

Alessandro Perissinotto

LA CONGREGAZIONE
The Congregation

Translation by Olivia Jung

Chapter 1

Now

In the darkness of her hiding place, Elizabeth can feel her life slowly dripping away, like the ice stalactites that are melting from the ledge of the abandoned house. She can hear the inexorable pattering sound of their drops falling on the tin roof of the shed, setting the pace of her last hours. And she embraces those drops with a resignation that she didn't think she could muster just a short while ago. She tells herself that, all things considered, she was granted forty more years of life, since she should have died in 1978, and that you can't cheat death twice.

They will be here soon. At this point, they know where she is. She was able to make them lose her trail for a few hours, but her time is up. They know she made it to Idaho Springs and that her last known location was at the entrance of the Argo Gold Mine. They will find her, even though she chose the most unlikely path. And maybe it's a good thing if they find her, otherwise it will be the cold that kills her. When she stops hearing the drops on the tin roof, the sun will have set below the mountains' horizon and water will have started freezing again. And that is only the beginning: the temperature will drop further and, little by little, her limbs will stiffen. What's better, a white death or a red one? Better to freeze or bleed to death? Dying by hypothermia or a bullet to the heart?

Chapter 2

Seven weeks earlier - Wednesday

"And with this, we're done," said Melvyn Storch as he screwed the last anchor to install the home station on the wall. "We brought prison home for you."

Elizabeth winced in disdain, then replied sarcastically. "Thanks, Mel, you're a sweetheart. And such a handyman too: cop, tv repairman, social worker. The woman who marries you will be a lucky one."

With thirty years of experience on the job, he didn't let her words get to him.

"Thank you for your proposal, Elizabeth, but there is already a Mrs. Storch. And I'm too old for you: I'm turning sixty next year."

"You're only twelve years older than me and I'm sorry you prefer your wife to me. As you can see, I'm still in pretty good shape. And I still made guys way younger than you lose their minds before you put this thing on my ankle."

"You mean those dudes who'd get drunk and put bills in your panties in that dump of the LoDo?"

"It's one of the best night clubs in Denver, a place where people like you aren't even allowed through the door."

"For goodness sake, Ely, there are age limits for strippers! Or did you think you could keep doing it for your entire life?"

"I told myself I'd stop at fifty, but now that you've buried me in this graveyard..."

"If you prefer, I can take you to jail and ask them to remove you from house arrest. I'm your probation officer: your freedom depends on me. On the other hand, you were the one who asked to come to Frisco."

"Only because my aunt, bless her soul, left me this house, which is a thousand times better than the pigsty I used to live in the city. The house is nice, but the town's a shithole."

"Then enjoy the house, since you'll be here for a while. Curfew is at midnight: if you're not back by that time, Homer will let us know."

"Homer Simpson?"
"Funny. That's Homer," said Melvyn knocking on the box he just finished installing. "Home Receiver. It's the device that collects the signal from your ankle monitor and transmits it to our police station. It lets us know if you're home, if you're moving, if you're asleep, if your vital signs are okay..."

Elizabeth looked at him stunned.

"What do my vital signs have to do with it?"

"It has nothing to do with the court's ruling. But, if you recall, in order to replace jail with electronic surveillance, you'd have to dish out forty bucks a day to rent the device. So, instead, we cover the rental cost and you become the Guinea pig for this technological jewel that we want to launch on the market to monitor old people with Alzheimer."

"So, you'll turn from a cop into a nanny?"

"You know I'm not a cop: I work for a private company. The court assigns us people to monitor and we do it, but we're not cops."

"So, if I tried to run, you couldn't do anything?"

"Exactly. Nothing beside calling Frisco's sheriff and getting you arrested within five minutes. Attempting to escape from house arrest would count as your third strike, and you know how many years of jail you'd get for your third strike, don't you? We're a little kinder here in Colorado compared to other places, but don't think you can get away with it scot-free. The same goes for tampering or attempting to damage the home station or your ankle monitor. Don't let those YouTube videos fool you, they're fake: you can't take it off. The only way to remove your nice electronic anklet is to amputate your foot. Do you think it's really worth it?"

Elizabeth didn't answer. The expression of challenge she had on her face was replaced by a discouraged look. What an idiot she was! Getting caught for the second time in a year for drunk driving. And she wasn't even drunk when they stopped her; it's one thing to have alcohol in your blood, but being lucid is another. And she was lucid both times. If it hadn't been three in the morning and she wasn't dressed like a hooker, they probably wouldn't even have tested her. If she had been in a ninety-thousand-dollar Lincoln and had been driving up the driveway of a mansion in Cherry Creek, they would have let it slide. But, instead, she was in a banged up 1992 Honda and the address on her driver's license placed her in a building that should have been demolished way back in the Reagan administration. Half her neighbors spent their days drinking in the Capitol Hill gardens, and the other half either sold drugs or prostituted itself. Living there was like having the serial number of the state penitentiary tattooed on your forehead. If she hadn't had another place where to go, she would have ended up in house arrest there. Luckily, Aunt Rose left this world right when she was on trial and, since she didn't have any other relatives, Elizabeth ended up inheriting the cottage in Frisco, so she was able to be placed under house arrest there. In other words, Aunt Rose's death allowed her to choose her prison.

"Don't worry, Mel. I won't hurt neither Homer nor this beautiful ankle bracelet. Spending fourteen months with this thing sawing into my leg will be a real pleasure. But out of curiosity: how will I go to work if I always have to be in touch with Homer?"

Right, because Withney Controls, the company Melvyn worked for, had also found her a job. A very lucrative market had opened up for the private sector thanks to the new law: monitoring and rehabilitating people convicted for minor crimes. And Withney, which recently created a branch in Colorado, was trying to outdo the competition by proving its efficiency to the governor with state-of-the-art electronic surveillance, tailored rehabilitation programs, and skilled personnel.

"Don't worry. Homer takes a break when you leave the house and it's the satellite system that monitors you. You're free to move within a two-mile radius. If you breach that perimeter, the alarm goes off. When I say "move," I mean "walk": given your causal relationship with traffic rules, and the fact that you're in good health, the judge decided that you can't get in any vehicle. If you go any faster than a person running, the alarm will go off even if you're within those two miles."

“Did you mean it when you said that you could have my house arrest revoked? Because I’m reconsidering the idea of going to jail: no need to work, hot meals...”

“And an intense sexual life with women in their sixties sentenced to life in jail who are itching to try the newest addition to the block.”

“Gay jokes are so passé. Besides, sex with women isn’t bad at all.”

“Better end the argument here. Listen, Ely, the system is giving you a chance to change your life. You’re a pretty woman, beautiful, but you’re done as a stripper. And as for those other services you provided clients at the end of your shift at the club, well... the demand for those will also decrease as time goes by. Set your head straight and don’t waste this opportunity. Working as a cashier at the gas station is an honest, clean job, even if it isn’t what you dreamed of as a girl.”

What did Mel even know about what she dreamed of as a girl?