

ONE

The informant looked like an ex-cop. His uniform must have been padded with mothballs and buried in his closet for years, yet the crease in his pants and the neat part dividing his thinning blond hair gave the impression he'd never risen through the ranks. I had nothing else to go on, but instinct and experience provided me all I needed to know. He had a dark mole as thick as a nickel on his right cheek. His nerve wasn't what it once was. Neither was the rest. When he talked money, his eyes lit up—brief flashes that betrayed his need to escape the tightfisted routine his pension demanded.

He said to call him Hermann, and from time to time he ran his left index finger over his lips, as if to check they were clean.

“You sure?” I asked, once more showing him the headshot of the man we were looking for.

He gave a firm nod. Convinced he was telling the truth, I handed him the envelope with 1,000 euros worth of Swiss francs. He didn't ask what we would do with the information. The answer may have spoiled his desire to spend the cash. Bouts of conscience always have to be handled with care.

Even if he had, I'd have taken pains to avoid telling him the truth. I was prepared to tell him that we had extraordinary news for the mug, that he'd become a millionaire, that an uncle who had immigrated to Brazil had named him sole heir to his fortune.

Around the clubs and underbelly of Bern we'd spread

word that we were looking for someone. The photo, ripped from a flashy magazine for affluent gourmands, showed a handsome, charming forty-five-year old with the disaffected and smug look of a winner, a look we wanted to extinguish for good.

As far as possible we'd been discreet. Bern is the city where you're likeliest to turn heads for intending to commit murder. In the end, word had reached the ears of gentle Hermann, who, so it seemed, knew the right address.

He met us at a joint that was as old as its owner and would shutter the moment she was gone. The clientele wasn't much younger. We liked the place because it was a throwback, the glasses tasted vaguely of Savon de Marseille, and every night, for a solid three hours, an Irish couple, Mairéad and Killian, played guitar and sang oldies. Folk, a little jazz, some blues. She had a boyish voice, like Bonnie Raitt. Her man, between notes, held off the ancient rage of the Northern counties. The love between them was the real reason we felt attached to the place. They'd been together for years and still knew how to laugh, kiss, hold each other's gaze. We envied those lips that sought one another out. They weren't young anymore, their faces bore the marks of a life spent gigging, but they were real. We hogged a whole table topped with glasses of Calvados, grappa, and vodka. We sat in silence and listened, toasting them with admiration and even shedding a few tears for that love that we ourselves had gone searching for, found on occasion, then lost forever, but which our outlaw hearts weren't ready to relinquish.

Hermann, the informant, slipped me a piece of paper with the address. It was typewritten, the "s" key had been used up, and you could barely make out the letters. Our man lived in the fifth district, around Spitalacker Stadium.

"What else can you tell me, Hermann?"

"Cottage. Lives with a woman," he said in halting English.

His words dispelled any lingering doubts. “When did you see them last?”

“Him the other day. Her before that.”

I held out my hand. Hermann, embarrassed, hesitated before taking it. His hand was as cold as the winter that had arrived all of a sudden. He ducked out, careful to avert his gaze. Useless precaution. No one would remember an insignificant little man in the domain of those two Irish lovers.

I went back to my seat—and my drink. “Maybe it really is Giorgio Pellegrini.”

Old Rossini shrugged. “Maybe. Let’s get this over with.”

I looked away. Max the Memory was checking the latest news on his tablet.

“We’ve been in Bern for over a month. If the informant’s mistaken, we go back to Italy. Otherwise the cops will come around asking a lot of uncomfortable questions.”

“I agree,” I said. “We’ll scope it out tomorrow morning.”

Whenever the old owner tired of having us underfoot, we’d retreat to a quiet spot near the train station where high-end escorts came to unwind between clients. Cappuccinos, smoothies, and long sessions in the bathroom to remove the stink of their last john. Unfortunately, the language barrier didn’t help improve relations, but we’d befriended a pair of thirty-something Spanish girls and a trans woman from Slovenia who spoke perfect Italian. She went by Katarina and joined our table willingly. Sometimes she’d sit there silently listening to us chatter away, and other times she’d interrupt for no other reason than to talk about hustling in Milan, her lovers, her neighbors. She kept us company for an hour that night, waiting for a high-paying john to call from the best hotel in the city. Now, for the first time, she insisted on buying us drinks. Normally we wouldn’t hear of it, but when it became clear she’d take offense, we accepted.

She had a thing for Beniamino. That much was clear. Just as

it was clear that she didn't like him for a john. That was her life: screwing strangers and meeting men with whom she could dream of having something better. Katarina stroked his thin whiskers—a source of pride for the Old Gangster—and strutted off.

I'd been expecting a sad and anonymous cottage. The kind you don't bother noticing, the best kind for hiding out. Instead it was painted a bright, if elegant, color. The small garden was looked after and the hedges along the fence were planted with millimetric precision. But the white gravel drive, which led to the entrance and wrapped around the unit, lay buried in leaves that had gone to rot in the cold and rain. Hermann said he hadn't seen the woman in a few days. She must have been the one looking after the place. Unless Giorgio Pellegrini was taking care of it. But he wasn't the type to push a broom, and even if he were, he wouldn't have risked being seen in the neighborhood.

"It's deserted," huffed Beniamino, starting up the car. "Let's come back for a look when it's dark. We might have more luck."

"Maybe he's just left for a few days," added Max.

"Or else he smelled a rat," I interjected, "and he's fucked us over again."

Old Rossini engaged the gear of the subcompact with Swiss plates that had been procured for us by our landlord, an Italian who'd done a couple jobs with Beniamino twenty years back. The apartment cost as much as a suite in a luxury hotel, but it was comfortable and safe. No one would ever find us there.

We drove to a nearby neighborhood and everyone went his own way. I drank a beer and slipped inside a record shop. The owner was an old rocker with shifty eyes and a face that bespoke a steady diet of hard drugs.

"What're you looking for?" he asked in German.

“Women blues singers,” I said in English, “are all I listen to right now.”

He pointed to a rack, but I didn’t budge. “I’m looking for something new, but I don’t like combing through CDs. I’m open to suggestions.”

He smiled. Without a second thought, he fished one out and handed it to me. “No way you know this one. Finnish blues.”

I scanned the cover. Ina Forsman. A redhead, tattoos on her arms. “I’ll take it if you let me have a listen.”

“Be my guest,” he shrugged, passing me a pair of battered headphones.

The guy was right. Ina had the perfect voice for songs like “Bubbly Kisses.” For a while now all I’d been relishing, heart and ears, were women singers. Maybe because that was the only kind of blues that could make my desire to fall in love bearable. I thought about some of my past relationships. Just to remind myself that I hadn’t always been so lonely. At a certain point I yanked off the headphones. The rocker looked at me, concerned.

I waved my hand to ensure him everything was fine, but I offered no explanation. It wasn’t as if I could tell him that affairs of the heart must be swept aside when you’re about to kill a man. That I wouldn’t pull the trigger myself didn’t matter. I’d be there and I’d feel relieved to watch Pellegrini die with my own eyes.

The last time we’d been face to face with Handsome Giorgio was in a basement, Rossini pointing a pistol at him. He bartered for his life in exchange for something more important to us, and we kept our end of the bargain. At least the Old Gangster did. I’d begged him to pull the trigger, to rid humanity of that snake, but my friend didn’t listen. We’d given our word.

And yet I continued to believe that for once we could

renege on our principles. I had come to terms with that. But Beniamino hadn't.

A few minutes before 7 P.M. Old Rossini forced open the wrought iron fence. We preferred dinnertime to late night, convinced that the neighbors would be snug in their homes, distracted by the hum of the TV and the noise in the kitchen.

The door's deadbolt was no match for Beniamino's picklocks. He entered first, pistol raised. Inside, it was dark and quiet. There was nobody there. Our man least of all. A framed diploma in the hall informed us that the owner was Lotte Schlegel. My tiny electric flashlight shone on a photograph of a young woman with short black hair and a pleasant smile. How had she ended up in Pellegrini's claws, I wondered.

It was Max who noticed another photo tacked to the door of the antique solid oak closet in the bedroom. Giorgio Pellegrini smiled down at us, his arms crossed. It was the same photo we'd been handing out. Somehow he'd gotten hold of a copy, realized that sooner or later we'd find him, and split.

Max also noticed that the closet was sealed with packing tape. But it was Beniamino who took out a jackknife and cut the tape with the sharp tip.

The faint stench indicated there was a body inside. It was the owner of the house, naked, wrapped in several layers of nylon. The rope with which she'd been strangled was still wound tight around her neck. Her smile from the photograph had been replaced with a horrible grimace. We were no experts, but she must have been dead for days.

Max shuddered, his eyes fixed on the plastic cocoon shrouding the body of the latest woman to pay a high price for having met Handsome Giorgio.

Beniamino put his hand on Max's shoulder and guided him gently toward the exit.

“What now?” I whispered, disheartened, back in the car.

“Call the cops,” snapped Rossini. “We’ve exhausted all other options.”

I sighed.

Calling Inspector Giulio Campagna was never a good idea. But who was I to complain? I was the one who’d gone looking for him in a pinch. Campagna was as strange as the Hawaiian shirts he sported. He had his own theories about policing and justice. His regularly brusque, irritating tone could try the patience of a saint, but back when we’d written the final chapter in Pellegrini’s criminal activity in Padua, he’d stood up for us.

Convinced that snake was nothing more than a bad memory, we’d gone back to our lives. I’d hooked up with a blues band on tour: I traveled, listened to good music, drank, and picked up a new woman every night. Breezing through life is my way of catching my breath. Then one late afternoon I got a phone call. It was Pellegrini. I should have hung up but couldn’t resist finding out what he wanted. Maybe because I was on my third or fourth beer.

Pellegrini is a man of a thousand surprises, and on that occasion he didn’t disappoint: he wanted to hire us to investigate the murders of his wife and mistress. Martina and Gemma. I knew them well. After their master had fled, they’d taken over management of La Nena, the restaurant Giorgio had opened and made famous.

After arguing back and forth, I declined the job, but he laughed me off: “I know you, Buratti, I’ve seen how you operate. You’re obsessed with the truth. You won’t turn this down.”

His tone was too cocky. You can’t trust a mug like him, even when he’s telling the truth. His every move is carefully calculated. I finished my beer and went out in search of an Internet café.

From what I could glean the two women had been tortured and strangled in the restaurant cellar. The night's earnings had been found in Gemma's purse, and no one doubted that Pellegrini had been the real target.

Evidently, the two victims didn't know where he was hiding out, and their executioners ran out of patience.

That night I slept soundly, even though I couldn't put my finger on the reason for his phone call. A few hours later, I had my answer when Inspector Campagna and a few officers routed me from bed, the way cops always do, and brought me back to Padua.

At the station I made the acquaintance of Dottoressa Angela Marino. With her looks, I'd never have pegged her for a snake. I only got it when she made me listen to the conversation that I'd had the day before with Pellegrini.

There wasn't a single incriminating word, but to avoid getting life the bastard had cut a deal with this cop. It wasn't the first time. In the past he'd sold out accomplices and funneled information to cops, but now he was working a different angle for some kind of sting operation.

And we were part of the deal. If we didn't join her team, we'd wind up in jail on some trumped-up charge or other. We were hardened criminals, after all; only a long sentence was fit punishment for us.

Dottoressa Marino was persuasive. She threw Max's medical records in my face. "In his condition, he won't last more than four or five years in jail."

I hung my head. Which is to say, I pretended to give in.

My friends and I examined every possible angle, but the best solution was to uproot the problem by eliminating Giorgio Pellegrini, who had gotten us mixed up in that business just to get even. We disappeared from the scene and went after him, but he had evaded us three times. Now we were flirting with ideas and alternatives. And there was no question we needed

more time. Even if we still didn't know the details, it was clear this operation was too dirty to let witnesses walk—or live. Dottoressa Marino never had the slightest intention of keeping her word. We could run or hide out in some quiet spot on the Dalmatian Coast or Lebanon, where Rossini had friends he could count on. But that, we decided, would be our emergency option. The whole business was a sick joke, an injustice we couldn't stomach. If that cop in league with Pellegrini was planning on playing us for suckers, she was sorely mistaken.

We weren't about to barter away our dignity. Not for the world. "We'll go for broke," said the Old Gangster. In seventies-era gang-speak that meant risking it all: freedom, life.

"Call him," insisted Rossini.

I fished in the pocket of my old flight jacket for my phone.

Two days later it was sunup, and I was sitting down at a little café on the outskirts of Padua, on the ground floor of a gray building bristled with antennas. At that hour, they served frozen pastries, weak coffee, dry milk that was reconstituted as soon as it crossed the Austrian border. The upshot was that it was a discreet place to meet people I'd otherwise never be caught dead with. The owner was an Albanian woman who had mastered the art of minding her own business. She'd arrived at the port of Brindisi with the first wave of boat people in '91, had busted her ass doing jobs that Italians no longer wanted to do, and had tucked away enough money to buy the place. The clientele was largely composed of retirees and homemakers, all tranquil types.

I ordered a pear juice and glanced disinterestedly at the day's news. Some priests had gotten embroiled in a sex scandal, and the story had made national TV. Parishioners, porn, sex toys, and a "boss" charged with promoting prostitution.

The press was trying to paint a morally grim picture of the affair, but the city was having a laugh. Jokes and rumors abounded, in part because the religious leaders were known and beloved for their pastoral care, and a fuck here or there never hurt anybody. It was nothing new under the Veneto sky. I once knew an old priest who described celibacy as a punishment he'd chosen. He was made of finer stuff, called bread "bread" and wine "wine," and believed it was his mission to prevent old convicts from returning to jail. When he died, I took it hard.

Inspector Giulio Campagna arrived ten minutes late. He had on a hooded parka with mangy fur lining that looked like the genuine article. He sensed my interest.

"Brush wolf," he said, pointing at it with his glove.

"You mean dog," I said curtly.

"Exactly," he said, adjusting his velvet nut-brown blazer, which hid his sidearm. "They used to sell sewer rat and call it *rat musqué*."

I shuddered to recall the bright collars and cuffs of women's overcoats. After that, nutria became the fashion. Their numbers skyrocketed after the breeding farms closed, and the provinces in Veneto waited ten years to take remedial action and institute courses for specialized hunters.

"You shaved your moustache," observed the inspector. "Lose a bet?"

"No," I answered laconically. A woman had told me it wasn't a good look, said so while slowly riding me during a romp that had, at least at first, promised to be memorable. I decided to avoid other less than stimulating moments by taking a scissors and razor to it.

The inspector looked askance at the display of baked goods. "They buy these limp-dick pastries for twenty cents and charge a euro for them."

"A euro thirty," corrected the owner.

“And don’t get me started on the palm oil,” he went on, raising his voice.

“Don’t,” I said under my breath. Campagna loved preambles. He involved other people in idle talk and didn’t get around to the point until it suited him.

He stared at me a second then ordered coffee. “Sleep well?”

I lost my patience. “What the fuck kind of sting operation are we mixed up in? Please explain to me what that piece-of-shit Pellegrini is up to. He murdered a woman in Bern and now—surprise, surprise—he’s vanished into thin air.”

Campagna absorbed the news while pouring a whole packet of brown sugar in his cup. “I know as much as you, Buratti. They don’t tell me anything. All they give me are orders I can’t make sense of.”

“Set up a meeting with the witch,” I said, fed up. “And not at the station like last time.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?” he asked, checking to see that his spoon was clean. “That woman wants to fuck you over. She’s making you do the dirty work and after that she’ll flush you down the can.”

“I have you to thank. You’re the one who delivered me into the hands of that snake.”

“Let me reiterate: I’m the low man on the totem pole. I do the bidding of anybody who counts for something.”

“I still get the impression that she’ll fuck you over too. It’s not like you’re her idea of a model cop.”

“As long as I stay on the sidelines, I’m not running any risks.”

“Bullshit. Not even you buy that.”

He drank his coffee, scraped the bottom of the cup for sugar, and sucked on it pensively. “Meeting you turned out to be a real pain in my ass.”

“You and your stunts torched your career long before me.”

“It’s a tough métier,” he remarked grimly.

“I can only imagine.”

“Because you’re a bum. I should’ve thrown you in jail the minute I laid eyes on you.”

I sighed. Once again the curtain fell on our little act. The inspector stood up and walked outside to place a call.

“Marino will meet you here this time tomorrow morning,” he said when he came back in. Then he turned to the barista. “He’s buying,” he said, and left without saying goodbye.

Clearly Campagna wasn’t happy about being mixed up with Dottoressa Angela Marino. Neither was I, obviously, but after Bern my chances of getting out of that situation unscathed had gone up in smoke, and now we had to fall in line with that spiteful, dangerous official from the Ministry of the Interior.

The cold hit me as soon as I set foot outside the café. I reached my car, wishing I had a parka like Campagna’s. My old aviator jacket was totally inadequate, but luckily the heating in the Škoda Felicia, a car built for the colder climes of Eastern Europe, provided quick comfort. I turned on the stereo, which was more valuable than the car itself, and listened to Beth Hart croon “Baddest Blues.” As usual, I had a hard time finding a parking spot around Corso Milano, where I shared an apartment with Max and, more and more frequently, Beniamino.

During sales season, Paduans stormed the stores like barbarians and clogged the parking lots downtown. When Padua fell prey to shopping euphoria, the bars filled up with people eager to show off their purchases, as if they were trophies. According to a recent study of people’s emotional wellbeing, if you were to judge by emoticons, Padua was the saddest city in Italy. I believed it. Padua was beautiful, comfy as an old slipper, but in the last few years it had lost the bite that had once made it interesting.

“Padua’s dying,” sang Massima Tackenza, drowning in laws and a mindless urge toward order and cleanliness. The mayor didn’t appreciate the sentiment, so DIGOS paid a visit to the fledgling rap group’s home to have a little chat about free speech. The mayor had bought a gun and was prepared to shoot any robber with the dumb idea of burgling his residence. His bunk about reasonable force had garnered him votes, but the majority split down the middle, and for months an interim administrator had been governing Padua in the lead up to new elections.

Old Rossini, dressed to the nines, was reading the paper in an armchair in the living room.

“Campagna was no help,” I told him. “I have a meeting with Marino tomorrow morning.”

“I don’t envy you,” he said flatly. Then he put a finger to his ear. “You hear that annoying hum?”

I pricked up my ears. “Yeah, what is it?”

“The Fat Man has gotten it into his head to shed a couple pounds.”

I found Max in his room, bundled in a brand new tracksuit. He’d laced up a pair of sneakers and was pedaling a stationary bike. I pretended to ignore the damp sheen covering his purple face.

“Keep your comments to yourself,” he warned, short of breath.

“All right.”

“If I have to go to jail, I want to be in shape.”

“That’s not happening.”

The Fat Man looked down at his handlebars and pedaled faster.

I returned to the living room. “I hate to see him like that,” I mumbled.

“He hasn’t gotten over the Switzerland debacle.”

That makes two of us, I thought, opening a fresh pack of cigarettes.

Max reappeared a half hour later wearing a sponge robe and cradling a fruit-and-veggie smoothie. He took the first sip like a kid being spoon-fed cod liver oil.

Rossini and I looked at each other and burst out laughing.

“How about a quick drink in the square then fish at Punta Sabioni,” said Beniamino.

A look of sheer relief materialized on Max’s face. “I’ll go get changed.”

The following morning I woke up early. After a smoke and coffee I calmly prepared my shaving cream. I needed to collect my thoughts one last time before meeting Dottoressa Marino.

It was snowing in Central and Southern Italy, and under the snow the earth was rumbling. As usual, an emergency brought out the best and worst of Italy. Fortunately the sun shone on Padua, despite the freezing temperatures. On the street I stopped into a store advertising unbeatable discounts to buy something heavier than my old jacket.

“Eskimos are back in style,” confided the young clerk, as if she were sharing a secret. After sizing me up and tallying my age, she figured I was a remnant of the counterculture era.

I shook my head. I wasn’t all that nostalgic. I eyeballed a simple blue parka with particularly thick lining. “I’ll take that one,” I said, and headed for the register.

I parked a block from the café. On my way over I passed a black sedan, fresh from the car wash. The man in the driver’s seat was talking on his cell phone. He was Marino’s driver, clearly. I’d find the others waiting for me in the warmth of the café.

The moment I walked in, the owner nodded toward a table in the back where the Dottoressa was sitting with Inspector Campagna and another cop, younger, who stood up and walked over to me. Wholesome-looking, except for his weasely eyes.

“You know the drill,” he whispered in his thick Calabrian accent.

I raised my arms and spread my legs.

“Don’t be cute,” grumbled the agent, discreetly patting my sides. “No need to put on a show.”

“Everybody in the neighborhood’s already pegged you for cops.”

Angela Marino sighed. “Leave him be, Sergeant Marmorato. Buratti doesn’t pack a firearm in public. He doesn’t have the balls.”

She kept her eyes on me as I sat down. “Unlike Beniamino Rossini, who wears a bracelet for every man he’s killed,” she went on. “It’ll never be too late to lock *him* up for life.”

She had a pleasant voice, which made it all the more difficult to swallow her bullshit. I looked at Campagna, who was inconspicuously shaking his head, warning me not to react. I didn’t intend to, not in the slightest. It was my second time meeting that hyena, and I knew she was doing everything in her power to provoke me in order to remind me who was in charge.

Once again, she wore her hair in a ponytail. Maybe she wore her hair that way for work, or maybe she wore her hair that way all the time. Two gold aquamarine earrings dangled from her ears.

She took a sip of water. “Nice of you to show up. We were beginning to run out of patience,” she said. “I’ve earmarked three kilos of coke for you and your friends. For me to plant where I want, when I want. You know how many years you get for that? At least fifteen with my recommendation.”

“We were looking for Pellegrini,” I interrupted.

“I know. He told me. He thinks your objective is to eliminate him.”

Well look at that, I thought, pretty Angela has a direct line to Handsome Giorgio.

I feigned indignation. “Pellegrini’s wrong. All we want is to find out who could have it out for him so bad as to murder Martina and Gemma so brutally. Because there’s a long

list of people who have a score to settle with the guy you're protecting."

"Bullshit. You wanted to eliminate him and slink off."

I tried changing the subject. "Did Pellegrini inform you he killed Lotte Schlegel, his hostess in Bern?"

"Giorgio had nothing to do with that. It was probably the people who took out the wife and friend."

"It was him all right."

"Maybe it was you," she shot back.

I put up my arms. "What? Threatening to throw us in jail for trafficking isn't enough for you?"

The woman smiled. "I can top that."

I pretended to surrender. "What do we have to do?"

"Investigate the death of Martina and Gemma."

"Why us? Isn't that Homicide's job?"

"With your connections, I'm sure you and your friends have a better shot at uncovering the killers."

What she'd said was half true. I pressed on. "You didn't answer my first question."

"I don't have to."

The cop stood up, and Marmorato mimicked her. "From now on we won't tolerate anymore funny stuff," she said. There was venom in her voice. "Inspector Campagna will provide you with the pertinent information." She began walking away but turned around after a few steps. "I tapped my people at Interpol to get a clearer picture of your criminal contacts in Slovenia and Croatia. The local authorities cooperated. In the future, it won't be so easy to rely on your cohorts and hide-outs," she added smugly. "Running isn't a viable option anymore, Buratti. You should think about turning on Rossini, once the case is closed, in exchange for immunity. For you and that derelict Max the Memory."

"Three kilos of coke are more than enough to get what you want. You don't need me."

“You’re capable of nailing Rossini for every bracelet on his wrist.”

“You’re wrong. I’d never do that.”

“Oh, sure,” she replied. “You all act tough at first. But when you’re facing life in jail, you’ll turn on anybody.”

“That’s your goal is it, nail Rossini?”

“Not my main goal, obviously. But why not take advantage of the situation? Giorgio testifies to the few murders he witnessed, and you testify to the rest.”

Suddenly I got it. “Sending Beniamino to jail is Pellegrini’s idea, am I right?”

“He put it out there during negotiations. Involving you gives us the added opportunity to shut your gang down for good.”

“We’re not a gang,” I answered, indignant.

“An opinion that’ll definitely pique the interest of the High Court,” she trilled, exchanging a playful look with Sergeant Marmorato.

“There’s one thing I don’t get, Dottoressa.”

“Make it quick. I’m busy.”

“You’re presuming we’ll accept being blackmailed for some bogus crime. I mean, in the end you’ll do everything in your power to screw us over no matter what. Tell me, what’s in it for us?”

“Wake up, Buratti. This is a contest to see who’s most willing to peddle his ass,” she snapped, fed up, as if she was talking to an idiot. “Prove you’re willing to sacrifice everything in the name of justice and there’s a chance you can save yourself.”

She turned heel, and Marmorato followed. The Dottoressa had made herself clear.

I snatched Campagna’s wrist. “What, none of your usual repartee to lighten the mood while that bitch measures our coffins?” I asked. I was livid.

The inspector wriggled free. He’d gone pale. “Don’t make hay, Buratti.”

“You were fucking played,” I seethed. “Slithering around to please her won’t help you: you’re one of the scapegoats and fall guys too.”

“You’re forgetting we’re both cops.”

“Is that right? Too bad you count for less than zero to Angela Marino. She despises you, and she’ll torch your career as soon as you’re no use to her.”

“Keep dreaming,” he said, standing up. He took a disk out of his jacket pocket. “It’s the copy of the double-homicide report, updated yesterday.”

“You really think she’ll let you testify in court that she ordered you to deliver a homicide report to me?”

“Maybe I’ll play her game,” he spat. “Maybe I don’t know what the fuck to do. Not one of my colleagues will lift a finger to defend me against that bitch.”

I shot to my feet and he backed up. “Think, Campagna. If you’re the last cop she’d want to work with, why did she come to you?”

“Because she knows I covered for you when you forced Pellegrini out of Padua.”

I threw up my arms, exasperated. “And what are you going to do to avoid military prison?”

“I don’t know, Buratti. Maybe nothing. After all, I committed a crime.”

“Cut the bullshit. You took the only shot you had at getting justice.”

He sighed. “You and your partners are criminals. You’ve got absolutely nothing to do with justice.”

“Neither does Dottoressa Marino,” I replied.

“She’s different. She was born and raised on a planet of special ops at the ministry. She doesn’t think like a beat cop.”

“That’s exactly why we’re the only ones you can count on.”

“What are you talking about?”

I spelled it out for him. "We should team up, Campagna. It's the one chance we've got of walking away from this."

He stared at me a long time then silently withdrew.

"Think about it!" I said loudly. Everyone but him turned around.

I walked over to the register. First time in my life I was stuck paying for three cops.

The owner waved my money away.

"What's up?"

"It's O.K."

"I insist."

"In Albania I used to watch Italian television in secret," she began. "It was forbidden. But every night, when state TV stopped transmitting, I would tune in to Italian TV. I would watch till morning, because there was something magical about it that I couldn't put my finger on. When I arrived in Italy, I realized it was the light. Our lights were always weak and sick-looking. They never lasted long. Staring at a light bulb broke your heart. To read you had to use an oil lamp or candles. My first night in Brindisi I swore to myself I would never give up that light. I've always been careful to keep out of trouble. Italian trouble, Albanian trouble. Understand?"

I nodded. "I apologize. I won't come back."

I exited and lit a cigarette. The taste of tobacco mingled with the stink of the trash burner in the distance. The air in Padua is filled with fine dust that only rain can get rid of, but there hadn't been a drop for weeks.

I half turned to see the woman from the bar. She'd stepped out from behind the counter to help an old woman into her coat. She could have told me to get lost. Instead she'd chosen to confide something intimate to me to help me understand the importance of what she had and what I had almost jeopardized.

I felt guilty. I stopped a man with white hair protruding

from an old flat cap as he was entering, the paper tucked under his arm. He must've been on his way for a coffee or a glass of white wine. He'd stick around all morning, reading the news, offering his own running commentary.

He was suspicious, and my smile didn't assuage his suspicions. I took two fifties from my wallet and asked him to give them to the owner.

"Why don't you give them to her yourself?"

"It's an old debt. I'm too embarrassed."

He put out his hand and took the money. He had two wedding bands on his ring finger.

"Thanks," I mumbled.

I had nothing to share with my friends but bad news, so I took my time delivering it. I drove through Padua listening to Gina Sicilia's "Allow Me to Confess" and holed up in an osteria, one of the last places left where people still played cards. I lost at *scopa*, lost at *briscola*, offered everybody a round, gorged on meatballs and boiled eggs to avoid stomach cramps from the cheap wine, and got my fill of gossip and filthy jokes.

"Know what I think," remarked Beniamino, imperturbable, a few hours later, after I'd finished replaying my conversation with Angela Marino word for word. "Even if they torched our chances of hiding out with my old associates in what used to be Yugoslavia, we could always count on the guys who stayed in Beirut. But I don't have the slightest intention of running. As far as I'm concerned, the plan doesn't change."

I turned to Max. The Fat Man had been listening silently, chain-smoking.

"I can't stand the idea of an official from Interior threatening to throw me in jail regardless of my actual guilt," he said, choosing his words carefully. "Moreover, using my health to raise the specter of incarceration is frankly unacceptable. And the knowledge that her crusade is fueled by someone as



deplorable as Giorgio Pellegrini and his desire for vengeance drives me mad. But that's not all. I spent a large part of my life hoping to see a happy multitude achieve their dreams. Instead I find myself surrounded by legions of individuals who are dead inside, who are resigned to being robbed of their lives."

"So?" Old Rossini prodded.

"So, in a world as cruel as this, you have to survive. Whatever the cost," he replied. "It's a question of dignity."

