

CLUES BY POST

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Chapter 1

This is no time

At that point, Fox had no choice but to show the small group gathered in the room the final, definitive clue, the one that would undoubtedly incriminate the culprit: Irina Dimitrova, the acrobat!

A long sigh of surprise enveloped Fox's last words, while Irina, without batting an eyelid, raised her arms and began to move them rhythmically in a slow, majestic applause.

Beep. A message. Riccardo Maurici did not allow himself to be distracted. He resumed writing.

"Congratulations, Fox, your fame is definitely..."

Beep beep beep.

"...well deserved. But it's not enough that the shoes are women's and my size to..."

Beep beep beep beep.

"...accuse me of theft. Even Miss Octavia..."

Beep beep.

ENOUGH!

Maurici picked up the phone and threw it into the wastepaper basket next to his desk. A nice gesture, but completely harmless, since the bin was overflowing with crumpled sheets of paper, and nothing would happen to the phone. The rapid succession of notifications that the phone continued to emit, although it was muffled by the paper, confirmed it: the infernal device was still in excellent working order.

"No, I'm not falling for it, little sister! Not today, not until I'm done!" He picked up the mug from the desk, took a long sip of coffee that was still warm enough that he didn't have to get up to reheat it, glanced at the time – 9:35 – and resumed his work.

He had calculated that, if he didn't let himself be distracted by anything, he would finish within an hour. Then, as he always did when he reached the end of a new novel featuring Inspector Fox, his detective, the one who had brought him success, Maurici would turn off his computer to take a break from the novel, let it rest before making corrections, and emerge from the isolation he imposed on himself while writing. About ten years earlier, he had published *Ruthless Dawn on the Hills*, a mystery novel full of intrigue, featuring a young, brilliant detective, which had aroused the interest of critics. They had quickly declared it "a finally original voice in the stereotypical world of crime fiction for young adults". It was now a classic, loved by readers who devoured it and by booksellers, who sold it with an ease that made them happy. Each new episode was eagerly awaited, so Maurici concentrated as hard as he could while writing.

His life was confined to the space between his bedroom and his study desk, where he spent an average of seven or eight hours a day writing, and the same amount of time reading notes, polishing sentences and studying those he considered his great masters. He allowed himself to go to the cinema on Friday evenings because there were usually few people there, and he left some time on Sundays for his sister Renata, who was bombarding him with messages that morning. It was 17th December, Renata's birthday, and the content was certainly something like:

- You haven't forgotten, have you?

No, but he hadn't bought her a present yet, damn it!

- It's tonight and you still haven't confirmed that you're coming!

- You're my big brother, you must be there.

- You promised Mum you would take care of me, and you know how upset she would be... and then your nieces are dying to have you here with them... you're the famous uncle.

Renata, or rather Renée, as she preferred to be called, loved to type frantically on the keyboard and send very short messages, which Riccardo hated. He was a voice message kind of person, who wrote on paper before sending to be sure he said everything, all at once and with clarity. For this reason, she called him Boomer. In fact, she had saved his number in her address book as "Ricky Boomer" to emphasize the point.

'The boomer here has work to do if he wants to dish out his eagerly awaited new hit' thought Maurici.

That *if* had his first appearance about six months earlier, when Maurici woke up one morning with a new idea in his head. He went to the publishing house and began to explain, but the office staff rebelled:

"So tell us, did you come up with this nonsense about elves all by yourself, or did someone help you?"

"Who mentioned elves? I said magic, I was talking about a fantasy saga... you know? Do I have to name famous characters or authors who have had worldwide success?"

"Ah, you mean magic wands, potions, spells... I get it! No!"

"But you don't even want to listen to my idea? It's a crazy subject, with a wise old man who has reached the point where he must give up his role as the queen's defender. While searching for someone worthy to succeed him, he realizes that it is a girl, and this..."

"Okay, that's very modern and solves the gender gap, but no, in fact NO! I'm telling you in capital letters, so maybe you'll understand. Or at least not with me!"

His publisher had gotten up to accompany him to the door.

"Are you sending me away?"

"It seems to me that you're the one who's no longer happy to be here."

"Don't you think that after so many years with the same character, my image needs a refresh? Two novels per year, for ten years, with the same character make..."

"A lot of money. They make a lot of money, for me and for you, Maurici. Am I wrong? Should I list the festivals that invited you, and what about the boat and the beach house you bought thanks to Fox?"

It hadn't been necessary. Riccardo Maurici had pretended it was all a joke and promised to bring in the new subject within two days. He was working on it and he felt it would be a smash hit. He had assured his editor, and had left with his shoulders a little more hunched than when he had entered the office half an hour earlier.

Better not to think about it now!

He had got to:

"Congratulations, Fox, your reputation is well deserved. But it's not enough that the shoes are women's and my size to accuse me of theft. Miss Octavia also..."

He resumed:

"...wears size 36, and like me, she loves high heels, so I think you'll need something more concrete!"

Octavia Worthington, a washed-out blonde with a high-sounding name, screamed as if stung by a wasp.

RIIING! The doorbell!

"What the hell is going on this morning! Are you all against me?"

Maurici saved the file before getting up.

RIIING! RIIING!

"In a hurry too, are you? Renata, if it's you, I'll strangle you!" Opening the door, Maurici yelled at a burly guy in a courier's uniform with a large envelope in his hand.

"No, you're not Renata, thank goodness."

"For you or for me?" The guy looked at him with a rather grumpy expression.

Maurici chuckled, the guy made him sign a piece of paper, handed him the envelope and disappeared muttering something that could have been the advice to visit that famous hot place later.

Maurici closed the door and turned the key.

Once alone, he allowed himself to return to his irritable mood. Even the delivery of an envelope had to happen that morning. Greetings, probably. Stupid cards decorated with inspirational phrases, which had to be answered with equally overrated wishes, as if happiness during the holidays depended on them.

Meanwhile, the book wasn't finishing itself. It was almost done, Maurici had reached the climax where Fox revealed the last piece of the puzzle, and he was lost in musings about holidays and good wishes... Ugh!

He dropped the envelope on the armchair next to the front door. He would pick it up again once he had finished the last chapter and written the word "end".

He glanced at his watch, which read 10:20, the time by which, if no one had disturbed him, he should have already finished. He glanced out of the window and saw sparse snowflakes fluttering in the air. This cheered him up, as it always had since he was a child, and he got back to work. Octavia Worthington resumed her shouting, Irina tried to muddy

the waters in her favour, and Fox prepared to shine as he had done every time, twice a year, for ten years!