trouble seeing the footpath now. Thank god his house was close by. He decided to walk close to the wall of the block of flats, to avoid losing his sense of direction and his balance. And who cared if he scratched his jacket a bit, he said to himself. With the good fortune that would come with being rid of an unfaithful wife with the money he would save from the financial support that he would never give her he could even afford to buy himself a new one. Perhaps even a jacket by one of those famous Italian fashion designers that he liked so much.

He felt his eyes growing heavy and exhaustion was getting the better of his body. And the alcohol had already got the better of his mind.

When he realised that he was only a few metres away from home, he felt revived. He could already feel the mattress under his back. He wasn't even going to undress. The most he was going to take off and only if he felt like it-would be his shoes. Not because of the bender, but to spite that Martina bitch. Her-who every time, even before coming in, would oblige him to remove his shoes, put his slippers on and sometimes even those disposable guest slippers, like a hotel guest. And god help him if he'd even think of sitting on the bed with his clothes on.

*The bed is made for sleeping.* He could still hear that snake like voice. *You should only go to bed in your pyjamas.*

*Go fuck yourself, bitch!* He thought. Yes, he was going to sleep with his clothes on. And with his shoes.

When he was a few steps away from his front gate, he took his mobile phone from his pocket. He wrote a text message to a work colleague and sent it. He then pulled a bunch of keys from his pocket. It took him a minute to find the right one, and another minute to insert it in the keyhole and unlock it.

The gate opened with a terrible squealing noise that would make anyone's skin crawl, but it had no effect on Raffaele Ghezzi. He felt good, invincible, happy. Like a drunk who - evidence at hand - is about to nail his cheating slut wife.

He reached the stairs and, grabbing the handrail, he realised that he had an amused smile fixed on his lips.

Maybe he had over indulged with the whisky, but it had been worth it. He spent a pleasant evening at the pub, in his own company, to enjoy his moment of triumph. And to make a toast to his new life that would begin as soon as he was out of that ball-breaking situation with Martina. Obviously the following day he was going to wake up with a massive headache, but that was the price you paid when you got smashed and were not in your twenties anymore.

He covered with difficulty the first two flights of stairs. He faced the next ones with more confidence and the last two with a shortness of breath that was worse than he would have liked it to be.

When he found himself at his landing, he rummaged in the front pocket of his trousers looking for his bunch of keys. He pulled them out and moved closer to his front door. In the exact moment in which he inserted the key in the hole, he noticed that it was already open.

He knew he was totally wasted but he had locked that fucking door before he went to work.

Who knows? It's also likely that he had forgotten to do it. It can happen, he said to himself.

He smiled again and pushed the door knocker of the house. Of *his* house.

He left the door open, allowing the light from outside to illuminate the hall of his flat, so he could find the lamp that sat on the small writing desk. An opaque, almost timid light lit up that corner of the living room.

Raffaele closed the door behind him and locked it with two turns. He took a deep breath. Finally at home.

He caught a glimpse of something in the semi-darkness of the living room area, which made him jump, and hit the wall behind him. Suddenly his hangover seemed to have disappeared. It happened in a fraction of a second and now he felt as if he hadn't drunk any whiskey at all.

"I've been waiting a long time for you, Ghezzi," said the dark figure sitting in the armchair.

Raffaele felt like he was going to faint, his legs were shaking. He tried to overcome his terror.

"Who are you?"

He realised he'd used an "I'm-crapping-my-pants" tone of voice. Whoever that person sitting in his armchair was, he could read on Ghezzi's face all the fear that a man can feel in that situation.

The silhouette moved, causing a light swish. The voice seemed to reach out from the darkness.

"It doesn't matter *who* I am. What matters is that I'm back."

Raffaele didn't know why that person was there, sitting in an armchair in his house. But one thing was clear. Certainly this person didn't have good intentions. And had come for him.

#### CHAPTER 4

He couldn't remember the last time there'd been such a cold day.

After starting the car, he'd spent almost ten minutes scraping the layer of ice from the windscreen. He had done it with his bare hands, because he couldn't remember where the hell he had put the ice scraper. It had lived in the glove box the whole summer and every time he'd opened the compartment to retrieve something, the ice scraper had always been in the way. Then one day, tired of having to toss it around from side to side, he'd removed and put it

Nothing, he couldn't remember where in hell he'd stuck it.

And now, even after driving for fifteen minutes, he was still feeling a shooting pain in his hands caused by the ice. He was driving slightly bent forward, so he could breathe on his hands as they clutched the wheel. From time to time, he tried to drive with one hand, vigorously rubbing the other hand on his trousers in an attempt to warm it.

Giovanni Belmondo turned left and drove until he found a parking space right in front of the block of flats where his work colleague lived. He parked his Passat between two small, old cars and felt like a middle-class Italian. That thought managed to get a smile out of him, in spite of the terrible throbbing in his fingertips. He put his hands together in a prayer position. Then he began rubbing them vigorously against each other. The heat the exercise produced was minor, but enough to give him the relief he needed. He recovered his iPhone from the glove box and skimmed through his Contacts List.

When he saw the name *Raffaele Ghezzi Cell*, he swiped the screen with his index finger and made the call. He waited until he heard it ring, then he hung up. As he did every time that, for one reason or another, heâ##d go pick his friend up to give him a lift to work or go to a pub and watch Champions League matches together.

That morning, five minutes had already passed but Ghezzi still had not appeared.

â##Dickhead,â## he said, looking at the digital clock on the dashboard. It was 8:32 am.

According to workplace rules, at five to nine they should all be sitting in front of their PCâ##s. Mazzucotelli, their boss, was very strict. He said that you can tell a good employee by their punctuality.

Pffftâ## by their punctualityâ##

Due to a kind of superstitious bent-, he waited the full minute until the clock showed the thirty-third minute before calling Ghezzi again.

This time he let it ring twice, three time, four times, five, six â##

â##Youâ##ve reached the voicemail of 338â##'â##

He hung up, grumbling.

â##Iâ##ll bet this idiot is going to make us both late.â##

For a moment he regretted having offered the lift. He cursed his colleague, his car that was with the mechanic and the mechanic himself. With all the money mechanics charge for a simple vehicle inspection, he mused, the price should include the risk of being insulted without reason.

He tried making yet another call, but after six rings, it went to voicemail again.

â##Fuck,â## he cursed, realising that his annoyance had even made him forget about his throbbing hands.

He browsed through his Contacts again until he found his colleagueâ##s landline number. He pressed the Call button.

After it rang and rang endlessly, hearing at last the click of a receiver being picked up suggested to him that someone had answered.

â##Hiâ##'â##

He recognised the voice as belonging to that great piece of ass, Martina.

â##â## youâ##ve reached our voice message. The Ghezziâ##s are not at home at the moment. If itâ##s urgent, please leave aâ##'â##

â##Fuck off,â## snapped Giovanni, after he hung up.

He felt stupid for mistaking *Martina-answering machine*â##s voice for *the flesh and blood Martina*.

For a moment he even doubted he was supposed to pick Raffaele up that day.

He scrolled down the list of text messages until he found the conversation with the dickhead. Raffaeleâ##s last message dated back to 9:03 pm of the day before.

Could you pick me up tomorrow as well? Thank you. Raf

Heâ##d sent a reply two minutes later.



Ok. Good night.

He stood and gazed at the screen on his mobile phone. He hadn't make a mistake, not at all. Raffaele himself had asked for the lift.

Dickhead, he said to a colleague that couldn't hear him. Probably still sleeping.

He was about to put the car into gear and start driving, but something inside him something that he couldn't explain told him that it wasn't the right thing to do.

Dammit! he cursed, banging the wheel with his fist.

He stopped the car and sat there, contemplating the muted colours of a morning that looked as dull and grey as the city.

His side window reflected the image of a man in his forties that had no desire to deal with that freezing morning again. This also reminded him of a phrase that somebody he couldn't remember who had said to him a couple of weeks before:

Mirrors will always reflect an idiot.

He smiled and in doing so he felt a bit more idiotic than before.

He started counting down mentally from three. When his imaginary timer reached zero, he unlocked the car door handle and got out of the car, closing the car door behind him. As he was crossing the road, he pressed the button on the car key. In return, he heard the sound of the car's central locking system engage. He didn't know why, but crossing the street as the car locked itself always made him feel *cool*!

He smiled at the thought.

When he reached the gate he realised as he should have imagined that it was closed.

As he engaged his climbing skills, he asked himself what the point was of having a seventy centimetre high fence. His mind could not formulate an answer.

He walked down the path towards the glass door. He pulled the handle down, luckily it was open. He began climbing the stairs.

Reaching the landing on the first floor he saw his image reflected in the glass of the big window. He then remembered who had told him that stupid thing about mirrors and idiots.

The memory of Angelo Brera saying those words managed to get an almost hysterical laugh out of him. Then, he composed himself and continued going up.

When he reached the second floor, his wheezing suggested to him that maybe, from now on, it would be better to spend his time jogging instead of going to the pub and drinking Irish beer while watching twenty two guys on a giant screen kicking a ball around in exchange for millions of Euros a year and hot babes.

He covered the last flight of stairs trying to work out how many lifetimes someone with *his* job would need to work to earn what those boys pocket annually.

He reached the third and last floor now gasping for air. He moved closer to the door of his colleague's flat. He knocked, lightly at first, with his knuckles. Then again with his hand in a fist.

No answer. *Whatthefuck*.

He pushed the door bell and in return received a sharp ring coming from inside the house.

Apart from that, no other sound.

He rang it a second time.

Another sharp ring and nothing more.

At that point, he instinctively pulled the door handle down. And to his surprise, realised the door to the flat was open.

What he saw when the door swung open forced him to turn away. For a long moment, he thought his imagination was playing a horrible trick on him. Rather, he hoped it was.

Taking a breath, as if building courage, he looked back. His imagination had nothing to do with it. It was all real.

With one hand holding himself up against the door frame, against his will, he began retching violently.

## CHAPTER 5

When the police arrived at the flat, they found the man still visibly shaken.

Shortly after, an ambulance had arrived, along with the Police Forensic Team.

Inspector Carrobbio, head of Forensic Police, immediately set his men to work. The victim was Raffaele Ghezzi who had lived an apparently quiet life for around fifty years.

“Well, quiet,” detective Bassani said, “until someone killed him.”

The body was lying on the floor in an unusual position. It looked like he was asleep, rather than dead. His hands were placed on his chest, in proximity of the heart, one on the other. A yellow-gold coloured necktie was wrapped around his neck. The necktie was carefully arranged on the dead man’s chest, as if to make him look like the main protagonist in a ceremony.

“It almost looks as if somebody made fun of him,” said an officer, nodding towards the lifeless body.

“I still can’t believe it,” Belmondo jumped in, as if in defence of his dead colleague.

“Ah, our witness is getting better, at last,” said Bassani. “Are you feeling better now?”

Belmondo indicated yes with a light nod of his head, but judging by his wide open eyes, it was easy to see that he was still in shock.

“Good. Good for you,” stated Bassani, straightening his hat.

“Can I go now? I don’t feel well. I feel like I’ve been hit by a train.”

“A bit more patience, Belmondo. The Chief Inspector will be here shortly.”

Giovanni Belmondo moved closer to the wall. He leaned against it, as if the weight of death made the relatively simple task of supporting his body impossible for his legs.

After a few minutes Chief Inspector Walker arrived.

“Good morning, Chief,” Bassani greeted him. “Casual look today, hey?” he added, taking in Walker’s dark jeans and Moncler down jacket.

“I should be recovering, but it seems like somebody up there doesn’t like me.”

“Yeah,” confirmed Bassani, giving just a hint of a smile.

Bassani summed up the situation for Walker, then he pointed at Belmondo, still leaning against the wall.

“He’s the one who found the victim. And called us.”

“Good,” said Inspector Walker. “Let’s go and have a chat with him. But first, let me have a look at the poor guy.”

He moved closer, standing a few centimetres from the dead body and stared at it for some time.

“What happened to his wrists?” he asked Bassani, who moved closer, frowning.

“To his wrists?”

“They appear to have bruises on them,” Walker told him.

The detective squatted down to get a better look.

“Yeah, you’re right Chief. I didn’t notice it.”

“This job requires a good eye, Bassani. Otherwise you’ll never usurp my position.”

“But I don’t plan to.”

“Yes, you all say that, but...” joked Walker. “We’ll have a better idea when we receive the autopsy results. Now let’s go and see what the witness has to say.”

He moved at a decisive pace, his 180 cm-tall body carrying the muscles of a former workout freak beginning to go to fat.

“Chief Inspector Walker,” he said to Belmondo, stopping in front of him.

They shook hands.

“Giovanni Belmondo,” he replied.

Walker didn't waste any time.

You told detective Bassani that you came to pick the victim up to give him a lift to work, right?

Belmondo nodded, allowing himself some time before speaking. Then his voice came out trembling and feeble.

Yes, that's right. We're colleagues. Great colleagues.

Walker signalled for Bassani to take notes, before carrying on with his questions.

And where was it that you worked?

Mazzucotelli Chemical, answered Giovanni. It's here, less than ten kilometres away. In the area.

Yes, the Chief Inspector interrupted. I know where it is. And please tell me, Mr

Belmondo prompted Giovanni.

Yes, Belmondo. Do you know if your colleague had any problems with anyone?

Silence.

Giovanni stared at the Chief Inspector without answering, he wasn't sure what to tell him and what to conceal. As everyone should know, one never interferes between a husband and wife. Mister Belmondo, Walker prompted him, did you hear my question?

Giovanni tried to get his thoughts straight.

Raffaele and I were very close. We were more than just colleagues. We often went out together for a beer, for a drink or to watch football games. And we also told each other secrets. Belmondo looked like he was searching the bottom of the ocean for a missing word. personal ones, I guess you'd say.

The Chief Inspector nodded, wondering if Belmondo was really answering his question or going off on a tangent.

Giovanni continued with his statement.

Some months ago he confessed that he suspected his wife was having an affair.

Walker gave Bassani a knowing glance.

but he wasn't sure. He told me that he was devising a plan so that he could follow her every move.

Giovanni stopped and Walker fired another question at him.

And did you have the feeling that Mrs. Ghezzi was unfaithful to her husband?

The question seemed to hit like a punch.

Giovanni looked at Raffaele Ghezzi's body. Then, he tried to offer an answer that would please Walker and at the same time keep him out of this mess. Even though he was already feeling like he was up to his neck in it.

I believe there was some truth to it. You know, Chief Inspector, suspicions in these situations are nearly always well founded. Nevertheless, I am sure that Martina could have never

He left the sentence unfinished, certain the Chief Inspector would have interpreted it as intended.

Bassani stared at the witness as if he had just talked a load of bollocks.

And who would Martina be? he asked, although he knew the answer.

Raffaele's wife, Chief Inspector. Apart from the affair Raffaele was telling me about and I don't know if it's true she wasn't a bad person.

What? You didn't trust your friend? Walker asked, frowning.

The witness looked at his colleague's lifeless shell. He felt cornered. He had taken the time he'd needed to give an answer that would not drag him into this and instead had involved himself deeper. He may as well tell them whatever was on his mind and, if he was lucky, with all his irrational talk, he might say something that would convince the investigators to let him go.

After all, even though he had nothing to do with his friend's death, when there's a dead body involved and you're the one who found it, being questioned by the police puts so much pressure on you that it makes you lose control.

Belmondo forced himself to stay calm.

It's not a question of trust, Chief Inspector, he replied. Maybe there was some truth in it. The point is that even if Martina was unfaithful to him, I'm almost sure that she never would have gone this far! I mean you know. I think it must be something else.

Something else, eh! repeated the Chief Inspector, letting the words hang and slowly dissipate in a room that now carried the air of betrayal, as well as of death. And do you know where this Martina is now?

She's not here, said Giovanni. And immediately felt stupid.

I can see that too, Belmondo, the Chief Inspector interrupted sarcastically. So, where is she?

Giovanni spilt the rest.

Raffaele told me that some time ago his wife moved in with her mother. You know, their relationship wasn't great, so I think that they decided to take a break. With him staying here and her staying there.

And do you have this woman's phone number?

No, I don't have it.

And do you know where her mother lives?

I'm sorry, I don't know that either.

But you know the wife's maiden name, right?

The man nodded.

The surname is Pilenga. Martina Pilenga.

Martina Pilenga repeated Walker. Then, to Bassani. Track this woman down. I want to talk to her as soon as possible.

OK, Chief, the other man replied.

Then Walker turned back to Belmondo.

Take this, he said, handing him a business card. If something else comes to mind anything that might be useful to us, or that you think could be don't hesitate to contact me.

I will, said the man, feeling the tightness in his stomach had gone.

You can go now, continued Walker, but don't disappear. I might still need you. And remember to come by Headquarters for a formal witness declaration.

I live just a few kilometres from here, Chief Inspector, and I have no intention of disappearing, the other said, with a forced smile.

Better for everyone. Now try to recover, pull yourself together. You look distraught, Belmondo.

Belmondo said thanks and bid farewell, before turning his back and leaving the flat.

Chief Inspector Walker? a voice asked.

David turned.

Yes?

We're done. We need your authorisation to remove the body.

These decisions can only be made by the Public Prosecutor. He glanced at his watch. Fini will be here shortly.

When Antonio Fini entered the flat, he greeted everyone with a general nod of his head. Then he moved closer to Carrobbio, who was at a short distance from the body.

Have you taken all the photos we need? he asked, walking around the body.

All of them, the other hurried to reply. The body, from different angles. From far and near. The room and most of all



He stopped talking: *the coup de theatre* that, he was sure, would have guaranteed him Fini's complete attention.

Most of all? Fini urged him.

Carobbio moved closer.

Most of all we have recovered three sets of fingerprints. One set certainly belongs to the victim. After all, this is his house. But the other two could tell us something more about his death.

Fini noticed that the Forensic Inspector had grimaced when he'd mentioned the victim's fingerprints, but consigned this detail to the compartment in his mind labelled *Bullshit*.

So, you will let me have a detailed account after receiving the results from the fingerprints.

Of course, Carobbio answered, although the Public Prosecutor's question did not require an answer.

Good Fini added. I'd say we can proceed with the removal of the body.

Carobbio signalled his men who gathered around the body to lift it.

Fini moved over a few metres. He wanted to leave room for the specialists, but he needed breathing space to gather his thoughts. What was the motive that required the killer to dress up the victim with a gold necktie? And to arrange the victim's arms in that strange position?

*The world is changing*, he thought. *The crazies get even crazier.*

The chattering of the personnel authorised to remove the body took his mind away from his thoughts.

! a strange sound.

Yes, I heard it too. Something must have fallen.

I haven't heard anything.

Fini approached the four men. Chief Inspector Walker did the same.

What happened? Fini asked.

The Forensic men exchanged a series of conspiratorial glances. Then, the senior among them answered the question.

Nothing happened, Mr Fini. It's only that! while removing the body we heard a strange sound.

Fini looked at him. What kind of sound? he asked.

The man thought about it for a moment.

A metallic sound.

Metallic?

Yes, something like that. But I'm not sure. Someone heard it, someone else didn't. So!

He left the rest of the sentence to his questioner's imagination, who addressed them testily.

Well, let's find it, then. Let's make this elusive object the cause of that *metallic* sound-appear.

The senior officer nodded, and so did the others.

Once the body had been placed in its transport bag, they all made space for the personnel who, without a word, placed it on a stretcher and quietly took it away. And then it was all about looking and rummaging. Looking for something they weren't even sure was there.

After less than ten minutes an answer came.

Mr Fini? Gandolfi, the most senior specialist, called.

Yes? Fini replied.

Gandolfi approached him and handed him a small plastic bag with something inside.

This is the *elusive object* that we heard falling from the victim's body he said, with a hint of irony.

Fini signalled Walker to come and take a look at the content of the small plastic bag. Walker squinted his eyes trying to figure out what the object was and caught sight of a small white button with greenish and purplish pearl overtones.

‘A metallic sound, right?’ David said mockingly.

‘Clearly we were wrong,’ jumped in Blaine, another Forensic specialist.

‘Yes,’ Walker quickly agreed, handing Fini the small bag.

Gandolfi didn’t even consider answering back, as he knew that moment wasn’t going to be one of the highlights of his career.

Fini, after examining the button, gave it to the Forensic agent, asking him to check if it came from the dead man’s shirt.

‘I’ll make it a priority,’ the agent replied.

Before leaving, Fini looked around for Inspector Carobbio. When he found him among the others, he moved closer and made his final request.

‘Inspector, please, I’m counting on you to let me know as soon as possible both the results of what you find in this room and of the autopsy. Anything that can offer an explanation to this bizarre case.’

## CHAPTER 6

‘Come in.’

The door opened without a sound and detective Bassani peeped out into Walker’s office.

The two men stood staring at each other. *So?* the Chief’s eyes seem to shout.

Bassani looked away, as if for some strange reason he felt intimidated by the Chief Inspector.

‘We’ve tracked down the widow Pilenga, Martina’s mother, wife of’

‘Good. Well done.’ Walker interrupted him abruptly. ‘Where is she now?’

Bassani hadn’t even had time to respond when Walker spoke again.

‘That woman should have already been here.’

The detective’s eyes widened.

‘You’re right, Chief, but’ he stopped, worried by, but also quietly relishing the brooding expression on Walker’s face. ‘Martina Pilenga is not available *at the moment*.’

‘What do you mean *is not available at the moment*?’

‘Just what I said, Chief. What our witness said, Belmondo’

‘Belmondo’ Walker remarked with a hint of annoyance in his voice.

‘Yes, Belmondo. Like *Belmondo* was saying, Martina Pilenga moved in with her mother probably following the stormy period with her husband, but it’s been a couple of days since she’s been there. The widow Pilenga, Martina’s mother, said her daughter had told her that she was going to be away for the weekend’

‘But?’ asked Walker, as if he was inevitably expecting a *but*.

‘But she is pretty old,’ Bassani hurried to answer. ‘And doesn’t remember where she’s gone. Actually, she doesn’t even remember if her daughter told her.’

A cloak of silence fell on them again. Then it was the Chief who spoke again.

‘So, let’s see if I’ve understood it well’ he grumbled. ‘A man is found lifeless in his flat after discovering his wife was unfaithful. The colleague who finds him states that *that* man was a good person, but had just found out that his wife had cheated on him. We, obviously, try to trace the wife of this poor unlucky man and, strangely enough, she’s away for the weekend and no one, not even her mother, knows where she’s gone. It could be a coincidence, of course! But I’d say something strange is going on here. *Very strange*.’

The Chief took a pause. He couldn’t wait for Caslini - the detective he’d worked with since his arrival in Milan - to get back quickly enough from his holiday. It’s not that he didn’t like Bassani, he simply lacked initiative. Moreover, Walker was convinced that he was a slacker.

“That’s why I want that woman to be found asap,” Walker continued, running his fingers through his hair. Then the tone of his voice went up. “Call her girlfriends, relatives, colleagues, cats, dogs, even turtles if she has any! I want somebody to tell me asap where the fuck this woman is. And I want her here, in my office. It’s the only lead we have.”

“I’ll do my best, Chief,” the detective said. “Anything else?”

Walker shook his head.

The detective turned, heading towards the door. When he was about to open the door, the Chief Inspector stopped him.

“Bassani?”

He turned around.

“Yes, Chief,” he answered.

“If that woman, for whatever reason, cannot manage to come to my office this very day,” now his voice was calmer, “I at least want to speak with her on the phone.”

Bassani gave his boss a perplexed look, and tried to answer in a way that wouldn’t disappoint him.

“It will be done, Chief.”

Before disappearing through the door, Bassani raised his hand to wave goodbye.

Walker stood motionless for a long time, before deciding to treat himself to a cigarette. Although by law it was strictly forbidden, as long as that office was his, he would smoke any time he felt like it.

Smoking relaxed him, as well as helping him think.

Automatically he let the ash fall on a little china plate which had seen better days, when he felt a sharp pain running through his arm. He clenched his teeth and grimaced with pain, tossing and turning on his chair. The wound on his shoulder was still burning. Maybe he had underestimated it.

## CHAPTER 7

“What do you mean she’s at the *spa*?”

“A SPA is, like,” replied Bassani, “a sort of wellness centre, Chief.”

“I know perfectly well what a SPA is,” Walker replied dryly. Then the tone of his voice mellowed. “Did you think I thought it was the Software Publishing Association?”

Bassani smiled, shaking his head.

Walker became serious again.

“What I meant was what the hell is she doing in a SPA?”

“She must have gone there to relax, Chief. Maybe to have a break from her husband, since it looks like they were on bad terms.”

Walker nodded, remembering what Belmondo had told him about the marital instability between the victim and his wife.

“So,” the Chief Inspector considered, “Ghezzi’s wife is relaxing at a wellness centre. Sauna, Turkish baths, massage and other shit like that. All of this while her husband is resting peacefully at the morgue, after having been killed. Quite bizarre this thing.”

“Well, although a mortuary isn’t a wellness centre, at least it is a calm place. Where you certainly don’t get stressed,” Bassani tried to joke about it.

“That was a good joke, detective. Unlike mine,” smiled Walker. “But now, let’s be serious again. The fact that this woman is unreachable could make her a suspect. Actually, the only suspect, at this moment.”

Bassani nodded without saying a word, allowing the Chief Inspector to continue.

“Who told you that Ghezzi’s wife is at a wellness centre?”

“After speaking with some people who knew her, one of her girlfriends told us.”

Bassani didn’t mention the identity or details of that person and Walker didn’t care to know. “And where is this wellness centre?”

â##In a town in the region of Versilia, Chief.â##

â##So I can assume that it would be impossible to have her in my office today.â##

â##Exactlyâ#!â##

â##But I did say that in that case I would have wanted â#!â##

The phone ringing cut the Chiefâ##s sentence clean off . Before he could answer it, Bassani hurried to say he had called the place where Mrs Pilenga was staying.

â##After introducing myself, I told them I needed to speak urgently with Mrs Pilenga. I gave them your extension. This should be herâ## Bassani concluded, nodding towards the receiver that kept on ringing. For once, he felt like he had done something right.

â##State Police, Chief Inspector Walker speaking.â##

On the other end of the line was the tense voice of the receptionist who, after having introduced himself, passed the phone to Mrs Pilenga.

â##Hello?â## the woman said, her anxiety tightening her throat.

The Chief Inspector introduced himself and, choosing his words carefully, informed her of the fate that had befallen her husband.

No reply.

After a time that seemed, according to Walker, sufficient to take in the news, he prompted Mrs Pilenga.

â##Mrs Pilenga, are you still there?â##

â##This isnâ##t a joke, is it?â## she asked faintly.

â##Itâ##s not a joke, Mrs Pilenga. My condolences.â##

â##Dead in our flat?â##

â##Yes, Mrs Pilenga,â## confirmed Walker, not reminding her that she hadnâ##t lived under the same roof as her husband for some months.

â##Itâ##s impossâ#!â##

Sobbing stopped her from finishing her sentence.

Walker waited until the sobbing diminished, then asked her to come to Police Headquarters as soon as possible.

â##I should be back in Milan tomorrow,â## the woman told him.

â##Tomorrow will be perfectly fine.â##

â##I was supposed to leave in the early afternoon, butâ#!â## more sobbing in her voice, â##â#! I will leave early tomorrow morning.â##

The Chief Inspector told her he would expect her in the afternoon. Then, exactly when he was about to hang up, she mumbled something incomprehensible.

â##Excuse me?â##

â##Can I know why you want to talk to me in person?â##

Walker had expected that question. Nevertheless, he gave himself a couple of seconds before answering.

â##Mrs Pilenga, your husband has been found dead, in rather unusual circumstances. And you are his wife. It seems more than reasonable for me to ask you some questions.â##

â##Unusual circumstances? What do you mean?â## Mrs Pilenga asked in an agitated shrill voice

â##Iâ##m sorry, Mrs Pilenga, but I canâ##t provide any information over the phone. Youâ##ll have to come to Police Headquarters.â##

His tone of voice did not encourage a reply. The silence on the other end of the phone was a clear sign that she had got the message.

Walker re-confirmed the appointment for the following day, said goodbye, rang off and stood there listening to the sound of the interrupted dial tone, lost in his thoughts.



When he came back from the place heâ##d gone to, a new thought struck him: if the woman was in any way linked to the death of her husband, she hadnâ##t showed it at all. At least not from her voice. Only one more day and Walker would also read her body language. Then he could arrive at his most valid conclusions. He was trusting the same instinct that had many times before guided him to the right place.

â##So?â## asked Bassani.

â##Tomorrow weâ##ll see if Mrs Pilenga has something to tell us.â##

â##Good,â## said the detective, nodding. â##Can I go now?â##

â##Just one minute, please, thereâ##s something else I want to talk to you about.â##

Bassaniâ##s silence was an invitation for Walker to continue.

â##Iâ##ve been informed the necktie is the MODADUOMO brand. You know it, donâ##t you?â##

â##Who doesnâ##t know MODADUOMO, Chief?â##

Walker nodded, smiling. Then he typed the brand name on his Smartphone and clicked on the link.

â##Listenâ## he said. â##Straight from Wikipedia. MODADUOMO.â##I well known fashion brand made in Italyâ## founded in Milanâ## production and sale of tailored, custom-made suits and accessories for men for over fifty yearsâ## blah, blah, blahâ## with branches throughout Italy. Since 2004 the well known brand has also been exported, opening over fifty stores across the world.â##

When Walker finished reading, Bassani, looking disoriented, spoke.

â##I donâ##t understand what youâ##re trying to tell me, Chief.â##

Walker stared at him. The point perhaps eluding himself too.

â##Basically we are dealing with a giant of designer fashion. The necktie found at the victimâ##s throat could have been bought anywhere.â##

Walker stopped talking, giving himself time to reflect. It was when he noticed Bassaniâ##s puzzled expression that he began to put forward his next question.

â##Iâ##m getting there, Chief,â## Bassani said, interrupting with a fast movement of his hand.

Walker continued. â##It would be almost impossible to track down the killer through that. O.K., itâ##s also true that the colour is not one of the most common ones. Did you get any idea of how many gold neckties MODADUOMO, in that exact model, have been sold around the world?â##

Detective Bassani shrugged.

â##Neither did I,â## Walker admitted. â##Although I believe that it must be a three-digit number. Iâ##ll say it again, on our side we have thatâ##unusual colour. Having said that, since we donâ##t have anywhere to start from, I would like to cling to that damn necktie. I plan to drop into one of these stores. Please get me the address of the main office and let the manager know about my upcoming visit. Iâ##m going to have a little chat with him.â##

â##Will do, Chief.â##

â##Good, Bassani. Thatâ##s all. Thanks.â##

## CHAPTER 8

When Dr Visconti made his entrance into the Autopsy Room, he noticed that Dr Parri had already prepared all the instruments on the small trolley.

He didnâ##t let her see that he was pleased with her. Clara Parri was the new (and only) junior medical physician, she had arrived with a prestigious CV and was eager to work with the best medical examiner in the whole of Northern Italy. And Dr Visconti, although the idea of having to babysit junior doctors didnâ##t sit well with him â##heâ##d only done it once with another student before her â## in the end had accepted it.

And now, after almost a month and a half of work, he was pleased with the young woman. He still hadnâ##t found any negative trait in her. She was beautiful, sophisticated, with a refined attitude and well-mannered â##and these were the basics needed to work by his side. Moreover she

was a quick learner. With her you didn't need to say things twice and this was also a basic requirement if you were to work with Umberto Visconti.

Well done, Clara, that was all he said.

She gave him a delicate smile and he had the impression that she was attracted by his charm. He smiled back, then with few words their work began.

Visconti moved near to the table where Raffaele Ghezzi was lying, the tag tied around the dead man's big toe stating his name.

With a sharp look he covered the dead body from head to toe several times and in the meantime he was asking himself how many corpses he had seen throughout his career. He remembered the first one. He was still a junior doctor and the dead body belonged to an obese man, almost two hundred kilos. When the doctor had made an incision on that large abdomen, it had deflated and a sickening smell had filled the room. It had lingered on him for more than a week. Or at least that was his impression.

And since that day his life had been a series of dead people and autopsies. And the people, who initially had a name, a sex and an age, with the passing of time had become mere dummies to be sliced open and a skullcap to be removed.

And now Raffaele Ghezzi was also part of that miserable group.

Visconti allowed himself a smile careful not to be seen by the girl which reflected the satisfaction he had for his job.

He stretched an arm towards the small trolley and retrieved two rubber gloves.

He put them on, making sure that they were snug. Noticing that Clara was already wearing hers, he nodded at her and grabbed the scalpel.

The autopsy lasted a bit more than an hour and a half.

Visconti recorded that the victim had died of cardiorespiratory arrest.

A strip of fabric or something similar was tightly wrapped around the neck obstructing the passage of cerebral impulses.

Then, when the dissection was almost concluded, Clara, who was examining the dead man's oral cavity, in a feeble voice interrupted the operation.

Doctor, look here, said the girl.

What's up? asked the doctor, leaning forward.

There, she continued. In his mouth. It looks like

Clara didn't complete the sentence because she knew *what it looked like*.

The medical examiner moved a bit closer and with a torch illuminated the inside of the dead man's mouth.

There, the girl exorted him, under his tongue.

Dr Visconti lifted the dead man's tongue, as much as was necessary, in order to be able to take a better look at what Clara had seen.

Yes, he said. You're right, Clara. There's something strange.

## CHAPTER 9

Thank you for coming, Mrs Pilenga, Inspector Walker said to the woman, although it had been more of an order than a request.

Martina nodded, silent. Then, she tried to find something to say, despite the dreadful misery she felt inside her.

If there's anything I can do

Walker offered her a benevolent smile, in an attempt to look sympathetic. Then he rubbed his hands together and let himself drop back into his old worn-out armchair.

That's exactly why we have summoned you. We think that anything you say may be useful to us.

The woman replied by nodding again. She looked like a little doll with a broken neck.

“Good,” said Walker. Then he glanced at Zambetti, informing him that the real interrogation was now to begin.

The assistant nodded, sliding his fingertips onto the computer keys.

“Mrs Pilenga, do you know,” Walker started, “if there was anybody who would have wanted to hurt your husband?”

Before answering, the woman waited longer than the Inspector would have expected.

“Not that I know of.”

“And what about you, Mrs Pilenga? Did you get on with your husband?”

“What kind of question is that?” blurted the woman, fidgeting in her chair.

“Calm down,” the Inspector tried to quiet her. “This is just like any other question...”

“Of course we got on,” Mrs Pilenga uttered, interrupting him.

Walker nodded, moving his head slowly. In that precise moment he decided to shift into high gear, without reservation.

“Good,” he said smoothly. “Is there by any chance anything in particular that you would like to tell us regarding your relationship with your husband?”

The woman blushed. The Inspector could see on her face that she was wondering what the reason was behind that question. Following a few seconds of silence, Mrs Pilenga attempted to change track.

“What are you trying to say?”

Walker put on the most casual face he could summon.

“It was just a simple question, Mrs Pilenga. You know, before formulating any hypothesis about the murder, I would like to know a bit more about your husband’s life. And who better than you to help me?”

Martina looked down at the desk. She scratched nervously at the back of her hand, then she lifted her eyes and tried to look the Inspector in the face.

“My husband and I were an ordinary couple.”

“What do you mean by *ordinary*?”

The woman thought about that for a moment.

“We had ups and downs, like many other couples.”

“Ups and downs,” repeated Walker, turning his head sideways for a moment, towards his subordinate. “So, Mrs Pilenga, according to you, these ups and downs, could your husband also have them with somebody else. Don’t misunderstand me. I mean, of your knowledge, did your husband have problems with anybody?”

Walker’s cold eyes were inspecting Martina’s teary eyes, not prying away from them for even a moment.

“I’ve known my husband for thirty years. I have never seen him fight with anyone. I don’t believe he’d decided to start getting into trouble at fifty years old.”

“I understand,” continued Walker, who was still feeling his way through the dark.

“I still can’t believe it,” the woman opened up, letting herself go into a choked cry.

Walker stretched his hands out on the desk, in search of hers. She noticed it and decided to accept the charitable gesture. She put her hands together and entrusted them in the Inspector’s big, yet delicate, hands, finding warmth in them.

“I’m sorry, Mrs Pilenga. Believe me,” he told her. “Although my methods might seem harsh, I swear I am doing it for you. To find your husband’s killer. And I am sure that your deposition, even something that you might consider insignificant, could lead us on the right track. I am just asking you to help us to help you.”

“But I don’t know how,” she replied, sobbing.

Walker remained silent, wondering if he hadn’t made a mistake in summoning the woman too soon after her husband’s death. Would it have been better to have let some days go by?

“Mrs Pilenga,” he regained her attention, also by putting a light pressure on her hands. “Maybe it’s better if you go back home. You need to rest. Relax, let yourself go with all the tears you need. We’ll be in touch again in a couple of days. So if in the meantime you remember anything that can be useful to us, let me know.”

Martina nodded, taking a tissue out of her handbag.

“Maybe it’s better, yes,” she confirmed.

Walker offered her one last smile and stood still waiting for her to slip her hands from his.

“Have a good day,” said the woman, looking at the two men, first at one, then at the other.

“See you soon,” and “Have a good day too,” answered Walker and Zambetti in unison.

Martina Pilenga stood up from the chair and, walking slowly and sadly, left.

The two men found themselves alone together again.

“She seemed worn out,” ventured Zambetti.

“Well, even if it was true that she was unfaithful to him, he was still her husband,” suggested Walker.

“I wonder why she didn’t admit to the extramarital affair.”

“Well, it’s obvious. We didn’t ask her explicitly and she didn’t say it. It’s normal, isn’t it? Who’s that woman who loves to shout it from the rooftops that she is having an affair? I tried to bring up the topic, but she avoided it.”

“To be honest, you’re right, Chief Inspector,” Zambetti tried flattering him. “Although...”

Walker turned his head sharply towards him.

“Although?”

Zambetti tapped his fingertips on the edge of the computer.

“I don’t know why, but I kind of have the impression that she’s hiding something from us.”

## CHAPTER 10

After a lunch break, David Walker returned to his office. He saw straight away that the file on Ghezzi’s murder was on his desk. Bassani had notified him that the autopsy appraisal had been written. He had sent a copy to him and one to Fini.

David sat on the old armchair, in front of the envelope. He lit a cigarette and opened it. He made a copy of the appraisal and summoned Bassani.

“Well, detective,” said the Inspector, as soon as the other crossed the threshold. “I saw you brought me more fuel for the fire. Let’s get started.”

He handed him a copy of the document.

“Read it and make notes of the most important parts. I’ll do the same. Then we’ll compare them.”

Bassani’s face took on a bemused and incredulous expression. It was obvious that he had never worked that way before. Detective Caslini also looked shocked the first time. But afterwards Walker’s words had put him at ease.

Four eyes see better than two, and two heads think better than one.

When Walker repeated the same motto to Bassani, he replied with a pleased smile.

Then, neither of them needing to add anything else, they started reading Dr Visconti’s report.

After less than an hour, they had finished. Both men had highlighted the cause of death: cardiorespiratory arrest. Moreover, Visconti in his report talked about ligature strangulation with undetermined object. The doctor assumed it was a strip of fabric, or something similar. Some marks with a small regular square texture had been found on the victim’s neck.

Moreover, there was another element that caught their attention. In the victim’s mouth, Visconti had identified an unusual removal of the layer of the skin in the sublingual sulcus. And



around this tear, which was irregular in shape and as big as a corn kernel, traces of methyl cyanoacrylate had been found.

The two men stood there in silence for a long time. Without knowing, they were formulating the same thoughts.

The only noise, that for a moment disturbed the quietness of their room, was coming from Walker's lighter. A hiss and the cigarette came to life.

The Inspector stood there staring at the empty space, thinking about the information he had just read, as if in that way he could absorb them completely. One question, though, formed in his mind. And he was convinced that the same doubt was gripping detective Bassani.

Neither of them could pull an answer out of a magic hat.

When Walker noticed that his Marlboro had burnt itself out, he squashed what was left of it in the ashtray. Finally he let his fingertips slip onto the computer keyboard. His hands typed the name of the weird chemical compound and a link appeared. When the answer appeared on the screen, he turned towards Bassani.

What was that man doing with traces of glue under his tongue?

## CHAPTER 11

The man cursed in hatred against the gaming machine. It was the third time in a row that it had given him one short of a Royal Flush. It was as if it was making fun of him, giving him the illusion of a win that would never come. But he knew these stupid devices well. They would spin, spin and spin. They would deceive, deceive and deceive. And, after teasing one for so long with the promise of a prize without delivering, the eventual super jackpot would be served on a silver platter. And Caio Merli knew that moment was close, it was only a matter of investing some more banknotes.

He took his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans. He opened it and with disappointment found he only had a tenner. In that moment he realised the money-hungry bitch machine had already sucked from him a hundred and forty Euros. He pulled the banknote out and flattened it with his hands, trying to make it more appetising for the poker machine's mouth. Next, he put it near the slot, which was flashing as if to signal that it was waiting for the note.

The jaws of the machine swallowed the note, which was also Caio Merli's last chance to break the bank. The sound of the paper being quickly sucked in, followed by the polyphonic jingle of the machine, was the signal the credit had been accepted.

Now, Caio was ready to play; it was all or nothing.

He kept the button pushed until the bet reached the maximum amount allowed. In doing so, he would only have two hands to play.

He hit the red button with his fingertips and the card symbols began spinning vigorously. Then, on the second turn, they started to slow down, stopping on a combination that came to nothing.

Fuck! the man cursed.

He was about to push the red button again, when a short metallic cascade told him that one of the machines to his right had decided to pay a small amount. He shot a distracted glance at a man in a green cap, who didn't notice, as he was preoccupied collecting his few coins. He stood there staring at the lucky man longer than he would have liked it. Then, with a sense of disgust, he turned his eyes and concentration to the screen and with determination pushed the button that activated the movement of the cards, as though the outcome might depend on the force with which he pressed the start button. The combination of cards and the legend INSERT COIN told him that his chances of winning were exhausted. Just like his money.

Of all the decisions available to him, he was certainly not abandoning such a *warm* machine. He knew too well that it was only a question of ten or so more Euros for the machine to spit out a nice payoff.

He looked around and verified that there were only two other people in the small room.

He tilted the stool forward, placing it against the poker machine keyboard, to indicate that he was reserving the machine. He entered the door leading to the bar area of the place. He exchanged a glance with a well dressed man reading a newspaper, who sipped coffee. When he neared the bar he made eye contact with the barman.

‘‘I’ll be back soon, I’m going to take some money out,’’ he said, giving a hint of a smile.

‘‘I’ll be here,’’ replied the barman, while drying a glass.

It took him less than five minutes, the ATM was about two hundred metres from Bar Santo.

When the barman saw him return, he light-heartedly welcomed him back.

‘‘You’ve come back sooner than soon.’’

‘‘I can’t miss the jackpot. I feel it, the machine is hot.’’

The man behind the counter smiled, a sly smile, as if to say it was always -more or less- a substantial jackpot for him, whenever someone put a banknote in one of his machines.

‘‘Good luck!’’

Caio Merli didn’t get the meaning of that smile, or if he did, he didn’t show it.

‘‘Thank you, Anselmo,’’ he replied, without giving too much weight to those words.

His mind was elsewhere. He was already dreaming about the metallic sound of that cascading roll of Euros. He was thinking about how he was going to spend that substantial little lump. Perhaps he could

Something familiar stopped those thoughts. And for a millisecond even his heartbeat stopped. He felt dizzy: he recognised the sound of that cascading reel of money. His anger exploded inside him, so much that his blood pressure shot to the stars. He blinked his eyes in an attempt to awaken from that nightmare.

Yes, the nightmare where the fucking son of a bitch in the green cap waits for the moment you go to replenish your stock of Euros to move in on your machine. The one you reserved by tilting the stool forward. *The hot one*. The one that was still spitting into its tray metal coins that had the weight, form, size and value of one euro each.

‘‘Are you a fucking idiot?’’

The man with the cap didn’t hear him, or pretended not to.

‘‘OI!’’ continued Caio approaching him, his hands were trembling with anger and itching for a fight. ‘‘I’m talking to you, *Green Cap*.’’

The man turned.

‘‘Are you talking to me?’’ he asked calmly.

Caio moved closer, his mouth just a couple of inches from the man’s face.

‘‘That money is mine,’’ he said, with the confidence of someone who firmly believes he is right.

‘‘Yours?’’ asked the man, an idiotic smile on his lips. ‘‘But I’ve just won it.’’

Caio took a step back, not only to have a better view of the dickhead’s face, but also to let the man see his anger.

‘‘Look, man,’’ he started, hitting the centre of the man’s chest with his knobby index finger. ‘‘If you’re looking for trouble, you’ve found it. You saw perfectly well that I was playing at that machine. And you also saw perfectly well that I had reserved it!’’

‘‘Reserved?’’ Green Cap interrupted. ‘‘And since when can you reserve a machine?’’

Again, that fucking annoying little smile. This man and the way he behaved was unleashing that inner force that would lead Caio to punch him until he smashed the bastard’s face. Nevertheless, he tried to remain calm, although it was not in his nature.

‘‘Hey, stranger. Around here when someone tilts the stool forward against the machine board, it means that the machine is reserved.’’

“Oh, really?” The man was laughing openly. “That’s truly a good one,” he added, before turning away to resume playing.

Caio was now blind with rage; this man had driven him to the very depths of his anger.

“Get your paws off my money, you dirty bastard,” he cursed, while grabbing him from behind and wrapping his hands around his neck.

Green Cap started waving his arms around, in an attempt to free himself. But, considering his diminutive size, it would have been impossible for the little man to free himself from Caio Merli’s ferocious clutches.

Luckily for Green Cap, there was a man – a recent arrival – that jumped in and was rewarded with an involuntary elbow from Caio for his efforts.

The scuffle continued for a few more seconds, then six-foot tall Anselmo’s face peeked out from the entrance to the room.

“Hey, what the hell is going on here?” His rough voice echoed in the game room.

Caio turned, slightly releasing the grasp around the neck of the man who had stolen his win.

“This fucking idiot took my machine,” he said, tugging him. “And my money too.”

“What are you talking about?” jumped in the little fellow in the green cap. “That money was mine, I won it. Besides, if there’s a fucking idiot between us, that would be!”

The shove he received stopped his sentence and sent him crashing onto the machine. Caio moved closer again, and slapped his face a couple of times, until two strong arms grabbed him from behind.

“You know I don’t want any trouble in my bar,” Anselmo admonished him.

“I swear I’m going to kill you, asshole!” Caio shouted at Green Cap, trying to kick him. “Let me go!” he ordered the barman, who was keeping both his arms immobilised in a strong embrace.

“I’ll do it only when you calm down,” the barman’s voice left no space for an answer.

Caio wrestled for a few more seconds, then he decided to surrender to the grasp of the two strong arms.

“Okay. I’m calm now,” he said, although he was still fuming with rage inside.

“Good. Now you two sit here at the table and tell me word for word what happened,” ordered Anselmo.

## CHAPTER 12

Raffaele Ghezzi’s death was a mess, the Chief Inspector thought. There were those damn traces of glue under the victim’s tongue. And the murder weapon was still a mystery.

David Walker read the autopsy report for the umpteenth time, paying special attention to the parts that he had highlighted. When he reached the end, he remained there engrossed in his own thoughts.

Making an angry grunt, he lifted the office phone receiver and dialled Dr Visconti’s number. The phone rang three times, then the Medical Examiner answered.

“Hi Umberto, it’s Walker.”

“Inspector, good to hear from you. I bet you need something.”

“Correct,” admitted David.

“Shoot,” Visconti encouraged him.

“I’ve just finished reading the appraisal regarding Ghezzi.”

“Good.”

“Actually, I dare say that I devoured it more than read it.”

On the other end he heard an amused snicker.

“So, the victim died by strangulation.”

“Without a shadow of a doubt.”

“But the murder weapon still remains a mystery.”

An eternal moment of silence.

“Well, I made my observations, David.”

“And now I’ll give you mine,” replied Walker. “Couldn’t the killer have used the necktie that was found on the victim’s body? That is, I mean, could it be consistent with the marks that you’ve found on the victim’s neck?”

The doctor thought about it for a moment.

“It could be. Yes, I wouldn’t exclude it.”

“Excellent,” replied Walker. “Besides, I read about some marks with little squares stamped on the neck.”

“Yes,” Visconti interrupted him. “Those squares are the pattern on the surface of the ligature strip or, as you have assumed, of the necktie used for the strangulation.”

“It’s exactly with reference to this matter that I wanted some clarification.”

“That’s why I’m here, David.”

“I spoke with Carobbio, from Forensics. He confirmed that the necktie found on Ghezzi’s body had some small squares tone-on-tone. The surface of the fabric, I mean.”

“Well, then I’d say there’s no doubt, David. It must be the murder weapon. If you want, we could confirm that, by comparing the pattern of that necktie with the marks on the victim’s neck.”

Walker waited for a few seconds before expressing his thoughts.

“Let’s do it, Umberto. Although I was also convinced that it was that necktie.”

“But?” the medical examiner asked.

“But Carobbio excluded it. Categorically.”

“Sorry, but why?”

“He said the necktie was too neat, too clean and ironed to be the one used to strangle a man.

In his words: it looked like it came from a drycleaner’s.”

“So he discouraged you.”

“Absolutely.”

After an embarrassing silence, it was Visconti who came forward.

“As for the rest of the picture, is it clear to you?”

“To tell the truth, I wanted to ask you something else.”

“I’m all ears.”

“What can you tell me about his wrists? I couldn’t find anything in my report.”

“The wrists?” asked Visconti, worried.

“Yes. As soon as I arrived at the scene, I noticed some reddish bruises around the victim’s wrists.”

“Ah, those,” said the doctor. “Yes, I saw them. I didn’t attach any importance to them because certainly they didn’t cause his death. It’s very likely that the victim had been tied with something metallic before he was killed. Chains? Handcuffs?”

Walker remained silent.

“David, are you still there?” Visconti prompted him.

“Yes, I’m here,” he answered, shaking off his lethargy. “It’s exactly what I’d thought.”

“Well, then why did you ask?” joked the doctor.

“I wanted you to confirm it.”

“Well, I did.”

“Good. Thanks a lot, Umberto,” said Walker, letting his friend know that their phone conversation was over.

“Don’t mention it, David. It’s my job.”

“Ah,” Walker drew Visconti’s attention again, “I’ll show you the necktie, to compare it with the impressions on Ghezzi’s neck.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Walker slowly returned the receiver to its hook. It was the first time that Visconti had submitted an incomplete report. Poor Umberto, he must still be under stress from his mother’s death. He would give the document back to him and ask for the amendments. He didn’t wish to cause him any trouble.

### CHAPTER 13

Visconti and Carobbio’s joint effort brought the first result: the necktie with which Ghezzi had been killed matched the one found on his body.

Walker made a mental note to visit the tie manufacturer and got into his car, cursing the traffic in Milan.

He parked his AUDI A3 in the only available spot, in a “no parking” space. He remained inside the car until the end of his cigarette, smoking with his eyes closed, sunk into his seat, thinking about his next moves.

When he got outside, he remembered to leave a copy of his police ID on the windscreen. He had already accumulated a collection of fines.

MODADUOMO’s main office was in Piazza San Babila, a hundred metres from there.

While walking, he consulted his iPhone and suffered all the advertising used by the big brand on their website for their products.

Nothing special, he said to himself. He lit another cigarette, ignoring that little voice warning him that he had only just finished the previous one. He sucked in three long drags of nicotine and felt his lungs cursing against him. The discomfort sensed at his breastbone brought back to memory the ongoing lectures from his mother who used to nag him every time she saw him with a cigarette.

The store was enormous, luxurious even, but not the exclusive domain of the rich. Many of its products were more or less affordable, Walker knew, even though he had never bought anything there.

A good-looking black man flung the door open for him, and greeted him showing the contrast between the whiteness of his teeth and his skin colour.

Walker returned the smile and made towards the first shop-assistant he spotted. She was young, blonde, blue eyes. Definitely very pretty. Reading the tag on her chest, Walker saw her name was Marina Papetti.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning, sir,” she answered, her voice friendly. “How can I help you?”

“I need to speak to the Manager,” he simply replied.

The blonde frowned.

“I’m sorry, sir, Mister Del Chiaro is rather busy today.”

“Tell him that Inspector Walker is here, from the Police,” David interrupted her, holding up his Police ID.

The girl widened her eyes.

“I’ll call him immediately,” said Marina, before heading away.

Shortly afterwards Walker saw a tall man approaching. Good-looking, well groomed, expensive suit. A living advert for the store, the Inspector thought, with a bit of jealousy.

“Inspector Walker?” the man asked.

“In person,” David replied, offering his outstretched hand.

“Marzio Del Chiaro. Nice to meet you. May I see your ID?”

Walker showed it to him. “Murder Investigation - Milan.”

Del Chiaro was startled.

“Please tell me Inspector, what can I do for you? Would you like a coffee, while we talk?”

David accepted his offer, convinced that the other had chosen the excuse of a coffee to bring him to a more private room, far from curious eyes and ears.

The manager's office was very welcoming, a modern desk at the centre of the room. Along the walls were huge sets of shelves finished in white. The black marble floor enhanced the luminosity of the bright walls. Two ergonomic armchairs welcomed Walker and the manager.

Del Chiaro picked up the cordless and pushed a button.

«Elena, can you bring two coffees to my office, please? Thank you.» Then he addressed Walker. «Tell me everything, Inspector.»

«I advise you that everything we discuss here must stay between us.»

«You can count on it.»

«Good. Let's get to the point.»

Three light knocks at the door interrupted him.

«Please come in, Elena,» the manager invited her.

A brunette, almost as pretty as her blonde colleague, made her entrance with a tray in her hands.

«Here you are,» she said, placing two steaming coffee cups on the desk.

When she was gone, Walker started again.

«I'm investigating a delicate murder case, Mr Del Chiaro.»

«Should I be worried, Inspector?» His voice showed a touch of anxiety.

«You tell me,» Walker rebutted. «Do you have something to be worried about?» Hesitation.

«Of course not,» the man acknowledged finally.

«I knew it,» Walker smiled. «I'm here because it appears the victim was killed with a necktie made by the company you work for.»

The Inspector slipped a photo of the necktie from his pocket.

Del Chiaro stared at it intensely. He didn't look pleased.

«Yes, I recognise it, it's one of ours.» Then he raised his eyes and met the Inspector's. «I remember reading a couple of days ago that a man had been murdered. But I don't recall having read that a MODADUOMO necktie was used to kill him.»

«We've decided to feed journalists only with the basic information, without entering into details. They've already begun adding their own, making up false details to pull in more readers.»

The man invited him to continue, as he started stirring his coffee.

Walker did the same, and then drank the coffee in one gulp.

«Excellent,» he said pointing at the cup. «I believe such a large company must have a software program that manages the flow of incoming and outgoing goods, please correct me if I'm wrong.»

«It does,» the manager confirmed.

«Perfect. Would you be so kind as to tell me how it works? How you manage articles, inventories, colours?»

The manager nodded.

«Each item has a code, indicating the item, model, colour, fabric. Well, the code creates an identity card of the product.»

«Very convenient,» Walker interrupted him.

«Indeed,» the manager continued. «Imagine we have a white silk necktie with a herringbone motif. Suppose its identification code is CSS9047.»

«I'm following you,» said Walker, «That's where I want to go. Let's suppose that we have the same silk necktie with the herringbone motif, but it's red instead of white. Would its code be the same, since it's the same model, or would it be different, considering that it's a different colour?»

The manager didn't hesitate.

‘‘If it’s only the colour that changes, then it will change only the last digit of the code. For example, if the white one ends with the number 7, the red one will end with number 8.’’

‘‘That’s what I thought,’’ said Walker. ‘‘Would you be able to track back to anyone who bought, in one of your branches, two, three, four or an infinite number of gold coloured neckties?’’

The manager thought about it.

‘‘Well, if the customer has made the payment electronically, then yes, otherwise, if he paid cash, we can’t track him.’’

‘‘Well, it seems obvious,’’ Walker replied. ‘‘But it’s worth trying. I want all the data of all the people who purchased one or more gold neckties. The model is the one in the photo.’’

While the Inspector had been talking, Del Chiaro had widened his eyes.

‘‘What’s the matter?’’ Walker asked him. ‘‘Something wrong?’’

‘‘No,’’ the manager replied, ‘‘it’s only that it’s a big job and we are in our sales period. I’ll try to do what I can, Inspector. I’ll contact my colleagues in the other Italian branches. I’ll let you know as soon as possible.’’

‘‘Very good,’’ said Walker, satisfied.

‘‘But,’’ Del Chiaro began, then stopping immediately.

‘‘But?’’ Walker pressed him.

‘‘No, nothing.’’

‘‘Please, tell me. Anything that comes to your mind might be important, even if it doesn’t seem like it to you.’’

Those words were all that were needed to convince the manager.

‘‘I was wondering if it could also be that the culprit, in an attempt to mislead the investigation, also purchased neckties in other models or colours, or even other articles, such as shirts, cufflinks and various accessories.’’

The Inspector took a few seconds to think about it.

‘‘It could be,’’ he agreed. ‘‘But I repeat my request.’’

‘‘My colleagues and I will do our best to help you, Inspector,’’ the manager reassured him.

‘‘I’ve no doubt,’’ replied Walker. ‘‘Another thing,’’ he hurried to add. ‘‘Try to find out if any of the shop assistants remember having sold one or more gold neckties to someone who, for one reason or another, they might remember. Always with the maximum discretion. I don’t want this information spreading like wildfire.’’

‘‘Will do, Inspector.’’

‘‘Good,’’ said Walker, smiling at him.

Then, he pulled out his wallet, opened it and took out a business card.

‘‘These are my numbers. Police Headquarters and the mobile.’’

Del Chiaro took the business card from him.

‘‘As soon as I find anything out, I will certainly contact you, Inspector.’’

‘‘I’m counting on it, Mr Del Chiaro.’’

## CHAPTER 14

That morning the sky was grey and so was the city. A competition with no winners.

Walker was standing in front of the big window that from his office looked out onto an anonymous street. Bassani just stood there, leaning against a wall.

The only audible noise within those four walls was caused by the little stick stirring his coffee. Regular, rhythmic, it was accompanying the Inspector’s thoughts. It was almost a ritual: stirring his coffee, sucking the stick, drinking the scalding mixture all in one breath. And, finally, nibbling the plastic stick. It helped him to relieve the tension. Now that was indeed a good trick to postpone for as long as possible the lighting of a cigarette.



He had almost blended completely with the grey backdrop when a *knock- knock*, followed by Zambetti's voice, announced the arrival of Mrs Pilenga.

Good morning, said the woman faintly.

Good morning, Mrs Pilenga, answered the Inspector, without turning to face her. Thank you for coming back.

Martina stood there in silence, also because she had nothing to say. If it was for her, she wouldn't have come back, but the Inspector had summoned her. And here she was.

Please, make yourself comfortable, Walker invited her. Then, he turned, offered her a warm welcoming smile and sat in his armchair, inviting Bassani to sit down as well. So!

He drummed his fingers on the desk, while waiting for Zambetti to reach his position at the computer. He decided the time had come to be direct.

Did your husband have any enemies? Maybe a bit too direct.

The widow opened her eyes wide. No, she answered almost under her breath. Not that I know of. You have already asked me that.

But between you two! between you and your husband, I mean, there was bad blood between you. Isn't that true?

And why should this be relevant? asked the woman, irritated. I already told you last time! it was the same bad blood that there might be between any couple after thirty years of marriage.

Walker took a deep breath. He couldn't stand when people screwed with him. He folded his arms and leaned against the back of his armchair.

Mrs Pilenga, I've got a wife too, he lied, earning a look of surprise from Zambetti. Bassani simply sniggered. I know what it means to have been married for many years. And I also know what the ups and downs between a husband and wife are. A marital infidelity is not part of these ups and downs. I guarantee it.

And what are you trying to say with that? she asked, giving him a sharp look.

Mrs Pilenga, maybe what you don't understand is that we are here to help you. But you need to help us. And you can do so only by cooperating. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. We are the police, not a bunch of idiots. Even though there are jokes around about us that make us look like it. We've been told that you've had an affair. And the truth about this could give us a new lead regarding the death of your husband. Therefore, we expect from you nothing less than maximum cooperation.

He stopped, allowing the woman to get the message. When he was sure she had, he went further, continuing Mrs Pilenga, adultery is not a crime in Italy. Perjury is.

Are you saying that I am a loose woman, Inspector? pressed the woman, challenging him.

No, Mrs Pilenga, said Walker, shaking his head. I'm trying to understand who, and for what reason, someone took your husband's life.

And the fact that I had an affair with another man could help you catch my husband's killer?

Her tone of voice was suspicious, but her wall of distrust was crumbling down. The tears that appeared in her eyes proved it. The woman rummaged inside her handbag looking for a tissue.

Why not, answered the Inspector dryly. You, or your lover, or both of you. You are all suspects.

Martina Pilenga's face turned purple. If this was a cartoon, we would have seen smoke coming out of her ears.

Are you insinuating that I killed my husband? But do you realise ?

“No, Mrs Pilenga,” Walker interrupted her, his voice hard. “Mine is only an assumption. Assuming” he started moving his hands around, “is part of my job. Maybe among thousands of assumptions that don’t lead anywhere, one will jump out and bring you straight to the truth.”

“Alright then,” the woman surrendered. “I admit I have had a relation with another man. But I can assure you that it has nothing to do with my husband’s death. We were at odds, it’s true, but that doesn’t mean I wanted him dead.”

Walker exchanged a look with Bassani. *And this is our first one*, he seemed to be saying.

“Try to relax, Mrs Pilenga. If you had admitted your extra-marital relation immediately, you wouldn’t be here now.”

The Inspector leaned against the back of his armchair again and observed the woman before him without sympathy. Better being a bachelor for life, than having a wife like her.

“Maybe this relation has nothing to do with the death of your husband but, as I’ve told you before, we need to follow any lead. And at the moment a crime of passion seems to be the only one.”

Mrs Pilenga nodded. It looked like she had understood. She sniffed and dried her eyes again, shaking her head negatively.

“Can I go now?”

Walker sighed. He looked at his assistant and then at the widow again.

“Zambetti, offer Mrs Pilenga something warm to drink if she’d like and then accompany her to the exit.”

The assistant nodded. He was about to escort the woman towards the door, but Walker’s voice stopped them.

“Mrs Pilenga?”

“Yes?” she answered, turning back.

“With whom did you have an affair?”

Walker’s voice was calm, but steady.

Martina Pilenga shook her head, as if to push away a question that wasn’t going away. She lowered her eyes and murmured a name.

Zambetti took her by the arm, as you would do with someone who is barely standing up, and escorted her out of the room.

“Did she get offended?” asked Walker.

“Maybe a bit. But you did well to be so frank, Chief.”

He was beginning to like this Bassani. Caslini had better hurry back from his holidays, Walker thought ironically. Or he was going to find his place taken.

“What do you think?” he asked him.

“About what, Chief?”

“That she might have killed him.”

“Her husband?” asked Bassani doubtful.

“Mh-hm,” agreed David.

“I don’t think so. It seems unthinkable that such a petite woman could even hurt a man. Let alone kill him.”

“Good observation,” said the Inspector. “She could never have done it. Unless”

“Unless?” asked the man, curious.

“Unless she had an accomplice.”

“An accomplice?”

How the hell can Bassani not bloody get it? Maybe Caslini didn’t have to worry about losing his job after all.

“Yes, an accomplice, for God’s sake. A crime of passion. To get rid of the betrayed husband. The wife, along with her lover and accomplice, kills the husband. A story as old as time!”

Bassani stood there with his mouth open, his eyes like saucers.

â##Do you really believe that woman and her lover might have killed that guy?â##

â##Of course not,â## answered Walker straight off, quickly waving his hand through the air, as if he wanted to slap away the idiocy of what he had just heard. â##Why would they put that necktie around the victimâ##s neck?â##

Bassani was fed up with the Inspectorâ##s flights of fancy. Firstly he would say one thing, and soon after he would dismiss it. You need to have a lot of patience with your superiors.

â##Maybe to mislead the investigations, Chief.â##

Walker smiled, allowing himself a blessed moment with his cigarette.

â##Do you mind?â## he asked after he lit it.

The man gave his approval opening his arms ambiguously. What else could he do?

â##But have you seen her, Bassani? Does she look to you like someone who could mislead an investigation? That is a frustrated woman, in search of something her husband couldnâ##t give her anymore. Iâ##m afraid that Ghezziâ##s death, on the other hand, is the work of a professional.â##

â##Do you really think so?â##

â##Mh-mh. And the tie around his neck is nothing else than the killerâ##s signature.â##

The man nodded, showing a bitter resignation.

After a beat, it was Walker who spoke again.

â##And what can you tell me about her lover, detective?â##

Bassani thought about it.

â##I donâ##t know Chiefâ##! Iâ##ve got the impression that somehow Iâ##ve heard that name before,â## he said succinctly.

## CHAPTER 15

When Inspector Walker entered *Caf  Cielo*, the man who had invited him to breakfast was already sitting down.

Walker greeted him with a nod and approached him.

â##Good morning.â##

â##Good morning, Inspector,â## replied Carobbio. â##Please, sit downâ## he added, inviting him to take a seat.

Walker obeyed. Then he took off his gloves and scarf and rubbed his hands.

â##What would you like?â##

â##Whatever youâ##re having will be fine,â## said Walker, without giving it much thought.

â##Two Scotches, then,â## declared the Chief Inspector of Forensic Police.

Walker gave him an incredulous look.

â##I was joking,â## continued Carobbio, smiling. â##You really think Iâ##d have Scotch for breakfast?â##

David smiled too.

When the waitress came, Carobbio ordered two cappuccinos with soy milk and two wholemeal chocolate brioche. The girl nodded, firstly showing a perfect smile and then, when she turned her back to them, a rear worthy of a standing ovation. Both men admired the ass, catching each other doing so. However neither one hazarded a comment.

â##Chocolate in the morning wakes the mind up, Inspector,â## said Carobbio. â##Did you know it?â##

Walker, still absorbed in following the progress of the girlâ##s bottom, was caught unprepared.

â##No,â## he answered, bringing his eyes towards the other man. â##Iâ##ve never heard this one. Maybe because in the morning I wake my mind up with these,â## he concluded, throwing his packet of Marlboros on the table.

“Oh, Inspector, that’s a really bad habit! Anyway, that thing about the chocolate is not a rule. I mean it wasn’t a Nobel prize winner who discovered it, but for me it works. I can’t explain why, but chocolate in the morning wakes up my neurons.”

“Well, let’s hope it has the same effect on mine,” Walker said with a wink.

After this amusing exchange of witty remarks, the waitress arrived with their breakfast.

Carobbio waited until the girl was gone.

“Let’s get down to it, Inspector. To serious matters,” he said gravely.

“I’m all ears,” answered Walker, knowing that the Chief of Forensic hadn’t invited him to breakfast just to discuss chocolate brioches.

Carobbio took all the time he needed to explain the situation.

“We have examined the fingerprints discovered at Ghezzi’s.” He chewed a piece of brioche with pleasure and swallowed it. “As I have probably already mentioned, three sets of fingerprints were found in the flat. One belongs to Ghezzi, the owner of the flat; the other to his wife, Mrs Martina Pilenga, and thus far everything seems normal.”

Carobbio allowed himself another sip of cappuccino.

“The problem is the third set,” he continued calmly. “It belongs to a minor craftsman from that area.”

“And who is he?” asked Walker, curious.

“He’s someone called ‘ah, I’ve got his name on the tip of my tongue. Damned old age! Anyway, he’s known for being someone who is quick to use his hands.’”

“What do you mean?” asked David, interrupting him.

Carobbio continued, as if nothing had happened.

“It means that when there’s a fight, he is not the type to back down. He has a record because he has been charged several times for minor scuffles.”

“Well, fist fighting is not exactly like killing a man,” said Walker ironically.

“That’s true, Inspector. But if I were you, I’d start to get more information on this character. And I’d put him under surveillance.”

“I’ll work something out when I’m back at Police Headquarters.”

“Wise decision,” Carobbio congratulated him. Then, he became serious again, coming to his real purpose for organising their meeting. He slipped a yellow envelope out of his briefcase. He opened it and selected some photos featuring a man’s face. “I wanted to show you these.”

“Is he the third fingerprints man?” guessed Walker.

“That’s right,” confirmed Carobbio. “Do you know him?”

Walker took all the time he needed to observe the images.

“Never seen him before,” he acknowledged.

Carobbio slipped another sheet out of the envelope.

“And here you can find all his personal details. With my bad memory, I have to write everything down.”

Walker took it and started reading. Reading the man’s name and surname was enough to make his heart speed up.

Suddenly he lifted his eyes.

“Fuck!” he said. “I don’t know him, but I know who he is.”

When he arrived at Police Headquarters, Walker summoned Bassani to his office.

“Detective, we have a lead,” he informed him.

“Good.”

Then, before showing him the photographs, he rattled off the little speech he had prepared while he was in the car.

“Yesterday, when Mrs Pilenga mentioned the name of her lover, you said you had heard that name before. Is that right?”

â##Yes, but I donâ##t remember where. My memory has never been my strongest point, Chief.â##

Hereâ##s another one with a short memory, Walker thought.

â##Let me try to jog your memoryâ## he said, as he laid out on his desk the photos Carobbio had left for him. â##Itâ##s Mrs Pilengaâ##s lover.â##

Bassani tried to find a more comfortable position in his chair. He had barely looked at the photos when he blurted out:â## Damn!Thatâ##s where I heard that name before. Some years ago, when I was still in uniform, some other officers and I jumped in to stop a fight between locals and immigrants. He was one of the most difficult to handle.â##

The detective paused briefly.

â##He is one guy who *really* knows how to use theseâ## he stated, holding up his hands.

Walker smiled, satisfied.

â##Inspector Carobbio told me the same thing.â##

He paused, just enough time to light another cigarette followed by two good drags.

â##Maybe heâ##s the man weâ##re looking for,â## he said, pointing at the face staring at him from the photographs.

## CHAPTER 16

The sound of footsteps forced Romeo to look up. A last-minute client had just arrived.

He asked himself why some people just canâ##t come and buy their fucking newspaper half an hour earlier, instead of showing up two minutes before closing time, when he had already filled in the goods return form. He couldnâ##t wait to go home. The day had been deadly boring.

â##*The Evening Courier*, please.â##

The newsagent leaned forward to get the newspaper from the already wrapped parcel of return goods and handed it to the client.

â##One fifty.â## How many times had he already said those words?

The last-minute client rummaged in his pocket and retrieved the coins.

â##Thank you,â## said Romeo, â##and good night.â##

â##Goodbye,â## the man answered.

The newsagent stood staring at the client walking towards the exit. Suddenly, the man stopped. *What the hell is wrong with him now?* Romeo asked himself.

Then he realised that something on the big notice board had caught the manâ##s attention.

Romeo kept watching him, while the man was looking at the collage of old photos.

â##Do you like it?â## asked Romeo, with a hint of irony.

â##It looks like thereâ##s a century of life here,â## said the client, with an amused smile.

â##Not a century. But half a century, yes.â##

â##Are you a photography enthusiast? I am too.â##

â##No, my passion is not photography. Itâ##s only that I like seeing myself with the people who have come into my life and, in one way or another, have left a mark. Positive or negative. For example, in the first photo on the left I am with my wife on our wedding day. Negative mark: she left with somebody else before our fifth anniversary.â##

â##Iâ##m sorry.â##

â##Ah, you donâ##t have to feel sorry. Life would have been hard with her. Maybe it was better like this. Actually, it was definitely better like this.â##

Romeo noticed the embarrassed look on his clientâ##s face. He tried to bring back the conversation towards a less personal level. In the end he would have liked to continue that conversation. It had been a long time since someone had looked at his photo collection.

â##So do you like my idea? I mean, the photo collage.â##

â##Itâ##s truly brilliant!â## the man exclaimed, showing his amusement again. â##But do you also have celebrities in there?â##

Romeo went around the counter and joined the client. The conversation might begin to be interesting. In the end the day was taking a turn for the better. Coming home could wait.

â##Well, celebritiesâ#! Yes, thereâ##s some. For example, that one dates back about twenty years agoâ## he said, taking pride for it, while showing a photo that had faded with time. â##Iâ##m with Marco Van Basten, that was the year when AC Milan won both the UEFA Champions League and the Italian Champions. Ehâ#! those were good times.â##

â##Indeed! Are you supporting AC Milan too, eh?â##

â##Yeah. But everythingâ##s changed now. Now weâ##re a minor-league team.â##

The client smiled, making a strange movement with his hand. He didnâ##t know why, but he was beginning to like that man.

â##Youâ##re right, itâ##s a really bad football team. Itâ##s better taking an interest in something else. I donâ##t knowâ#! beautiful women, for example.â##

Romeo became gloomy..

â##Iâ##ll leave that to you. Iâ##ve never had any luck with women. I didnâ##t have any when I was young and still had hair, let alone now. Bald and with this gut.â##

The client smiled, amused. Then, Romeo noticed that another photo had caught his attention. Before he could say anything, the man had already anticipated him.

â##And who is this guy?â## he asked. â##He looks thunderstruck. His eyes are popping out of his head.â##

Romeo moved closer to the board, squinting his eyes to focus on the image. Then he put on his glasses that he kept around his neck. He stood there for a moment thinking, before he answered.

â##Ahâ## he said finally, â##now that one really is a weird character.â##

When he turned again towards him, the manâ##s eyes were already set on him, waiting and greedy for knowledge. Romeo checked the time on his watch. Now the conversation was really turning better.

â##If youâ##re not in a hurry, I can tell you that guyâ##s story.â##

The client nodded, satisfied. It would have been impossible not to read the curiosity in his eyes. Thatâ##s what the client was waiting for.

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â##He should arrive,â## Mrs Beatrice told her friend.

The other woman nodded.

â##Usually he comes back around this time. He works late hours. At least, from what I gather. Maybe he works shifts.â##

â##Ah, youâ##ve already spied on him, eh? Old busybody,â## Beatrice told her, joking.

Luigia looked at her, amused.

â##We are old busybodies,â## she remarked, winking at her.

Theyâ##d been on the landing for fifteen minutes, waiting for the new tenant to come home. He was a young man in his thirties, with dark skin. But not really black. Brownish. As if a perfect mix between a white and black person. They didnâ##t know what the right word was to describe an individual of that skin colour.

He was a handsome young man, oh yes. Muscular too. But they were too old now to even think about picking him up. There was another reason why they had decided to wait for him. They couldnâ##t wait to introduce themselves and gossip for a while about the habits of the other tenants who lived in the old council building. Minding other peopleâ##s business helps you live longer, Beatrice and Luigia were convinced. Or they wouldnâ##t have reached eighty and eighty two years old respectively.

They heard a squeaking sound from the ground floor. The old door of the main entrance had been opened.

â##Heâ##s coming, heâ##s coming,â## Beatrice exclaimed, all excited.

They were beside themselves with delight. They were going to vie with one another for who was going to gossip the most.

Luigia rubbed her hands. They would have certainly told him everything under the sun. That lad was going to stay and listen to them.

But both friends saw the disappointment in each other's eyes when a man with a dark coat appeared on the staircase. His face was covered by a scarf and his head by a wool cap. The collar of his coat, turned with the point upwards, helped hide his identity.

The elderly ladies stood there in silence looking at him. The man, with his eyes behind glass lenses, nodded his head in a polite greeting. Beatrice and Luigia did the same.

Then the man that they'd never seen before continued climbing the stairs, and disappeared from view.

And who was that man? Luigia asked her friend, under her breath.

How would I know? the other lady answered, almost whispering. Between us, you're the best gossip.

Look who's talking!

Luigia would have liked to say something else, but at the squeaking sound from the main entrance door her friend anticipated her.

This must be him.

She nodded, her bright eyes revealed her happiness.

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The man looked around, sitting on the ruined fabric of the couch that he had found at a dump. He was moving his eyes from one side to the other of the lounge, the biggest room of his two-room flat.

His! What a nonsense! It was owned by the council. He felt ashamed for even thinking that only immigrants and old lonely people would live in one of these council houses. Immigrants, old people and himself, Giuliano Giuliani.

If he hadn't been caught, maybe he would have become the leader of a criminal gang, a really big one. With a lot of dough. After all, hadn't he got away with it when, during a job someone had died?

You don't make history with *ifs*, you don't make *anything* with *ifs*, he admitted to himself.

But, if! here he goes again. Well, who cares. If his life had been different, maybe he could have even had a family. A beautiful wife and a couple of brats around the house. He should have quit dealing earlier. Had he got out once he'd made his money, he could've thought about starting a family.

Instead he was all alone. And certainly he would remain like this for the rest of his awful life. Besides, which woman, even one of the really desperate ones, would want to have a relationship with an incomplete man?

That question made him look down at his arm that no longer had a hand, and down at his leg that was without a foot.

He sighed.

Then he cursed out loud.

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Romeo went to the entrance door and locked it. The newsagent's was officially closed. His working day was over.

I bet you've never heard such a bizarre name before, he said to the client. That guy was called Giuliano Giuliani!

Like an old goalkeeper from Udinese Football Club, I think.

Ah, I didn't know that. Well, if so, then I've lost my bet.



They chuckled, like friends.

Then, the newsagent regained his train of thought.

«Going back to Giuliani those were the times when if a client wanted to buy a copy of La Gazzetta Magazine with *the special supplement*, he'd come to me. I was the only one who could supply *that*»

«Special supplement?» the client asked, with a perplexed expression that was a pleasure to watch.

«Yes, back then, when someone wanted to smoke some good weed he'd come to me to buy his copy of la Gazzetta dello Sport. I'd insert it among the pages of the newspaper. I had the best Mary Jane in all Milan. At least, that's what I thought. I didn't know that on the other side of the city in Quarto Oggiaro there was a Giuliano Giuliani who had it as good as mine. And in industrial quantities»

Romeo paused, noticing that the interest in the eyes of his anonymous client was growing. People may have said these were not the kinds of things you'd discuss with anyone, but at this stage he had nothing left to hide. He'd made his mistakes and had paid for his errors. That life belonged to his past. But it would always be his life and he could recount it to anyone he wanted to, any time he felt like it.

«I met him in jail,» he continued. «We got caught within days of each other. And we ended up in the same prison. He was a really tough guy. With a knack for business, you know what I mean? For a certain type of business. But in jail he wasn't popular with the other inmates. One night, he was raped by four of them. Someone joked about it saying that they made his arsehole as big as the window of Milan Cathedral»

The newsagent stopped, proud of the laughter he elicited in the client.

Then, Romeo's voice became serious again.

«He had probably mentioned names that he should have kept secret. And jail, as everyone knows is like a big community. Inside everyone knows everything about everyone. To survive you should see and hear as little as possible. You need to plug up your mouth and your ears to avoid having your arsehole plugged by someone else»

He granted himself a satisfied little laugh, that his new friend echoed immediately.

«I remember that we became very close» he continued, «even though outside we had been rivals. He made me a proposition to do business together, once we were out of jail»

«And did you start a.. farm business?» the client said ironically.

«Ah, that's a good one! No, I called it quits with everything. I mean, I continued selling newspapers, but without special supplements»

Another pause. And another laugh.

«And what about the guy? What happened to him?» asked the client.

He was really interested, thought Romeo. Good, an enjoyable night.

«I believe Giuliano carried on with his dealings. After a couple of years he even ended up on the front page»

«On the front page?»

«Yes, he had been assaulted by a group of unknown individuals, according to the journalist's report. They assaulted him in the middle of the night and beat him to a pulp»

«Did they kill him?»

«No, for God's sake! He has a thick skin!» stated Romeo, enthusiastically. Then, getting darker, he continued. «But they ruined him. Apparently they cut off his hand, or his foot. Now I can't remember exactly. The point is, after jail I have never seen him again. Maybe it's better. Otherwise now I too could have also be without one of these» he concluded merrily, showing his hands.

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It was just a matter of seconds. The mixed race young man's silhouette materialised on the stairs.

“You must be the new arrival, right?” Beatrice was quicker than her friend.

The young man answered with a smile.

“You’ll like living here,” Luigia continued. “It’s a safe place.”

They waited until he reached the landing area, then Beatrice started talking again, without letting up.

“Let us give you some advice.” She was saying this in a low voice, almost whispering.

“Because here even walls have ears.”

The young man looked perplexed.

“If you need anything, do not hesitate to ask,” Luigia added. “Anything.”

The young man nodded, as his eyes darted towards the flight of stairs. Beatrice noticed he was in a hurry. She decided she could not let him go upstairs. At least not until she had informed him of the building’s quirkiest people.

“Yes, Luigia is right. If you need any favour, please ask us,” she said, indicating with a wave herself and her friend. “On the other hand, if you have certain *needs* to fulfil! Well, in that case you should go up a couple of floors. Mrs Pina, despite her age, is still very active!”

“True,” Luigia confirmed. “When her husband finds out something, you can hear them shouting from here. Even the building’s walls shake.”

The young man gave a hint of a smile. Then his hands clutched nervously at his trousers, as if he was thinking up an excuse to get away from these two crazy old women.

Luigia noticed it.

“Yes, what Beatrice is saying is completely true. Mrs Pina is getting it on with that really weird guy, the one with a hand and a foot missing!”

“That’s right!” the other woman confirmed. “See, Mrs Pina is a lot older than him. But, you know, there’s many a good tune played on an old fiddle!”

“Besides, she was already doing that when she was young, good tunes,” Luigia remarked. “They say that Pina, when she was twenty, was always up for it. I don’t know if I make myself clear.”

“Yes, but now!” Beatrice continued, “at seventy years old behaving like a tart!” and with that guy! Giuliano!

“Well, at least they’ve found each other. Because he’s not a saint either, eh. Think that up until some years ago he was constantly in and out of prison. Him and his strange dealings...”

“Yes, who knows what he gets up to in that flat.”

“Ah, Beatrice, he can’t do much now, eh! with only one foot and one hand!”

Luigia stopped. She realised that sentence had stirred some kind of curiosity in the young man. Beatrice realised it too.

“Eh, yes eh!” the latter jumped in. “Probably someone didn’t like his dealings. One time they really beat him up. They cut his hand and his foot off!”

“Yes, Yes, cut off for real!” Luigia repeated. “Cut off. Thwack!” she finished, mimicking the movement of a machete.

The young man’s eyes widened, nodding. Then, a shy smile appeared on his lips.

“Now to home. Tired. Much work.”

“Of course!” Beatrice exclaimed. “My friend always has a tendency to drag things out. Please forgive her, she’s of a certain age.”

Luigia gave her a crooked eye. Then she spoke to the young man again.

“I just wanted to put this young lad on his guard. So now he knows who he can trust. And with whom he needs to be careful.”

“Indeed, indeed” Beatrice took the opportunity to continue the conversation. “In this building you need to be wary twenty four hours a day, you never know what your neighbour has in store for you. There are some odd types of people around”

“And then they gossip, and gossip. Ah, scandalmongers!”

“See, one time”

“Sorry. I have to go now,” the young man interrupted her, taking two steps towards the next flight of stairs.

“Of course!” Beatrice again. “Poor thing, you must be tired after a day at work.” Then she said to her friend: “Luigia, let him go, this handsome lad must get some rest. He will have another opportunity to talk to us some other time.”

With those words, the young man finally felt authorised to climb the steps, while the two elderly ladies observed him with inquisitive looks.

Once they heard the door of the upstairs apartment closing, the two women said goodbye to each other, arranging to meet the next day. And with that they each took refuge inside their own homes, which were old and shabby, just like them.

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Giuliani was there, on the wrecked couch, his gaze remaining, since who knows when, on the arm and leg. An incomplete man, that’s what he was.

He repeated to himself for the hundredth time that at least the disability had allowed him to skip the housing waiting list to be given the miserable abode. Otherwise he would have been forced to sleep in a cardboard box under some bridge. Having to compete for a spot, maybe even fight for it, with other homeless people.

Those were the thoughts that took hold of him every night; the thoughts that made him believe he might have been better off dead than reduced to this.

Knock, knock, knock.

Was he mistaken or had somebody just knocked on the door?

He said to himself that the first hypothesis was more likely, because nobody ever visited him. Only Mrs Pina, the one who offered him breakfast in the morning, and in the evening, unbeknownst to her husband, brought him an ashtray full of cigarette butts, so that he could finish them, smoking the small amount of tobacco that was left. The gossipers in the building were even saying that they were having an affair.

Please! Although he was in a really bad state, he was not desperate to the point of having it sucked by an old hag.

Giuliano looked at the cheap wall clock. Almost 11pm.

Pina had already come at 9pm. It couldn’t be her again. He must have been mistaken, he must have misheard.

In that moment he heard another knock on the door and realised that it was not a mistake.

“Come in,” he said without much confidence. After all he wasn’t accustomed to receiving guests. “It’s open!”

He stood for a long minute staring at a door that had no intention of being opened. Then, exactly when he was taking the last sip from his cut-price supermarket beer – a present from the same Pina – three *knocks*, stronger and clearer than the previous ones, were heard.

He put the beer can on the coffee table. Supporting himself with his good arm, he stood up on his leg. He didn’t feel like bending to pick up his crutches, so, bracing himself against anything he could find, he started hopping on one foot until he reached the door.

“I said it’s open!” he said sharply, opening the door wide.

The landing was dark and empty. He frowned. It was obvious that the alcohol and his melancholy had played a trick on him.

He shook his head and closed the door. Then, hopping on one foot he turned around and leaned against a small cabinet to regain his balance.

The man in the raincoat was a lot faster than him and attacked, banging him against the wall. Blind with pain caused by his arm bent violently behind his back, Giuliani almost didn't feel the light sting, as if a needle were entering his forearm.

His sight became blurred and he was forced to shut his eyes. He felt his leg collapsing and a sense of torpor took hold of him.

Then, at once, everything became dark.

## CHAPTER 17

That's all he needed that morning: a flat tyre.

Lucky for him, there was a garage a couple of hundred metres away. He walked almost half a kilometre to get there. To him, walking was a bit like smoking: it helped him to relax and think. He was a born walker. Even his surname confirmed that. Walker, *the one who walks*.

David congratulated himself because he was still in the mood for making jokes even during times as unlucky as this one was.

When he saw the bald man in the mechanic's overall, he explained the situation to him. The man didn't waste time. He retrieved his breakdown van and headed towards the Inspector's Audi.

While waiting for him to come back, Walker lit a cigarette. It had been a pleasant walk, but it hadn't helped with the fact that he was pissed off. It was going to cost him a fat one hundred euro note, apart from all the wasted time.

Bloody tyre.

He had just caught sight of his Audi on top of the breakdown van, when he felt his pocket vibrating.

'Fuck!' he exclaimed seeing the extension of a Police Headquarters number. 'You can't have something unexpected happen to you, because they can't get by without you.'

He swiped the screen with his finger and accepted the call.

'Walker,' he answered.

Bassani's voice was on the other end of the phone.

David's face froze in surprise. The phone call was brief. But as painful as a punch in the teeth. He hung up and stood staring at the mechanic without seeing him. His mind was processing images of men laying on the ground, dead, with gold coloured neckties wrapped around their necks as a decoration.

Shortly after, his Audi A3 was ready to go again.

The mechanic had done him a big favour by helping him immediately. Well, truth be told, he did charge him, and quite a lot. But Walker didn't feel like arguing about it, he had other priorities. Bassani had been succinct, but clear.

'The killer has struck again.'

Then he had given him just enough time to write the new victim's address down.

Absorbed in the vortex of his own thoughts, Walker almost didn't notice the traffic light was red. He jammed on the brakes, causing the tyres to squeal.

'Fuck!'

He lit a Marlboro and waited for the traffic light to change; then, he engaged first gear and flattened the accelerator. His A3 took off like a flash, becoming a white dot lost in the traffic of Milan.

The entrance of the building was blocked with the usual red and white tape.

Inspector Walker marched in resolutely, until a man in a uniform signalled him to stop.

'Police,' Walker said, showing his Police ID.

The police officer apologised with a movement of his arms and lifted the tape, inviting him to cross it.

David climbed the stairs, two steps at a time. He had no difficulty identifying the flat, with two policemen guarding the entrance.

Even before he pulled out his Police ID for them, the policemen stepped aside, clearing the way for him. He thanked them, nodding, and pushed the door open.

The sound of the door creaking open caused another uniformed man to turn.

«Chief, welcome!», he said.

«Good morning, Bassani.»

«Something wrong?»

«Next question, please! I've had an awful start to the day» admitted Walker.

«Well, I don't think you'll find anything relaxing here, Chief.»

Walker immediately understood what his subordinate meant.

Not far from them, on a filthy floor, was a man lying in an arranged position.

The Inspector moved closer and stood staring at the dead man. It wasn't the necktie that was troubling him. He'd expected to find that. The dead man had two body parts missing: a hand and a foot.

Of course, the amputations were not the work of the killer. They were covered with two identical socks. Therefore, they were old wounds.

The same couldn't be said about his own shoulder. Fuck, it hurt!

He bent over the dead man, careful not to contaminate the scene. The mouth was half-closed. The temperature inside the flat had contributed to slow down the process of stiffening the body, the Inspector noticed. The *rigor mortis* hadn't yet set in. Not completely, at least.

Walker pulled a pair of latex gloves out from the small box the Forensic agents had left almost beside the dead man. He lifted the end of the necktie to get a glimpse of what interested him. He smiled bitterly, seeing MODADUOMO clearly on the label. A serial killer was having fun behind their backs.

«A tough nut to crack.» A voice said unexpectedly. «Two dead bodies in a couple of days.»

Walker and Bassani turned. Then, David stood up.

The Public Prosecutor had his eyes fixed on the dead body.

«Good morning, Fini», Walker and Bassani greeted him in unison.

Antonio Fini waved at them. Then the three men moved further away, the Forensic specialists were there to collect evidence.

Before the Public Prosecutor could ask, Bassani gave him an account of the facts.

«We were called by a neighbour. An old lady that used to come here to bring him breakfast every morning». He gestured in the direction of the dead body. «She told us he was a poor devil. He never had a penny in his pocket and she was doing all she could to help him. However, I was informed by Headquarters that he was no saint. He'd been inside on several occasions for theft and drug dealing. Between us, it's no great loss.»

He could have omitted his last comment, thought Walker. Especially in front of the Public Prosecutor.

«Well, at least somebody took care of a guy who could still have caused us trouble», said Bassani, trying to make amends.

Fini said nothing, and moved on to the matter at hand.

«I've read the report on the first victim. No abnormalities, if we consider that we live in a crazy world. The only thing I don't understand is what was Super Glue doing under his tongue.»

«Super Glue?» repeated Bassani.

«Methyl cyanoacrylate», Fini informed him. «Glue.»

“Oh, yes. Now I remember,” Bassani said, annoyed over the bad impression he was making.

Then Fini continued talking, but Walker had stopped listening to him. His brain was now following other trajectories.

When the Inspector came back to earth, he did it with a tone of voice that froze everyone present.

“Glue!” he shouted. Everything was clear to him now.

Fini and Bassani looked at him dumbfounded. So did the others.

“Don’t move!” Walker ordered to the Forensic agents, who had just closed the bag, after the Public Prosecutor had given them permission with a nod of his head.

Without waiting for anyone to ask for explanations, Walker moved closer, but an agent of the Forensic team tried to stop him, catching the attention of the Public Prosecutor.

“Let him go,” Fini said firmly, “Inspector Walker knows what he’s doing.”

David smiled at him, pleased. Then, regaining his serious look, he made sure that the gloves he had taken earlier were still intact. As a precaution he took them off, pulled a new pair from the box, and put them on.

The body bag opened with the metallic sound of its zip.

Trying to ignore the pressure of everyone’s eyes on him, Walker’s hands disappeared inside the bag.

Anyone who had seen his arms fussing around inside that bag would have thought that he was playing with the dead person’s face.

Then, unexpectedly, Walker’s voice rang out. Tinged with triumph.

“Bingo!”

Bassani took two steps towards him, trying to identify what Walker was holding in his hand. He thought he’d caught sight of something sparkling. He narrowed his eyes to slits and, when he was a few centimetres from the Inspector, he repeated his Chief’s exclamation.

“Bingo?”

Walker opened his hand, showing Bassani what he had recovered from the mouth of the dead man.

“Yes, bingo!” he repeated satisfied. “Forget about the gold necktie. This is the killer’s true signature.”

## CHAPTER 18

Walker was sitting in his car, still parked a few metres away from Giuliano Giuliani’s house.

He had just ended a phone call with Visconti. He had told him about the new victim. There was more work for him, although, Walker was sure about it, nothing new was going to be revealed by the autopsy. The usual death caused by strangulation with a necktie and the usual lack of clues. The only difference was going to be the fact that Giuliani didn’t have bruises on his wrists, but only on one wrist and ankle.

Anyway, he was looking forward to this new autopsy report, hoping for some news that would boost the investigation.

Right now he had more important puzzles to solve.

He thought again about the small tag found in Giuliani’s mouth. It was gold, he’d have bet on it. Its form resembled a circle and at a guess, its diameter was not much more than a centimetre, although its edges were quite irregular. Jagged. It almost looked gnawed by rats. It was approximately a couple of millimetres thick. He had never seen anything like it in his life. Also, there were those strange symbols engraved on one of its faces, and roughly polished.

Tapping the fingers of his hand on the wheel, he was keeping his eyes fixed on the sheet of paper where he had copied, in large size, the symbols.

The more he stared at them, the more he repeated to himself that it was all absurd.

Four fucking lines. Two were parallel, a third one, always parallel but a bit off, and a final line that, compared to the others, was oblique. In his opinion, those lines were the signature left by the killer. The problem was twofold: how to read those lines and how to interpret them. He could have put them in many positions.

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= / -

= / -

= / -

= / -

Which was the right one? *If* there was a right one.

Four lines, that at that moment meant nothing to David Walker. Almost nothing.

The only thing he could think of was *equals divided by minus*. Or *equality division minus*. Or *minus divided by equals*. Anyway, mathematics seemed the only thread of the damned symbolism.

Now, however, he couldn't wait to arrive at Headquarters. He should have already sent two men to tail Merli, but with the flat tyre and the new dead body, he had lost time. One of the priorities, apart from studying those stupid symbols, was to keep an eye on Merli. He didn't like that man at all.

A knock on the window made him jump.

He turned suddenly and recognised Bassani's moustache.

The detective, showing an amused smile, was signalling him to wind his window down.

'I didn't mean to startle you, Chief,' he said to him.

'No problem,' Walker replied, defensively, 'I was studying these damned symbols,' he continued, waving the paper in front of him.

'Ah!' exclaimed Bassani. 'It's a big headache.'

'It is,' confirmed the Inspector.

When Walker turned back to Bassani, he noticed the detective's face was as dark as a cloudy night sky.

'What's the matter, detective?' he asked him.

The man waited for an eternity before answering.

'What's got into you?' Walker pressed him again.

Bassani stroked his moustache.

'We must return to Ghezzi's house,' he stated, serious.

'To Ghezzi's?'

'Yes, Chief.'

'But why?' asked Walker.

'Do you remember when someone said they'd heard the noise of something falling on the floor? A metallic sound?'

'It was a butto!' Walker didn't finish his sentence. 'Are you trying to say that?'



Yes, admitted the detective. If we're lucky, we'll find what we're looking for.

You're a genius, Bassani.

## CHAPTER 19

David was sitting on the bed, his eyes fixed on his mother's lifeless ones. He was listening to the mangled words the woman was pronouncing with difficulty. They seemed meaningless and made no sense. A sign that death was coming to take her.

David sighed, trying to hold back the tears.

David, m-mhy d-d-hear!

The voice shook him.

For the first time his mother had said something almost comprehensible.

He granted her his full attention. He stood there staring at her for a time that seemed eternal, then more words came.

ss-h-k-keep on sshmoukeeng, if hhyou c-can't do without em!

Then, on the woman's face there was the sign of a breakdown, a snarl of pain that prompted David to squeeze her hand to comfort her, making her feel his presence.

The old woman's head fell heavily forward, almost lifeless, and he tried to call her.

Mum!

The woman, with her last strength, raised her head and half-closed her eyes, trying to focus on her son's face. Then, she shut them completely and started chewing on nothing again.

A series of distorted and fragmented syllables was the reward to David's patient wait.

But plheashe it's for u hoo! art a mmly! I whuont hhee you sttleouwn.

He sprung suddenly and sat on his bed soaked with sweat. That dream again. That nasty pain again, suffered at his mother's deathbed.

He placed a hand on his chest, as if trying to calm the frantic beat of his heart.

He repeated the words engraved in his memory, but he couldn't decipher their meaning.

He sat there until a normal heartbeat returned.

He lit a cigarette and took a long strong drag. He held the smoke inside until he felt some kind of itchiness in his lungs, then he let it out, along with a thousand thoughts.

He entered the bathroom with uncertain steps, in the hope that his morning routine would bring him some peace. He came back to the bedroom, leaned for a moment against the door frame.

It was from there that he saw it.

On the pillow was the sheet of paper that he had almost worn out from constantly looking at the symbols.

He stood there observing the crumpled piece of paper, while taking his mind back to Ghezzi's house.

*He had entered into Raffaele Ghezzi's flat, after Bassani had his intuition.* The metallic sound

At that point he and the detective, having donned latex gloves, had begun searching the living room. They had looked everywhere. Under the furniture, on and under the rug, they had searched meticulously between the gaps of the tiles. Nothing. Besides, what could they have expected to find, after the Forensic team had gone through that room again and again?

They had looked at each other, dejected. Walker had dragged a small chair over to sit down. That was when he heard something scraping against the floor. He had turned the chair upside down and there it was: the tag.

He held the little gold coloured piece close to his eyes and tried to read the symbols engraved on its surface.

While Bassani, triumphant, was going back to Headquarters with their loot, Walker got in his car to go home, having copied the symbols of the two small tags on a new sheet of paper.

And now, as he approached the sheet of paper, he realised that he was not even a millimetre closer to the solution. In fact, the increasing number of symbols rendered him practically unable to come up with (let alone find!) any meaning whatsoever. Lines, dots, circles. Nothing, he couldn't think of anything.

He noticed his cigarette had almost burnt out. He stubbed out what was left of it in the ashtray and grabbed the crumpled paper.

He stood staring at the new symbols.

$\acute{a} \cdot \% -$

$\acute{a} \cdot \% -$

He sighed.

Then he made his tongue click against his palate, turned the paper over, so he could see the whole sequence of symbols, and tried for the umpteenth time to solve the problem.

$- / = \acute{a} \cdot \% -$

$- / = \acute{a} \cdot \% -$

He was sure: those signs were nothing more than a mathematical code to decipher. Or maybe a lead, a hint that, somehow, held information. About what? The murders already committed, or

They should expect a third murder, Walker said to himself. And maybe a fourth one, even.

Many serial killers were in the habit of using that *modus operandi*. It was the means the killer was using to communicate with the Police. The only thing in common between him and those who were hunting him. The main difference was that one formulated the riddles to make them as difficult as possible; whereas the others racked their brains trying to solve them, before it was too late.

This son of a bitch wants to play the maths professor, he said out loud, conscious that he was talking to himself like crazy people do.

He turned the sheet of paper over again and focused on the symbols found at the first crime scene.

$\acute{a} \cdot \% -$

$\acute{a} \cdot \% -$

He tried to find a link between the three or five symbols in case the central one was a percentage symbol and the place where the second victim had been found.

What is the fucking connection between the minus, the percent, that bloody , and the murder of Giuliano Giuliani, a man with one foot and one hand?

The answer he was hoping for didn't come. And he was sure it was not going to come easily.

Disheartened, he let the paper fall on the pillow.

He retrieved the clothes he had thrown on a chair the night before and started putting them on, letting his mind keep wandering around those damned symbols.

He shook his head, depressed. He had never been that good at maths, even less at algebra.

Nevertheless, he smiled.

He knew who to turn to. Arturo Mosetti would surely have given him some brilliant advice. He had done it several times during previous investigations, when Walker had been in difficulty.

And there was nothing to say that he couldn't have also solved this complicated problem.

He would see him that same afternoon, but right now he had another meeting. He had decided to have Merli followed from that very night. Before that, however, he was going to ask him some questions. If he could catch him straight away, there would be no need to have him followed.

When Walker arrived at Headquarters, he was surprised to see that detective Paolo Caslini, his most loyal man had already come back to work.

Weren't you supposed to come back next week? he asked , with a sidelong glance.

Let's not go there , Chief. I thought this time she was the real thing, but I had to dump her too.

Even this brunette left hair in the toilet? Walker said ironically.

This was not the first time Caslini left a current flame while on holiday and took off in haste. He was intolerant of people, but if you asked him, it was they who were full of faults.

“If that had been all, Chief” answered Caslini, disconsolate.

“You’ll tell me later, Paolo. Now I’ve got some urgent work to do. Actually, you could come along,” he said to him. That wasn’t a suggestion, it was an order.

When they entered the office, Merli who was the only suspect, though unaware of the fact - was already there waiting for them. Once again Bassani had done a great job. He had got him there in record time.

The guy seemed anxious. Was it guilt or fear?

Walker stood behind Merli, who had neither seen nor heard him come in. Walker could sense Merli’s anxiety even by standing behind him. So he decided to surprise him.

“Good morning, Mr Merli.”

Merli turned, almost scared, his mouth open.

“I’m Inspector Walker,” he continued. “And this is detective Caslini.”

At last Merli spoke as well.

“Good morning,” he answered in a soft, but firm, voice.

David went past him, looking at him. He took a seat at the other end of the desk, along with Caslini. Lining themselves up in that way, they wanted to make Merli understand that there were two of them, while he was on his own. They were putting mental pressure on the suspect, something that in the majority of cases brought results.

Walker’s steady eyes locked on Merli’s disorientated eyes. He deliberately remained silent, in order to increase the man’s anxiety.

Merli started looking around, as if he was wondering if they were still waiting for somebody else. He was also wondering if one of these two men was going to tell him why he was in that room with Homicide police, instead of being in his small garage. When his anxiety was about to become painful, he made up his mind.

“May I know why you’ve called me?” His tone of voice was trying to show a confidence that he didn’t have. He was scared, clearly.

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