

Barbara Baraldi

The Season of the Spider

It is the summer of 1988 and in Torino an inexplicable and strange event takes place: the Vittorio Emanuele bridge that crosses the river Po' has been completely invaded by spider colonies, with large, endless webs extending all along the parapet that leads to the neoclassical *Gran Madre di Dio* church on the other side.

Prosecutor Francesco Scalviati, nicknamed by his colleagues the 'cop-judge', is in the neighborhood of Pian del Lot on a crime scene: it is the third homicide that seems attributable to the same hand. This time as well the victims are a couple who had hidden themselves away in a private place. This time as well one of the victims was killed with two shots from a pistol while the other one was killed with the aggressor's bare hands. This time, however, it was the girl; and each time, the killer changes the method.

Among those present on the scene is Leda De Almeida, an investigative journalist with a past that includes a stint as a war correspondent in Lebanon. Wounded in conflict, Leda subsequently became dependent on painkillers, a habit she was only recently able to kick. Scalviati and De Almeida have a reciprocal respect for one another, even if the prosecutor often attempts to dissuade Leda from taking on private investigation cases that appear to be too dangerous.

Soon Scalviati receives an unexpected visit from an American, an analyst from the behavioral science unit of the FBI, by the name of Isaak Stoner. Stoner proposes himself as a consultant on the case due to his expertise in the new, powerful methods used in the field of criminology, such as the hot new solution called *profiling*.

Even though he is fascinated by these connected homicides, which Stoner calls "serial" using the new term in vogue at the bureau, Scalviati is not able to fully trust his American colleague and is convinced he is harboring a secret.

At home, the due date of Scalviati's wife is approaching and they have yet to decide on a name for the baby.

On the case, the investigation continues at a breakneck pace but with few results. One day a man presents himself at the station declaring that he is the killer. As Scalviati is on his way to the station the man is left in the waiting room for hours and at a certain point, he gets up and walks out. The police are able to identify him but once they reach his home they find him dead by suicide, with a note that explains he was overcome by a sense of guilt for what he had done.

The problem is that, even if they are able to link the man to the most recent homicide, they are not able to place him at the scene of the other crimes. Making matters worse, another double homicide is committed, using the same methods as the previous crimes.

The key to resolving the case is contained in a BBS (bulletin board system) – a virtual bulletin board accessible by password – which is called The Directorate. The set up is similar to the dark web of today. A part of the global network that will become the internet that we know today actually hides an unexpected network of assassins coordinated by an enigmatic leader who calls himself The Director. He considers himself to be above and beyond all moral judgement.

Only the combined efforts of Scalviati, De Almeida, and Stoner will be enough to take down the killer this time. And in the meantime, Stoner admits that he is in Italy to investigate because a series of similar homicides had recently taken place in the US.

The investigation is finally winding to a close, and in the early days of September a baby girl is born. Francesco Scalviati is wrapped up in capturing the killer and misses the moment of his daughter's birth. When he finally arrives at the hospital and enters his wife's room, she is bitter and disappointed. "The baby is born already and we haven't even given her a name. What kind of terrible parents are we?"

Scalviati takes the newborn baby girl in his arms and looks into her eyes. "We'll call her Aurora. So that she will never have to walk in darkness."