

Malfaiera

OR

Unholy Coincidence

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*... for he that soweth to his flesh shall of the
flesh reap corruption*

Galatians 6, 8

One death is an accident
Two could be a coincidence ...
Three times is murder

Truth is indeed stranger than fiction and sometimes truth catches up on us in the strangest ways ... sneaks up behind us when we are unawares and forces us to consider the improbable.

So it seemed for Lucia, caught in an International web of intrigue and gifted - or perhaps cursed - with tiny morsels of information, rumours, whisperings which she had accumulated since childhood. Victim of a string of unlikely coincidences, she was eventually forced to piece the jigsaw puzzle together.

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This is a work of fiction.

Any resemblance between characters, events and reality is left purely to your imagination

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Part One

Francesco rhythmically lifted his snow caked boots - just a few more steps now , .. soon be able to see the house. His dog limped beside him. Snow had driven between the pads of her paws and she whimpered occasionally as they made their slow progress to shelter. It was stupid to come up this way in mid winter. The branch road to the property was impassable at this time of year and the house would be cold , the fire unlit since Lina, his wife, had died. His daughter Laura begged him to move down to the town and live with her family. But stubborn old man that he was, he insisted on living in the old house. He could hear her voice even now ringing in his ears.

'Babbo, you'll die up there. You don't eat properly, you don't have a phone, what other fool in Italy lives like you do - even the peasants in Sardegna have electric fires and televisions - one of these days your grandchildren will drive up the track and find your bones chewed on by the wolves - Is that what you want for them?'

The house had been named Malfaiera from before the time of local memory. Some said it was a Roman name. Some that it stood for Mal fa qui era - some sort of corruption of the words for a bad thing happened here. Whatever the meaning it had been lost in time but the family and Francesco in particular had loved the place.

Maybe it was inconvenient but it was as secure as a fortress and solid as a rock, built in fact of the local stone, with walls thick enough to accommodate 'priest hole' style alcoves and 'walk in' chimneys and hearths. And today security is what he wanted. He had seen things he should not have seen - out there in the snow. Heard murmurings from those who did not know the old man walked the hills, he had old eyes, but they knew when they saw evil.

At last, the door. He fumbled the lock with his gloved hands not removing the protective covering, Lina had fitted a steel door like a bank

vault after squatters had invaded while they were on a rare visit to their elder daughter Romina in London. He told her it was overkill but she insisted and as usual he eventually gave way to the female members of his family. But on a freezing night the metal could stick to the flesh of the unwary - hence the gloves stayed on losing precious seconds. Francesco fell inside enveloped in a flurry of snow, dog and clothing, he kicked the door shut behind him and sank to the ground sitting with his back to the door. His breath rasped as he sucked in the warmer indoor air and waited for his pulse to steady while Pippa the pointer sat licking her paws.

Had they seen him? No he was fairly sure they had not noticed him. But all the same, best to avoid lighting the fire, smoke might raise suspicions - did they know he lived up here? It was snowing and fortunately his tracks would soon be covered. Tomorrow he would go down to the town, make an excuse to stay with Laura, the grandchildren would like that, keep him out of the way for a few days and give him some time to process his thoughts. What should he do?

“Porco cielo! What have I seen? How can I keep that inside my head?”
Who could he turn to? *“Better to keep myself out of it. Non ho visto niente¹. When powerful men are involved in dirty dealings, they will always find a way to crush the likes of me.”*

Maybe he should get right away for a while. He had not been to London since Lina died. Romina had a nice house and he could stay as long as he liked without feeling he was in the way. Wistfully he reflected how he had missed his grandchildren growing up. Lucia had a place of her own now and was getting on in her career as a lawyer. ... But going to London might arouse suspicion. Would it look like he was running away? They might think he knew something.

Why had they come back? Or had they? Maybe it was just his tired old brain making the wrong connections. He couldn't think - waves of panic and fear spread over him making him feel physically sick. How long ago? Was it twenty years? Maybe longer - who knows, and who cares? Everyone else has forgotten those times now.

He closed his eyes and the scene from the past replayed like a video inside his closed lids. It was up by the monastery at the top of the mountain. He had walked the back trails up from the house exercising his young truffle hound - Pippa's great-grandmother was it? A black

¹ Non ho visto niente - I have seen nothing

Mercedes with thick snow tyres stood outside the chapel. He had thought it might be a visiting dignitary - perhaps the abbot or an archbishop from a neighbouring diocese. But then a dark figure enveloped in a big coat, had come out of the building carrying a long cylinder - what could it be? Perhaps a rolled painting going for restoration?

As he or she got into the back nodding to the driver to move on, Francesco caught a glimpse of another shadowy figure in the rear seat. But then the car moved upwards along a rough back-road. Why not go down to the valley? Did they know this was a dead end? Maybe strangers to the area they had mistaken the route. Francesco decided to walk down to meet them and put them on the right road. In this weather they could get stuck in a drift - snow tyres or no snow tyres.

The car sped away spraying snow to both sides like a passing snow plough and the reckless ascent put two bends between them and Francesco before he glimpsed the now stationary vehicle across a straight section. It had slewed to the side of the track against a juniper bush whose spiky branches had been shaken loose of their covering ice by the impact.

The snow seemed to muffle the subsequent action and slow the scene to half speed. A freeze frame in Francesco's head saw the same figure get out of the car and talk animatedly to his fellow passenger while the driver calmly walked round the car and shot him through the head with a silenced pistol. At first Francesco did not realise what he had seen. Suddenly the figure fell and a trail of red arced across the virgin snow.

Then what were they doing? Francesco could not quite make it out - The car engine idled for some minutes spewing out steam from the wide exhaust and obscuring his view.

Francesco threw himself down in the ditch as the car sped back towards him, diving into the snow for cover and landing on top of his complaining hound. As the car drew level - he glimpsed the passenger who for a split second turned his head towards him unawares. It was a face he knew

* * * * *

It was about a week later that another drama unfolded.

The media echoed with the story for weeks. *'Shares fall as mystery surrounds the disappearance of financier Van Stockert's wife.'* The local paper for a brief period lived up to its name 'Azione' 'Action' - which generally speaking there was little of in the area. Two foreign women disappearing in the Appenines in winter. What were they doing there anyway?

The Azione began by being very informative and precise. Reporting the exact road they had travelled, how they had run out of petrol and got out to walk. How they had been overcome by the cold and perished.

But was that the full story? Many had doubts. Had they been kidnapped by the Sardi who were known to use the area for their 'safe houses' and secret cellars to conceal rich victims until their families had been milked dry of funds. Yes - after all had it not been just the previous year that a kidnap attempt on the daughter of the local senator had been foiled at the last minute. The man destined to ingratiate himself with the children and then make a grab at the school gates had grown genuinely fond of the girl and refused to go through with it. His body was found shortly afterwards with the tell tale one bullet through the head - a warning execution. And had the town not whispered for months about the mystery observer at his funeral - the man who kept his hat on in the rain - a sign of disrespect at the grave side - or of 'Don' like importance.

If it had been a kidnapping - then it must have gone wrong. No ransom, no calls to the family, no packages containing pieces of ear, fingers or other identifying points to back up a later ransom, nothing. Lost without trace. Did not sound like the Sardi with their highly efficient system of sequestri.

Another theory was that they had gone for a drive in the country and decided to take a walk but got lost in the snow and died of exposure. This theory carried some weight with the papers but locals found it hard to believe that intelligent and apparently elegant 'city types' should on a whim decide to stroll in atrocious conditions without equipment or guide. And if they had gone for a drive - where was their car? When the snows began to melt a Fiat Ottocento was found half in a drift - headlines the following day *.. financiers's car found in snow!* But no .. it belonged to some French tourists who had broken down and abandoned their hire car.

When there is no information, people will fill the void with fantasy and gossip. Soon locals who had never heard of the women before began to

'know' all sorts of things about them - to the exasperation of the local carabinieri who were trying to piece together the facts. The world's media - hungry for information fanned the fires of fancy and waved bundles of lire at loose tongued farmers.

"Si certo .. of course we knew them. They would often come to the area .. the Signora she had a taste for our soppressato - you can't get that quality of Salame anywhere else ... you could see the woman had taste ... Did you know she was wearing Gucci shoes to walk in the country"

"Well you know ... " Anna tapped the side of her nose for effect "They say that poor woman was having trouble with her husband ... he was having an affair and that was why she spent so much time out here on her own. Perhaps she had an amante herself? Maybe you should be looking for him? Was this a crime of passion - maybe her lover killed her because she had decided to go home and give her husband another chance!"

"Ma Anna! Quanto sei cretina! Why do I have to have such a stupid wife. How could she have an amante when we all know she was gay. This 'travelling companion' they talk about - what do you think that means, hey? That's why her husband has an affair - that's why they were separating! Maybe she just ran off with her lover"

"Ma Stupido - non capisci niente! - you don't understand anything. Maybe her husband had her killed!"

"So in that case what happened to the other woman?"

"We'll maybe her body was chopped up and made into soap like happened to that woman in the war .. you know, the one who killed travellers and boiled the bodies to make soap, they called her 'la saponificatrice', the soap maker. ... Or maybe she was a wartime spy and she assumed a false identity and then she was found out and killed, or perhaps she got away and has taken up another false identity ... " She rambled on as her husband fumed.

"Si brava, tu sai tutto - you know it all don't you - and now she is travelling the world as an agent for the CIA. Are you sure she was not also involved maybe in the Kennedy assassination or perhaps the John Lennon murder conspiracy?"

And so they continued to argue in household after household, kitchen after kitchen, bar after bar.

Francesco heard the news but was careful not to join in the banter. He did not want to appear too knowledgeable in case this was something to do with his own experience. He followed the story in the 'Azione' carefully - surely there could not be two major dramas unfolding in the usually quiet area at the same time? But no, this was just a coincidence. he thought he had seen a man shot - possibly a woman - not two women. The Azione was clear about location, and his events took place on a different hillside way on the other side of town.

Anyway six weeks after the disappearance the focus moved North to Toscana after an apparent sighting in Firenze. This pleased the foreign press who are much more comfortable writing about Tuscany than Marche - It often seems that the British think that Italy ends at the Tuscan border and anything south of the Rubicon is not worth mentioning. Very inconvenient to have two of the rich and famous go missing in a less 'cultural' area.

* * * * *

He had avoided the area for months even though it was on his regular 'truffle hunting' route. He waited for some news, waited for someone to find traces of the events he had seen, for the authorities to find bodies, to report someone missing.

Nothing.

Later when the snows had long melted he stealthily approached the spot just after sunrise one morning, circling it first from a distance, illogically expecting a trap, and then spiralling his steps inwards across the rough terrain until he stood where the body had dropped. Still nothing! Could the body have been moved? Could the victim have survived and crawled away? Could the whole thing have just been in his imagination? Gradually he began to walk his old route again - and as the months and years passed the fear dissipated and he learned to forget.

* * * * *

Now echoes of the past returned to haunt him. It had started as a walk no different from the day before, or the week before, no forewarning or clue that today might bring a fresh threat. A bright crisp afternoon, the air warmed gently by the winter sun ... as he rounded the area of scrub above the monastery and headed into the thicket where the snow was lighter on the ground, he heard voices rising up from the hollow below. Anxious, urgent voices, carrying unusually far in the mountain atmosphere....

“Ma come si fa! How are we expected to do this. You can’t find anything in this snow.”

“Dai, continua. Hurry up and get on with it.”

“Roba da matti. Only a madman would do this. Why can’t we wait ‘til spring and see what we are doing. I don’t see why it needs doing anyway.”

“It’s not up to you to know why - it’s enough for you to know that you are told to do it. You can be too clever for your own good.”

“Capisciotto! Know all - You always think you are better than the rest of us don’t you Dante. Well I can tell you that I’m getting frostbite here and my balls are freezing off. For all their talk I just don’t think they are ever going to open up the road tunnel. After all we can’t even find the hole!”

“Forget the frostbite - talk like that will get your balls shot off, not frozen off. Stop complaining ... ssshhh ... Quiet, Andrea ... listen! ... I thought I heard something up in the trees.”

Francesco froze and prayed the dog would not bark. He hardly dared breathe while he waited for sounds to resume from below him.

Above and below - both waited for a tell tale sound from the other.

Andrea broke the silence *“Oh it’s just a weasel or maybe a fox. Come on let’s get back to town. We are never going to find anything now”*

Francesco waited a little longer and then started to make his way back to the house as fast as he dared travel without making too much noise. Had they seen him? He knew the pair, a couple of local heavies who were in to most of the dirt in the area - Andrea the pimp and Dante the dealer -

usually freelance small stuff - but also known to contract out to work the odd hit and to lean on someone who got in the way of their 'customers'. They were not exactly noted for their love of the countryside, unless it was to stitch someone up on a land deal, or for their love of outings in the snow, save securing the odd drug drop. What the hell were they doing here? Whatever it was they were not doing very well at it.

It was then that he saw the survey truck. It had stopped a little further down before a fork in the route where the road was wider. Was it 'Forestale' - Forestry Commission? No, didn't look quite like it. Maybe it was road services? Perhaps the rumours of making a new road tunnel were true.

Laura had taunted him about it some weeks before - "*See Babbo, they will be shaking you up in that mountain of yours. They are going to continue the new road to Rome and dig a tunnel right under you!*"

"*No, they've been saying that for years. Every new politician who comes in or who wants to be elected makes promises about new roads.*"

"*But look it's in the paper*" She jeeringly waved the local paper in front of his face.

"*Bah! They would say anything! You know why it's coming up again? Because there are elections next month - that's why. You mark my words - in a few weeks it will all be forgotten about again.*"

He did not believe it - it would be too expensive - even though it was true that Corelli, the new man standing as local senator did seem to genuinely want to help the town. After all he had made improvements with his own money to the high school and a new laboratory for the hospital. The incumbent Mondini, who had been in post for years and wanted to hang on another term despite advancing age, he was already seventy, was bitterly opposed to the plan. He pointed out that test drillings had been abandoned due to the poor quality of the soil. Yes, but that was nearly three decades ago.

Last year the town engineer Bertoni, had written an article praising the scheme and pointing out that with modern methods there was no reason why it should not go ahead and questioning the previous findings. The article did not further his career and he left abruptly for his home town of

Modena taking his wife and children and leaving an empty house and barking dog which was eventually taken in by neighbours.

The van sat idling for a while - were they waiting for the men above? Probably nothing to do with them. What would a survey team have to do with those two jokers? Two big men in black coats emerged carrying what looked like survey poles and one had binoculars round his neck.

Looks like they really are going to survey the route for the tunnel but surely it will be difficult to put their markers and look for reference points in the snow? Francesco decided to watch for a while and maybe if they did seem to be planning the road he would go down and ask them if it went through his land - best get news from the horses mouth.

They walked up towards the slope above. Andrea and Dante were still arguing on their way down but shut up as the two drew near them. They exchanged some hurried words which Francesco could not hear and then turned upwards together. One opened up a tripod at the side of the field and handed Andrea and Dante a survey pole each, motioning them out across the snow. The other spread a sheet of paper in front of him and yelled instructions, checking line of sight with his binoculars.

What are those two losers doing with a survey team? Maybe they just needed some extra pairs of hands. Now Francesco could hear. ...

“Si .. piu` di la. That’s right, this way, left a bit ... further over. Push that pole in and move to your left”. A triangulation of poles seemed to give them the desired layout. *“Ecco, dovrebbe essere proprio qui. It should be right here.”*

The two surveyors nodded and moved forward to check their findings. Their accomplices made to join them. *“No, stay there, ... we may need to check your positions.”* They disappeared momentarily behind a small stand of juniper bush and emerged looking smug.

Andrea’s whine *“Have you found it?”*

“Stay where you are while we check it out.” An order not a suggestion.

Fifteen minutes passed, half an hour passed. The two waiting figures twitched, scratched, beat their arms and shuffled on their cold feet but did not dare to move. There was something about that order...

Francesco could not allow himself the luxury of movement. What could they be doing behind a bush for half an hour? Could they have found the old test tunnel?

Emerging forms - "*You can come and take a look now*".

The two lowlifes lumbered forward and in turn disappeared behind the juniper. "*Here let me show you the way*". Uncharacteristically helpful.

The surveyor emerged seconds later and motioned to his companion to depart. They walked back towards the van. Where were the other two Neanderthals?

It was then that the dog spotted a squirrel. She barked but pointer-like she fortunately did not run. Merely pointing at the quarry for her master to hunt.

Francesco felt the binoculars scan him like a dermatome - the plastic surgeon's knife that slices off slivers of skin. He was well within the cover of the trees but the keen gaze penetrated the branches. Keep still, keep still, maybe he can't see me. Too dangerous to even attempt to drop to the ground. How to stop the dog moving - she would not 'point' for ever.

The binoculars lowered for a moment - just long enough for Francesco to fall on his face in the leaves and murmur 'morto' to the dog, the only trick she knew. Play dead - they both had to *play* dead or *be* dead. With leaf mould and snow chafing his face and perfumes of the mountainside - rosemary, juniper giving no pleasure to their nostrils, man and dog waited. Then an engine starting up. Relief. They could at last get out of there.

* * * * *

Back at the house, Francesco thanked God for his deliverance and thought about a cold meal. It was already dark but he did not start the

generator and instead made do with a candle. He had some prosciutto ham which he made himself and hung in his big chimney and there was a little bread left from the end of a loaf. A glass or two of 'Nastro Azzurro' beer and some leftover scraps for the dog saw them settled for the evening alone. He did not feel like going to bed and wrapped in a heavy blanket with Pippa at his side, he eventually succumbed to the alcohol and dozed off in his chair by the unlit hearth.

When he awoke Francesco had no idea what time it was. Pippa whined and looked at the door. A faint scraping at the lock. Not an animal. Someone was trying to pick it.

What to do? There was no phone to summon help. His hunting rifle was in the next room - no time to get it. There was no other way out of the main room and the windows on that side of the house looked out over a considerable drop being built on the slope of the hillside. Where to hide - they would soon be upon him, he had no doubt who they were and why they were there. Why had he fallen asleep and forgotten the security bolts in the steel door?

His gaze landed on the remains of his dinner and an idea seized upon him - the hams! Quickly he stepped into the chimney and reached up for an empty ham hook running on a thick iron bar within the chimney breast. He pulled himself up and hung - his feet wrapped round the bar and his arms holding tight to the hook base. Soot itched his nostrils but at least there was no fire! Nothing he could do about the dog - but hopefully they would leave her alone.

Crash! The old house shook as the door flung open.

"Old man. We want to talk to you."

Heavy footfalls throughout the house, barking, a squeal and yelping as a boot connected. *"Get that fucking dog out of here!"*

Pippa dived and ducked - a roar on the side of her head left her deaf and reeling.

"Cretino! Idiot ...Don't shoot the bloody thing, it's a waste of bullets. It's not going to squeal to the cops. Just get it out the goddamn way!"

The dazed dog felt herself lifted, her head jammed against the shutters as they were pushed open, then flung into a void, tearing through tree branches which cut into her flesh while breaking her fall - then the stunning impact. Freezing, cold hard snow.

Francesco kept his position, although he trembled within to think of his dog's fate. For days on end she was his only companion. He trembled again as he heard the house ransacked. What were they looking for? It could not just be him, they were looking in places too small to conceal a human being, drawers, chests, turning out the kitchen jars.

Finally a pause. It seemed they had exhausted their search. Now one of the heavies sat down in the hearth beneath him.

“He’s got to have it here somewhere. It must have been him. Old Guy walking around these hills all these years. Don’t tell me he didn’t find the hole. ... And then what else might he have seen.”

“Yeah. But you saw how those two stronzi² - shit heads - couldn’t find it. And they knew what they were looking for.”

“Are you sure they didn’t get there first and take it? They were walking away when we came up - maybe they just made out like they couldn’t find the tunnel for our benefit. Perhaps it was just a act and they had found it all the time - they must have gone up there to get a start on us and take what they could”.

“No, no, no! For fucks sake - You saw they were empty handed. We gave them a real good going over and they had no chance to hide anything up there. No way did they have anything on ’em when we left them up there. Shit man! - can’t have that happening twice!”

Francesco, from somewhere inside his head, looked on impotently as a bead of cold sweat formed itself into a globule hanging suspended from his forehead and then became a droplet falling through space,

... falling so slowly,

... falling in suspended animation

... falling to it’s fate.

And in falling sealing his...

² stronzi - shits

“Shit! What’s that? Raining in here?” As the droplet turned to a glistening pool on the back of his hand. He looked up. *“Well, what have we here? Here’s the old boy hanging in the chimney like a ham!”*

* * * * *

Part Two

It had taken two days for Pippa to make the painful journey to the town. Her body ached all over and she had to drag one of her back legs. She had been knocked unconscious by the fall, blood trickled from her mouth and her limbs were cramped by the cold.

Silvietta³ saw her first *“Mamma, mamma corri! Come quick, there’s a dead dog in the garden”*

Laura came to the door to see what all the fuss was about. Her daughter was prone to exaggerate. *“No it’s not dead, Cara, look it’s still breathing.”* Then the realisation. *“Dio mio! Look it’s Pippa! What can have happened? Why is she here? Quick, call your father! Luigi! Luigi! Signore mio, call the police, get the Vet. What’s happened to my father? Call an ambulance!”*

By now the whole neighbourhood was alerted, running for help, peering from windows. His wife in her panic forgot that Luigi *was* the local vet. He pushed his half eaten lunch aside and laid Pippa on the kitchen table.

“I’ll have to take her to the surgery, she needs some fluids fast. I’ll have to put up a drip and it looks like her leg is broken” He ran over to the car with the dog in his arms, laid her on the back seat and sped off shouting through the window *“Tell the police what’s happened. I’ll go up to your Dad’s place as soon as I get the dog settled”*

Forty minutes later Luigi returned to find a police car parked outside the house. Laura was sitting on the sofa in the front room crying with Silvietta on her lap. A policeman tried to calm her.

“Ma Signora, you don’t know that anything has happened to your father. The dog may have escaped or got lost and had an accident. I’m sure you

³ Silvietta - diminutive of Silvia

need not worry. We will send an officer up there to check on him and let him know the dog is on good hands”.

“I’ll go up too. The old man might be worried seeing the police arrive out of the blue”

“Luigi be careful, the road’s bad. Take your ski jacket and boots. You’ll have to walk the last bit”.

“I’ll be fine. I’m a big boy now ...I do know the way you know. You just calm things down here and get the children to eat something. They never finished their lunch”

The officer waited for Luigi to collect some belongings and pull on his boots. Luigi hugged his wife and whispered *“Dai, Coraggio⁴”* in her ear.

The officer echoed - *“Si, coraggio, Signora”* they walked out together *“We can both go in my car, then we can talk on the way”*.

As they moved off, Luigi turned to his companion. *“The dog will live, but it was in a bad way. Didn’t look like a traffic accident. I didn’t want my wife to hear and worry unduly, but I’m puzzled by the wound in the ear lobe. She has a nick in her ear and a long deep graze on her neck which looks very like a bullet wound.”*

* * * * *

Funerals are held quickly in Italy, usually within forty-eight hours of a death. In this case though, the police wanted to examine the body further and an autopsy was necessary. The delay gave Lucia enough time to tidy her affairs, pass her current court cases over to one of the other partners in the law firm and make arrangements to have some time off.

Her mother Romina had flown over immediately and was comforting her younger sister and helping with the funeral arrangements. There was a twelve year difference between them and Romina had been like a ‘little mother’ to Laura as they grew up. The middle sibling Antonio had moved temporarily to Bologna with his family to finish a research project in the biology department at the University. His kids were teenagers who had

⁴ Coraggio - have courage - bear up

been upset to move from their friends, but they were due to return in the autumn in time for the new school year - generally speaking, nobody moves away from the town for long.

Romina was the exception, marrying an Englishman and living so far away. Now she felt relieved that she was older and that she did not have to cope with small children of her own at a time like this. It was bad enough coping with her nieces and helping them understand what had happened. Ten year old Paula understood enough but little Silvietta, at only four years old, did not grasp the idea of death and kept asking when Nonno was coming back from visiting Jesus.

“I think Gesu` is being mean keeping him so long. I want him to take me to the park and buy an ice cream. I`m going to tell Don Virgilio that he should tell him to send Nonno⁵ back quick. I don`t want him to miss my birthday party. He said he would buy me a big present.”

Don Virgilio, a Franciscan friar, was getting on in years but he still taught at the local primary school where Silvia attended the nursery section. He had known the family for years and was supporting them in their grief.

There were no other relatives going from England - Lucia`s younger brother Mark was about to take his final exams at medical school and her father Paul had just had a hernia operation and was supposed to rest. It was decided that he would stay and look after the house. Romina would have liked him there but at least she would have her family around her.

Lucia booked an Alitalia bucket seat through an Italian company who started off selling cheap seats to ‘pilgrims’ going to see the Pope. They sold plenty of tickets , but it would not be hard to guess that only a small percentage of them ever had a Papal audience. She flew to Bologna, picked up a hire car and arrived at the little medioeval town of Mediano by late afternoon.

Although she loved her grandfather deeply, Lucia was uncomfortable with the trappings of funereal grief. The surviving members of her grandparents generation filed over to the house to pay their respects to the family and weep with the gathering relatives. After the first few days it became an added drain on her mother and aunt to have yet another rosary bearing well-wisher troop into the front room and wail laments to the

⁵ Nonno - granddad

Madonna while sobbing over the two sisters. Lucia seemed to be bringing endless cups of espresso coffee and reviving shots of Stock cognac for the visiting throngs - 'old crones' she called them, at the end of her tether.

"Don't be so nasty" Her mother scolded. "They mean well and you know it's tradition"

"Well enough's enough. Haven't they go homes to go to? And they are old crones - they remind me of old black vultures, dressed like that. Why can't we mourn Nonno in peace? And why on earth can't we get on with this funeral? You've been here a week and a half Ma. It never takes this long."

"Yes, I know. I would like to bury Babbo⁶ too but you know the police are still investigating. They say there is some problem with the death certificate. These things take time over here."

"Well I think it's ridiculous. We have been told nothing by anyone. Not even Zio⁷ Luigi makes any sense. The police are sitting on their fat behinds doing bugger all and I'm not waiting any longer!"

"Lucia, Lucia, have some respect! What are you planning to do"

"You'll see. I'll get something moving here if it takes a court order to get the body."

So saying she flounced out to her car.

It was true that the family had little information. When Luigi eventually came back in a police car it was night and Laura had the children in bed. He was white and shaking. All he could say was *"E` morto, e` morto, he's dead"*.

The police officers muttered the usual official pleasantries to Laura. *"We regret to inform you Signora, that your father has been found dead in his dwelling. Investigations are being carried out. You and your family will be kept informed."*

Laura was stunned. Shock set in, followed by screaming hysterical sobbing. The doctor had to be called to sedate her and stop her from

⁶ Babbo - daddy

⁷ Zio - uncle

running up the mountain in her night clothes. The police would tell her no more. She begged for details - but nothing would they divulge.

Luigi spent the night pacing the yard alone. He shed tears, wrung his hands, ran his fingers through his slightly receding hair and dived for the bathroom at intervals where his body was wracked by fits of vomiting and retching. He would not speak of what had happened at the house or what he had seen. In the following days he went about his work mechanically and speaking only when absolutely necessary. When Francesco was mentioned, Luigi left the room.

Now Lucia drove off towards the Questura⁸. She would have some answers. With a screech of tyres she pulled up directly outside the ancient Palace which housed the police headquarters ignoring the ‘no parking’ signs. An hour later she emerged fuming, paced to her car, tore off the parking ticket and shredded it in the breeze. Muttering obscenities unsuited to her background and position, she drove off, turning down a narrow alley.

The car bumped and juddered on the cobbled surface as she steered perilously through the winding ‘vicolo’⁹. Anyone wondering why Italians make small cars should try negotiating the streets of medioeval towns in anything larger than a Fiat Uno! Impossible! Lucia knew these streets and side alleys from childhood and now she just wanted the quickest route out of there. She would drive out to the country and try to get her head together.

A blare of horns, screech of brakes. Oh God. Now what! Some idiot coming the wrong way down the one-way street! The car wheels locked and slid forward the last critical feet. Lucia jolted forward and hit her head on the dash. Crunch! The front wing crumpled and a tinkling of glass as a lamp shattered.

“Stupido! Ma dove vai! Sei cieco! Where are you going, idiot - are you blind? Why do all you Italians have to drive on the wrong side of the road?”

The other driver emerged from his vehicle looking bemused. He was a smart if somewhat formally dressed individual in his late twenties or perhaps early thirties. At a different moment Lucia might have thought

⁸ Questura - police headquarters

⁹ vicolo - alley

him attractive with his athletic build, dark hair and blue eyes which now escaped her notice.

“Are you crazy? What are you smiling about?”

“But Signorina, it was you who was on the wrong side of the road. In fact you were going the wrong way down a one way street”

“Can’t you see you’ve wrecked my car!” Lucia looked down at the crippled vehicle and suddenly the frustration, exhaustion and pain of the last few days flooded over her. She sat down in the road and howled and cried.

“Signorina, Signorina. Don’t take it so hard. After all it’s only a car, you are not hurt at least”

Through sobs - *“ My head hurts”*

“Let me see.” He said, kneeling beside her. *“Perhaps a small bruise, nothing more I can see. Do you want to go to the hospital?”* She shook her head. *“You were not wearing your seat-belt. Do you know that is against the law?”*

“What is this?” she grew angry again through her tears *“Are you some kind of doctor or are you a lawyer? You seem to be very knowledgeable about the law - or are you just an annoying busybody”*

“In fact Signorina, I am a policeman. That is why I am concerned about your situation.”

“So where is your uniform?. Oh this is too much!” Floods of tears again.

“I am a plain clothes member of the Carabinieri. That is why I have no uniform at the moment. But, forgive me for saying so, you do seem unusually upset for a traffic violation. Perhaps we should go to the hospital to have you checked out. No? OK Then just calm down and we can talk about this. Perhaps we should go to my office?”

“NO. I’ve just come from there, they won’t let me have Nonno’s body! ...Does this mean I am being arrested?”

“No, no, no. Calma” By now a small crowd was gathering attracted by the noise. Two uniformed officers had appeared on the scene. With a

flash of his badge. *“Officers, we seem to have a problem here. Unfortunately this young lady and I have damaged our vehicles. Please arrange for the cars to be towed to the police garage for repair whilst I assist the Signorina”* The police nodded assent - adding an almost imperceptible wink to each other - whilst Lucia found herself gently led by the arm and walked slowly down the street.

She was steered to a table in the back of the nearby bar and gently pushed down into a seat. The cappuccino was half emptied before she spoke. *“The Bar Centrale. My father used to bring me here for ice cream when I was little. We would sit and drink and eat while my mother went to buy shoes and clothes when we came over from England. The shopping was so boring then and she always bought me sandals that were too tight and pinched my feet.”* He let her continue. *“Sorry. ... Lucia.”* she held out her hand to him. *“I’m not usually a hysteric. I’m really quite a calm logical person”*

He shook her outstretched hand *“Marcello. I don’t usually wreck young women’s cars!”* She allowed herself a weak smile. *“That is much better. Tell me about it if you can.”*

Two cappuccino’s later he had heard the whole story.

“I am sure that your grandfather’s body will be released for burial very soon. I will do what I can to hurry things along but I think that the post mortem has been completed.”

“Do you know what happened? How did he die?”

“Well, I know something but nobody knows the full story. I have just been assigned to the case and there is a lot of investigating to do yet. I can’t really tell you how he died, some of the details I am sure you would find too upsetting so it is better that you don’t ask - believe me”

“You can believe me too. Now I don’t want to be rude and I know you are trying to be helpful, but I am able to cope with death and hard facts, I am a lawyer, I deal with pretty nasty cases, rape, murder and mainly child abuse which I can tell you is not pretty.” She tapped her coffee spoon on the table to punctuate her sentences. *“Do not spare me the details in any misplaced attempt at chivalry - because it is the details I want and the details that I will find out. I am very resourceful, nosey and determined and you will not stop me getting the truth, so it will be much easier all round if you tell me frankly what is going on!”* The coffee spoon came

down hard for the last emphasis, accidentally left her fingers and bounced up into his face.

“Well, that was pretty clear” He brushed his face where the spoon had hit him.

“Sorry” She did not look it.

“Look I am not trying to deceive you, just protect you and your family and avoid speculation before we know the facts”.

“I can be as discreet as necessary. I am also no fool and I know that for my uncle not to speak of what happened and to react the way he has, this is no ordinary death.”

“E` vero¹⁰. No ordinary death. I can tell you Francesco was murdered. We do not yet know why. The house was ransacked but nothing seems to be missing so far as we can tell. Luigi helped us check the basics, but details we don't know, if there was any special object missing, documents or jewellery. Later maybe the family can check again, when we have cleared up a bit.”

“Was he shot? The dog seems to have been shot.”

“Yes he was shot, and ...” he hesitated.

“And what??”

“Well he was shot through both knees. But that was not what killed him.”

“Knee capped! That is what the IRA do to informers or when they are torturing people for information.”

“We can at least be fairly certain that the IRA had nothing to do with this - but it does seem that whoever did this was wanting some information. I am afraid that your grandfather did not die painlessly and in fact ... I don't know ... no I will tell you - you are bound to find out anyway. Do not tell your mother yet ... but ... Francesco was found hanging in the chimney - he had a meat hook driven through his neck just between the shoulder blades from the back. He was hung on it with a ham on each

¹⁰ E` vero - it's true

side of him. Must have amused them, looked like the three on Golgotha - sorry I should not have said that. I've said too much, you must be upset."

Lucia felt the room pitch and reel and fought back waves of nausea. Her anger rose like an inner fire quelling her grief. *"No, thank you. It is better to know the truth. I feel I can fight back when I know - otherwise there is that awful frustrating impotence."* She rose abruptly from the table. *"Excuse me, I must go up to the house. I want to see it for myself."*

"Please, Signorina"

"Lucia"

"Please Lucia, do not go while you are so upset. Wait."

"No I must go. You can't convince me to wait."

"Very well. If you really must go - at least let me go with you. Maybe your observations will be helpful even though you presumably have not seen the house for a while."

"Thank you. Yes it would be good to go up with someone. I must confess I was a bit nervous of walking up there alone."

"We can go in my car ... Oh no I forgot - it is in the garage being repaired after an accident." Lucia forced a smile. *"We can take a squad car. The road is passable now. We had to clear it with snow ploughs for the forensic teams."*

* * * * *

As she stepped out of the car and stood in the paved pathway before the open steel door, Lucia paused unsure of whether she really wanted to see the house wrecked by thieves. Did she really want to see the place where her grandfather was killed and his body defiled? Was it not better to remember him as he had been, tough, wiry, able to climb mountains and survive in the wilderness even into his seventies? But it was not the wilderness or the powers of nature which had overcome him. It was the evil and corruption of man.

Lucia wanted to know how and why; she wanted to get to the bottom of the story; and although she would not voice her desire to her civilized 'self' - Lucia wanted to get even.

"Show me where it happened." She asked. *"Did they break down the door? I thought it was almost impregnable"*

"It would have been if the bolts had been shot properly but your grandfather must have closed the door hurriedly and he only pulled it to. The lock was picked and then they got in fairly easily. Most of the damage is in the bedroom and the main living room".

The floors were covered in family pictures, linen, clothes, everything had been turned out. *"I'll come up again later and tidy up a bit before Mum sees it"*

As they entered, two forensic officers were dusting a chair for fingerprints and picking pieces of fibre from the cane seat. The older man, portly and in his fifties turned to them. *"We came back to check out fibres. There are some unusual hairs embedded in the cheek wound. At first I thought it was from the dog, but we've just typed her and there is no match. We checked our samples book and the nearest we came up with was 'wolf like'. No sightings of wolves up here for years and I don't think it was a full moon."*

His partner made a mock howl. *"Got your silver bullets?"*

Marcello threw him a silencing look. *"Colleghi¹¹, this is Signorina Lucia ..?"* He trailed off realising he did not know her full name. She filled in the blanks.

"Blackwell. My father is English."

"Ah, si. Signorina Blackwell is the deceased's grand-daughter"

"Scusate, Signorina, we meant no disrespect to the dead. Sometimes in this job we make tasteless jokes. It relieves the stress and helps distance ourselves from some of the horrors we deal with."

Lucia addressed fatty. *"Please, no need to apologise, I know the situation well, I am in a similar line of business and my father is a policeman. He*

¹¹ Colleghi - colleagues

has worked at Scotland Yard for many years. Perhaps you have heard of it”.

The portly man beamed *“Of course, who has not heard of Scotland yard. In fact I did a forensic course there some years ago and I still keep in touch with some of the scientific officers. It was very interesting indeed.”* He crossed the room to shake her hand. *“I am very sorry not to have met you in happier circumstances but I hope we can be of assistance to your family and sort this out as soon as possible. It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Fabrizio Pozzo”* He shook her hand warmly and vigorously. *“We have just about finished here. Just a few objects to look at in the hall and then we are off. You can feel free to touch or move anything you like in the other rooms there won’t be any more forensic investigation here now.”*

Lucia wandered through the rooms lost in thoughts and reminiscences. She could see through the disorder and violation to how it used to be, where things were, what she had seen, heard in each room, how she had played and talked with her grandparents, sat on Francesco’s knee as he told her stories.

The bedroom was in the worst state. It was here that most of her grandparents belongings were stored. Dressers and a big wardrobe full of clothes, now all over the floor. The trunk once full of photographs and papers upturned and it’s contents scattered. The bed linen torn and flung aside. The horse hair mattress shredded with sharp knives.

“Was he still using that? My God, that mattress must be an antique. Still they say that those old things were good for you - better than synthetic.” She knelt beside the trunk. *“Can you help me turn it back over. I want to put a few of these photos back inside before they are ruined by people walking on them”.*

They struggled to right the old trunk. It was a dark fabric covered material, with reinforced metal corners and tarnished metal fastenings. The sort travellers used to pack for ship journeys.

“My grandmother bought two of these when she was a young girl and wanted to emigrate to Argentina. A friend of hers was marrying an Italian out there who had sent her is photograph and arranged for a bride. In a moment of madness Nonna thought she might do the same -

they were advertising for Italian brides. But then Nonno Checco¹² came back from the war. ... I always called him that”, she explained, “I could not pronounce Francesco when I was little - Anyway he had been sent to Yugoslavia with his regiment and everything went to pieces, there was no proper retreat plan so he walked home, hundreds of miles up one side of the Adriatic coast and then down our side. Nonna Lina said he was like a skeleton when he arrived and his feet were in a really bad state. He took boots off a dead comrade’s feet but they had worn right through. She was his childhood sweetheart, and they got married as soon as he could stand and walk up the aisle. He was always a walker, always tough, my hero when I was little, I made him tell me that story of his walk over and over again. My mother’s got the second trunk at home. She used it when she came to England to get married”

Marcello let her talk. She needed to. He thought it would help her come to terms with what had happened .. and he might also pick up some useful snippet of information which might fall into the puzzle. Often important clues can emerge in seemingly casual conversations.

She leafed through a heap of discarded photographs, turning them the right way round and gently dusting them off as she piled them neatly back in the trunk.

“Oh look, my parent’s wedding photos, don’t they look funny? Dad with his suit and long hair and the bride’s maids with flowers in their hair ... must have been the hippy influence. You would not have had that here so much I don’t suppose. Mum told me that Dad wanted to get married in his Sergeant Pepper jacket ... do you remember those?” It was a rhetorical question, she did not wait for Marcello to reply. *“Anyway Mum wouldn’t let him - it would have been too much for the Italian side of the family! Of course he became more conventional when he went into the police force. ... Oh how sweet! Look my little brother at the seaside! Look at his little rolls of fat sticking out of the water - he could just walk then ... God he would hate to hear me talk like this!”*

It took nearly half an hour and a cascade of reminiscences to replace the photographs. Lucia went to close the lid. *“These trunks are always a pain to close. It’s the same with our one at home. Unless you get the lid just right, square on, it jams or you catch your fingers in it. Ouch! There I knew it”* She jumped back and sucked her finger.

¹² Pronounced keh-koh or like Gekko with a K

“You’re bleeding”

“It’s nothing. I’ll live. I caught my finger on something.”

“There’s a sharp bit sticking out on the inside of the lid. Let me see if I can bend it back into place. ... Look Lucia, part of the lining of the lid is loose. Looks there is a picture stuck under the corner. Let me get it out. ... Hey, wait a minute ... it’s not a photograph, there are some old newspaper cuttings glued into the lid. Do you mind if I cut the fabric to get them out without damaging them?”

“Go ahead. This could be interesting. What did Nonno want with newspaper articles - he was no great reader or follower of the news.”

Producing a pocket knife Marcello deftly slit the edge of the lining and revealed a wad of newsprint, yellowed with age. *“Let’s handle these carefully. They are very crumbly when they are so old and dry. I’ll spread them out on the floor for you to look at.”*

Lucia read the first headline - *“Corriere della Sera, Wednesday ... I can’t read the rest of the date .. it’s torn off .. just a minute I think I can just about make out 1975 on this second page. Usual political stuff. Some negotiations about taxes .. A priest in Milan accused of fraud ... tell me something new! ... bit at the bottom here .. ‘missing women sighted in Firenze ... Local militia call off search of Appenine countryside as financier’s wife seen in vicinity of Duomo.’ Well, I can’t see anything of interest to Nonno here.”*

“Look at the next one” Marcello urged, spreading out the front page of an old Azione. *“Anything ring any bells here? ‘Mondini stands for senate. Local mayor to become member of parliament’ ... ‘Restoration fund for Cathedral looking for benefactors’ ... ‘Paper mill lays off employees as electronic finance and increased use of credit cards decreases demand for paper money’. - I didn’t know ’til I was posted here that the paper for bank notes was made in the town, a place of hidden talents. ... Again a piece on those women... ‘Is there a kidnap gang working our valley? Fears for the survival of missing women rise as search parties return empty handed.’ ...”*

“Hey, Marcello, we may be onto something. There’s a magazine cutting from ‘Oggi’ here. It goes on about the disappearance. Speculation about missing women etc ... and there are some photographs ... ‘Signora Van Stockert pictured here at the Cannes film festival with her companion,

secretary ...' looks like they were trying to make something of it - were they gay? Must say this one does look very masculine" She pointed to a rather overweight figure dressed in black trousers and a shirt. The dark hair was cropped short in a male cut. Standing next to her was a statuesque blonde. *"I wonder which one is which? ... various people from show business ... and another one. 'The couple in happier times ... at the Milan show ... pictured here with friends from the fashion industry ... It is rumoured that Van Stockert has endowed a scholarship for young designers ... the philanthropic financier has an interest in fostering Italian talent and has set up a special trust fund ...' ... goes on a bit ... gets boring now."* She scanned the photographs again furrowing her brow.

"What's the problem?"

"Oh probably nothing. But there's something about that last photograph ... the fashion show ...there's a face I am sure I recognise from somewhere. It's difficult when you work with the public all the time, you see people in court, see them in the shops or on the street and you sometimes can't place where you saw them before. But I dare say it will come to me at some stage. I'll tell you if I remember anything" She shivered.

"You're cold. Let's leave this now and come back another time"

"Well I did want to look around a bit more .. but I am feeling as if my batteries are running low. Can you just show me where he was found. I can't leave without knowing that at least"

"Ok - but that's all and then you will come and have something to eat. I bet you have had nothing to eat today?"

She nodded assent and he led the way into the main room with the huge chimney. *"It was here"*. He motioned to her.

She stepped into the chimney. *"I used to hide in here when I was a kid. But he always found me because I could not reach to pull myself up like ..."* Her voice trailed off.

"That's enough. Come on now ... food."

* * * * *

They drove for about twenty minutes along the Rome road in the direction away from the town. Marcello reported into headquarters on the car radio as he drove and enquired whether there was any new information available. He also made sure that the release papers had been completed for Francesco's body.

When that was confirmed, Lucia rang her mother on her mobile phone. She had a vodaphone with International service. The funeral would be two days later on Saturday.

They pulled up outside a rustic looking tavern shaded by poplar trees. A small stream burred along one side of the forecourt. *"You'll like this. They have really good home made pasta and since today is Thursday they will have gnocchi¹³ on the menu. A treat not to be missed"*

"I love gnocchi and we sometimes make them at home but they are so difficult to make well in England the potatoes are not the right quality."

"Well these ones are just right. Come and see."

Feeling generally stuffed and hardly able to move from the table. They slowly sipped their espresso coffees and Lucia felt a little relaxed at last. *"Do you make a habit of taking your clients to lunch or am I an exception?"*

"If I said that you will always be an exception, or rather 'exceptional' you would think it was a chat up line wouldn't you? But no, I do not make a habit of this. However it is not every day that I have my car wrecked by a pretty woman who tells me off so nicely."

"Hysterically you mean. Thanks for helping out. I can imagine that if I had hit one of the other officers I could have ended up in jail. I've never seen the inside of an Italian jail, presumably it would not be much different from ours, but whenever I think of it I get a vision of Pinocchio and his father in prison"

"Oh you mean the bit when he won't eat the apple core and there is nothing left to eat? It's supposed to make children feel responsible and not be wasteful".

¹³ Potato dumplings. Pronounced nee-oh-kee

“My grandfather used to tell me so many stories. The classic fairy tales with bits mixed in of his own experience, like the war stuff ... then there were ones he made up but sometimes I discovered that they might be based on something which had really happened. I loved his stories, even if they did scare me sometimes.”

“So did he ever tell you a story connected with those cuttings?”

“What the missing women? No, I don’t recall anything like that. Lots of stories about the kidnappers. There was a lot of that going on when I was little. In fact Mum was scared of coming out with us one year because she thought that with a foreign car and all that, we might be mistaken for someone rich and my brother and I could be snatched.”

“It might be worthwhile for you to think over your grandfather’s stories in case there is something relevant which he told you which might tie up with his death.”

“I’ll give it a try. Can I see the body?”

The waiter arrived with the bill and he used the opportunity to ignore the question. *“Did you see the name of the restaurant ‘L’Aqua del Papa’? They say that one of the Popes once stopped to drink at the little stream outside so they called this spot the Pope’s water.”*

“You are very knowledgeable about the area, is your family local?”

“Oh no, my family are from the north, from Bolzano, but I have been here for two years and I try to learn about the area. As a Carabinieri I am not allowed to work near my home town. The idea is that it avoids corruption and local influences.”

“Let me get that.” She reached for the bill.

“No I invited you. You get very big portions but the bill’s very reasonable. There are not so many places left like that nowadays.” He sensed a frisson of disapproval as she gauged whether he was patronising her or seeking her approval. *“I know you English are independent - so you can pay next time OK?”*

So there was going to be a next time? She decided to let the remark pass and get back to the matter in hand. *“So are you going to let me see the body? ... Don’t think I didn’t notice you dodge the question.”*

“Senti¹⁴ Lucia, please understand, I’m not trying to deny you but it’s never nice seeing bodies ... and I told you that there has been some damage. Why upset yourself more than you have to? Remember him as he was when you last saw him.”

Lucia was insistent *“Look I know what you are saying and I appreciate your concern, but I do want to see him ... and before the undertaker makes him look pretty for the funeral.”*

“OK. If you insist, I won’t stop you. But we had better hurry and go now before the body is released from the morgue.”

* * * * *

Lucia steeled herself against what she was about to see. She decided to detach her emotions and think of the body as one of her cases. She had seen dead bodies and seen pictures of children killed in dreadful abuse cases. She would try to think of it that way. Nevertheless as the sheet was pulled aside she involuntarily shied away and had to force herself to look. Thank goodness her mother would not see him like this.

Breaking the oppressive silence Marcello explained. *“Some of the wounds were to make him talk - you see the bullet wounds through the knees as I told you before. Then there are signs here of the finger nails being pulled and two of his fingers on the right hand have been broken.”* He had decided also that the best tactic was to keep professionally factual.

The right hand did in fact look a swollen mess *“I suppose they think that someone will value their right hand more so they start on that one. Well at least you got them there, Nonno. He was left handed!. What’s that black stuff on his left hand?”*

“That must be soot from inside the chimney. You see it’s under his fingernails so he must have clawed at the wall as they pulled him out of his hiding place.”

¹⁴ Senti - listen

“There’s none under the right hand - wouldn’t he have reached with both?”

“Yes, you’re right.” He paused to think “ ... He must have touched the chimney when he was being put back there then, after his right hand had been damaged”

She shivered involuntarily “Christ that means he was conscious when they did that.”

“Conscious at some point during the time he was in the chimney, but I am sure that he would have passed out several times during the ordeal.”

“Look at his poor face. How will the undertaker fix that?”

“They do have all sorts of tricks for making them look good - you would be surprised what they can do. But you may have to have a closed casket.” He paused to let her think about it. “... Now remember also that we have some incisions here caused by the post mortem. So although there were contusions on the head caused by blows, possibly being struck by the butt of a gun or some other blunt object, the scalp has also been reflected back during the craniotomy and that wound has also been sutured back up. ... There are some diagonal scrapes across the right cheek. That was probably caused by being back handed across the face from right to left ...”

She interrupted. “So by a right handed person from above ... could have been taller than him but more likely he was sitting or had fallen beneath him. ...”

“Yes, very good. Of course being right handed is unhelpful. If he was left handed like Francesco it would have given a slight lead. However, this is the wound that Fabrizio found the hairs in - so maybe he was wearing a glove or perhaps his cuff scored the wound as his hand swept across. Or of course the fibres could have ground in from somewhere else. One reason why I do not think he wore a glove was that you see there is a slightly deeper cut in the middle of the area? That could have been caused by a ring or some other irregularity which would have been covered by the glove.”

“So you must have a lot of fingerprints?”

“ That’s the odd bit really - there are not as many as we thought. Some smudged, a mixture of stuff which could be family or visitors that have to be excluded, lots of Francesco’s but no others on the meat hook or the bar inside the chimney. And I can’t imagine a lot of fumbling taking gloves on and off ... strange.”

“In that case maybe the gloves had studs on them, you know like biker’s gloves.”

“Well I wondered about that but we don’t get many bikers around here, especially in the snow. ... Now there are another group of wounds which were inflicted more as a warning to others rather than as torture. Often these types of wounds are inflicted after the death of the victim and they may have thought your grandfather was dead or may not have cared anyway. The manner of leaving the body hanging on the hook ... ” He avoided use of the name Francesco referring to him as ‘the body’ to keep an emotional distancing for Lucia. *“Also we have some ritualised cuts on the trunk...”*

The torso was still partially covered by the sheet and Lucia leaned to pull it off. She glared at him determinedly as he made to stop her and he thought better of it, allowing her to see the wounds.

“Bastards! Look they’ve carved letters on his chest. What’s this? Looks like 666 - isn’t that the Devil’s number?”

“ Yes. It’s supposed to be the Devil’s mark, isn’t it - but in this case it’s done to frighten people. They are not into black magic or anything like that I am sure.”

“Strange how people are compelled to leave their mark. It’s like with some abused children who have a lot of cigarette burns or bite marks. There is a sort of ritualised marking and scarring. It’s not just inflicting pain. So premeditated - it’s frightening”

“True, ... well with children it seems even worse. ... From time to time we see signs of various types of marks on a number of bodies over the years. Maybe to start with it is intended to scare people away from investigating and perhaps falling foul of a cult - and then some hit men decide to use it as a way of bragging how clever they are evading the law. Of course they also are leaving us a signature and one day we will be able to clean up on a whole lot of linked crimes.”

“What sort of crimes?”

“Oh mainly petty stuff. But every so often there is a body - someone perhaps who offended the wrong person or may have got the wrong side of a protection business. Very difficult to link to anything specific. Those whom the warning is directed towards will know what is meant but they keep silence, are afraid to squeal to us. We can't act on rumours, but you know what things are like out here and how politics or big money can be tied up with dirty dealings. One day we will get to the bottom of it - it's just a matter of time. ... This mark though, I have not personally seen before and I went through all the records for the last five years and came up with nothing similar.”

The morgue was getting oppressive and the undertaker had arrived and was anxious to get on with things. A tall slender ‘Uriah Heep’ type, he entered the room with eyes downcast and wrung his hands lightly as he spoke.

“Scusi signore ..” he addressed Marcello. *“Excuse me sir, may I remove the body now?”* He gasped as he raised his eyes and saw the torso.

“Yes, we have finished here. - Is something wrong?” Marcello noticed the reaction but Uriah declined to say anything. Shaking his head as he went about his business.

Once outside in the fresh air Lucia took her leave and agreed to speak to Marcello later. Declining a lift, she walked the short distance to her aunt's home glad of the time to think things through. She had a lot to process, a lot to work out in her mind, but she was resolute and her resolve made her stronger.

* * * * *

The next two days were taken up in a maelstrom of visiting family, funeral arrangements, funeral Mass, tidying up the family vault for the burial and then finally the burial itself. The relatives had been disappointed that in the end it was a closed casket affair. The body was brought to the house the night before and placed in the front room for those who wanted to pay their respects but they had managed to find a nice photograph of Francesco to place at the head of the coffin so that

visitors could remember him as he had been. It was not quite adequate but a necessary substitute.

They decided to use the same photograph for the inscription in the vault. He was buried alongside his wife, his mother and father and one of his brothers. The inscriptions all bore cameo faces of the dead which may at first seem morbid, but at least allows a sense of continuity. They can always be 'visited'.

Marcello and some of his colleagues watched the funeral from a discreet distance. They wanted to see who, apart from family might show an interest in the death.

No more leads as yet. Lucia found it frustratingly slow. She had intended to fly home right after the funeral but certain details bugged her and she felt she needed to look around and find some answers.

It was on the way back from paying the florist that she caught sight of Uriah walking in front of her. She quickened her pace to catch up with him but he seemed to sense it and speeded up too. *"Hey! Just a moment, wait. Can I talk to you?"* They were level now. *"Please. Spare me a second. I am trying to understand how things work out here, can we have a few words?"* He looked at her somewhat pityingly. *"Look, I know you saw something, that afternoon in the morgue. What was it? Please tell me."* Feeling a stone wall she continued to plead *"... Look I really need to know. I'll be leaving in a couple of days and I'll be far away from here. You may never see me again so please don't be nervous of telling me anything."*

"Signorina, you are mistaken, there was nothing special, it was not a pretty sight, that is all."

"Nonsense, you are an undertaker, you must see 'not pretty sights' all the time. What upset you and made you gasp?"

"Some things it is better not to speak about. I have seen men's tongue's cut out for speaking out of turn"

"Yes, but who is going to cut your tongue out? If it's that serious shouldn't you be telling the police?"

“I did not mean my tongue. But one should be careful - there are people who might not like me to speak to you”.

“Well I suppose that if you told me what you know, I could keep quiet about my sources - but on the other hand if I were to go around town saying what an interesting conversation we had, then some people might get very twitchy. And I wonder if they would ever know that we had not spoken, wouldn't they prefer to believe that we had?”

“Shush. Signorina, not so loud” Anxiety rose in his eyes. *“Let us go into the church”* They were passing the door of the cathedral and he ducked quickly into the cold dimly lit interior. They chose a side chapel and knelt at the front near the shrine. *“I was probably mistaken. But it was the mark on your grandfather's chest. I may have seen it before.”*

“Where?”

“Well It may not have been exactly the same, so don't hold me to it.” He breathed deeply as if about to ‘dive in’ *“It was about six or seven years ago. I was in Ancona doing an advanced course in embalming at the college there and we had a body brought in. It was an unidentified man who had fallen off the cliff above Porto Nuovo. He was pretty badly smashed up and we could not use the body for the demonstrations but he had those same marks on the chest. The police thought it was some satanic cult who had pushed him off the cliff in one of their ceremonies. But I didn't think they did that sort of thing ... I mean I never heard of that kind of occult killing. ...It's not that I'm into that side of things you understand, but I like to read up about unusual deaths and that sort of thing as background to the job.”*

She thought that he ‘doth protest too much’ and began to wonder what he might get up to with some of the bodies on lonely nights ... she shuddered mentally and wrenched herself away from that line of thought.

“Did they ever find out who he was?”

“The body was never properly identified, it was smashed from the fall, and then crabs had been feasting on it for a couple of days before it was found by some children fishing for mussels under the rocks. They say that the fingers were cut off to avoid printing and there were no teeth. There was some talk of it being a politician who committed suicide - the guy went missing about that time, but it's a strange way to commit suicide if you ask me. Do you remember Tosti? Liberal guy. He stood against

Mondini in one of the elections and then some scandal came out about him using rent boys. He denied it of course but it ruined him and his marriage. It was soon after that he went missing.”

“Have there been any others like that?”

“No.”

Was that too emphatic? Too quick a response? *“Are you sure? Nothing similar?”*

“There are sometimes bodies with cuts or marks - but not the same pattern.”

She pushed the point. *“But something similar?”*

“When I was looking into such things, for my professional satisfaction you understand, I did come across some other mutilations and marks. But I cannot recall the details. Anyone who wants to research that can look in the newspaper archives. It is best to avoid the war period, too confusing and incomplete, but the years after that are quite interesting” Sensing that she was about to speak he added *“No. I cannot say any more. ... I have already said far too much. Do not leave with me.”* And so saying he rose abruptly and left.

She waited a few minutes and took advantage of the time to light a candle for her grandfather. She then went out of the side door into an alley which would take her back to the square.

* * * * *

The newspaper archives were housed in the old town museum. This had been the jail in Medioeval times and was built like a fortress it resembled the famous palace in Firenze and was from the same period. The Malfatti family, cousins of the Borgia lived there at one stage and evidence of their cruel despotism were still visible. The museum housed torture equipment and the underground cells, now used for storage, included an oubliette where bones of the forgotten had laid for centuries.

As she reached door she saw the notice ‘Chiuso per ferie’ - closed for the holidays. Which holidays? It was too early for Easter and Christmas was long gone. She enquired at the shop next door. *“Oh no, Gino just forgot to take the notice down after the New Year holiday. He’s just gone for a slice of Pizza. Be back in a few minutes. Take a seat while you wait.”* Lucia declined, deciding instead to have some Pizza herself. She ate it walking back and met Gino as he was opening the door.

He animatedly ushered her in *“Nobody has looked at the archives for months. Everything is in here.”* He motioned to rows of dusty shelves. *“They are in date order and by publication. Daily papers on the left and periodicals on the right. Anything older than five years is microfiched and the viewer is in the booth in the corner. I’m afraid that I have not finished cataloguing everything but if you can’t find something just ask me. I’ll be in the next room”*

She decided to start with the microfiched local papers and go back to the post war period moving forward to the present day. She would cover the town’s own local ‘Azione’ and also the regional paper ‘Stella delle Marche’. Some of the stuff was routine, boring non news about weddings, first communions, local fetes and school events, but she also found much that was fascinating about the town where her mother grew up, tales and gossip she had vaguely heard as a child and she found herself continually side tracked.

Eventually she decided she had to be strict with herself, stick to the subject. Only read what is absolutely relevant, or this could take days. Just stick to bodies and murders. She had reached the mid fifties. 1953 Reference to Queen being crowned in England linked to bit about the Italian Royal family in exile ... no diverting again. 1954 .. Here, a body *‘... bodies found in disused well ... been there several years ... victims of war crimes ..’* no that’s not it. ... another story ... *‘Search for bodies continues ...Industrialist killed in freak accident. Giancarlo Mondini, founder of the Mercurio factory chain was killed instantly today when his light plane exploded in the sky over Parma. A search of the area is being conducted to find the bodies of Mondini and his co-pilot. Wreckage is being examined to determine the cause of the tragedy. Mondini leaves a widow Marta and two children Irene¹⁵ fifteen years and Carlo twenty five. Readers will recall we recently reported the society wedding of Carlo, heir to the family fortunes to international model Veronica.’*

¹⁵ pronounced ee-rey-neh

Well not quite relevant although interesting background reading. And also interesting in that she found she knew the details from Nonno's stories. He had changed the names but this was certainly one of his tales. The one about the wicked wizard who tried to escape with the crown jewels and the ravens flew at his plane making it spin and crash to the ground. She recalled her conversation with Marcello. How many more of his stories were based on facts she wondered?

Let's think. What was another story about bodies? ... The witches who covered their bodies with oil and turned into cats. He liked stories about witches and black magic. ... The witches killed by hail storms as they tried to escape on their broomsticks. ... The witch who was killed in the cemetery in Ancona, tied to the gravestone of her victim, she was shrivelled by the rising sun. ... Lets see if there's anything about them.

Scanning through the following year. *'Butcher bleeds to death in tragic accident as electric ham slicer amputates hand ...'* No .. nothing ... on to '56 ... *'... Double tragedy hits family as mother's body found in cemetery'*. Sounds promising *'... The mutilated body of Ved.¹⁶ Marta Mondini was found early this morning by a young boy picking blackberries in the now disused Jewish cemetery area of Ancona. The boy, who was shocked by his discovery was able to tell our reporter that Ved. Mondini was tied to an upright gravestone and her arms spread-eagled to reveal her naked chest. We understand that there were mutilating marks on the torso. Police sources are unable to give any information and say that the young lad has a vivid imagination fuelled by his experience and is currently regarded as an unreliable witness. This is the second tragedy to strike Carlo Mondini and his family who only two years ago*' The witch story! A cover up! Rich pickings. Perhaps Marcello can find out the missing bits.

Lucia decided to check up on the Porto Nuovo 'suicide'. Several references to it and the accompanying scandal - nothing new - and interestingly nothing on the mutilation or the difficulty identifying the body. Who had the clout to keep all this from the public? And who would benefit from it?

"Signorina, ... scusi, but I am closing now, my wife is waiting for me to take her to the dentist ..."

¹⁶ Ved. Short for Vedova - The manner of address for a widow - as opposed to Signora for a married woman.

“Oh sorry, I had lost track of the time. Can I just quickly take a copy of these couple of articles ... I will be very quick.” She hurriedly worked the machinery producing some poor quality but readable copies while Gino fiddled with his keys and tapped his watch. Once outside she was on her cell phone to the Questura.

* * * * *

Marcello was stunned. They met at a small bar in the ‘Giardini’ the small park. It was early evening and most of the town were preoccupied in their ‘passeggio’ walking up and down the main street in their best outfits. The pair were generally ignored.

“How did you find all this out? Don’t you realise it’s dangerous to dig around in things you don’t understand? No Sorry, that sounds patronising and I don’t mean to be. It’s just that I’m concerned for you. Neither of us know what we are dealing with here and we do have to proceed carefully.”

“So leave it to the pros eh? I do have a lot at stake here. It’s my grandfather who is dead. I’m afraid I’m just naturally nose-y too and I’ve always been a bit of an amateur detective - my brother often calls me Miss Marple - you know the Agatha Christie detective - Poirot’s female counterpart.”

“Well you have done very well I must say. Remembering the stories seems to have been a bit of a break though. But I am still puzzled at how these bits of information tie up, and why they should. After you rang me I did a bit of digging myself and it seems that the records of the Mondini woman and the jumper are sealed. They should be in the Ancona office and I’ll go down there tomorrow.” Anticipating the question. *“No, you can’t come. You want to be careful of appearing over involved. Might make sources clam up if they think we are onto something”*

“I’m going to have to go back to London for a few days at the end of the week, probably fly back home on Wednesday. I have a court case that can’t be done by my partner, I am too involved with the family - it’s a care case and the mother is trying to get her child back from the local authority. It’s a new baby and I dealt with the family when she had her older child taken away a couple of years ago. It was more or less my first case after I qualified and looking back I think I got a bit over involved.”

The mother was on drugs and I helped her get clean and she has been an NA¹⁷ member for some time. She really wants me there.

I thought I would tidy up a few things and then come back next weekend. Mum needs some help with the house. We have to clear it up and decide what to do with it. Her sister is pressing her to sell it, mainly because of bad memories, but personally I think we should hang onto it. I want to see what other properties sell for round here. Then if necessary we could buy out the rest of the family share and keep the house ourselves.”

They sat and talked until dinner time and then Lucia had to return for a farewell meal with Zio Antonio who was going back to Bologna the following day. “*Ring me when you get back from Ancona*”.

Later that evening she rang him again. “*I’m getting a lift to Bologna tomorrow and I can get a seat on the plane the following day so I’m going to leave with Antonio around lunch time and I’ll stay the night at their place. It will save me having to get the train - shame the hire car had to go back!. I’ll be back in just over a week. Ciao*”

“*Ciao, be careful. At least I know you’ll keep out of trouble over there. Buon viaggio!*”

As she put the phone down she realised how useful it would be to have Nonno’s newspaper cuttings and some photographs with her in London to mull over and perhaps get some more ideas.

She rang back the following morning and got the answer phone. Must have left early for Ancona. She left a message “*Hi. Thought I would just run up to the house to get a few things. I’m taking the cuttings to London. Don’t think they’ve been stolen. See you soon.*”

* * * * *

Antonio had told her to be ready by noon so there was plenty of time. She slipped out of the house early telling Laura she was borrowing her car for a few minutes. Best not to explain where she was going, she did not really want company, just wanted to be quick and get what she needed.

¹⁷ Narcotics Anonymous

The road was not too bad having been cleared by the police and the snow had started to melt anyway. The weather had been getting warmer throughout the past week. She parked the car just outside and struggled for a moment with the door. She had her mother's set of keys which having been kept mainly in England had been less used than the others. They were a bit stiff but she eventually managed to turn the lock and stepped inside.

So he had not shot the bolts, she thought. Probably being paranoid but she would double lock it and shoot the two dead bolts top and bottom. She had just completed the task when she realised her bag was in the car. Never mind, didn't really need it right now. She could not be bothered to open everything up again.

She walked into the main room. Something compelled her to enter the chimney. She stood inside the gaping hole and looked up past the soot and the hanging bars. You could just see sky at one point - the rest obscured by the bend in the flue. She always thought of Hampton Court when she played here as a child and imagined Henry the Eighth sitting there munching on a roast leg of boar.

Now she stood with her back to the rear wall looking out as her grandfather must have done in his last moments. She lifted her left hand. Ran her fingers over the soot and imagined what he was reaching for with his remaining good hand. Was he just clawing at the wall, reaching out for help, trying to cling to life?

The large grate sat beside her with a few shreds of paper laid in it ready for lighting a fire.

"OK Nonno, just one last time".

She had loved making fires with her grandfather - once they made such a big bonfire in the garden that the fire brigade had come up thinking there was a forest fire. She struck a match and threw it on the rolled up paper and flames licked up lighting the darkness of the chimney piece.

It was then she noticed it. A faint indentation in the soot, the edges brought into relief by the firelight. On closer examination it looked like a letter drawn in the carbon. She ran to fetch the torch. Where was it? It was always in the drawer of the big dining table - but now everything was scattered on the floor. She rummaged around and finally her fingers

closed on the black rubber handle. The batteries were low but a weak light shone into the chimney.

Yes, it was a letter .. M and then a smudge could be an I or an O depending on how thick the letter was supposed to be Then what .. another M ? no maybe an N then a possible O or was it a D then an I or a 1. What was that? She wrote it on a piece of paper. M I/O M/N O/D I/1. Mimdi? Momo1? Mondi? Did he mean world - mondo? Or maybe the word was incomplete - perhaps he passed out before finishing? She thought for a while. No .. surely not ... could it be Mondini? She sat down in the hearth trying to assimilate the enormity of the idea. Maybe there were some things it was better not to know.

Lucia shuddered as if subconsciously shaking off the notion of the local member of parliament being involved in her grandfather's murder. She wrenched herself away from the chimney-piece and made her way to the bedroom. Kneeling before the trunk she picked out a dozen or more photographs and gently folded the newspaper articles. She wrapped the bundle in a pillowcase which was amongst the linen strewn on the floor, not having a bag available.

It was then that she realised that there had been a droning noise in the background. Quiet at first it scarcely came into consciousness, but then it grew louder and she recognised the sound of a car engine. Was Marcello coming up here after all? No he must be in Ancona. Who else would come up now? A shiver of fear ran through her as she realised the visitors may not be benign.

Thank goodness she had bolted the door. She had an awful foreboding - is this what Nonno felt like as he heard them coming for him? But no, it could not be the same people. They had plenty of time to gut the house looking for whatever they wanted and they certainly would have no business with her. Probably this would prove to be nothing, but just in case, she would lay low.

Now the engine stopped and car doors slammed. Voices, but not distinguishable. Then a sound at the door. First a knock. Polite visitors? She would not risk finding out.

“Signorina!”

They knew she was there. How did they know it was her? This was her aunt's car. Had they watched her go up?

“Signorina, per cortesia. Please, we would like to talk to you.”

I'll bet they would, she thought. Surely any decent person would speak to me down in the town. Why follow me up a difficult isolated road if they had honourable intentions?

A pause. And then a rasping at the lock. After some working the lock was picked and gave way. Lucia watched in horror as the handle turned. She stood in the hallway a few feet from the door. How easily they had broken Francesco's defences. But then the bolts held. The four metal deadbolts drove deep into the metal frame of the door and when set the door was as solid as a bank vault. She was safe.

Now they tried the windows. Lucia knew that the only window at ground level, the one to the hallway was similarly equipped with a steel shutter and the higher ones were not only unreachable without a ladder, but also had bolted wooden shutters and glass inner windows. Nonna Lina did not believe in half measures. The only open glass was on the other side of the house, where poor Pippa was thrown out over the precipice.

Lucia decided to wait it out until they went away. She felt secure that the house was near enough impregnable. Some yelling and arguing outside. Then a scraping on the roof. What were they doing up there? A crash and a scraping noise as pieces of plaster and earthenware cascaded down on the other side of the room. Oh my God! They're coming through the roof!

Lucia cast her eyes around for a way out - none. A hiding place - where? Think! Think! She urged herself. Think where you used to hide. Where was the best hide and seek place?. Where did her brother never find her?

Yes! - the old forno¹⁸. The house was equipped with an old fashioned oven which was a stone compartment built high into the wall to the right of the front door. Beneath it was a disused fireplace which would have housed the fire to heat the oven and make the farm workers daily bread and cook pasta al forno and roast meats on Sundays. The forno had long ago been converted into a housing for the water tank when Lucia's father had helped Francesco to bring running water into the house. The tank

¹⁸ forno - oven

filled with a pipe from the spring just up the valley. There was just enough room around the tank for some storage - or for a hiding place.

Lucia stuffed her pillow case under her pullover and gingerly climbed up to the trapdoor leading to the forno. She balanced first on the top of the upright piano which stood unused since she had stopped having piano lessons in her holidays at the house. From there it was hard, but by slipping one hand into a crack beneath a ceiling beam she could pull herself up just far enough to reach and open the trapdoor. She could then swing one foot up onto the rim and catapult herself inwards. This move was a mistake. She had not been into the hole for years and neither had anyone else. She found herself face down in spiders webs, squirrel shit and all manner of delights. As she moved her hand she stifled a scream as a small black scorpion scuttled away. They were common in the old houses and were not really dangerous but nevertheless could sting.

Once inside she turned to the opening, dusted the outer rim so that there would not be any hanging debris to attract attention and she closed the hatch. She then moved away from the opening realising that if caught there, she would be a sitting target. She inched her way to the back of the water tank and tried to get up into the space above it. It was a narrow dark area, quite invisible from beneath. As she heaved herself up she closed her mind to the livestock which might inhabit the space. God, it was a tight fit. She had been quite a bit smaller when she last hid there. Her upper body squeezed in, but her hips stuck. Breathe in, no use. Relax, ... heave. Then she flattened her pelvis against the boards as much as she could, ... heave, pulled hard with her arms and yes! At last she was there. Stuck fast and unable to move. But moving was not something which she cared to do at that moment.

A crash heralded the entrance into the house and for the second time unwelcome visitors rampaged through the dwelling. Lucia could only hear snatches of their conversation. Two voices, or was it three? Now they were in the hall and she could hear better. No two voices definitely.

“Perhaps she isn’t here after all.”

“... Maybe she left the car and went for a walk”

“Don’t be stupid - where would she go?”

“Well she might have heard us coming and run off up the hill”

“But then the bolts would not be on, they only work from the inside. Hey what’s that noise?”

“Sounds like a phone, but they don’t have one here”

“It’s coming from outside. Get that bloody door open will you.” She heard the bolts being released and the heavy door swing open.

“It’s in the car. Stopped now. Must have been a mobile. Hey, there it goes again - see who is ringing the little madam”.

He must have picked up the phone *“Pronto”*¹⁹. *No this is the wrong number.”*

“You idiot, you should not have said anything, they might recognise your voice.”

“Don’t call me an idiot. You’re the one who nearly screwed things up with your art work last time. Don’t worry , it was the message service. A recorded voice said ‘Lucia, this is Antonio, you are late. Let me know where you are’ ... I wish we knew where you are, Lucia”

A scream *“WHERE ARE YOU, LUCIA?!”*

* * * * *

As Lucia hung on in her hiding place, her family grew increasingly worried. Antonio did not know whether to leave without her but he was working the following day and did not want to leave things too late. She was not responding to her mobile but sometimes the mountains shielded the signal.

Romina suggested ringing Marcello in case she was with him. She had noticed her daughter spending rather a lot of time with the Carabinieri. His answer phone cut in and Antonio left a message *“If Lucia is with you can you ask her to ring please. We have not seen her since early morning and I need to leave for Bologna. I will wait until four o’clock but then I must go without her.”*

¹⁹ Pronto - ‘ready’ - usual response on answering telephone

Marcello arrived back from Ancona at three. He was tired from the drive and took a shower before checking his messages. He shook his head and sniggered to himself as he heard Lucia's first - 'Typical' he thought 'Unable to leave things alone'.

The second message set his heart racing. He dressed, called the family to check the situation and then rang for two squad cars to go up to the house, all this more or less simultaneously. He then leaped into his car and raced the country roads with headlamps on full beam to alert other drivers. His car had no siren.

Lucia waited. The thugs waited. Then more activity as they thought of looking in new places. The noises got closer again.

"Hey maybe she's in the chimney too - but higher up"

"We looked there. It's not possible."

"Maybe she's in the f'ing piano" kicking and sound of strings being abused. *"Nah not enough room"*.

"Hey look there's a hatch up there. Maybe there's a loft space"

"She'd never get up there - but take a look."

"It's too high. I'm not good on heights"

"Ok, I'll do it - Get me a ladder" There was a step ladder in the bathroom. *"Shit! ... it's dusty in here"* Lucia held her breath as she heard him open the hatch and thrust his hand into the opening. *"Can't see anything"*

"Get up inside and take a proper look"

"Give us a chance ..." He sniffed a couple of times and went to wipe his nose on his cuff. Bad cold ... or maybe a coke - head thought Lucia.

Now screams. *"... Christ! Get it out! A sodding scorpion just shot up my sleeve. Get it out!"* He shook his cuff wildly and Lucia thought he must see her or dislodge her supporting platform in his wild movements.

“Fuck! Help me” He yelled as he lost his balance and crashed heavily back into the room.

They moved to the bathroom to bathe the fallen thug’s wounds and Lucia breathed again. Then relative quiet. Were they waiting? They seemed to be sitting in the main room biding their time, probably waiting for her to move or trying to make her think they had gone.

Had they gone? Seconds, minutes passed. Lucia could hear her heart thumping so loudly that she was sure they could hear it too. She decided to try to count the minutes by her pulse. She would probably have about sixty beats to the minute normally but with the anxiety and fear it had probably risen to nearer eighty or more. She counted and counted .. God this seemed like hours. How long would they wait.? Her legs cramped and ached and then started to go numb from lack of movement. What were they doing?

At last a sound. *“Maybe she jumped out of the window”* she heard one of them moving in the direction of the door. *“Hey listen! There’s a car coming. Let’s get out of here”* There followed sounds of cars throttling and panning into the distance. Then more car sounds approaching.

Sirens. Noise. Then a familiar voice.

“Oh God Lucia! Where is she. LUCIA! Where are you”

She could not move immediately. She was stiff and her limbs seemed to have swelled in the tight space. She managed a cry. *“Here. Aiuto!²⁰”* then *“Help! Marcello!”*

Officers brought the ladder and Marcello gently eased her out of her hole. A bright coin on the sill of the trapdoor caught her attention. As she picked it up she noticed it was not a coin but a button.

“Look. This fell off his cuff while he was shaking the scorpion out. Could it be a clue?”

“Well it is slightly unusual - it might be possible to get a purchaser or maker for his coat or was it a jacket?”

²⁰ Aiuto - Help

“I couldn’t see much - I only saw the arm but it looked quite heavy and furry so I would say it was a coat and not a jacket. ... hey you don’t think that it could have worked loose because it was dragged across someone’s face do you? That could account for the scratch and the gloves. It was not a ring that cut Nonno’s face - but the cuff button. It is quite sharp.”

“It’s possible . Although I must say, a somewhat fanciful suggestion ... but you never know. You may have something there. I’ll give it to Fabrizio in forensics ... But young lady I’m more concerned about your welfare. Let’s get you home and you can tell me what’s been going on.”

She lingered wanting to sit and massage her aching limbs and shake the dust out of her hair. Marcello fetched her a glass of cold water and she sipped it sitting at the big table. She stroked the polished Oak thinking of the happier times when she had toyed with her spaghetti at this table or sat playing dominoes or cards with Nonno - briscola or scopa, games played with the old ‘tarot’ style Italian cards.

Funny, she mused, the dominoes were on the table. They were scattered before but now they were lined up in a regular barrier across the table. The thugs must have been doing a ‘three D’ doodle with the tiles while waiting for her to reveal herself. There was another line on the table too. A faint line of white powder. One of the domino tiles had traces of the powder along one edge. *“Hey, look Marcello, they must have been using the domino to line up some cocaine powder while they waited for me to come out. Funny how they’ve lined up the tiles too. Sort of compulsive addicts behaviour - association you know, line up the coke, line up the tiles ... ”*

He examined the table top. *“Looks like you could be right. You don’t miss much do you? I would have thought that in your shocked state you could at least let me get to one clue before you do - you could end up making me feel inadequate!”*

On a different occasion she might have made a facetious remark about male inadequacy - but she did not have the energy for jokes and he may not have appreciated the English style humour.

The Police gave chase to a car which sped down the mountainside after hiding in a gully and allowing them to pass. An officer had trailed behind and noticed the deception. It sped off on the Perugia road towards Assisi and lost control on one of the sharp bends. When the police reached the

wreckage only one man was found in the car. He broke his neck in the crash and survived only a few hours in a coma. It turned out he was not known in the district but had warrants out for grievous bodily harm and rape in Milano.

Where was the second man? Lucia was certain there were two. She asked Marcello to check the dead man's cuffs and see if he had a button missing.

Marcello spoke to the officer at the scene of the crash on his police radio and relayed the response to Lucia. *"No, he had no buttons. It was a zip up anorak style overcoat."*

"That's not the type of sleeve that I saw reaching into the forno. Are there any footprints in the snow? Could someone have got out and walked away?"

"No. No trace. And anyway there was no chance for anyone to get out."

"But there was another man."

"My guess is that he did not get back in the car. He may have sent his accomplice down the track, knowing that there was a fair chance that he would be caught. And meanwhile he may have gone upwards on foot. I'll send some officers to search the slope above the house"

"So he used his friend as a decoy."

"Definitely a cold blooded character. He is probably the more important of the two. The dead man may just be a hired hand."

"There's the back trail to the monastery. Nonno used to walk up there with the dogs. Maybe he's gone that way"

"We'll check it out. He has a head start on us but apart from the monastery, he has nowhere to go. We should be able to find him or his trail."

* * * * *

Marcello eventually organised for Lucia to have a police escort to the airport - himself. He did not trust anyone else to deliver her safely.

On route they exchanged information.

“The body of the jumper had been as Uriah had described. It was clearly not a suicide although it did look as if it was indeed Tosti. The evidence was circumstantial but a lot of effort had been put into concealing the identification and in obstructing the police investigations. The marks on the chest were interesting in that they had begun to congeal and close before he was pushed into the sea. This would indicate that he may have been tortured for some days before being finally killed. The marks were as your grandfather’s 666.”

Lucia gasped and held herself as Marcello continued.

“Incidentally, I went carefully into the coroner’s report and also phoned the doctor who performed the autopsy. He’s retired now and almost had a fit when I spoke to him. A scared man. He confirmed that there were no signs of regular sodomy although of course this does not exclude use of rent boys.”

“Bastards! so it looks as if the poor man was vilified tortured and then butchered. What could he have done to deserve it? Just oppose Mondini?”

“Now Marta was found in the cemetery and I matched up some old police photographs with the grave stones up there now to try to see whose stone she was tied to. That’s assuming that we believe your grandfather’s story points to her being tied to the person she harmed.”

“ Like his witch?”

“Yes. It was difficult with the way that the weeds have grown and the earth has shifted, especially after the quake in the early sixties. But I am pretty sure that I have a fit with the grave of Rebecca Hillman. She was one of the last people to be buried there just after the war. Then they stopped using the cemetery. It is one of the few Jewish cemeteries in Italy - but you know that there was a big Jewish population here and the Italians hid more Jews in the war than any other nation.”

“Yes, I knew that. Did you ever see that wonderful film - ‘La notte di San Lorenzo’? That was about hiding the Jews in Italy - it was so moving. I

saw it in London but it was in Italian - subtitled for the English, but I think they missed a lot of the emotion in the translation.”

“Yes, I saw it a few years ago, excellent film. ...

But, to get back to business. ... Now it seems that Hillman’s family were big art dealers before the war and also had very sizeable collections themselves. Rebecca was also at the centre of a salvage operation looking after the valuables of other Jews who fled the Nazis. Towards the end of the war, she was captured and was sent to Dachau and it is rumoured that she passed the treasures to a friend, a fellow Jew in hiding. She was saved by the arrival of the allies and returned home to this area but died soon afterwards - she was found hanging in her kitchen and it was said that she could not cope with life after seeing the camps. Her treasure was never found.”

“Just a moment, that does not quite add up. Seems a bit too ‘convenient’ if you ask me. Why commit suicide after having survived all that pain? It took a lot of guts to be a survivor in those circumstances. ... I know that people sometimes say that the survivors felt guilty because they lived while their fellows died, but I don’t think that’s a prime factor in the immediate ‘post camp’ period. Then there’s more of a feeling of being glad and relieved to be alive, and a fervent search for other survivors, family members.”

“You may be right. She would have been very much into that, the finding survivors I mean, if she had been entrusted with their treasures.”

“Yes. And it would have given her a purpose of sorts. .. The ‘survival guilt’ is more something that creeps up as a notion in the years afterwards. I’m no psychologist and I don’t want to teach my grandmother to suck eggs, but I have picked up a fair bit on motivation and that sort of thing from my court work. One thing I came across which I found interesting was that, and you probably know this, but it was that in the next generation it’s the children of the camp guards that suffer more psychological problems, depression, guilt and suicide etc than the children of camp victims. A sort of retribution I suppose ...”

“Yes, well anyway... That’s all very interesting but we don’t have much time left before we get to the airport, so let me just get to the details.” He gave a theatrical sigh and smiled “Do you always talk so much?”

She pretended to pout and be offended. *Well, if you don't want me to talk to you ... Sorry, I'm joking. My brother says that to me all the time. He says that it takes hours to get a story out of me because I always go into all the juicy details and build up the plot, while he is impatient to get to the punch line, the final details. Maybe that's a male : female thing ... Oh sorry, there I go again ... do carry on please...*

He pretended to look stern. *" ... Marta's body bore the 666 sign and I think that in that case it probably did indicate that her killers regarded her as the devil's servant. Possibly the subsequent 666s have been more a sign of doing the devil's work - so we are not necessarily seeing the same motivation behind the mutilations. The other thing was that she had two other mutilations. The body had a freshly executed tattoo on the wrist. It was the type that concentration camp victims have. I have sent an email to the Israeli war crimes records office and I will not be surprised to find that this was Rebecca's camp number tattooed on Marta's wrist.*

The last point was an incision on the chest wall of the star of David. Indicating I am sure that Marta was in fact a covert Jew. So it all points to Marta having been the recipient of the Jewish treasure and having stolen it for herself. This is now speculative but it could be the source of the Mondini money and their empire."

"Wow - It's all beginning to add up isn't it? Nevertheless I still don't see what Nonno had to do with it. There must be more to come."

"Well, whatever that 'more' is - leave it to me to find out. I've nearly lost you once and we don't want a repeat performance. Please stay safe in London."

"Oh, don't worry I will ..." She meekly replied, all the while feeling like a little child crossing her fingers behind her back. She would keep herself safe ...but she had no intention of being passive or 'leaving it' to anyone else to get to the truth.

* * * * *

Part Three

The flight was boring but short. Lucia declined the airline food and slept most of the way. She had trained herself to sleep on journeys to conserve her energies for work ahead. Her brother met her at Gatwick and nagged her for details. She did not much feel like talking by that stage. But by the time they drew up outside her small flat, he had been filled in on most things.

“Quite a trip eh, Miss Marple”

“Oh don’t start. Listen can you tell Dad. I don’t think I could bear to go through the whole thing again and I must get some rest and read my papers for Friday. There is a hearing on my child care case in the Strand.”

“Ok, but don’t think you’ll get away scott free. He’s been talking to Mum on the phone and is dying to speak to you. He’s feeling a lot better now and I’m sure he’ll try to drive round to see you tonight.”

“Look, try to convince him I’m exhausted and I’ll catch up with him tomorrow.”

He shrugged *“Fine, I’ll do my best, but you know Dad. And by the way, who is this dashing Carabinieri I keep hearing about?”*

She blushed. *“That’s another story. I’m tired. Goodnight, Mark and thanks for picking me up.”* She waved goodbye, closed the door, pushed aside the pile of post and pushing her suitcase into the kitchen where she would later sort out her washing, she walked into the bedroom and threw herself on the bed.

* * * * *

By the time she had sorted her mail, visited her father, caught up with her work and attended her court hearing it was already Saturday. She had given little thought to the photographs and newspaper articles from Nonno Checco's trunk other than to contact a cuttings agency and ask them to search out references to the Van Stockerts and the Mondinis - not so likely to find the latter in the English papers, but Van Stockert was often in the news.

She decided also to contact the Charity commission and see if they had details of the trust fund set up for young designers and to do a company search on Stockert's empire. That would have to wait until next week, nothing 'official' open on a Saturday in London.

Lucia then decided that she needed a break from 'brain work' and made her way to her sport's club. She took a short bus ride from her Kennington flat preferring to leave the car behind in case she had a drink at the local pub after practice. She made a token appearance in the gym with a short jog on the running machine and then went for a long slow swim. She found this one of the best ways of calming herself and centring her mind. She could keep up her slow breast stroke almost indefinitely as she 'Zen like' emptied her mind. Ideas and inspiration would then magically pop up in her head without effort. She often found that stressful cases and difficult decisions would more or less solve themselves using this tactic.

Her other escape was in the martial arts and her Saturday Aikido class would meet later in the afternoon. She dried off, went to her regular café for a cappuccino (not quite to Italian standard) and Danish pastry and then walked the few hundred yards down the road to her class. The club was situated in an old building in Victoria, near the Royal Mews. From the outside it looked much like a church hall, but the windows had been covered with a translucent film which looked quite like rice paper and a criss cross of wooden dowels completed the appearance of Japanese screens. The same effect was continued on the interior partition walls and the main dojo had high wooden beams which gave a feeling of space.

Lucia would hardly ever miss her Aikido practice. She found that the flowing disciplined movements provided a structure, a sort of stability when she was feeling uncertain or under threat. She could also imagine some of her less savoury clients, child molesters, rapists at the end of her Japanese sword as she practised her kata or being pummelled by her 'Jo',

a heavy wooden staff. By the end of the session she was feeling quite recharged even though perhaps somewhat overdosed on exercise. Lucia was like that though, never did anything by halves.

As she dressed again and sat chatting to her friends, she absent mindedly leafed through a Japanese picture book left behind by one of the teachers. It was a guide to Zen temples and he had picked it up while on a club visit to Japan. A dozen or so martial arts enthusiasts had visited sites of interest, fellow clubs and some Zen temples the previous year. A group picture of the participants with smiling Japanese colleagues had been tucked into the front cover. Lucia scanned the photo and drew her sparring partner's attention to the group.

"Hey, Carol, look at this. I wanted to go on that trip, but I was stuck at work. Look there's Phil smiling like a Cheshire cat"

"It was all those geishas he was hanging around with ... not that I believed him.. I think Japanese women are quite modern now. I bet they don't pander to the men any more. ... Pete looks a bit fed up though."

"Oh I think he had stomach ache - he told me he got food poisoning from the raw fish in the sushi. I must say I like the stuff, but I don't like to think about the ingredients too much."

"I thought you Italians were into squid and snails and all that stuff"

"Yes, but we have it cooked! ... I don't recognise all the faces"

"That's 'cos some of them are Japanese, dummy."

"No you idiot. I mean the westerners. I suppose some of them took girlfriends or husbands."

"Yeah, I think they did. Mine wouldn't have gone. He thinks we're daft doing all this martial art business. He thinks it should all be like Simon Segal or a Jackie Chan film. He thinks this slow kata is stupid"

"Well we can't all be endowed with sense and brains!" Lucia caught her breath as she thought she recognised a face. "Who is that woman? I don't think I've seen her around"

"Hmm. Looks vaguely familiar. But I can't place her right now. Someone's wife I would bet."

“Look don’t rat on me, but I’m going to borrow the picture for a day or two. I think I’ll make a blow up of it for the club.”

“I’m miss discreteness itself - the inscrutable samurai-ess. I wouldn’t worry though. I’m sure nobody will mind it being missing for a few days.”

Lucia stuffed the photograph in her kit bag and joined the others for the ritual gossip and drinks at the local. She stuck to orange juice negating her decision to leave the car at home. She felt she needed to keep a clear head. By nine o’clock she had had enough socialising, she bought a tuna sandwich and a bunch of bananas at the late night grocers by the station and hailed a cab home.

She had not realised how hungry she had become and nearly ate the sandwich in the cab. She thought better of it realising she needed a warm drink to wash it down.

Lucia settled down on her sofa with food and hot lemon tea in front of her. She put the TV on for company and did not watch it. She spread Nonno’s newspapers in front of her and added the photograph she had ‘lifted’ from the club. Where was the connection?

It was that woman’s face in the crowd at the Milan fashion show, just before Helena Van Stockert disappeared. It had touched a nerve somehow. And now the face in the club photograph. Was it the same woman? She examined both in turn. The hair was different, but some women change their hairstyles every week. It looked very much like her but not enough to be sure, no it was not quite right, she was clutching at straws and indulging in too much wishful thinking. It was more of an emotional response which she was experiencing, a sort of intuitive feeling that it was the same woman.

“Are you trying to tell me something, Nonno? If so perhaps you could be a little clearer. What if it is the same woman anyway. Why should it not be just another coincidence that the wife of someone at my club should be at a fashion show twenty years ago? So what?”

* * * * *

Lucia held out until Monday evening. She was waiting for her next Aikido class so that she could question her teacher about the photograph but her curiosity got the better of her and she could not wait. She phoned him up and made an appointment to meet.

“Thanks for seeing me, David. This might sound silly but I need some information and I can’t really tell you all the background at the moment of why I need to know”

“Well, fire away and then I’ll tell you if it sounds silly. You have never seemed the sort of person to do something without a very good reason behind it but I don’t have to pry into your reasons .. you’ll no doubt enlighten me in due course.” David was a sound mentor and an experienced teacher. He had spent several years in Japan but was also a street wise cockney born in Deptford. This would not be any ‘grasshopper’ and ‘master’ session.

Lucia had known him nearly fifteen years since she started Martial arts at the age of ten. He was then an energetic thirty-five year old fresh from a long stay in the far east. At that stage Lucia did Judo since David did not believe that children had the maturity for Aikido. She was allowed to move on to her chosen art when she was eighteen.

“Well, I suppose you might consider that talking to your Sensei is a bit like talking to a priest - perhaps we have the confidentiality of the confessional - not that I’m going to confess anything, apart from the fact that I did ‘borrow’ one of your photographs” She produced the picture from her handbag. *“There is someone here that I need to identify. This woman here standing behind you.”* She pointed.

“Oh let me see ...” He picked up the picture and adjusted his glasses. *“Oh yes, that’s Bill Donaldson’s daughter, Caroline”.*

“Daughter! Oh that’s it! That makes sense, of course she’s twenty years younger”

“Well, I’m glad it makes sense to someone. I’m totally in the dark here”

“Sorry. Bear with me. I don’t know her. What was she doing on the trip?”

“She came to help her father out. He’s a fashion designer you know and he was putting together a new collection that had an eastern influence. He wanted to meet with some of the Judo and Aikido people to get a feeling for the clothes and the culture. When we got back he set up a fashion show and you know he even asked me to arrange a Martial Arts demonstration on the cat walk. It was something new for me and I was not sure if I approved. In the end I said I would show the models how to move in Japanese style but I said I was happier to leave out the demonstration.” He paused and looked down. “He was just putting the finishing touches to the collection when he died.”

“Died? ... What of?”

“You must have seen it in the papers. It was about six months ago. Suicide. The papers said that he had become obsessed with the Japanese culture and identified with a Samurai who had killed himself when his wife was found to be unfaithful. He bought some Japanese swords and apparently fell on one in traditional manner .”

“Now I recall my brother did tell me something about that when I got back from a business trip. He thought I would be interested in the Samurai bit, but I did not tie it in with the fashion guy. Did you believe that story?”

“Well. I had no reason to disbelieve it, but I do find that people often get mixed up over Japanese culture and generally talk rubbish when referring to hara-kiri and Samurais and Ninjas and all those things you hear about in the media. It is not actually very easy to kill yourself with a sword. You need someone to stand by and finish you off really - but that’s not so dramatic. It is true that we had talked about the Samurai wronged by his wife but I don’t think he identified with him.”

“You don’t think his wife was unfaithful then?” Lucia was curious to find out background details of someone she had read about so often in the society magazines. “It was more the other way round I would imagine. He apparently had quite a reputation with the women.”

“No it’s not that. He did have a reputation and I’m sure some of it was based on fact. He certainly had one mistress that I knew about, but mainly he was a pretty down to earth fellow. But the thing was that his wife was really that in name only as far as I could make out. They led separate lives, she and her daughter had lived in America for a number of years and only came back about two years ago. So all things considered,

he would hardly be devastated by her behaviour, certainly not to the point of killing himself.”

“So if it’s difficult to kill yourself that way, do you think he was capable of doing it?”

“If you put it that way, I don’t honestly think so. I imagine that the police must have had more evidence to convince them and we are only going by the basic press details- but I can’t see it. He was also a big man, rather unfit, not very brave and with a pretty low pain threshold I would say. How could he position himself in front of a sword and cut across and up in traditional manner?”

“Was that the way it was done?”

“Well that’s what came out at the inquest. I actually went along because I was interested in the Japanese connection and I did not think he knew enough about that to kill himself. They said that the sword had penetrated the abdominal wall and then the blade had been dragged across and finally up under the rib cage, which is how you would see the wounds described in theoretical descriptions or if you looked it up in a book. ... But in reality, usually what happens is that as the first cut penetrates, the ‘helper’ or second is standing by with a very sharp sword and cuts the guy’s head off. So the cuts are never really completed.”

“And he did not have any head wounds or neck cuts?”

“No. No sign of a ‘helper’ in that sense. But you see, in Japan, when someone commits suicide traditionally, or in the old days they may have been ordered to do it because of loss of honour or failure, they would normally be allowed a ‘helper’ or ‘second’ - if they had acted with great dishonour or the lord was very upset with them, he might order them to die without a ‘second’ - this was a very frightening prospect which was absolutely dreaded by everyone ”

“So you think he was murdered?”

“Well ... Look, I don’t want to jump to any conclusions. We don’t know the full facts. ...It is not really for me to say ... ” He saw a disappointment in her eyes as he dissembled. She was used to seeing him resolute and unafraid to state his mind. “... But ... Yes. Ok. I do think he was murdered. It is the only explanation that fits. I think someone read up about the ritual suicide and made it look as if that had happened. Why I

don't know. ... And anyway I do know that he was not depressed because I saw him just a few days before to plan the show. He had high hopes for it, he had no financial problems that I was aware of, in fact I would say he was doing pretty well, he paid me generously for my advice about the fashion show... and if he did think his wife was cheating on him, it did not seem to upset him that way"

"You think you would have known?"

"Funny enough, I think he might have told me if he had a serious problem. It was odd because I had not really known him long, but we struck up a rapport quite quickly. Usually these fashion types are a bit shallow or posey, not the sort of people I would mix with, but he was alright and he seemed to find it easy to talk to me."

"Well you are that sort of person aren't you David. Look at us now! I'm doing the same thing really, finding it easy to talk to you..."

"Yes, but I've known you for ages."

"Maybe he was lonely..."

"Well, yes. I think he probably was. It seemed to me that despite being surrounded by a whole load of 'hangers on' and people who wanted to impress him or be impressed, and he was often in the news or feted by someone famous, ... even royalty you know, ... well despite all that, it did seem to me that he was lonely, that he did not really have anyone he could confide in. He just seemed to use me as a friendly ear and I did not have to reply much at all."

"So you were playing the inscrutable 'master' were you - like the analysts 'blank wall'?"

"Maybe. But I think it was also to do with being 'ordinary' He knew he did not have anything to pretend with me. I was not out to be impressed, we were not in competition, we were from different worlds really. In his line of work he had to make sure he was well regarded by people and he had to keep up a front. With me he could just be himself, no make-up necessary. I actually thought he was a nice straight guy and you don't meet many of them around."

"Did you know his wife? What is she like?" Lucia was becoming eager - this was getting interesting.

“This is third degree time, isn’t it? I’m clocking up my brownie points for a good Italian meal.”

“OK. It’s a deal”

“The wife was some kind of aristocrat. Not by birth, but by marriage. She was married before to Lord something or other - was it Wantage or Watford - something like that. Funny enough she was raised in my part of London and so I knew about her before I heard of him. She was not what you would really call ‘Lady’ material. So we used to joke and call her lady ‘Wanstead Flats’. She was the type you call ‘Fur coat and no drawers’ ... you know what I mean?”

“I get it, flash on the outside and common as muck on the inside.”

“She landed her first husband through the fashion trade. She got signed up as a model for a tuppenny halfpenny outfit in Greenwich and had a lucky break when she was hired as a ‘lady in the cake’ for Lord Whatsit’s twenty first. By the time the wedding was announced she had become ‘society model’ and ‘queen of the catwalk’ although nobody could recall ever having seen her picture up to then. Later she did get a lot of work though and was, I suppose, one of the first super models.”

“So how did she get together with Donaldson?”

“Well there was a bit of a sticky divorce. Oh and there was a funny incident which caused a ripple in the papers. Some woman tourist was trying on clothes in Selfridges and complained that the woman in the next cubicle was eyeing her. She called the store detective who realised it was Lady Sabrina Wanstead or whatever, the famous model and he tried to cover it up, but the tourist made a fuss and it hit the press. Sabrina said that the woman was trying to extort money and had made up the whole thing. But it was soon after that they divorced ... so who knows?”

“The lives of the rich and famous. Are there any that are not in a mess? Now I realise why I recognised her picture. It was in a cutting of my Grandfather’s and obviously it was because she was a ‘face’ more or less a household name, ... not that I actually knew her...” Her voice trailed off.

She sighed. “Thanks for the information David. I suppose I have to put this down to a dead end lead ... After all there is no reason why a top

model should not have been at a fashion show, particularly if her husband was a designer. I don't suppose there was any connection at all between her and my Grandfather or between her and the others in the picture, other than that they were working in the same field."

He sensed she was into something serious .. and in there deep. *"Listen Lucia, I don't want to pry and I certainly don't want to know anything that you want to keep to yourself, but we have known each other long enough for you to know that you can trust me and if there is anything you think I can help you with, please use me. I can be your sounding board if you like."*

"Thanks, I know you will be there for me" She considered whether to include him in her search for answers. *"I really appreciate the offer, but for the moment it is probably best if I keep things to myself. It's not worth stirring up too much muck until I'm sure what I'm doing. But I'd be grateful if I can keep the offer open and I may well come back to you if that's OK"*

"Any time at all. Just give me a ring"

"Thanks David. And if you fancy that Italian meal, how about Friday evening? I'm going back to Italy on Sunday and Saturday's practice day so..."

"That's great - look forward to it"

"OK - about eight. I've got some sausages from my home town and some bits and pieces you can't get over here."

"Can't wait!" By now they were at the door and David saw her to her car. He squeezed her hand fondly as she said goodbye. Their closeness was platonic. Had he been younger? ... but that is another story ...

* * * * *

On Wednesday morning, as she left for court, she met the postman at the door. *"Blackwell? ... Can you sign for this? Recorded delivery"*. As she obliged. *"It's quite heavy. Should have gone parcel post you know"* He grumbled as he handed her the package.

It was an A4 padded ‘jiffy’ envelope stuffed full. Probably more court papers although they usually went to the office. She was running late so she just tore open one corner as she got into the car. Mistake. The fibrous padding flew about sticking to her black court suit with ‘static’ persistence.

‘Shit!’ she thought ‘No time to do anything about that now. I’ll have to find some sticky tape at the office and try and get it off before the hearing’. Through the tear she could see the package was from the cuttings agency. ‘Have fun with that later. I’ll look at it in the lunch break’ she decided.

The hearing was short. Apparently the social worker had got her facts wrong. She had taken over from a colleague who had left the department suddenly due to a nervous breakdown and did not have time to check on the details. She had read the file where the mother’s drug history had been laid out and the statements of her colleague prepared for the care hearings of her older child. Unfortunately she had not updated herself on the mother’s becoming drug free or seen the statement of the rehabilitation centre manager.

That scenario was unfortunately common. The stress on social workers had become increasingly intolerable and good people were being forced out of the service. The main problem was funding. Good workers wanted to do the best for their clients and met a brick wall of financial constraints. They struggled to cope in a climate of increasing frustration and often their best efforts were stymied - lack of the proverbial ‘ha’peth²¹ of tar’ spoiling the ship.

Mountains of paper work and increasingly complex and adversarial hearings and meetings also laid on the pressure. It often seemed that professionals were forced into confrontations with each other in a game of who pays for what, rather than being able to co-operate to do the best for their clients and families. The result was that the children involved were short changed and suffered from poor case management while the professionals caved in from early ‘burn out’.

In this case the judge felt that there were insufficient grounds for removal of the new baby from her mother. The woman’s circumstances had self evidently changed and the new situation has to be assessed. He adjourned

²¹ ha’peth - half penny worth

the case ordering a residential assessment of mother and child and time-tabled a 'directions' hearing in three months time.

The judge was annoyed at the misinformation and had a moan about wasting court time. The case had been booked over four days as a final hearing and with court time so scarce it meant hardship for others as well as a huge waste of public funds.

Four barristers had been involved representing local authority, mother, father and Guardian ad litem with barrister for the child. The Local authority had a 'silk'²² and then there were the solicitors like herself sitting in the second row bench with the clients. Add the social workers, senior and team leader, the expert witnesses waiting in 'the wings' and you begin to clock up big money. Money which would have been better spent on client support and treatment with courses of action reached by collaborative agreement between the parties. But then Lucia might be out of work ... or she could swap to criminal cases ... she liked the excitement but didn't like all the clients.

With the case ending early, Lucia had some time to play with. She left the high court building and grabbed a cab to the Charity Commission head office. Charities were listed by category in the card index and she was able to retrieve basic details about the trust fund.

"I'm sorry" said the clerk. "We can't give out all the annual returns. Nowadays you are supposed to contact the individual charities for that information and they can charge a fee for producing it. Cuts down on paper work"

"Oh, no. That's such a shame. My brother was wanting to put in a bid for a grant to help him produce some designs for London Fashion week and if he does not have the details by the end of the week, he won't be accepted." She lied, but it was for a good cause. *"I hate to let him down, especially since the accident"*.

The clerk looked on enquiringly, slightly raising an eyebrow. She continued, *"Oh, he used to be a fireman, but he got a crushed leg helping a child out of a house fire."*

The clerk looked sheepish and shuffled his feet not sure if he was being 'had'. Lucia picked up his hesitation and uttered a deep sigh, she then

²² 'silk' or QC - Queen's counsel - a senior barrister allowed to wear silk robes.

fluttered her eyelashes and said *“Well, never mind, there’s always next year ...”* and then weakly added *“I suppose ...”* She turned to leave.

“Just a minute. I don’t suppose it would matter if I showed you the last year’s returns and their articles of association. Would that help?”

Lucia beamed her widest Italian beam. *“Oh, Yes. That would be very kind of you. I’m sure it would help”*

“Everyone’s at lunch at the moment. Do you mind to step into the office. Take a seat and I’ll get the files.” He returned ten minutes later. *“Sorry to keep you waiting. The odd thing is there does not seem to have been any accounts or returns lodged for the last five years. That’s unusual because we check on missing returns at the end of each year. We can’t go through all of them, too many people are registering small charities nowadays, it’s high time the charity law was tightened up, you know.. but anyway we don’t usually miss on so many years in a row. Here’s the last one that was filed.”*

She glanced through the papers. *“Hmm, not many grants, are there.”*

“No, but they do seem to be quite big ones. In actual fact we don’t often have that sort of information. It is usually just a straight income and expenditure with a few subsections. The information about specific grants must be there because someone asked about it. From time to time one of the supervisors looks at an audit and goes into the details. We actually do less of that nowadays. They must have been satisfied with the answers because nothing has been followed up since. Mind you I do wonder about the size of the grants.”

He looked over her shoulder and ran his finger down a column. *“See, £100,000 to a young Italian designer - well I suppose so, it’s an Italian sounding name. Ven t e s imow”*. He struggled with the pronunciation.

“It’s pronounced vent-ey-see-mow and it’s not a real name as far as I know. It means ‘twentieth’ ..”

“How strange. Well, maybe his mother ran out of ideas if she had that many children! It seems a lot for a grant - but I suppose fashion design is a costly business.”

“Look here’s another grant for ‘Church restoration’. Could that be compatible with their articles of association?”

“It’s a bit stretching a point but you could say they were supporting art and design. I’d have to check up on that. Legally these things are a bit indistinct. Mind you it’s a big amount £654,000”

“The charity trust must get a lot of donations. They are turning over an enormous amount each year. The returns show five million in this year alone. Where is it all coming from?” She questioned.

“And going to. There is not much surplus. Quite a high amount for clerical and administrative costs. Wow, look at the advertising and promotions section - £489,000 a year. You could run a few TV ads with that and I’d never heard of them before you walked in today.” He was warming to the hunt.

“It looks like that donation to Mr Twentieth is about the smallest. It may be out of my brother’s league. See there are other ones all over 200,000. Obviously a very generous charity.”

“Well, this was worth knowing about. I think I will ask my supervisor to request their recent account. It should not have been left so long.”

“Can you tell me, do you think all the grants are ‘international’ to foreigners, or are there some British ones too?.”

“Well, I can’t be certain. But it does look as if most of these names are foreign ‘Quindicesimo’ ... ‘Sesto’ ...” he spelled the names out *“There are lots of transfers to an Italian bank, let’s see there’s a figure here ... May 1992 transfer to Italian Co-operative Bank £844,325 beneficiary D. Angelini, Church of Peace, Marche.”*

She wrote down the name. D. Angelini sounded not quite right - Mr Angel? And she had never heard of the ‘Church of Peace’ ... weird too that the names were all numbers - fifteenth, sixth.

“What about the Articles? I was wondering who the trustees might be?”

“Oh Right. That’s easy. Let’s see should be right here in the file ... yes here we are ... Trustees are ... three names ... Chairman of trustees - Rosswell Van Stockert ; Honorary Secretary Sabrina Marsh and Hon. Treasurer a Barbara Van Stockert.”

No definite bells ringing there ... Other than the obvious Van Stockert. She thanked the clerk and decided to let Marcello investigate further. Might be something concrete here.

“Goodbye and thank you.”

“It was a pleasure. I’m Michael. Give me a ring if you have any questions. Hope your brother gets on OK.” She sensed he had stopped believing the ‘brother’ story but that he realised she had a good reason for the deception.

“Thank you, Michael.” She did not give her name.

He hesitated ... *“If you are ever passing this way, we could go to lunch, there are some good sandwich bars round here.”*

“That would be nice. I’ll drop in next time I’m in the area” She left having no intention of returning.

* * * * *

Lucia stopped by the office and sorted out some phone calls and a few semi-urgent queries. There was not much going on and she read through her paper work quite quickly. She decided to take some time to look at her package of cuttings and spread them across her desk.

The secretary hurriedly stubbed out a cigarette as Lucia entered and tried to hide it in the waste basket. Smoking was banned in the office as the wife of one of the partners had died of lung cancer three years before. She had only been fifty five and left a big family to mourn her. Her husband had waged an evangelical campaign against the ‘cancer sticks’ and would not have anyone smoking in his sight.

Peggy did not usually indulge at work, but her stained fingers, lips turning sourly at one corner and what Lucia, out of earshot, jokingly referred to as her ‘dog’s breath’ evidenced the fact that she chain smoked at home. She was an anxious wiry type with permed hair, skirt a bit too tight from eating too many take aways and an unhealthy pale look.

Today Peggy hovered. Brought her coffee and looked wistful. *“Miss Blackwell, would you mind if I left a bit early?. I want to go and talk to my son’s teacher. He’s been acting up in class again and they are threatening to suspend him. ... I’ll catch up with any typing tomorrow if you want to leave it on my desk, I can have it done by the time you get in tomorrow morning.”*

“That’s fine, Peggy. Everyone else is still in court and there are no clients coming in this afternoon. I won’t have any typing today and if there are any letters I can run them off myself on my laptop. Hope things go OK”.

Peggy left wrapping a scarf round her head against the sharp spring wind and coughing as she went. She was a single parent working full time and although once attractive, the years of stress had begun to show their toll.

Her ten year old son had been seeing his father recently and had become upset by the contact sessions. He was becoming destructive at school and violent to other pupils. It seemed he felt pressured to see Dad and afraid of repercussions if he said no. Basically the boy was carrying the adults stress and anger and was fearful of what his violent father might do to his Mum. Hopefully something would be done to address the situation.

Peggy was talking about stopping contact and getting a court decision on it. She would have to find a solicitor and was working on Lucia to represent her. Lucia had done some of the preliminary work for her ‘pro bono’²³ but was a bit worried about conflicts of interest and boundaries in their office relationship. Nevertheless Peggy was very grateful and did favours for Lucia, directing difficult phone calls to other partners and dropping hints to people as to Lucia’s superior skills as a solicitor.

Lucia did not mind being in the office alone. It did mean being interrupted by phone calls but she would be able to look at her cuttings without drawing comment.

The package was thick. To cut down a bit on the volume of material, she had asked for all relevant references from the past two years and only full articles from previous years.

Lots of financial stuff on Van Stockert. She skimmed through that, not being entirely comfortable with stocks, shares and banking. The general

²³ Pro bono - free of charge - for the good of it

impression was that he was loaded. Several articles about him being a patron of the arts and a benefactor for various charity enterprises.

Lucia was beginning to get bogged down. It was difficult to select what was relevant and what was not. She decided she needed some perspective. The board room was empty and had a very long table. She cleared it of the debris of the last meeting and laid out as many articles as she could. She concentrated on the ones with pictures so that she could get an overview without going into details. Then she reached into her handbag and added her grandfather's clippings and finally a copy she had taken of the Japanese group.

So, what do we have? ... Here is the mother ... Sabrina Donaldson at the Milan fashion show - let's see that would have been 1974 ... the year before Helena Van Stockert went missing. ... And here is the daughter in Japan in 1998. Wonder how old she is? Around my age? No older. I'm twenty five so could she be twenty eight or perhaps even thirty? They do look remarkably similar. Perhaps mum was about the same age when the picture was taken. That would make her fifty. No, she must have been older - after all models don't look their age do they? Could perhaps add on five or six years and she was probably older when she had Caroline because she would not want to prejudice her career by getting fat and pregnant. So let's say she was thirty when she had the baby, ... that would make her near to sixty now.

OK, Lets look at the other Van Stockert pictures. Lots of photos of him at dinners and functions, dutiful wife at his side. One of the colour gossip magazines bore less formal pictures. 1973 Holiday snap in Sardegna - gala reception. In the early seventies lots of the rich and famous partied in the Costa Smeralda. Sophia Loren, Peter Sellers, Aga Khan. There was certainly a smattering of those at the reception, plus the Van Stockerts, celebrities from the fashion world including ... yes there she was again ... Sabrina ... and, the caption said, 'Veronica' with friend Sabrina Parker.

Parker? Was that her name from her first marriage. Yes, it must have been because she started her modelling career when she was married to Lord Whatsit (she was catching that habit from David - must find out what the real title was) .. so if she started modelling then, she probably kept her same professional name later, she would not want to change it and risk being unrecognised by the public.

So - Sabrina and friend Veronica. Ah yes, Veronica. She had married Mondini in 1953, the year before Mondini senior's 'accident'. I wonder if his plane was sabotaged? He seems to have been a likely target for a lot of people. When you live by the sword, you die by the sword - isn't that what people say? She had not seen Veronica's face before but she was beautiful. A sort of classic sculpted beauty - the sort which endures as the face ages.

What's this? *'A select group took time out from the gala reception to attend a private dinner party to celebrate the fashion diva's fortieth birthday. We are informed that Veronica's actual birthday fell on the previous day but the gourmet dinner was a double celebration hosted by the financier Rosswell Van Stockert whose wife Helena, once a child actress, also reached her milestone fortieth birthday today.'*

Right - so Veronica was forty in 1973, makes her sixty six now. Her husband's sixty eight I heard someone say. Now how old are the others?

This was complicated. Lucia took a large legal note book and started to sketch out the principal players and she marked down the ages of the 'actors' in her piece. ... This birthday party is two years before the disappearance of the Van Stockert women and Helena was forty two years old when she went missing - so she was the same age and Sabrina was six years younger than Veronica.

So who was there? Lucia tried to make out the faces in the crowd of celebrities. She recognised Carlo Mondini, Van Stockert and Helena, and a woman with her who could have been Belinda. Belinda the missing 'companion' was thirty eight when she died, according to the press. So that means she was thirty six at the time of the party photo, four years younger than Helena.

She made a mental note of finding out what Belinda had looked like. Most of the 'disappearance photographs had only Helena in them - but then if this woman at the party was Belinda, then she was not very photogenic. Maybe there was something here somewhere.

She searched the cuttings for a better picture. It was near the bottom of the pile that she hit lucky.

"A rare shot of Helena Van Stockert with recluse companion Belinda Moore. The pair are constantly at each other's side and it is rumoured

that Mrs Van Stockert never ventures out alone without her. Belinda the little known actress, is shy of publicity and her 'benefactor' Van Stockert has been known to pay large sums to the press to suppress photographs of his wife's companion.

The reason for this flight from the limelight is a mystery, particularly for a member of the acting profession, however sources inform us that some of Belinda's film parts may not have involved close ups of her face but have concentrated on other areas of her anatomy. It is also rumoured that Rosswell Van Stockert has been her most faithful fan buying up any copies of Moore's films which come to light. So far this paper has not been able to obtain any prints of such material. We understand that Helena VS became acquainted with Belinda when they both performed as child stars in a little known feature film. The couple declined to provide us with the title of the film ."

This picture was of a rather chunky woman wearing what looked very much like a man's suit. Was the unisex look in fashion then? She could not remember, but anyway it was true that she did look very 'Butch'. Short cropped jet black hair. No jewellery that she could see, no apparent make up and certainly not a fashion model. She was not particularly good looking and had a pronounced 'beak' of a nose. Her features were not complimented either by visible facial air and her bushy eyebrows met in the centre.

Back to the party photos and let's get back to chronological order. Lucia had diverted to look for Belinda. Who else was at the party? Couple of politicians who Lucia did not know or recognise and some now aged actors. The head of the Milan museum and the local head of police. He liked to move in high circles evidently.

Then there was Sabrina. Could not see her husband. Was she married then? The captions under the pictures listed most of the guests and his name did not figure. Surely he must have been there if he was a designer? Strange to be at the Gala and not the private party.

Turning the sheet over .. curiouser and curiouser .. *'Fashion designer seen leaving club with top model while wife left in hotel room'* A slightly blurred paparazzi style photograph of Donaldson getting into a taxi with Veronica's face caught in the flash bulb light and instantly recognisable peering out of the cab window. So were they having an affair? William Donaldson and Veronica Mondini?

Nothing much else ... Picture of Helena and Veronica holding hands and smiling for the camera as they sipped champagne from intertwined wine glasses. *“Stars double birthday party, most extravagant in Milan’s recent history. Model Veronica and long term friend Helena Van Stockert have been celebrating their birthdays in style, it is rumoured that Helena’s presents include a diamond watch from an admirer.”* Yes, there was the watch on Helena’s right wrist facing towards the camera as she held the champagne glass. Looks like she was left handed too, she thought, jumping for a moment to Nonno and his poor hands.

There was a small insert picture underneath the main article giving a view of the watch and a short description. The watch seemed to shimmer even in the two dimensional picture - it was unusual with the actual strap made of diamonds in little clusters on a platinum background. Asked if it had an inscription apparently Helena giggled and would not say. Who could that admirer have been?. Surely they would have said if it was just her husband? Maybe it was the ‘girlfriend’ Belinda.

* * * * *

Lucia decided it would be ok to use the office phone to ring Marcello. It was already nearly six thirty and with the hour difference to Italy he would be thinking about dinner and she might miss him.

She let the phone at his home ring several times but no reply. Odd he had not put the answer machine on, he usually did that when he was out. She rang his office and again no answer machine. Odd? Had she mis-dialled?. On the second try the phone was picked up just as she was about to give up. He must have been working late.

“Marcello?”

No, it was one of the telephonists. *“I am sorry, you are through to the switchboard of the Questura. How can I help you?”*

“Sorry, I thought this was a direct line? Is Officer Gastaldi there please?”

“Si, Signorina. Il Signore Gastaldi is in the office but he is interrogating a client. May I give him a message?”

“Grazie. Just tell him I phoned please and perhaps he could ring me back later this evening. I will be home I about an hour, he can ring me any time after that.”

“Certainly, Signorina. May I take the number?”

There was something about his tone which made her uneasy. She decided not to give the number - Marcello would have it anyway and even if he had left the number at home, it would not be long before he could retrieve it and return her call. Better if as few people as possible knew where she was. She realised she had not even said she was in England and the international call sounded as close as the next room.

“It’s Ok. He has it. Just ask him to ring Lucia.”

“Lucia?”

“He will know which Lucia. I think there’s only one of me.” Surnames could be looked up - she was ex directory, but someone on a police switchboard would have special access to numbers no doubt.

Probably just paranoia, but did she hear a click on the line just before she replaced the receiver?

She made her way home - the car was parked in the alley behind the office in some spaces reserved for the company. Tomorrow she would get the companies house searches done. In fact Peggy could do most of that - she would think it was just routine client work and anyway, she owed her.

* * * * *

Thursday was going to be hellishly busy. There was quite a lot of paper work to do and things she wanted out of the way so that she could return to Italy for a few days. Marcello had not rung and she was feeling a bit neglected.

The morning passed quickly and she almost reached her lunch break before realising the time. She decided to split the tasks.

“Peggy, I need to find out the directors of a couple of companies. Can you do that for me? We need the information quickly. Can you do it in your lunch hour? You could go now and start early ... let’s see it’s just after twelve now, ... when you get back if you have finished the work for the others, I’ll mind the phones this afternoon so you can go home an hour early and pick your son up from school. It will keep him out of trouble on the way home.”

“Oh fine. Yes, that would be really useful. Thanks Miss Blackwell. Can I bring you back a sandwich?”

“Thanks - but I’m trying to cut down on lunch at the moment. I’m in training for going back to Italy. My family feed me so much that I have to prepare my body for the onslaught! I’ll just have a cup of coffee and do some work on my computer.”

“I should be back in about an hour - but it might take longer to look up all the alternatives.” She looked at the list Lucia had handed her.

“Never mind, take as long as it needs” She suspected that Peggy was making excuses ahead of time to cover herself for some ‘shopping time’. But as long as she did her work, Lucia did not mind.

The computer screen was beginning to hurt her eyes a bit and she realised she had been working on it a long time. She liked to type most of her own work so that she could check information and have her reports and statements under her own control. She had developed the habit at University where she had done some research papers before completing her final degree. She found that she could type as quickly as she could write and almost as quickly as she could think through a statement. So why waste precious secretary time? She also liked to experiment with email and internet searches. Not many solicitors were on line as yet but most of the barristers were. If she could help educate her colleagues to use email it would cut down enormously on paper work.

She stopped for a coffee break and then switched to the internet. Had to be careful not to get distracted. Surfing the net could become compulsive. The server kept going down and she was unable to connect. Blast! Should have remembered it was lunch time. Half the office population probably

playing on-line games during their break. May be she should consider swapping to a newer provider with fewer users.

Finally a break through. The small earth shape in the corner of her screen started to spin as Internet Explorer bit on some cyberspace. What was it she was going to look up? Oh yes, the advertising and publicity agency which earned a small fortune from the charity trust for young designers. She had already done a search on the trust itself and drawn a blank on all the big search engines, Yahoo, Altavista etc and she had also found nothing on Van Stockert's companies, hence Peggy's visit to Companies House.

She had no name for the company unfortunately but decided to look anyway and see if there were any sites with possible names. Unlikely that Van Stockert would use his own name here but there may be some sort of link.

She cruised past lists of well known advertising agencies. Publicity agents. How about video makers. No nothing. She tried Yahoo Yellow pages. Not much there. The UK counterparts of the US directories were not half as comprehensive yet.

She had a thought and phoned Peggy on her mobile. Although Peggy was short of money, she had a mobile long before Lucia or any of her partners in the firm had one. Lucia had borrowed it from time to time when she needed an urgent message while she was visiting a client and it had been embarrassing admitting it belonged to the secretary and not the company.

“Peggy are you at companies house yet? Ok And have you found the charity trust company records? Yes? ... Good ...So they are registered as a company too ... limited by guarantee ... yes, I see. Listen Peggy, there's something I'd like you to do. Ask them to show you the company returns. Any of the last few years should do. You may need to pay a fee ... you've got some money ... Ok I'll reimburse you when you get back. ... Right, ask them for the returns and then look in the accounts where it gives details of the expenditure. It should say 'advertising' on one section and I want to know the name of the company they use for advertising.. Can you do that? ... Great ... thanks a lot .. Ok, see you later, Bye.”

Peggy more or less fell in the door at four o'clock just as Lucia had given up on seeing her for the afternoon. She was over two hours late but excited and looking pleased with herself.

"I have got everything you wanted, Lucia. Here we are." She used the familiar form of address feeling an accomplice's bond with Lucia. Peggy was no fool and she realised immediately that this was more than a client enquiry. She produced a note book and a white A4 envelope.

"Thank's Peggy. Get your breath back. Sit down a minute. It's all that smoking you know. You have lost the puff to get up the stairs." She scolded jokingly.

Peggy sat and kicked her shoes off stretching her legs up to rest on the bar under her desk. *"Sorry, my feet ache from all the walking and my varicose veins are playing up. Don't worry, I'll put my shoes back on quickly if someone comes in. ... Right. Here are the company details. First I looked up all companies with Van Stockert as a director. There was one called 'VS Holdings' and another one called 'VS Finance Corporation', then ... let me see ..."* She ran her finger down one side of the now dog eared sheet. *"Oh yes, here we are ... There was one called 'Stockert Services' and then 'Art Lovers Supplies' - at first I thought that maybe that's the wrong Stockert I looked up, does not sound like the others does it. Then I found the charity you were asking about 'Designers Charitable Trust' but ..."*

A pregnant pause, Peggy was enjoying this. *"Did you know there was another charity .. the Helena Foundation?"*

"No, I didn't .. That's interesting. It's the name of his first wife."

"I found that by looking up Van Stockert without the Rosswell and it came up as having her as a director, Helena Van Stockert. He isn't on their books. The other directors are Belinda Moore and Sabrina Parker. I looked at their returns but they seem not to have been trading for years. Anyway, ..." She paused and looked conspiratorial. *"When I was on my way back, I happened to bump into an old friend of mine who works in that big bank building in the city ... you know the one with all the pipes on the outside ..."*

"Isn't that the Lloyds Building?"

“Yes, I suppose so ... Anyway, he works there and it was his lunch hour so we had a coffee ... Oh, Don’t think I planned it, Lucia, it was a chance meeting you know.”

“Ok Peg, I won’t think you’re skiving off with some man friend on firm’s time ... get to the point!”

Peggy cast her a sideways glance not sure if she was joking or serious. *“Well anyway. I asked him about different companies ... without giving anything confidential away, you understand .. I would never do that.”* Righteous indignation. *“Anyway, he said that this Stockert chap could have other companies registered abroad or in the ‘States and that if he was into financial things, he probably had some of his business in places like the Cayman Islands to escape tax. Now his uncle knows some people who can find out about stuff like that ...so I thought you might be interested ...so we went up to his office and he made some phone calls ...”*

Lucia decided that it was best not to cross question Peggy on her sources - she gave an encouraging look *“...And ?”*

“And he was right. He does have a Cayman Island account ... and also there is a company in Long Island called ‘VS productions’ sounds like a film company doesn’t it?”

“You’re right, it does. You have done really well Peggy. I see you have the directors of all this lot written down” She glanced at the page.

“Yes. But most of them seem to have the same names in different combinations. There is this Rosswell Van Stockert who is in all of them of course, except the Helena Foundation, because that’s the way I looked it up. The there’s Barbara Van Stockert, I suppose that’s his wife, who is in most of them, and then there’s Sabrina Marsh on the Charity trust ...”

“Yes, I knew about that one.”

“Ah .. but she also comes up on the ‘VS Holdings’ and ‘Art Lovers Supplies’. Maybe a relation?”

“Don’t think so, but we can look into it ...”

“Wait. ... There’s more. You asked me to find out the name of the advertising company that the charity used. ... Well ... Guess what?” She savoured the moment like a child’s guessing game.

“What Peggy? I can’t guess. Don’t play games”. This was frustrating!

She waved the white envelope in Lucia’s direction. *“This is their brochure, I picked it up on my way back. The office is near Bond street station. See? ...”*

“See, what? Put me out of my misery. Go on, tell me what I should see”

“Well, the name. It’s called Parker, Parker and Marsh, so this Marsh woman who is a director of their companies is also the one who does their advertising.”

“And gets a large whack of cash for the privilege.” Lucia muttered with feeling. *“This could tie up some things. There was a Sabrina Parker involved with Stockert too - so Parker must be a friend of Marsh.”* She thought out loud. *“... And I was beginning to think that perhaps Sabrina Marsh could be Sabrina Parker, but obviously there are two people involved here, two different Sabrinas. So perhaps the other ‘Parker’ in the title is her first husband, perhaps he helped her set up the agency, just as he helped her into the modelling business, so she kept his name in the firm’s title.*

“Oh my legs do ache... My doctor said I should be careful of too much standing” Peggy was fishing for sympathy and pushing her luck to manoeuvre for more time off. *“If you want me to, I could ask my friend to do some more digging about the ‘VS Productions’ and he might be able to find something out about the Helena foundation.*

“Well, it could be useful. But be careful you don’t get too tired. It would be a shame if you had to take time off work to have your veins sorted out.” She spoke with joking light sarcasm. *“Can’t you deal with it over the phone instead of walking to your friend’s place?”*

“Well, I could ...but it would be easier to get the information face to face. I could go first thing on my way to work tomorrow morning if you don’t mind me coming in a bit late.”

Lucia decided it was not worth arguing although she did wonder at Peggy’s ‘bit late’ *“OK Peggy, Thanks. Now let me look at the brochure.*

Can you just check the answer phone before you go out. I didn't answer the phone much 'cos there were too many things going on at the same time."

The brochure was a series of glossy photographs of past advertising campaigns with the usual non committal blurb about 'professional' approach to corporate image etc. The mandatory quotes from satisfied customers, a health farm, modelling agency and high class florist. Photograph of smartly dressed group at what could have been 'Ascot' races with a strawberry blonde, Armani suited girl presenting a trophy to a jockey under a banner advertising '*Parker, Parker and Marsh*' - *The Discerning Client's Publicist*. Her face was partially obscured by a broad brimmed couture hat which had probably required a mortgage to buy it.

Lucia found these promotional brochures deadly boring. God, she thought, fancy having to work for something like that and have to dress precisely, wear meticulous make-up, the obligatory string of pearls and low-key costume earrings and be careful what you say all the time. Lucia was more the type who would wear an Armani or a Donna Karan suit for fun and add some dark glasses to look flash as she drove a soft top on her visits to LA. But she would not bother with makeup, her jewellery made a statement and she had to really concentrate to stop herself from speaking her mind in some situations. Tact was not her middle name.

She looked at the girl again. Look at that hat!. Lucia would not have been seen dead in it, very much an English accessory. Dog racing was much more her line anyway and didn't carry that sort of paraphernalia.

Manicured hands held the trophy shield. Bet she wears a Rolex or Omega, ... this girl breathes money. But just a moment ... what was that on her wrist? The watch band which just peeped out from her cuff was bright shiny material and although not very obvious in the picture, it could have been like that of the diamond watch in the birthday party picture.

Ok she thought, let's check that out. She placed the photograph face down on her flat- bed scanner and clicked on her image maker, selected preview and then zoomed in on the image. The dainty hand was blown up to several times it's original size and now the wrist band was clearer. Yes, although only a small segment was visible, it certainly looked the same as Helena's birthday present. This was something Marcello should see.

She turned her attention to the face area and zoomed in on the bit visible beneath the hat. Bingo! The face could only have been that of Caroline Donaldson. She evidently works for her mother's company. 'Hmm', she thought, ... she must dye her hair. Her mother's fair and her father was dark I think. Red head's don't usually occur naturally from that sort of parentage. Red is fairly fashionable now though.'

Lucia scanned the wrist image reducing the resolution slightly so as to reduce the 'memory' size of the photograph. It was now a 'jpeg' image which could be emailed. She searched in her clippings envelope and produced the birthday party picture and made a second scan of Helena's wrist. She wrote an email message to Marcello and added the two images as attachments. At the same time she sent a copy to her own computer at home. *'Marcello, Hi - what are you up to? Here is something interesting for you to mull over. I have a lot more juicy information for you, if you care to ring me. I'll be at home tonight. Did you get my message? Be back Sunday. Ciao Lucia.'*

As she finished the task, Peggy entered the room. *"I'm off now. There were two messages for you. One from someone called David saying not to worry about phoning back, because he will see you tomorrow. The second one was from a Marcello Gastaldi saying he hoped you were Ok and he was worried that he had not heard from you."*

"Oh!" Dismayed, *"... so he didn't get my message then? I'll ring him when I get home"*

* * * * *

Marcello was relieved to hear her voice on the phone. *"I did try to ring you a couple of times but you were out. And then I thought you would ring me so I was a bit surprised not to have heard anything."*

"I left a message last night with your receptionist - didn't you get it?"

"Receptionist? You must be mistaken, I don't ... oh, she must be the new one" he rapidly changed his tack not wanting to reveal his suspicions.

"Well I phoned your house but there was no answer and the machine was switched off ..."

He interrupted. ... *“Oh, I had a break in last night, just young kids I imagine”*

“Oh, no! Did they take much?”

“They didn’t take anything so perhaps I disturbed them when I got back. But Listen I can’t really sit here talking - I’ve got to get on with some work on my computer. So we can have a ‘CHAT’ later ...” He was careful to enunciate very precisely the English word CHAT *“You know sometimes people don’t TAKE much when they break in - have you noticed that?”*

“What?” She took a moment to understand what he was saying. She felt fleetingly rejected that he would not speak to her and then realised that he was in no way giving her the brush off. They didn’t take anything ... ah, he means they left something. ... he’s bugged! Was he meaning that they would have an ‘on-line’ chat? *“Oh , Sorry, I don’t want to interrupt your work. I’ll speak to you tomorrow. I’ve got some computer work to do as well”*

“Fine, we can both get on then. Ciao”

“Ciao”

She turned on her desktop PC and retrieved her emails. Yes, there was the picture she sent herself. And an email from Marcello.

‘My house was turned over by those young burglars so I need to get things sorted out and tidied up. While I’m at it though I think I had better get the place ready for the spring. The cats often have fleas in the spring and you know there are all sorts of insect eggs that lie dormant in your house and bugs which can hatch in your furniture.’

Messages passed each other in cyberspace.

‘I’ve sent you an email. You know I have learned an awful lot about networking and messaging on my computer course. Did you know that the American government don’t allow Microsoft to sell the most advanced forms of encryption programmes to international clients? They only allow

'512 bit'²⁴ encryption in their European sales but the Americans have more powerful encryption up to 1024 bits. I suppose they are afraid of spies or their enemies being able to have codes they can't crack. Have you ever tried to encrypt your messages?'

'Received your email. There may be a problem with my server. Will check system and see if any leaks. My home machine not very good for encryption. Will look at alternatives. Remember that I have a new receptionist at my office.'

'If you have a flea problem it may be a good idea to speak to the Vet. The surgery opens until quite late and you can get some good products nowadays which deal with parasites quite effectively. Have your cats got flea collars?'

* * * * *

He understood her message and made his way to Luigi's surgery. His door was still open although the last patient, an egg bound canary, was leaving in the grateful hands of it's owner an eighty year old woman. Luigi was pleased to see the Carabinieri and was happy to let Marcello use his computer.

"I'm sorry it's a bit slow. I have been meaning to upgrade the processor, but I never seem to have time to sort things out properly. I just order my supplies on line and that's about it. The email works fine though. Let me get you connected and then I'll leave you to it. Can you lock the office up when you've finished please? I have to go home to eat. Laura will be waiting and I don't like to keep her waiting. She's still quite fragile. ... You can post the keys back through the door. I've got a spare set ... and anyway, I don't think anyone will be reaching through the letter box tonight with Bruno here."

Bruno was a 'blue' Neapolitan Mastiff who was coming round from an operation on his foot. He had stepped on some broken glass in the courtyard of the 'Albergo Moderno' the main hotel and severed a tendon. He would be in plaster for ten days while the gash healed and would be sedated to stop him worrying the wound. He also had a big collar round his neck to stop him biting the plaster off. The collar was made of an

²⁴ 512 bit - in this context a measure of the complexity of a code. The higher the figure the more possible combinations.

upturned bucket with a hole in the bottom and only just cleared his ears. He looked comical but was still quite menacing.

“Are you sure that Bruno will be Ok with me?”

“Yes. He’s a softie really. He spends all his time welcoming guests at the hotel. It’s a promotional thing. I had him here for a while after his previous owners abandoned him when he was six months old, but the hotel owner saw him and thought he would be an attraction, so they took him off my hands. Just in time really, he was getting too attached to the surgery and he needed his own home. He looks big and fierce, but he wouldn’t harm anyone. ... well that is ... not unless provoked!”

“Fancy abandoning a dog like that! I can’t understand people who do that sort of thing.”

“Well, they moved to another town at the beginning of last year and left him behind. I think they did not have room for him. They probably did not realise how big a mastiff grows ... the next door neighbours took him in for a few weeks but they had a new baby and were afraid that Bruno would hurt the child. They brought him here asking me to put him down. ... But look at him, ... how could I? Poor old Bruno, misjudged entirely ... poor old softie.” He stroked the sleeping dog’s muzzle affectionately.

Marcello made friendly noises to Bruno who snored away on his bed. He then checked the email. Yes, there was one from Lucia.

‘Hope you are OK. All this sounds very dodgy. How can they break into a policeman’s house and it looks like they were in your office too? I’ve got lots of things to tell you but maybe I should wait until I see you on Sunday. This does not seem very secure. What did happen last night?’

He replied and clicked on ‘send’. The electronic message silently winged it’s way.

‘Last night was a nightmare ...I was out quite late answering a call ... someone rang pretending they were one of my superior officers, a chap called Gattini, and asked me to meet him in Camerino. So I drove there to his place and it turned out to be a hoax, he was on a fishing trip with his son and had never phoned me. Whoever it was just wanted me out of the way. While I was out they broke into my house.

What I had not realised, until you told me about the receptionist, was that someone had been in the office too. There is no receptionist and there should not have been anyone there answering my phone.

I agree that you should not tell me any more at the moment. Wait until Sunday and in the meantime keep safe. I'm worried about you collecting information. What have you been up to I wonder? Look after yourself. See you soon. Love Marcello'

Her reply was brief.

'Don't worry. Get some rest. Sogni d'oro - pleasant dreams! Lucia'

Sogni d'oro, ... dreams of gold. That's what Bruno seemed to be having at the moment, ... or may be better to say dreams of bones or tasty dog snacks ... Marcello looked at him as he slavered out of the corner of his mouth while he slept. Those jaws would have fought the gladiators in Roman times. Thank God I'm not a gladiator!

* * * * *

Lucia felt cheated. She had wanted to parade her 'finds' in front of Marcello and have him amazed by her information. Now she would have to wait. But it also meant that there was no time to waste. Things were hotting up it seemed and people wanted to stop Marcello investigating and wanted to intercept his knowledge. This put her in a sticky position. She would have to investigate herself and could not risk sharing her information.

How would she cover herself.? She needed to share the information somehow, somewhere without compromising the recipient. No good telling Dad, he would be worried and try to stop her. No good going to the British police at this stage, too much to be explained and much of her knowledge was incomplete or based on hunches. She had to get more concrete evidence.

In the meantime though, she had a solution. She would put the information in a place that was so public and open that nobody would see it. She had learned that tactic from reading Agatha Christie novels.

She had been playing with websites and had been planning an internet site for herself. She had registered a domain name which gave her a unique address of Blackwell.com and had been working on the idea of advertising her legal services on the world wide web. So far she just had a 'site under construction' notice on her site and she had prepared a few bits and pieces to go on it but had not posted anything to it yet and had not advertised it's presence to any search engines²⁵.

She now worked furiously making up web pages for her site holding all the information available to her so far. She wrote long passages of text as if writing a newspaper article about the case and embroidered the pages with scanned images. She added to the ones already available with new scans of most of the relevant articles, taking care to keep the sizes of the images fairly small. She did not want to exceed the memory allocated to her website. She then let her imagination run free in a section she titled 'suspicions and deductions'.

Finally she linked the pages together to form her site. The 'home page' or first page to be reached by the viewer displayed her basic details - name, professional address as if it were a corporate site; but subsequent pages were unreachable without an access code. In order not to draw the suspicions of a casual viewer reaching her site accidentally she had a heading explaining 'Some pages may contain sensitive client or legal information and therefore are not available to the general public. For access you will need a username and password. Please apply to LuciaB@Blackwell.com for further details.'

Lucia sat back from the computer and sighed with satisfaction. She felt somehow purged by putting everything in writing. It did not weigh so heavily on her mind. She entered the details and codes into her programme to 'publish' her pages onto her internet site. She took a deep breath and hit 'enter' button on her keyboard sending the files across the world wide web to lodge on her site. The die was cast, as Luther had said. No turning back. Her thoughts and suspicions were now public, private knowledge.

No way anyone would even know she had a website. The information was sitting there looking out at the world like a picture on a gallery wall. But nobody would see it because they did not know it was there, they would not raise their eyes to look. And if they did come across it, they

²⁵ search engines - directories of services and companies on internet. Software designed to search for specific sites, names or subjects.

would not see it's hidden side. She congratulated herself on 'a most excellent' solution 'a bodacious solution' in fact ... thinking 'surfer' language. An added beauty of this awesome trick, was the fact that she could update the information at any time she wanted from anywhere in the world. And the information would be there for anyone to whom she allowed access. She clapped her hands ... 'YES! ... *Who's a super surfer then?*'

The next step would be to lodge the access details with someone trustworthy. She decided to divide the information for safety. She wrote a note to her brother telling him that she had a web site and that he should look at it if anything happened to her.

'... Mark, don't immediately jump to conclusions that I am in danger. Don't look at the site prematurely. I do know what I'm doing and this is just a safeguard. Please don't worry Dad or Mum with this. Only tell them if something happens. I'm not giving you the code for the secure part of the site. I've given it to someone else. In fact to David, my Aikido instructor - you know him don't you. That way it can't be stolen from you. You each have half the information. You have the internet address - <http://www.blackwell.com> and he has the access codes.'

She wrote a similar note to David and although she would see him tomorrow evening, she decided that for safety she would post it tonight. ... No need to be morbid or melodramatic .. but no need to be foolish either. She needed a safeguard.

It was eleven o'clock when she posted the letters. They would go off in the Friday morning collection. She decided to put on her track suit and jog to the post box. Somehow it seemed safer to move faster and to pretend to be out exercising rather than just walking to post a letter. The street was badly lit and the pubs had been emptying. The area was mixed with some expensive apartments and poorer blocks of council dwellings.

She left by the rear entrance to her building since this provided a short cut to the main road. She jogged up the block to the post box, deposited the letters and then ran back down the opposite side of the road to avoid a group of winos sitting on the pavement. This route brought her level with the front of her building before she reached a safe spot to re-cross the road at a pedestrian signal. As she drew near, she noticed a car parked in the shadow of a tall tree. It faced her apartment windows and there

seemed to be two figures sitting inside. She had the suspicion that they were watching her flat.

Lucia deliberately ran past them and did not stop at her door. They would not recognise her in the dark in her jogging clothes. In the cold weather she wore a balaclava style hat and scarf and very little of her face showed. She was behind them now. She stopped as soon as she was far enough away to dare to observe them. She watched for several minutes from behind a hedge. They did not move. Did not look as if they were waiting for someone or picking someone up. Nobody came over to them. She took down their number, writing on the back of her hand with an old biro she found in her pocket. Then she went home running round the back way again.

Once inside Lucia turned off the lights in her sitting room and lit the small lamp in her bedroom. She drew the curtains to make it look as if she was going to bed. She then took her digital camera and took the best picture she could of the car in the street. She had no telephoto lenses, but it was a passable image.

Returning to the computer, she downloaded the image from her camera and posted it on her website together with a note of the registration number. You can't be too careful, she thought as she double locked all her doors and finally fell into bed.

* * * * *

On Friday morning Peggy phoned in sick. She had food poisoning she said. Lucia was sceptical but decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.

The senior partner Peter Bennett was in a foul mood. He had been in court all week and had wanted to get his letters out first thing in the morning. He was annoyed at Peggy who usually took his dictation. He slammed into the front office as Lucia was sorting out the incoming mail. She found that as the only woman in the practice she often did the more menial jobs. The other partner Gordon was more practical. Gordon was in his early forties and quite dynamic. He was more receptive to Lucia's ideas and innovations and even had a PC at home. Peter probably did not even know where the kettle was.

“That woman is taking the mickey” He fumed. “She is forever taking time off on the slightest excuse. People don’t get food poisoning on a Friday - they skive off to get a longer weekend.”

Lucia gently tried to calm the waters *“Well, she is very good when she is here. Very efficient and quick. And you know she has been struggling lately with a lot of problems. Her son ...”*

He interrupted testily *“Don’t make excuses for her. She should be here at work.”* Then pathetically in almost a whine ... *“How am I going to get my letters done? I have to meet a client at lunchtime.”*

The ‘client’, Lucia knew, would carry a set of golf clubs. Peter played golf every Friday afternoon with his local bank manager in Kent. He would start off with a lunch in the club house which would be liberally laced with alcohol and then finish off at the nineteenth hole - the club bar. Strange what some people regarded as exercise. The lifestyle was beginning to tell on him. His face was flushed unhealthily and when he got angry the blood vessels stood out on the side of his head and a pulse was visible at the side of one eye. He had high blood pressure and was clearly close to his first heart attack or even a stroke. Lucia had tried to put in the odd hints about health living but they fell on completely deaf ears.

“Look Peter, why don’t you dictate your letters into the dictaphone machine and then Peggy can type them when she comes in and I can sign them for you. She may well be in this afternoon.”

“And supposing she isn’t - some of these are important. I really don’t think that you people here realise the seriousness of work. You are all going off here and there. There is a lot of work to be done ...” He was starting on one of his hobby horses about changing times and being unsupported. He did this when he felt sorry for himself and Lucia wanted to stop his flow ... she had heard it all too many times before and did not want to waste any more time.

“If she does not come in, then I’ll get a temp from the agency to do them for you. Now here’s the tape. Let me have it when you’ve finished.”

“I can’t work the infernal machine. And suppose the woman is away on Monday. I can’t be here on my own.”

“Now, Peter.” She was getting annoyed herself now and realised with horror that she was talking down to her boss as if he were a child. Well he was behaving like a toddler having a tantrum ... *“Gordon will be back from Southampton next week and he can sort out anything that crops up.”* He had been away for a few days on an industrial tribunal case. *“I’ll ring the secretarial agency and ask them to have someone standing by for Monday. They can ring here first thing in the morning and see if Peggy is in. You do remember that I have to be back in Italy? I am sorry to be away again so soon, but I have a lot of leave owing to me from last year and you did say that it was OK to take it now.”*

He grudgingly nodded assent. Lucia’s side of the work in family and ‘care’ matters was quite slack at that moment. She had been snowed under with cases from the previous September but most had been cleared by February and the work was always slow coming in at this time of year. It was coming up to the end of financial year for the local authorities and they never seemed to be able to make decisions on casework at that time. Everything was subjugated to the finance department and nobody dared to initiate assessments, court proceedings or anything that might upset their expenditure or interfere with their bids for next year’s slice of the financial cake. The work would probably start to pick up after Easter.

Lucia set up the dictating machine for Peter and carried on with her own work. He settled down. Finished his letters and, looking a lot more cheerful, departed for his lunch appointment. No sign of Peggy. Lucia rang her home to see if she was feeling any better but got no reply. Maybe she was asleep. She would not trouble her on the mobile.

The agency had someone for Monday but this afternoon was impossible. She sighed *‘You owe me, Peggy’* and got on with the typing herself. She did not want Peter to be ‘creating’ in the office while she was in Italy. Best leave everyone happy.

She left at four thirty leaving the answer phone connected. She was feeling she had done enough and was not guilty about leaving early. Unlikely anyone would ring at this time on a Friday anyway.

She wanted to check out the advertising agency and decided to leave the car and take a tube up to Bond street so as to avoid the rush hour traffic. She had prepared the dinner before leaving for work and so was not worried about being home a bit late. The meat would be nicely marinated and her pasta sauce was ready. Antipasto would be the salami slices and

Parma ham with ‘Carciofini’ little preserved artichokes and Italian bread sticks. David should enjoy it.

She got to the door of the agency just as the ‘Sloane ranger’²⁶ type was about to close it. She looked disapprovingly at Lucia’s dress and drolled “*I’m sorry, but we close at five on Fridays I am afraid*”. She appeared not in the least bit sorry.

“*Oh, if I could just spare a moment of your time*” Lucia had her foot in the door. She pretended to drop her handbag so that in stooping to pick it up she pushed the door open with her shoulder and stepped inside. She moved to the counter and leaned on it feigning exhaustion. The Sloanie looked as if she smelt rotten meat.

Lucia continued “*Sorry, I’m out of breath, I ran to get here in time and if I don’t sort something out with you my boss will kill me.*” She paused for breath. She was making a habit of telling stories, lying was becoming easier! “*Our usual promotions company in New York has let us down and we urgently need to find a replacement. We have a reception planned for our film backers after the premiere in two weeks time and we wanted to organise a corporate event of some kind. The guests will mainly be from the states and so we want something very ‘English’. The producer has his mind set on the Tower of London - he could see his guests being served by waiters dressed as beefeaters. Could that be done?*”

Sloanie gasped slightly. She looked puzzled. She did not entirely believe Lucia but this was too big a deal to miss - what if it were true? “*That would be difficult.*” She droned. “*But we might be able to fix something similar - perhaps the suite in the modern world trade centre building nearby, with actors dressed as beefeaters? Or have you considered the London Dungeon or the Zoo?*”

Lucia was not sure if she was mocking her or being serious. There had been a slightly sarcastic snarl associated with the word ‘zoo’.

Glancing up, Lucia noticed a picture on the wall. The ‘Ascot’ picture from the brochure. She continued quickly not wanting to give the woman time to think. “*I have noticed that picture in your brochure and my boss was interested in the girl and the impression she creates. He would like to have her on the reception desk at the function.*” She decided to push her luck ... “*He also noticed her jewellery. The film is a costume drama and*

²⁶ Sloane ranger - Classically dressed upper class who frequent Sloane square in Chelsea

features a lot of ornate clothes so we would quite like to hire some pieces for the leading actresses to wear at the premiere.”

“Well, ... I don't know ... the lady to which you are referring is one of our directors. She does not usually do promotions herself.” She unsuccessfully tried to hide her outrage at the affront. *“We do provide costume jewellery ... was it pearls you were interested in? ... we can do single strings or thicker coils with earrings to match ...”*

Lucia interrupted her *“Is that a bracelet or a watch she is wearing? I can't quite see in the photograph. A good watch would be ideal for the leading lady.”*

Sloanie was almost speechless. *“I would imagine that Miss Donaldson might be wearing her watch for the photograph. It is not our practice to hire out personal effects ... her watch is genuine you know. From Tiffany's in New York”* She looked down her nose at Lucia as if she had crawled out from under a stone.

Lucia in turn attempted to look haughty *“Indeed ... Well, my boss is quite used to recognising the genuine article and would not wish to be palmed off with cheap replicas”*

The reply was icy. *“Madam we would not wish to palm anybody off with anything. However I am sure that Miss Donaldson would agree that her personal jewellery is too valuable to hire out and in any case the sentimental value is such that Miss Donaldson would never part with it. I understand that it was a twenty first birthday present to her from her mother. She wears it always”* Her outrage loosened her tongue and she spoke more than she normally would have done.

Lucia lifted her eyebrows enquiringly as if she did not entirely believe the excuse. This tactic she found often provoked people to further justify their statements and dig themselves further into holes.

An almost petulant statement followed. *“I think Madam that when one is used to working for American customers in the manner that you have become accustomed, one loses a sense of occasion and of history. This piece had originally been given to Miss Donaldson's mother by her first husband I believe. It is engraved with his initials.”*

Lucia felt the air was getting hot. This woman would regret having said what she did, she would be annoyed with Lucia and would start retaliating with unpleasant questions. It was time to go.

“Look, I’m sorry to have held you up on a Friday evening. I can see you need to go home. I’ll tell my boss that you are looking into his suggestions” She moved to the door as she spoke and was on the pavement as she added. *“Get us some quotes and I’ll be in touch again”*

“But . But I don’t have your name and address ...”

“I’ll ring you on Monday” Lucia practically fled to the tube station.

What was it she had said? She was given the watch by her mother. Very odd. This was supposedly the watch that an admirer had given to Helena - Who was the admirer? How had Caroline Donaldson got the watch? Perhaps there were two of them. So this watch was engraved with her father’s initials. Would that be a clue?

One thing was certain. Lucia had to see that engraving. .. But how?

* * * * *

By the time the door bell rang, dinner was ready, the flat was tidy and Lucia had washed and changed.

“Hi, David. Perfect timing as usual. Come in, it’s all ready.”

“Smells great I must say. I brought the wine. Hope it’s OK. I don’t know much about that sort of thing but the label says it comes from your part of the world”

“In that case it should be fine. But you needn’t have bothered, I’m supposed to be treating you remember.” They both laughed.

By the time they got to the Marsala cake, one of Lucia’s favourites, they were feeling pleasantly relaxed and somewhat over full. Lucia brewed some strong coffee to keep herself awake. This was the first time she had felt really at ease since she got back to London and she could very easily have fallen asleep in the chair.

“Sorry I missed your phone call yesterday, David. I’m afraid I did not have time to ring back later on but you said it was not urgent - was that OK?”

“Fine. I just wondered how you were doing really and I had a bit of gossip that you might find amusing.”

“Oh what?” Lucia was hooked. It was not like David to gossip. Very un-samurai like.

“Well, it’s funny that often you don’t think about someone for ages and then a couple of things come up about that same person in the space of a short time. It’s that girl you asked about - you know Caroline Donaldson. Well, I had not seen her since her father’s funeral and then she turned up at the club on Wednesday night. I wondered what she was doing there because she did not seem very enthusiastic about martial arts when we were in Japan. Also she was not particularly interested in the practice, it was judo on Wednesday, but Ted in the office said that she had come for a private lesson with Simon Daniels.”

“What is he giving private lessons in these days? He has passed his time of glory as World champion, don’t you think? If you ask me, he spent too much time clubbing and dating ‘page three’ girls. He looked really seedy last time I saw him. I lost respect for him when I found out he had been using steroids to bulk up before his fights but after that nothing much surprised me.”

“True, he has not quite conducted himself as befits a martial arts champion”

“Too true! Look at the time he posed naked for that pin-up magazine. Yuk!! The man thinks he’s God’s gift to women, but if I had him as a present, I’d throw it back!” She punctuated her words with ample gesticulations and ended by knocking the coffee pot across the room.

“Hey careful! You’re a dangerous lady to be on the wrong side of. That metal pot just skimmed my ear!” David teased.

“Sorry, it didn’t hurt you did it? At least it was empty so it didn’t scald you.” She picked up the pot and cleared the mess. “I interrupted ... So what about these lessons then?”

“Well, if I am safe from missiles ... Simon may be getting serious about his training again, but I don’t think so somehow. He has been giving the odd lesson, usually after hours or in the early afternoon when the club is not in use. From what I understand, ... and I did make a few discreet enquiries because I had a feeling you would want to know ...” This was not like David, something must have triggered this interest. Was it his empathy with Donaldson? *“ ... as I understand it, in addition to his regular children’s class, he mainly teaches young women and he has coached a few minor actresses who need to do some small stunt or learn to fall for a part they are playing or to prepare for an audition. No great shakes as far as technique is concerned.”*

“So Caroline is one of his pupils is she?”

“It would seem so. But it might be more than that. Seems they have been seeing each other from time to time since the Japan trip last year. However, she is engaged to some rich guy from the city, so she needs to be a bit careful about her encounters.”

“This could use some further investigation ...”

“Well yes, but you be careful.”

“By the way, David.” She tried to sound as matter-of-fact as she possibly could. *“I’ve sent you a note with some information in it that I’d like you to keep safe for me while I am away.”*

“Do I sense melodrama? Sounds a bit worrying. Would you care to add a little explanation?”

“It’s a long story ...”

“I don’t have to rush off anywhere. I don’t have any pets to be let out. There are no TV programmes I want to hurry home for ... in short, I am at your disposal.”

Had it not been for the wine, the food and the relaxed way she felt in his company she probably would not have told him the story. She needed to talk to someone and it was not possible to discuss things with Marcello at the moment. Telling him would also delay his leaving and she did not want to be alone again. The car was no longer outside the flat, but she was sure they were still watching her from somewhere else, maybe another car or from a different building. She felt safe with him around.

She told him the whole story starting with her grandfather's death and including all the information currently on her website. She told him about the English connections and Peggy's information. Lucia did not tell him about Marcello's break-in or of her accident with the hire car. Why had she left that out she wondered? Perhaps it was not really relevant in any case.

"I'll show you how to use the access codes for the website, David. But as I said before, you have half the information - username and password and Mark has the address. I will post information and new messages there. If something happens, I want you and Mark to meet up and look at it together. You will be the only two people who can reach it." She realised as she said this that not even Marcello knew about the site yet.

* * * * *

Saturday passed in preparations for her trip. Washing, packing, watering the plants and leaving the house clean. Lucia had lunch with her father and he was more or less his normal self, his operation wound had healed and he was threatening to fly out to Italy in the next few days.

"Probably best to stay at home, Dad. You know how tiring these plane journeys are and Mum will be coming back in a few days anyway. Once I get there we will tidy the house up and then she can come home."

He promised to think about it.

"I can't say I like you and your mother being out there at all. It seems the world has gone mad. To think that things like that can happen in that little country town. I would have thought most people there would die of boredom ... rather than anything as dramatic as this."

Paul never really liked the town. He had met Romina in 1969 while he spent time at the 'Universita` degli Stranieri' - the University for foreigners in Perugia to brush up on his languages. She had just started a literature degree but she gave it up when they married the following year and she followed him to London. She was only 19 and her parents were not pleased that she had left her studies, but she did manage to enrol in

one of the London colleges and she got some credits for her work in Italy. So she did eventually get her degree just before Lucia was born in 1974.

Paul had to pay his penance for taking away the daughter of the family and spent long weeks visiting in-laws and helping her parents on the farm. The old house was the centre of a working farm in those days although as Francesco got older it ceased to bring in any money and the family relied on work in town.

Paulo knew all about Francesco's murder and the thugs that threatened Lucia in the old house but he did not know about her researches, the clippings and her suspicions. All in due course.

* * * * *

By the time she got to the club for her Saturday practice, Lucia was feeling in need of relaxation. She practised hard, working up a healthy sweat and then indulged herself in a long hot shower. The conversation at the pub afterwards was the usual chit chat interspersed with bravado about who *could* have beaten who .. but usually didn't, reminiscences about contests gone by and gossip about who was going out with whom.

Most of her friends were men and she was amused at how they gossiped more intently than the women. She noted that Caroline and Simon did not get a mention and thought better of introducing the subject. Better be careful, the club was a strange environment, you never really knew who had the ear of another member and which way the in-house politics and allegiances would go. She had joined the martial arts to get away from that kind of pettiness and to begin with things like honour and the code of the Dojo were respected.

But in recent years it seemed that the management committee who were mainly non-practising 'has-beens' or 'never-had-beens' had distanced itself from the club members and become self seeking and autocratic. There were rumours of misappropriation of funds and government grants, whispers of nasty things being swept under the carpet ... like drugs and some unsavoury sexual liaisons.

As usual in situations where rumours abound, some could be true and some fictitious, however the atmosphere is poisoned and becomes

uncomfortable. Lucia had considered changing club, but had stayed, really out of loyalty to David. Apart from personal loyalty, she would not find an instructor of his level anywhere else outside Japan.

By eight thirty Lucia was feeling her stomach churn with hunger but this week she managed to get some of the boys to go for a pizza. It was not the Italian sort, bought fresh in slices and usually eaten walking down the street, but a 'bastardised' version veering towards the American style. Crust too thick and chewy with too much vegetation on top. Still it filled the holes in her stomach and it was more comfortable sitting in the restaurant than balancing at the bar in the pub trying to hear above the noise of music and fellow customers while attempting not to passively smoke too much polluted air.

Lucia wished her friends goodbye and walked to her car. It was parked just beyond the club and as she passed the darkened building she thought she saw a small chink of light coming from the direction of the women's changing room.

"What could that be? Nobody should be there at this time and I'm sure I turned off the light. Carol was not here this week so I was the only woman practising."

She was in no mood to let an opportunity for 'Miss Marple-ing' pass her by. She quickly took her kit bag and put it in the car. Then, locking the door, she walked back to the club and silently climbed the fire escape. There was a high window just below the ceiling of the changing room, a long narrow window designed only for ventilation. It was frosted glass but it was open a couple of inches to let out the steam from the showers. From the fire escape, climbing to first floor height, Lucia could get level with the window.

She peered inside. The lights were on, there were some clothes thrown on the bench. Male and female by the look of things. Some trousers, a judo suit, large sized trainers. She glimpsed one high heeled shoe and a bra lying on the floor. Those had not been there when she left. The room had been empty.

No people visible.

Was that voices she heard in the distance? There was some traffic noise coming up from Buckingham Palace Road. The bus passed and it grew

quiet again. Yes, she could hear something, a giggle and a man's voice. No words distinguishable. Well, they were not in the changing room, and the voices were too near for them to be in the dojo upstairs. ... Ahh They must be in the sauna.

The sauna was in the end of an L shaped part of the room - it was double and could be entered from the men's side or the women's side. Usually the sexes had a tacit agreement to use it at different times and there were not many women users anyway so this was not a problem.

So who were these sauna 'rompers'? Lucia would not mind betting that their names were Caroline and Simon. A thought struck ... so she always wears the watch does she? She would have to take it off in the sauna. It must be there among the discarded clothes, after all no need to lock it up if there is nobody else around.

'No, Lucia, don't do it!' she told herself - feeling that she was about to do something rash. A plan was forming in her head involving breaking and entering and looking at watch straps. 'Oh what the hell, let's go for it!' came the reply.

The window was too narrow and high to get through easily. She crept round to the front of the building and checked the door. ...As she thought, locked from the inside. They had probably not bolted it though, so she would be able to use it as an escape route.

Now how to get in without being seen. The upper dojo had poor ventilation and although the weather was cold for the beginning of March, several of the windows were left open to give some air during the practice. Perhaps they had not all been closed. Lucia crossed the road to view the building from further away and get a view of the upper floor. Good! There was a window ajar on the far side, away from the fire escape. This meant a more difficult climb but the roof of an old stable building next door could provide an access point. It had probably been an original part of the Royal mews but was on the boundary between the properties and had fallen into disuse and neglect.

Forcing one of the decayed wooden doors was almost too easy. Inside the building was on two levels, the main area full of junk was on the ground level and there was a half floor which used to be a hay loft at the far end. Lucia pulled at a rope hanging from the upper level, only to have it part in

her hands. 'Have to be careful here. It looks as if most of this stuff is rotten', she thought.

There was no stair linking the levels. Remnants of wood protruding from some holes in one wall showed where one might have been. Lucia decided to use these stubs and holes as grips and footholds to climb up. She moved slowly using 'three point' technique, holding always with one hand and keeping her feet in position when she moved one hand hold, and then holding with hands and moving one foot at a time. This meant she always had a grip if one of her holds gave way while she was moving.

She reached the platform fairly easily, it had not been as high as it looked. She then inched her way across to the far wall where she could see a trap door leading out onto the roof. It showered dust in her eyes as she pushed it open easily. Obviously this was not the first time someone had come this way. She heaved herself out onto the slates and lay down across them to spread her weight so as not to fall through. She did not trust the roof timbers.

As she slid to the edge of the roof where it met the dojo wall, she felt a beam give way beneath her and almost slipped. She gasped, froze and held her breath. Fortunately the beam did not fall - the noise would have given her away. She decided not to think about the void beneath her and moved on to stand in the gutter by the dojo wall. This felt more secure and she could just get herself up onto the sill of the window above her. She lowered herself down as far as she could, but the last drop caused her to make a rolling 'break-fall' which she executed as quietly as she could.

Right, she was in!

Now out of the dojo and down the stairs. Stopping after every few steps to listen for anyone moving below her. Finally the hallway before her. She checked the front door, from the inside this time, and put it on the latch to give her ready access in and out.

She stood behind the door to the women's changing room and listened. No sound.

What if she opened the door and they were right there? No point prevaricating now.

Still no noise.

Soundlessly she pushed the door open, holding her breath. ‘Please don’t creak’ she prayed. She was past the next hurdle. Now she needed to create a delay in case they heard her. She took a tanto, a wooden practice dagger, from a shelf with the intention of jamming it under the sauna door, but before she could do anything, she heard voices and the door began to swing outwards! With nowhere to hide she just stood her ground and prayed for deliverance or a swift end.

The door swung towards her catching her behind it. She was bound to be seen.

“Come on, let’s just do one more line. Nobody will miss us. A little bit more won’t do any harm” A slightly whining female voice with a hint of a transatlantic accent cajoling.

“Where is the shit anyway? I can’t see anything in all this steam.”

“Pass me my shirt. It’s in my breast pocket.”

A thick arm reached out and picked the shirt up off the floor, almost touching Lucia’s left foot. Real beef cake, she thought, still on steroids by the look of that arm. Thick brain too in my opinion.

“Come back and close the door. It’s cold out there and I’m getting goose bumps” She giggled ... *“Ha ha I’ve got goose bumps. But you’ve got a goose egg on your head ...How did you get it anyway. I thought champions didn’t get injured?”*

“Ouch! Leave my head alone, you bitch. I told you I hit my head on the shower head and I can do without your smart arse comments”

“Hey, hey. Tetchy! Come on my hunky sex machine. Close the door and get back to business”

“Ok but don’t put any more water on those stones, I’m sweating like a pig.”

And behaving like one no doubt, thought Lucia. No, take that back, I’ve met some reasonably nice pigs.

The door swung closed. Lucia stood completely still until she heard them settle down to business inside.

“Be careful, your credit card will never work again using it like that in all this steam. I got mine wet once and it ruined the strip”

Giggling *“Well it gives a nice edge to my line. Pass me that fifty quid note will you ...”*

“I could use that! Why don’t you just use a piece of paper like anyone else? You’re some sick bird” He laughed

Giggling again *“Don’t worry, there’s more where this came from. Daddy would want me to use his inheritance wisely”*

“If that poor guy knew what you were up to and how you operate, he’d turn in his grave”

“Let him turn, his guts might fall out though!” Snort of laughter. *“Poor sap. I never liked him with his high minded ideas. He adored Mum and she despised him. Don’t know why they stuck together.”*

Lucia felt sick inside thinking that her club, her dojo that she had frequented since she was fifteen, was being used to snort lines of cocaine and have illicit sex in the sauna.

Sniffs, giggles and some heaving and sighing of naked bodies gave her the signal to move. She crept forward and quietly jammed her tanto under the lip of the sauna door, making sure that she did not stand in front where she might be seen. The glass was completely misted over. Passion or steam? Probably both.

No time to fix the second door to the men’s side, but at least she would have time to get out. The men’s side led to the changing room which was further down the corridor and further from the street, so she would have the advantage.

She deftly rifled through the discarded clothing. Christ, what if a client were to see her now. She would definitely be ‘struck off’ by the law society. Putting such thoughts out of her head she continued with her search. Where was the watch? Don’t say it’s not here after all this effort? She felt a rising panic. Something glinted in the corner of her vision. Yes,

there it was lodged in one of Caroline's shoes. 'I should have thought of that' Lucia kicked herself mentally, realising that she herself had often done the same, push her valuables into a shoe to stop them rolling off the bench.

She picked up the watch and turned it over. Here was the inscription *'May our love endure like diamonds. For ever yours V.M.'* It didn't quite make sense but there was no time to mull it over now. There was fresh movement behind the steam.

"Get me a drink, will you Simon"

"Hey what's going on? The door's stuck. Must be one of your bloody shoes jammed underneath. I'll have to go round the other way."

Lucia ran. Out of the room, across the small hallway, to the front door, out to the street. She breathed again as she leaned against the brick wall outside. That was close. She thought it best not to start the car right away in case they heard it and saw her. They would know someone had been there because of the tanto but they would not know it was her. Maybe she should have used a shoe, but it would probably not have worked so well.

She hid in the shadows by the side of the building until she was fairly sure they were not following her out and then crossed quickly to the other side of the street. It was not quite closing time at the 'Firkin and Goose' and some people she vaguely knew were still drinking near the door. She thought it might not be a bad idea to have an alibi so she entered by the back entrance and made to walk out towards the front as if she had been sitting in the back room all the time.

"Hi Lucy. How have you been?" She did not like the anglicised form of her name.

"Oh Rob, I didn't notice you there. I've been sitting at the back with some friends." She lied, smiling sweetly.

"What are you having?"

"I should really be getting a move on now, I've been here for ages already"

“Just stay a few minutes more, it’s nearly closing anyway” The landlord called last orders as he spoke.

“Ok, just a quick one then. I’ll have an orange juice.”

“Not drinking anything stronger nowadays?”

“No thanks, I’m driving”.

As they sat and drank, Lucia could just about see the pavement in front of the club through the window behind Rob. She saw a female figure walking away but did not notice Simon.

Rob talked and she listened, not in the mood for light conversation. They left together as the pub closed and Lucia was grateful of the crowd milling across the road to cover her progress. Rob walked up the road and Lucia walked to her car. She had used the ploy of offering him a lift so that she would be accompanied but he had turned down the offer having promised to meet his flat mate at the kebab shop down the road and go to a late night film.

“Why don’t you come too?”

She was too tired and thinking of tomorrow’s journey.

As she reached the car she realised someone was behind her. She turned to see Simon. He would not know it had been her at the club. It was perfectly normal for her to be in the area on a Saturday night and she would often be walking to her car at pub closing time. She would bluff it out. She gave a weak smile and nodded a greeting as she continued to open her car door.

“So it’s little miss aikido is it?” She ignored him.

“Hi, little miss aiki. What are you doing here so late?” He taunted her in a sing song voice.

“Same as you I expect. We all go to the pub after the practise. Which one were you in?”

“Well obviously not the same one as you. I see I was missing something...” He leered.

He's out of it, she thought. Too much coke tonight. He has completely lost it. *"Goodnight Simon, I'm going home."*

He lurched at her as she turned to open the door and unsteadily leaned his body against hers pinning her to the side of the car. *"Hey, take me home with you. You look as if you need thawing out and I can make you really hot."*

"Look Simon, I don't want any trouble, just let me go home."

"Did you know I'm mister steam, comes out of my ears when I have sex, I can really heat you up". He thrust his left hand into the front of her jacket and held it over her right breast. She struggled to let out a scream but he clamped his right hand over her mouth. The proximity of his body made her feel physically sick.

"Not much use are you Miss Aiki, without your weapons, your little sticks and swords, and your little wooden daggers?" Lucia breathed in deeply behind his sweaty palm and gathered herself for action. He was much stronger and bigger than her but he was stoned and his reflexes were poor. *"Did you know I found one of your little wooden daggers in the club tonight. Stuck in the sauna door. I wonder how it got there. Do you know anything about it?"*

As he finished the question he tightened his grip on her breast until it hurt and moved his body closer. He thrust his right hand harder against her face. She concentrated her energy and as his hand pushed against her mouth, she opened it wide, his hand slipped in behind her teeth and she closed them as hard as she could. As he drew back she brought her knee up hard into his groin and jerked both her arms up and out between his, knocking them away from her. He stumbled backwards clutching at his crutch. She would never have got away with that had he been sober.

As he writhed on the floor lying exposed on his back in a very non martial artist pose, she wickedly brought her foot down on his scrotum and ground her heel to make her point. *"You really shouldn't keep your brains between your legs!"*

He passed out, partly as a reaction to the blow in the testicles and partly from the effect of drink and drugs.

“Lucia! Lucia!” Rob was panting down the street. *“What’s happening? My mate stood me up, so I was going to cadge a lift. Good God, I’m only gone a few minutes and you start world war III. Who is that Guy?”*

“Oh just some idiot.” She whispered.

“Well an idiot in a poor state by the look of it, but I reckon he’s going to come round in a moment and then the shit will hit the fan. Let’s get out of here fast”

“Rob can you drive?”

Lucia made Rob stop at the end of the road while she vomited into a hedge. As the adrenalin rush wore off, she started shaking from her ordeal.

“Look I can’t leave you like this. Is there anyone who can stay with you?”

Too late to disturb anyone really. She thought of David *“No, I’ll be OK Just drive yourself home and I’ll go on the last bit myself”*

“I think not” He said as she had a renewed fit of shaking.

“Look it’s just a reaction. I’m not usually like this and I’ll be fine in a moment or two.”

“You’re coming to my place for a coffee and then I’m going to ring a person of your choice who will come and collect you. No arguments. It’s that or the police”

“Ok, Ok, don’t nag. I’d forgotten what a nag you were”

Lucia complied meekly and sat sipping coffee while Rob rang David. Rob gave him chapter and verse over the phone but David cut him short and was knocking at the door in less than half an hour.

As David drove to Lucia’s flat he told her to rest and talk later. He had made a valiant attempt to stop Rob from going over the whole story for the umpteenth time, each time his part in it grew larger, until he was the saviour knight in shining armour. *“God that man can talk the hind legs off a donkey.”*

“Oh, he’s Ok in small doses. He was a gopher in one of the offices I worked in when I was a student. Harmless guy really. I hadn’t seen him for ages. It was a bit of luck that he showed up. What are we going to do about Simon?”

“Well my guess is that come the morning he will have forgotten part of tonight. He was obviously well stoned. He may not remember much at all. And if he does remember, he is hardly going to admit that the once world champion was beaten by a young woman. His pride will be damaged and his male ego has suffered a cruel blow because you did not fancy him. He may make up some bad stories about you to get his own back, but that would be dangerous for him.”

“Exactly, If I keep quiet, then he will want to keep quiet. He won’t want to risk me shooting my mouth off, which I could easily do if he started a slanging match”

“We need to get the club investigated for drug use though. Can you get your father to arrange that?”

“Well I suppose so. But you know it might be better coming from you. Then it won’t be linked to this other business. Dad knows you so you could quite legitimately ring him and say that you are worried about drug use at the club and ask him to get it looked into.”

“That sounds reasonable. I’ll do that as soon as you have left tomorrow. It will be good to do it while you are away, then nobody can point the finger at you as an informer.”

“Lucia, the whistle blower. I’m a natural target for that don’t you think? I can never leave things alone ... It’s always been like that for me. Even at school every so often the girls might get upset about something and we would have a protest with ‘guess who’ being voted as spokesperson. So I would stand up in class and say my piece and look round behind me and all my so called supporters had melted away”

“Tough little freedom fighter ...I bet you loved Robin Hood as a child”

“He was one of my heroes. And then later Lenin and Che Guevarra. I’m a freedom fighting female Ninja” She gestured a fighting pose and laughed.

“Please! Not Ninja. Samurai-ess. The Ninja were criminals.”

“Sorry, I was thinking of the Robin Hood connection ... he was supposed to be an outlaw too. If he was there tonight he would have shot an arrow right through that sleaze ball’s nuts. That would have been wicked!”

“Well, Lucia, for now leave it to the authorities. He will get his comeuppance before long. He is playing with fire and he will definitely get burned”

“I’ll make sure of that. Listen David, get the club committee to do some random drug screening - it’s an easy urine test - my brother can get the tests done for you on the spot. It could be very interesting to see who tries to duck out of the tests.”

“That’s certainly a good idea, but you know how difficult it is to get anything organised at the club”

“But how could they refuse? No one would condone dealing and using at the club? Surely no one could possibly think it in keeping with dojo etiquette and safety to have people on ‘mind altering substances’ practising martial arts? At the same time Dad can get the drug squad doing searches of the dressing rooms. It would be in everyone’s interest in the end.”

“Well, of course, but unfortunately the Martial Arts do attract ‘names.’ - famous and influential people who like the image of Karate or Aikido - and there are powerful people at the club who do not want to lose their positions and if they think that a scandal is about to break, they will want to sacrifice the weakest members to the wolves, so Simon and his cronies might find themselves out in the cold.”

“If that’s true, they certainly are a dirty lot, all operating by thinking they have leverage on someone else. ... It’s like a Victoria Mafia isn’t it?”

“In this case perhaps Yakuza would be a more appropriate parallel!” he smiled at the analogy and then smiled again as he realised her voice was getting slower and slightly slurred.

“So far as the Caroline business is concerned, ...we will have to leave that on one side until we have some more information.” She paused as weariness caught up on her “... We don’t want to mess things up.” She yawned “... After all Simon would not have any reason for thinking that I was snooping on Caroline” She closed her eyes. “... he is too vain to

think that anyone would be snooping on anyone but himself” She leaned her head on David’s shoulder and mumbled snatches of the Carly Simon song “You’re so vain ...I bet you think this song is about you ... you’re so vain ...” As she hummed she ever-so-gently rocked her body as one would rock a baby to sleep. It was a childhood habit she slipped into at times of stress.

“That’s certainly true. So we’ll keep it all on the drugs level at the moment. I’ll sort out the club side and you will have a restful time in Italy, won’t you!”

“Sure” she yawned again. “Sure ... I’ll have a great rest ...” She fell asleep.

* * * * *

She woke up wondering where she was. Her neck was stiff and her stomach ached. As she opened her eyes she realised she was in the sitting room lying on her couch. The smell of coffee wafted over to her and she slowly remembered the night before.

David had a demonstration session booked in the afternoon so he could not take her to the airport. She had a cab booked. Mark was away for the weekend.

They drank coffee. David waited while she showered and dressed. He made sure she was alright and with the usual admonishments about being careful, which he knew she would totally ignore, he went on his way.

Lucia updated the web site, put her documents into her brief case with her laptop and some spare discs and closed her suitcase.

The cab was late and she had to ring the office to check on the driver.

“Premium cabs. How can we help you?”

“I had a cab booked on my account. Blackwell.”

“Oh yes, Miss Blackwell, this is Stan, I thought I recognised your voice. The car was cancelled”

“Are you sure? ... hold on a minute will you ...” The door bell rang. She crossed the room to the intercom and listened in without opening the door.

“Hello. Who’s there?”

“Cab ma’am - for Gatwick South”

“Would you mind waiting a minute please. I’m not quite ready.” What would she do? She glanced out of the front window and saw a green ford parked outside the front door. Must be him.

Back to the ’phone. *“Look, Stan are you absolutely sure you didn’t send anyone?”*

“No. It’s down in the book here. A woman rang late last night and said to cancel the cab because you were getting a lift”

“Well it wasn’t me and there’s someone downstairs saying you sent them”

“I don’t like the sound of that Miss. Hang on a minute and I’ll radio our cabs ...”

“No don’t do that - they probably have your radio frequency”

“Well don’t get in the car. There have been quite a number of young women attacked by bogus mini cab drivers. I think we should call the police.”

“Right. You do that. I’ll stay put”

She wondered if the phone was tapped too. Anyway if it was they would think she was still in the flat and she had no intention of sitting still. She grabbed up her bags and went down the fire escape stairs to the back entrance. Would they be watching her car? Best not to risk taking it. As she rounded the corner she glimpsed the cab waiting outside. ... Move fast before he gets suspicious.

She followed her jogging route to avoid being seen from the cab and reached the main road. Fortunately a black cab approached and she hailed

it to the airport. Should be safe. There were not many bogus black cab drivers. They were trained and well vetted.

The driver was chatty and she did not feel like talking. He seemed offended and she found she had to apologise saying she had a headache. Not like her to avoid conversation, she often joked about that being the English way. She usually enjoyed a gossip with cabbies and the like, but now she was increasingly concerned about who to trust. She was getting paranoid she was sure. Now she had even started to believe that the Citroen behind was following them.

* * * * *

Part Four

Lucia picked up a new hire car in Bologna and was back in her aunt's house by early evening. She had felt reasonably safe in the plane. After all a high jacking was unlikely! And the road down seemed clear of tailing cars. Why follow her anyway. By this stage they must have known where she was going.

Marcello called round just after dinner. His mother was visiting for a few days and he had taken her out for the day. He left her resting in front of the TV watching an Italian soap opera.

"Gelato?" Shall we go for an ice cream he suggested.

This is a regular Italian, after dinner pastime. It would also give them a chance to talk. They planned to walk round the gardens, talking in the open were they would not be eavesdropped on so easily by electronic listeners. ... Well, that had been the plan. Silvietta had other ideas. She heard the word 'gelato' mentioned and insisted on coming too.

"Gelato, gelato. I want an ice cream. Take me Lucia. Please!"

"It's a bit late, tesoro²⁷. Why don't you come with me tomorrow.?"

"No, No .. I want to come today. You went to see the Queen without me and now you can't go out and leave me at home again" She had heard that the Queen lived in London and thought Lucia was her regular acquaintance. She regarded the Queen of England as something like Father Christmas.

Lucia looked at Marcello *"Oh go on, it's alright Lucia, she can come if her mother let's her. We can get her an ice cream and then bring her back early"*

²⁷ tesoro - treasure

“Hurray, hurray, I’m going out with Lucia” Silvia sing songed and danced around the room. Her sister came in and wanted to go to. *“No, just me”* she pouted.

“Hey Silvie` that’s not very fair is it?”

“So?”

“Well we should think of Paula too don’t you think?”

“No, she went out with Daddy to see Bruno and he wouldn’t let me go, so now she can’t come.”

“Mamma had to wash your hair that’s why ...cos you had creepy crawlies in your ... awwwh” Paula yelled as Silvia hit her.

“Its not true... I hate you!”

“Children stop it!” their mother entered the room. She spoke to Lucia. *“Take them both out PLEASE. I just can’t seem to cope with them since Babbo died. They fight all the time.”*

“OK come on kids .. out! Ice cream time!” They followed Lucia like the children after the pied piper.

It took a while to decide what flavours were best but finally both children and the adult ‘kids’ were furiously licking giant cones to stop them dripping down their arms.

“Bet I can finish mine first” Silvia crowed.

“Look what I used to do when I was little” laughed Lucia as she bit a hole in the bottom of the cone and started to suck the ice cream through the hole. *“It’s a bit noisy”* she slurped *“But it stops the drips!”*

They reached the children’s playground as the last of the ice cream slid down their throats. *“Play time ... who can race me!”* Lucia jumped on a little bicycle built for a five year old. It was dark and nobody would see her breaking park rules by riding on the children’s toys. She reckoned the kids needed some light relief. *“See how high I can swing ... wheee. Sit on my lap Silvia. ... Come on Paula see if you can beat us!”*

“You’re just a child yourself aren’t you, Lucia?”

“Well, you wouldn’t arrest me for using the rides would you Marcello?”

“Just watch me ..” He climbed to the top of a slide and slid down face first. *“I’ve been dying to do that!”*

After a bit more rough and tumble and a short game of football with a discarded cola tin as a ball, the two bigger children sat down on a bench while the sisters played throwing stick boats in the fish pond.

“Don’t fall in” Lucia called. *“Zia Laura would never forgive me”* She turned to Marcello. *“They seem more relaxed now. Poor kids, they’ve been through a lot. ... I’m sorry Marcello, but I don’t think we are going to get much of a chance to talk tonight”*

“There’s always tomorrow. Let’s meet for lunch.”

“OK, but a light one this time please. My waist line as been complaining”

“Nothing much to complain about as far as I can see ...” They both laughed.

“Lucia! Where’s Silvia? She’s gone” Paula screamed.

“What do you mean? Where is she? Where did you see her last? Did she fall in the water?” Lucia fired questions as she raced round the pond, looked in the playground. *“Where could she be? We were right here! She can’t have gone. I didn’t hear any splash ... Did you? ... Marcello do something ... PLEASE”*

“Just a moment, calm down, she can’t have gone far. She must have just wandered off. Maybe she’s walked home”

“But she’s only four years old. Oh God!”

“Lucia, guarda! Look what I’ve got!” Silvia ran towards her from the road running alongside the little park. She was carrying a chocolate rabbit of the type being sold in the local shops in preparation for Easter a few weeks away.

“Silvia, where have you been? And where did you get that? I was so worried about you” Lucia hugged the child so hard that Silvia squirmed.

“Careful, you’ll squash my rabbit. But look the man gave me a present for you too.” She wriggled free and groped in her pocket. She had been to nursery school that morning and was still wearing her ‘grembiule’, a smock like garment that children wear at primary school. She had refused to take it off when she got home because she liked the colour and it had big pockets she could hide her secret treasures in.

She pulled out a small ornamental box. *“Look, he sent you a bonboniera, is it for when you and Marcello get married?”*

Lucia did not waste time blushing. The bonboniera usually held ‘confetti’ which are coloured sugared almonds and are given out to guests at weddings, christenings and other celebrations. White for weddings, blue for a boy’s christening, pink for a girl, silver for a twenty fifth anniversary and so on.

She opened the little box - it held black almonds. Grotesque. Un-heard of in that colour. Under the funereal sweets lay a small card. It read *‘How do you like the sweets Lucia? Wonder when you’ll be eating them next? White for a child isn’t it? ... Enjoy’*

She shook as she questioned Silvia. Was he referring to the white coffin that children are buried in? *“Which man gave you the sweets? What did he look like? Have you seen him before?”*

“Yes, I know him. He comes to the piazza at Carnevale²⁸. He has a big red beard and red hair and his tie spins round and he has got that ring that squirts water in your face ... and some flowers in his pocket and sweets for all the children”

“Are you sure? Did you see him with all those things tonight?”

“Well, not tonight, but I saw him with them when he was in the carnival fair”

“So what did he have tonight?”

²⁸ Carnevale - Italian Mardi Gras (carnival)

“Oh ...he had a hat so I didn’t see his red hair ...” she paused to think sucking on her thumb to aid concentration, “ ... and he was wearing his best coat I think because it was not all torn like last time. And his face was funny ... it looked like my doll ...”

“She means plastic I think ... I bet he was wearing a mask” Explained Paula. Then to her sister “You stupid girl going off with a stranger ... You are going to be in the biggest trouble ...”

“No I didn’t ... he wasn’t a stranger, he was Beppe the clown!”

“Don’t be stupid. He’s not real, he’s only on television. That man was dressed up to fool you. You are going to be in sooo much trouble ... You are! You are!”

Silvia started to cry ... first quietly and then a loud howl. *“Waaahhh I want Mamma, I want to go home!”*

“Baby!” Taunted her sister, *“Silly baby”*

More tears and howling crescendo-ing with rage and fear. Lucia hugged her.

“That’s enough!” It was Marcello who spoke this time. *“Now this is serious and we are going to have to go home and tell the police so let’s all stop screaming and fighting and get back to your mother, OK?”*

The children responded immediately, being unused to hearing his voice raised. They were somewhat awed and walked quietly and subdued back to the house. Marcello reported in to the office as soon as they reached a phone and asked for a police artist to come and take a description from Silvia.

The result of the artists work was more in line with children’s TV than with a police investigation. Beppe the clown smiled out of the mugshot.

“Well, I’ve been warned off” Lucia sighed. *“But I’m in a cleft stick now. Seems impossible to go back, and to go forward could put everyone in danger. Sometimes I think that I should leave it all alone ... but then I remember Nonno and I know he would not want me to run away.”*

* * * * *

Lucia woke early and drove over to Luigi's surgery. She wanted to use his computer to update her web site. It was her safety net and she had to keep it current. She struggled with the antiquated system and posted her changes. Unfortunately Luigi had no scanner, so could not paste images, but wrote a paragraph describing Beppe and the contents of the bonboniera. She would have to buy a connector for her digital camera and then she would be able to snap images of documents and feed them into Luigi's machine.

Bruno slept on her foot as she worked. A key at the door ... Bruno heard the sound and lumbered to his feet ... he loped to the door to greet Luigi, wagged his tail and slobbered on his hand knocking him with his bucket collar.

"Hey, steady boy" He patted the gentle giant and ruffled his fur behind his ears.

"I didn't know he was still here."

"Oh I don't think we'll ever get rid of you, will we Bruno" The dog barked assent. *"He can have his collar and plaster off in a day or two. The wound should be well healed by then. But I'm afraid that it's a case of good news and bad news. ... Some guest at the hotel complained about him."*

"Oh?" Lucia raised her eyebrows *"How could anyone complain about you, babe?"* She had jumped down from her stool and hugged the creature.

"Apparently the day before his accident, he crept under one of the dining room tables and sat down on the 'Contessa's' foot. It was not a smart move. She lives there now and she has been campaigning for Bruno not to return".

"Is that the same woman that Nonna Lina used to gossip about when I was little? Her mother said she was a countess but nobody believed her although she had all the airs and graces. Apparently she got pregnant illegitimately when she was in her teens and the family had hushed it up. She stayed in the house for months so that nobody would see her 'bump'"

and then they sent the baby off for adoption. Nonna called her 'Contessina', the little countess, as a joke."

"Well, not quite. ... This is the mother. She has bad arthritis and she is quite frail so Bruno is a bit much for her. When her daughter died, she was all on her own so she shut up their house and moved down to the hotel."

"So they can't offend their regular customer ... Poor Bruno!"

"I know that there was a lot of gossip about the daughter but she was rather a sad case really. She carried on being a recluse even after the pregnancy was over. She hardly ever went out, nobody saw her. She never did get married or have a family. So the two of them were just there on their own with a pair of servants coming to cook and clean. Over the last few years there was a couple in fact who looked after them, the wife was a housekeeper and the husband did the garden and worked as a handyman."

"That's sad. She must have regretted losing her baby all those years ago. Her mother sounds a bit of a bitch making her do that."

"Her mother might not have made her do it. Maybe she wanted to get rid of the baby herself ... we can't judge either of them. Anyway, they were not short of money and when the daughter died the 'Contessa' put some financing into the refurbishment of the 'Moderno'. She has a private suite on the ground floor leading off the garden. So she leads a sheltered life, looked after by the hotel staff and waited on as her 'position' deserves!"

"Don't be sarcastic. You ever know, she might be a real countess ... after all there were hundreds of minor Royals and aristocrats in Italy during the monarchy. What was her real name?"

"Oh I can't quite remember ... di Forti? ... di Fiori? Something like that ..."

"Is that di with a small 'd' ? If it is then that is aristocratic isn't that right?"

"Yes 'Di' with a capital 'D' is common .. but little 'd' is aristo!" He laughed. "So Bruno, old feller, you parked your bum on an aristocrat's foot eh?!"

“di Bum ...di Bum ... di Bruno” Lucia giggled as she pranced round the dog patting his back side. He enjoyed the fuss and started to play about.

“Hey, you two, stop horsing around, we’ll have customers arriving in a minute.”

“We’re not horsing around. We’re dogging around aren’t we Bruno baby” She laughed shaking his ears comically. Messing about was a relief from the tension of the previous days. *“Well Zio²⁹, I’ll be off now. What are you doing today?”*

“I’m only going to be in the surgery for a short while this morning. I have to try and get through the patients quickly which is a bit of a pain on a Monday when we are often quite busy. Gaspare has a prize bue, one of those big white oxen, that should go into labour today, so I’ll spend some time up in Cupo for the delivery”

“So Bruno will be on his own for most of the day. Can I take him out with me?”

“I don’t see why not. Just watch he doesn’t get the plaster wet. You have a key so you can bring him back when you want to.”

“Hear that Bruno? We’re going out! ...Yes you are, you lucky boy” She talked to him laughingly mocking the tone of a mother fussing and cooing over a baby. *“Can he have the collar off while he is with me? He should not chew if he’s interested in what he’s doing, should he?”*

“Oh, all right, let’s get it off Bruno, it should be OK now anyway. I was just being extra cautious keeping it another day or two” He spread the edges with his hands and slipped the collar over the dog’s ears *“I’ll have to sort something out for that dog. He needs a home. We have Pippa at home now and there is not really the space for two dogs and two children.”*

“You never know, I might end up taking him home with me to London. The quarantine regulations are going to change soon.”

Luigi put a choke chain type collar round Bruno’s neck and handed her a lead as she made for the door. *“Let’s go! you horrible hound”* She joked.

²⁹ Zio - Uncle

She stopped at the house to borrow an old blanket for the back seat so Bruno could lie down. As she walked out through the back garden she noticed some clothes hanging on the line. A pair of children's socks in the colour of the Italian football strip caught her eye. 'Must be Paula's' she thought, 'she's going through a football phase'.

"She won't mind us borrowing one, will she Bruno? Mustn't get your plaster wet." She shot back indoors and re-emerged with some tape and a plastic bag. *"Right, hold still. This is haute couture a la dog"* Lucia deftly slipped the plastic over the plaster, stuck it down and pulled the sock over the top fastening it down with another strip of sticky tape.

"Wow, knock 'em dead, Bruno. Real style. Eat your heart out, Giorgio" Referring to Armani of course.

The Mastiff almost looked proud as he raised his great feet, plodding towards the car where he regally set himself down on the spread out blanket. Had he been human, Lucia was sure he would have uttered 'home, James!' in true British aristocratic style.

They had another aristocrat to see today. But first some unfinished business ...

* * * * *

There was only one estate agent in the town. People in the area did not move much so there was not much business. Lucia wanted to know the price of property in case they sold Francesco's house.

"Look we don't get much call for country houses round here, Signorina. I told your mother when I spoke to her on the phone." Mauro Fazzi had been to school with Romina and had been rather disappointed when she left for England. *"How is Romina? I was so sorry to hear about her father. This is a bad time for the family, but it would be nice to see more of you all"*.

"She is bearing up. I think that at first she could not take it all in, and then she has been supporting the others. Laura has been in pieces and the children have been very difficult. Probably it will hit her worse when she goes home and she has time to think about things."

“Poor Romina. ...I told her that it would be hard to sell the house. It’s not a tourist area and people don’t come here for weekend cottages. Local families have their own properties handed down from one generation to the other”

“Surely there must be some people moving here to work in the paper mill or in the Mercurio factory?”

“Well, we don’t get many people settling here from other parts of the country, and if they do, they want to live in the centre of town , not half way up a mountain. Mercurio usually handle their own housing anyway because Mondini owns a number of properties and his workers are rented their homes. It’s not a bad idea for him. He gets the rents which are quite high and are deducted from the salaries to ensure payment and he keeps the title on the property”

“Is there nothing that the man is not involved in? He seems to have fingers in all sorts of pies. Is Corelli the same with his electronics plant?”

“Dio mio, No! He is quite a different type. The Corelli workers get a housing allowance and they can choose their own accommodation, buy or rent, completely independent. Corelli is a very fair man and pretty generous to his workers.”

“I’ve heard that he has some good ideas for this town and he might just put them into practice one day if he can win the elections”

“Well, Signorina, he will have to beat Mondini’s lot to do that. He is either a very brave man or a very stupid one to pit himself against such an opponent. He is the strongest man to come up for some time and if anyone can do it he can, but I would not bet money on his chances. Of course if he can start some of his schemes then there will be extra employment in the area and you may get a better price for your property”

“What sort of schemes? Are we talking long term or short term projects?”

“Well, there are school and college improvements which need teachers and building work - those would be quite short term. But I suppose that for his bigger schemes we are talking years.”

“For example?”

“Strade ... new roads”

“Oh, like the Rome road bypassing the town?”

“Yes and going through a tunnel. That will take some engineering and bring jobs”

“Oh not that story again! I’ve been hearing that one since I was a little kid.”

“We’ll see ... I wouldn’t mind betting that the tunnel will be a reality before the mil... ah before too long. I just realised that I always used to say ‘before the millennium’ but since that will be upon us at the end of this year, I had better update my prediction! ... But seriously, I thought that Bertoni was talking a lot of sense when he wanted to re-survey the tunnel”

“Who’s Bertoni?”

“The engineer. He got fed up and went back to Modena. ...Now there’s a nice piece of property. I would like to get my hands on that. He left his house and has not sold it yet. Must be trying to use an agent in the North. The place has been empty for over a year now so it’s losing value. I tell you, if you want a really nice place round here, you could not do better than to sell your farmhouse and buy Bertoni’s place. It would be a good investment but a lovely place to live too”

“Va bene, Right, I’ll bear that in mind. But for now I’m after a valuation. Can you come up and see it?”

“Let me see ...” He consulted his diary pretending to look busy. *“I suppose I could fit you in at three o’clock. Is that OK?”*

“Fine. And I may go up and look at the Bertoni place for comparison. Where exactly is it?”

“On the slope going up to the monastery of Santa Barbara. It’s the last house on the left just after the salame shop, you can’t miss it.”

“Famous last words ...”

* * * * *

Lucia rang her mother on her mobile and told her of the three o'clock appointment.

"But Lucia, Do we really have to go up there? After what happened to you last time, I did not dare to go near the house while you were away."

"Don't be daft Ma, you don't want those slime bags to keep you away from your own house."

"But that man might still be up there. They never found him."

"Well, if he is he must be frozen stiff or starved to death or both. It would be nice to think that was what happened not him, but logically, he must have walked home by now"

"So ...Fazzi will be there with us anyway so I suppose we won't be on our own." Romina reasoned with herself. *"Your father told me not to let you go to the house any more. ... You would think he would know his own daughter. I told him it was no use trying to stop you."*

"I'll pick you up at half past two, Va bene?"

"Si, Ok. Va bene."

Lucia started the engine and drove to the other side of town. Bruno was dozing on the back seat *"Not long now Bruno and you can stretch your legs"*

The 'Albergo Moderno' was near the centre of town. On one side it was built into the old town wall and on the other a piece of waste land cleared after bomb damage in the second world war had been converted into a small walled garden. From the outside it blended well into the medioeval architecture of the centre but there had been criticism of wasting prime building space on a garden. It was in this garden that Lucia found the 'Contessa' sitting reading her newspaper.

"Buon giorno Signora" Lucia introduced herself and covered the necessary courtesies as Bruno sniffed around his old haunts.

“I see you have brought that dog” The old lady grunted.

“I thought you might like to see him. He should be well enough to come home in a few days”

“This is not his home any longer. He was only here temporarily but it is quite obviously an entirely unsuitable location for a beast of his proportions. ... and habits” she added as Bruno watered a flower bed.

“I’m sure he could be trained better ... he is a very affectionate animal ... and ...” Bruno had lumbered up and licked the Contessa’s hand.

Interrupting *“No ... please don’t go on Signorina..? sorry I have forgotten what name you said”*

“Blackwell, Lucia Blackwell”

“Ah yes. You won’t mind if I call you Lucia. English names are so troublesome. But you are one of the Vincenzi aren’t you?”

“My mother is Romina Vincenzi.”

“Yes she went to England, ... I remember now” In the little town everyone knew everyone else’s business. *“England is a nice place I hear, I studied a little English once during the war to talk to the troops that were here ...and then later when my daughter was at school she chose English as her language so we used to try to practise together. She always wanted to go there but ...”* Her voice trailed off and she looked into the distance oblivious of even the dog who was now nuzzling her foot. After a few seconds she shook herself free of her reverie. *“Sorry I have strayed from our subject ... Aaah get off my foot!”* she yelled as Bruno parked himself.

“Sorry. He didn’t mean”

“It’s not what he means, it’s what he does. I’m sure he can’t help it but I cannot tolerate that animal here.” Lucia pulled him away and made him sit on the grass. He looked dejected but settled quietly.

“I think we had better go now. It was nice meeting you”

“Come again ... without the dog. I would love to sit and talk a little. Perhaps I could try to remember some of my English.” She smiled and looked Lucia full in the face for the first time. *“I hope you don’t think me harsh or rude. I don’t have many visitors. Why not come for coffee tomorrow?”*

Lucia had a million things on her mind and not much time for socialising. Normally she would have said no but there was something about the old woman’s expression ... something about her eyes. *“I will try to come. Can I confirm with you later?”*

“There is no need. I am always here. Nobody ever takes me out. If you are free, just come.”

“Arrivederci³⁰ allora”

* * * * *

The next stop on their travels was the Bertoni house. Lucia decided to see what ‘prime real estate’ constituted in the area.

It was a large detached house set in a small garden with a half wall and railings round it and a wrought iron gate. The gates were supported by two thick masonry pillars which were repeated at intervals along the boundary wall. She parked the car by the gate and tried the handle. It was locked. No obvious way in. A metal post box set into the brickwork of one of the pillars was overflowing with letters and circulars. The snow had been melted for some time now and the garden was visible, unkempt and neglected.

“Scusi, Signorina!” A woman approached from next door. *“Are you a friend of the family? I see you have Bruno with you.”*

Bruno barked and jumped up licking the lady’s face. *“Bruno, manners”* scolded Lucia. *“Do you know him”*

“I should do - he used to live here and we took him in when he was left behind”

³⁰ Arrivederci - ‘til we meet again

“Here? Bruno lived here?”

“Well, yes ... for a while. He was a tiny little thing when they brought him home from the breeders. I think they bought him from a woman in Perugia. You would not believe that a great thing like that could have been such a tiny puppy and how quickly they grow. You should have seen the size of his feet!”

“I can imagine ... look at the weight they have to carry now.” Bruno appeared to want to demonstrate the point by leaning heavily against the woman’s legs.

“Oh you’re up to that trick again, are you? Always after contact and wanting a cuddle” She patted him. *“I expect he got like because he missed his family. I couldn’t believe they would leave him behind”*

“And then you took him in?”

“Yes. I thought the family would come back for him. The little girl, she adored him. Was always playing with him in the garden and when he was very small she even put him in her doll’s pram and paraded him around like a baby ... old softy loved all that ...” She ruffled Bruno’s ears.

“So they left suddenly?”

“Assolutamente³¹! Very suddenly! ...It was an odd business you know. I saw Rosa, that’s Signora Bertoni, in the garden in the morning when I was hanging out my washing ...it was a Tuesday , I usually do my washing on a Monday , but it had been raining ...” She was a woman who obviously enjoyed her opportunity to gossip. *“Then she left to take the little girl to nursery school. ...It’s only at the bottom of the hill so she usually walked. She had the baby in his pushchair. That’s little Aldino³², he was eighteen months old at the time. And the little girl was walking beside her. That’s the last time I saw them.”*

“They never came back?”

“Well, I don’t know about that ... I went out to take some lunch to my mother who is in the hospital ...she likes my minestrone for her lunch ... I cook it nice and soft because her teeth are bad ... and she wanted me to

³¹ Assolutamente - absolutely

³² Aldino - diminutive of Aldo

stay with her because the doctor was coming down from Ancona to see her. So I did not get home until about seven o'clock ... I was so tired .. I was pregnant with Mina ... that's why I had to let Bruno go you know, when Mina was born".

"So you didn't see any of them?"

"No, they must have left that afternoon, I suppose. It was dark when I got back and afterwards I thought 'were there any lights on?' - you know how you sometimes don't think about these things at the time. But looking back I think maybe not. No lights. No Bertoni".

"Gone, Just like that!" Lucia snapped her fingers and the woman nodded in agreement.

" I was a bit upset actually that they had not bothered to say good bye. You would think they could have said something. They must have planned it for a while because their furniture was all gone. But they never even left a forwarding address. I collect the post every so often and I have it all in a big box. There's less of it now because I suppose people give up when they don't get any reply. "

"Well, it does all seem strange, I agree. I came to see the house because I heard it was empty and I was wondering if it is for sale. The estate agent does not have any details."

"Would you like to see inside?"

"How .. break in?"

"No .. I didn't mean that." She laughed. "I have a key. Catterina gave it to me to go in and feed Bruno when she was out. When he was a puppy he needed feeding about five or six times a day and she was very concerned that he get the right nutrition."

"Well, she couldn't have been so concerned when she abandoned him. ... He would hardly be expected to get the right nutrition on the streets!"

"Doesn't make sense does it? Wait a moment Signorina and I'll get the key. By the way I'm Catterina" She extended her hand to Lucia who shook it warmly.

"Lucia eh Vincenzi" She decided to bypass the English explanations.

“Ooohh Vincenzi I was so sorry to hear ..”

Mistake. Lucia cut her short *“Yes, it was a bad business. I’ll wait here for you.”*

Her tone gave a clear message that she did not want to talk about it. Catterina bustled off and returned promptly with the keys.

“I always feel a bit odd coming in here with it empty. They used to be such a lively family. ...In fact I only came in once ... it was a week after they left, to see if there was any dog stuff left behind, ... but when I got as far as the kitchen it felt so creepy that I turned right round and went back out again. I bought Bruno new things”

“Any idea why they might have left?”

“I think he may have had some problems at work, but I’m not sure. He used to talk to my husband sometimes and apparently he never liked the politics here, thought they should keep out of his affairs. He didn’t agree with Mondini and I think he rubbed some people up the wrong way That Mondini is a pig in my opinion, but who wants to know my opinion.” She snorted as she completed the rhetorical question.

They spent some time looking round the house while Bruno conducted his own search of the garden. Catterina was reassured by Lucia’s presence. The furniture was gone but it was a hurried move. Here and there the odd discarded toy or book lay on the floor.

Lucia opened a kitchen cupboard. *“Smells musty .. they didn’t bother to take all the food by the looks of it. Some of these bits must have gone bad.”*

“I haven’t opened any of the cupboards. I assumed they were empty. Whoever buys the place will have to give it a really good clean. That smell is pretty disgusting.”

“The bedrooms are quite big aren’t they ...and they have modernised with these built in wall cupboards.” Lucia was standing in the centre of the master bedroom.

“Yes, it saves having those big heavy wardrobes like we have at home. There’s plenty of room inside” Catterina opened one as she spoke. *“I*

suppose the disadvantage is that you can't take them with you when you move."

"Looks like there are other things they didn't take with them when they moved" Lucia had walked across into a second bedroom as she spoke. She was standing in front of a wardrobe filled with a child's clothes.

"But they are all Mina's clothes!" Catterina gasped. *"What will she be wearing in Modena? Here is her favourite little dress that she wore at Christmas and her spare grembiule for school and ...oh her little shoes and"* Catterina could have gone on for ever inventorying Mina's clothes.

"Look Catterina this looks bad. Let's come back later with someone who might be able to look into this."

Catterina missed the point. *"How could those parents leave like that and forget to take their little daughter's clothes ... and her pet. I used to think they were nice people .. but to treat a child like that."* Her eyes filled up and she wiped her face with the edge of her apron. *"I must get back to my baby"* Mother's empathy. Thinking of one uncared for child reminded her of another. *"Here. You can have the keys for the moment. Come back when you want. Give them back when you have finished .. I don't want to come here again"*. She scurried off to her baby.

* * * * *

By the time she got to the restaurant Marcello was looking at his watch and feeling very hungry.

"Lucia, any longer and I would have eaten the tablecloth."

"Sorry, I got involved in a few things and time just ran away with me. I've got all sorts of things ..."

"Shhh ...get time to run back with you. No time for long stories. We can talk later. Now let's order and have something to eat." He had meant to sound humorous, but there was an edge to his words. What was that about?

They were placed near the back of a crowded trattoria just of the main square. The lunch time set menu catered for local business people and those who did not want to bother to cook in the middle of the day. Most businesses and all the shops closed from one 'til four leaving time for a leisurely meal or a siesta. Marcello ordered the set meal and Lucia decided to stick to antipasto³³ and a salad.

He kept the conversation mundane and her frustration mounted as he kept changing the subject whenever anything of importance was mentioned. *“Let’s just relax and enjoy the meal. Let yourself become in tune with the mood of the old square and breathe in the atmosphere of Italian food, wine and conversation”*

They were having precious little of that. What was he on about? - he was talking crap, she thought. *“This is the sort of place where cultures meet ...”*

“Are you sure you’re not ‘on something’ Marcello?”. Lucia was confused.

He was unstoppable *“Here you can meet your companions, a farmer, a shopkeeper, and ordinary people like us can rub shoulders with famous men, politicians ...”*

“Ok Marcello. Enough’s enough. Just eat and talk later when you have got your brains back. It’s my fault, I suppose. I kept you waiting so long for your food that your brain has suffered from hypoglycaemia³⁴. Don’t strain yourself trying to talk” She was sarcastic, but as she launched into her speech she realised what he was saying.

The waiters at the next table were being particularly attentive and she realised that the guests were none other than Senator Carlo Mondini and some associates. She had not seen him in the flesh before but knew his features from his photographs in the newspapers. Slumming it here, she thought, among the common folk. Putting good people off their food.

They did not linger over their food. Marcello told the waiter he was in a hurry to get back to the office. As they left their path took them past the adjoining table and Mondini raised his eyes enquiringly to Marcello. He liked to know of anyone new in town.

³³ Antipasto - hors d’oeuvre

³⁴ hypoglycaemia - low blood sugar

“Good afternoon Signor Mondini” Forced politeness. *“May I introduce Signorina Blackwell. She is visiting for a few days.”* He kept to the English although he knew the connection would be made. It was a cat and mouse game.

The barest of reactions from the old man but a lunch guest dropped his spoon in his soup and it splattered across his shirt and jacket. Lucia picked up a napkin *“Let me help you with that”*

The middle aged man cursed under his breath and said *“That won’t be necessary”*

Lucia took no notice. She succeeded only in spreading the stain further as she wiped his jacket vigorously. *“Sorry, I seem to be making rather a mess of this.”*

“Just leave it ... please. It is quite alright ... it was an old jacket anyway.”

“Oh I am SO clumsy, ... I’m sorry but I seem to have knocked over your little game” She apologised as her arm caught on a neat line of stecchini³⁵ balanced alongside his plate. She stopped and stepped away from the table. *“Oh dear, I have some soup on my sleeve too now. Excuse me a moment please.”* She walked to the cloakrooms leaving Marcello to exchange a few guarded pleasantries with the group.

As she returned, Marcello took her arm to guide her to the door.

Mondini addressed Lucia with studied false charm *“Scusate Signorina Blackwell”* He had the name perfectly for someone who supposedly had heard it for the first time. *“My son seems to losing his manners today. I do hope that officer Gastaldi will not keep you hidden away. This town can never have too many beautiful young ladies.”*

As he finished his sentence, Lucia felt Marcello’s grip tighten on her arm. She winced trying not to show that he was hurting her. Once outside and out of hearing distance she complained *“What was that for? You hurt me”*

³⁵ Stecchini - wooden tooth picks

“I’m sorry, I just could not bear that scum talking to you and eyeing you like that.”

On another occasion Lucia might have joked about male jealousy .. but this was not one of them.

“Let’s get out of here” He was upset. *“We need to talk”*.

* * * * *

It was difficult to know where to start, there was so much information to share and it felt as if there was nowhere safe to go to talk. *“Let’s take your car. It’s less likely to have been got at with a listening device.”* Marcello suggested.

“I was going to propose that anyway because I’ve got Bruno in the car. He seemed quite happy there so I left him asleep while I came to meet you.” The car windows were totally steamed up by the dog’s heavy breathing. Lucia opened the doors and let Bruno stretch his legs for a few minutes while she aired the car.

She passed Marcello a piece of folded paper. *“There’s a present for Fabrizio. See if it matches his wolf hair fibres. When I pretended to go to the toilet, I actually pulled some hairs out of the cuff of one of the coats on the rack at the back of the room. It looked like wolf pelt to me. You know those fur coats are very expensive. You don’t see them very often and I would think it would be Mondini’s or perhaps his sons.”*

“Right I’ll get it to forensics right away but of course we won’t be able to use it in evidence because it will not have been collected in correct form. However if it is a match, then we will ‘officially’ get another sample.”

“And did you notice ... the stecchini ... his little obsession of lining the toothpicks up ... like the dominoes were lined up at the house?”

“True but we can’t really arrest someone for lining up toothpicks. However much we might want to!”

“Look” began Lucia as they got into the car *“I was supposed to go up to the house with my mother to meet the estate agent and I was going to suggest we go up there to talk. But something came up this morning that could be urgent and I think maybe I should show you that first.”*

As they drove up to the Bertoni house, Lucia filled Marcello in on the story. He looked worried as she talked. *“We might need to get more officers up to look at the place ...and forensics. This sounds bad ...really bad.”*

“Well if you feel that way too, I can see this is going to take some time. I’ll ring and organise for Mum to go with Fazzi on her own. He can pick her up and I’m sure he’ll jump at the chance of having her to himself!” She made the necessary phone calls on her mobile as she drove.

Marcello looked on disapprovingly *“Have you never heard of a ‘hands free’ unit, young lady. You’ll have an accident if you carry on that way!”*

“Might even hit a Carabinieri, eh?!”

Bruno became animated as they neared the house, in anticipation of familiar haunts. *“He was just prowling round the garden before. Let’s leave him there while I show you the house. I don’t think he’ll do any damage.”* Lucia waved to Catterina as she spoke.

Catterina watched apprehensively from her kitchen window as they entered the front door. Marcello followed Lucia as she guided him around the rooms and showed him her finds. He frowned and sucked his teeth as he thought about possibilities *“Careful not to touch too much in case we need to fingerprint. Although I would imagine that we won’t get anything useful here with dogs, children and a lot of coming and going when the house was occupied.”*

“We didn’t finish going through all the rooms because Catterina got freaked out ...” They continued through an unremarkable bathroom, third bedroom and another nondescript room. Then downstairs again. A study sized room, large open plan living space with sliding glass doors for subdividing.

The unpleasant smell still wafted through the building. A door at the back of the kitchen area led down to the cellar. Lucia struggled with the lock which was stiff. *“La cantina!”* she yelled triumphantly as the door yielded. Her attempt at high spirits was needed to lift their mood. Lucia felt uneasy as they descended the stairs and she was not reassured by the increasingly strong smell emanating from the lower level.

No self respecting Italian house is without a 'cantina' - cellar. It is the best place to store wines, meats such as salami or hams, to mature cheeses and even to do your own brewing or preserving. The temperature tends to be fairly even throughout the year and before fridges became universal this was the only place to keep things cool in summer.

The fast move had meant that a number of things had been left behind in the cellar. A set of garden furniture, a work bench with some tools, two 'damigiane' big demijohns of 'Verdicchio' the local wine, a sealed up trunk, an old freezer against the far wall, a liberal sprinkling of dust, spiders and cobwebs ...and a dreadful smell.

Lucia moved swiftly to the freezer and flung it open before Marcello could stop her. "*Oh ...it's empty*" an anticlimax. She had expected a gruesome find and had steeled herself against what might be inside.

"Be careful. Let's do things in an orderly way or we will mess up evidence." Marcello warned. *"Of course Lucia, we must remember that we have no evidence that there has been any criminal activity here and we are strictly trespassing in someone's house. At the moment all we know is that they left suddenly and have not been in touch with the neighbours, but that's no crime and there may be a perfectly logical explanation here."*

Lucia promised to tread carefully as she turned her attention to the trunk. "Well?" she coquettishly asked.

"Well what?"

"Well are you going to open it or shall I?"

"It is sealed. We could be damaging property."

"Well, you could always arrest me!" She pulled at the tape stuck down over the lock.

"Aspetta, wait. Give it here. If we are going to open it we had better do it properly." He produced a Swiss army knife from his pocket and slit the tape along the edge. The lock was broken and the tape was the only fastening.

“See, it’s not locked so we can always seal it up again if necessary.” Lucia was almost elbowing Marcello aside as she peered into the trunk. *“Oh this suspense is killing ... what is making that smell? It must be in here.”* A zip up plastic bag concealed the contents and she lost no time in stretching out her hand past Marcello to open it up. It revealed ...

“Clothes!” The tension relieved Marcello gave a little laugh.

“What? Just clothes?” Lucia could not hide the disappointment in her voice. She turned over some carefully folded garments to look at the lower layers. Marcello turned his attention to the work bench as she dejectedly examined the clothes.

“Here I’ve found the source of the smell.” He held his nose as he peered inside the work bench holding the wooden door beneath open with one hand. It was a heavy door which swung shut as soon as he let go.

“There’s a dead cat inside with kittens. Looks like it could not have been dead long ... probably went inside to have it’s kittens and the door swung shut and trapped it. Died of hunger I imagine. The family left about a year ago so it’s nothing to do with that”

“ It probably was their cat though, hanging round it’s old home. It could have come in through the air vent. Poor thing ...I won’t look, it will upset me.”

“Knowing you, it would upset you more to look at a dead animal than to find the Bertoni in the freezer” He chuckled.

She was not listening. *“Marcello”* urgently *“Do you realise what these are?”* she pointed at the clothes. *“I’ve found the children’s christening clothes and a wedding dress in here. Now, I’m sorry but nobody goes off and leaves those things behind. My brother wore my grandfather’s christening robe when he was baptised and my mother has still got her wedding dress packed away in mothballs. You just don’t part with things like that!”*

“Hai ragione. You’re right. But we still don’t have any proof of wrong doing. Let’s get put of here and go and see you friend next door. We need to look at the letters and see if we can get a forwarding address or contact their family.”

Catterina was only too pleased to hand over the box of post. Marcello would examine most of them at the office but he took a cursory look first. *“There are a lot here with the same handwriting and a Modena*

postmark. Could be family.” He slit the edge of one of the more recent envelopes to look at the contents. He looked serious and read a piece out loud. “Figlio mio, My son, why don’t you answer your mother’s letters? If I have done something to offend you I am sorry. Just tell me that you are well and that little Mina and Aldino are doing fine. I miss you and pray that you are safe. Each day I say a rosary for you and for the little ones. I love you always, Mamma”

There was no address, nor on the other three that Marcello opened. He sighed deeply and looked at Catterina. *“I may be able to find an address from the phone company. The post mark is for a frazione³⁶ of Modena so there should not be too many Bertonis in the same area. Permessso?³⁷ ...”*

“Si, Si, Yes of course, the telephone is in the hall” Catterina pointed the way. She returned to sit in the kitchen with Lucia. She picked her one year old off the floor where he was playing with a wooden spoon and hugged him so close it must have restricted his breathing. He was her hold on reality, on stability. *“Madonna mia. What can have happened? Such a lovely family ...and to think I may have misjudged them ...”*

“It’s better not to think...” Lucia stroked the woman’s shoulder as she started to convulse with sobbing.

“But, if I had called the police again, If I had insisted that they investigate... I only reported the dog being loose. Nobody thought anything was wrong ...”

“Now now, calma, don’t torture yourself. Your information has been very useful. ... Let me make you a coffee.” Best to concentrate on practicalities thought Lucia.

“Oh .. I’m forgetting myself. I’m such a bad hostess. Let me do that. Do you think the signore would like some too? Please hold Leonardo a minute”. She passed her the baby.

Marcello returned some time later looking sombre.

“Oh, your coffee will be cold, let me warm it. ... Oh no, ..that will make it taste bitter, I must make fresh.” Catterina fussed trying to divert herself

³⁶ Frazione - suburb or outlying village within the jurisdiction of metropolitan area

³⁷ Permessso - please - may I?

from noticing his mood and from hearing bad news. Denial can be a wonderfully protective gift.

“It does not look good I am afraid to say” Marcello spoke slowly not wanting to alarm un-necessarily “ ... *but we will have to investigate this further Signora. I will come and speak to you again when your husband is at home. An officer will come and take statements from you both and we will be making some searches next door. We will try not to inconvenience you. ... If I could keep hold of the keys for the moment ..”*

“Yes, yes certamente, keep the keys as long as you need. Georgio is usually home at six o’clock now he is on shift at the cartiera³⁸, the paper mill. ... But he can get off earlier if you need him.”

Marcello took her phone number and contact details and wished her good day. Lucia handed back the baby and made reassuring noises. They walked back to the car.

“E` brutto³⁹ ...Bad news. The mother was not at home but I spoke to her maid who was really eager to find out about the family. Seems the old lady lives on her own and has no other relatives except a daughter who emigrated to Argentina. Nobody has heard from Aldo Bertoni or his wife since last year when they supposedly went back to Modena. I also made a quick call to the tax office and they have not had any returns from him for last year or this ...”

“... so wherever he is he is not working.”

“...Then I rang the questura in Modena and asked them to look into things at their end and see the mother. It’s best for her to talk to someone face to face, she could get very upset on the phone. In fact it’s a good job she wasn’t in ... if she had been I was going to make up a story ...”

“God, we forgot about Bruno!” Lucia exclaimed as she saw the empty blanket on the back seat. *“Bruno! Bruno!”* She called, running through the gate.

“I expect he’s been having fun doing some damage” Marcello sarcastically remarked. *“Ah, yes. Here he comes covered in mud. You’re not going to have him in the car like that are you?”*

³⁸ Cartiera - paper mill

³⁹ E` brutto - it’s bad

“It’s only its paws. He’s been digging. Oh Oh the plaster looks a bit ragged. Luigi will murder me.”

“Perhaps a bad choice of words in the circumstances”

“Sorry, slip of the tongue” She rubbed the dog’s legs on an edge of the blanket. *“I should have brought some rags. ... Hey there’s something in his mouth ... Give it to me Bruno ... come on ..”* She had to hold his jaws open and reach into his mouth.

“Yuk, rather you than me!”

“Oh I’m used to it, I’ve always had big dogs. We had Great Danes at home.”

“Good job they’re docile!”

“Hey look it’s a doll’s head. I thought it was a ball to start with. Where did you get that from Bruno? Go on show me boy ... show me ... go fetch ... play ...” She leaped around animating the dog and trying to get him interested in a search. She pretended to hide the head behind her back and play peek-a-boo with it while she ran into the garden.

Marcello looked on bemused. *“You’re crazy”*

Bruno barked and chased Lucia round the garden. Then when he realised she was not going to relinquish his trophy, he turned to look for another one. He cannoned over to the far side of the plot knocking over a rusted child sized pushchair, presumably the one in which he rode as a puppy, decimating a row of rotting pea stakes and disappeared from view behind a pile of planks. Lucia ran after him.

“Marcello! Quick, come here.” Urgent tone now with the playfulness gone from her voice.

“Where are you?”

She emerged from behind the wood *“You need to see this”*

She held Bruno and stood back pointing to the ground. At the edge of the pile Bruno had disturbed the earth and knocked over some planks. Some pieces of a doll stuck out where Bruno had pulled the head off to play. Marcello carefully removed some more wood and stacked it to one side. Something was stuck to the far end of the doll.

“Keep the dog off. This is evidence now. I’m sorry to say that looks like decayed flesh attached to the doll’s leg. We will have to get a full team in and go through this place meticulously a millimetre at a time.”

“So you are saying that little Mina was holding on to the doll when they killed her?”

“It looks very much like it”

“Bastards ... Come on Bruno.” As she led the dog back to the car tears were running down her cheeks.

* * * * *

The forensic team and police photographers were the first to arrive. Marcello wanted Fabrizio’s opinion as to the human flesh sticking out of the wood pile and they needed to photograph the scene before any more wood was moved.

Having done that they removed the planks covering the doll and revealed a gruesome find. First the little girl’s body, then her baby brother. It was hard to see that they were bodies in fact - they looked more like bundles of rags. The clothing was somewhat rotted but otherwise intact but the flesh had almost gone. A year of flies and decomposition had seen to that. Little Mina’s body was missing part of one leg probably from rodents. The adults were not to be seen.

Marcello reckoned that the children’s bodies were easily hidden under the planks but that they had not wanted to risk putting the adults there. A larger body would have been too noticeable.

So where were their parents?

* * * * *

After the grisly find of the children's bodies, Lucia and Marcello had left the officers to their search leaving instruction to be called if anything came up. Needing some space to talk, they drove to Umbria on the other side of the mountain chain and made for a quiet restaurant in a small village where they could eat leisurely and exchange information.

They still had the dog with them but the restaurant owner did not mind him and brought a plate of scraps for him to eat. He wolfed them down and fell asleep under the table. He too was tired from his long day.

Marcello listened intently as Lucia unfolded her story of her investigations in London. He was horrified at her break in and Daniels' attack on her.

"Look Lucia we know that this is a very dangerous and convoluted business. The more we investigate, the more people seem to have lost their lives. We don't know why the Bertoni were eliminated, at this point I am assuming they were, and we don't know exactly how the London business links in with what is going on here. But whatever the truth of the situation, we know we have desperate people here who will stop at nothing to achieve their own ends. You really must think about your own protection."

"I have been thinking about my protection, but I can't just stand back and leave these murdering bastards to walk all over me"

"But Lucia, you must admit that there are also some other points that indicate that our adversaries are powerful and far reaching. The break in at my office and the planting of listening bugs there. Not just anyone can break into an office in the Questura ... it takes some pull ... possibly political clout. Now my bet is that this smells of Mondini ... but we have to gradually gather proof and that's not going to be easy."

"What I can't understand though is why Mondini is going to such trouble to do all these things. My grandfather was a simple farmer. Politics were something alien to him. I did nothing but ask some questions about his death. Bertoni by all accounts was a conscientious engineer just doing his job. Why have we all come under threat?"

“Let’s go back over some of our facts.” He took out a biro and started jotting notes on his paper napkin.

“Just a moment, I’ve got a piece of paper in my bag. The serviette will tear.”

“Right”, he said starting again “In 1947 Rebecca Hillman dies. She is found hanging in suspicious circumstances. Jewish treasure missing. In 1954 Giancarlo Mondini’s plane blows up ... again suspicious circumstances. Hints of some kind of revenge? Carlo inherits. Next year the mother is killed. This time a strong message - linked to Hillman. My investigations confirmed that the tattoo on her wrist was Hillman’s camp number, not many people would know that - points to revenge for stealing the money and killing Hillman. Now probably that chapter of events is not directly linked to the present but someone picked up on the devils sign , the 666 and copied it in getting his or her own back on their enemies. Could be Carlo”

“... or now it could be his son ... what’s his name?”

“Guido ... yes it could be Guido doing his father’s dirty work. Carlo is too old to do much of the physical work but he is very firmly behind all this. So it looks as if it may have been Guido. We have your theory about the habit of lining things up when he is three dimensional ‘doodling’. We have to type the fibres from his coat and we have the possible button match from the cuff to check out. All a bit loose as yet.”

“So Guido could have pushed Tosti off the cliff after his father discredited him and made up the story about the rent boys. He carved his chest to warn people from getting in his father’s way. And he probably did the same to Nonno Checco - that’s what his mate meant by ‘your art work’ when I overheard them arguing”

“Right, what else do we have? Precious little in terms of concrete facts ... a lot of suspicions. What were they looking for in Francesco’s house?”

“We have the Mondini : Van Stockert connection and in London we have the dubious charity dealings, the money paid to Sabrina Donaldson’s advertising agency and we have the suspicious death of Donaldson himself.”

“The only link with Francesco seem to be the newspaper cuttings he had. Why did he keep cuttings about Van Stockert and Mondini.? Did he know

something?” Marcello tapped the pen against his teeth as he thought things through.

“So perhaps they found out he knew something ... and then thought he had kept some evidence and were looking for it to cover their backs?”

“Yes but why now? He had known about all that for twenty odd years. Why bring it up now? They could have searched him, or silenced him at any time. Was there anything that he might have mentioned to the family that was worrying him in the weeks before he died? Anything that might give us a clue to why this business , whatever it might be, resurfaced?”

“Not that I know of ... I’ll ask the others. I don’t know if Zia Laura would know anything. She seems to have been closest to him in his last months.”

“The business of the diamond watch is also odd. No doubt that will become clearer with the passage of time. Tomorrow you could perhaps phone your secretary and see if she has any news. ... And we have to find the Bertonis”

* * * * *

Lucia woke to a darkened room. She was accustomed to waking early but hated the winter and early spring days when the sun rose after she did. What time could it be? No clue from the shadows on the wall. And what day was it? Good grief could it be Tuesday? She could not believe it was only Tuesday. What had she been doing the previous day? How did she cram it all in?

On her way home she had dropped Marcello at his car and left Bruno at the surgery for the night. Now she returned there before Luigi started work and used his computer again. There was a lot to add to the web site and she wondered if David had looked at it or if he and Mark had broken the agreement to leave it alone unless something happened.

It worried her to think about who it might have been who had followed her to the airport and she wondered if her father would be safe. Well, yes ...why not? He had not really been involved in all this.

It was too early to ring Peggy because of the difference in time zone so she decided to have some breakfast first and wandered down to the square for a coffee and bun.

Something drew her to walk into the bar of the 'Moderno' which was not one of her usual haunts. There at a corner table sat the Contessa enjoying a croissant and morning cappuccino.

"Buon giorno⁴⁰, Signorina. How lovely to see you again." The old lady smiled with genuine pleasure.

Again there was something about those eyes thought Lucia. ...

"Or perhaps I should say 'Good Morning' if I want to practise my English" Her accent was stilted but not bad for an Italian. In general Italians do find English pronunciation difficult. *"Come and join me please. ... Gianni! Bring us some more coffee and paste⁴¹"*

They talked as they ate and gradually the Contessa became more comfortable with her vocabulary and the language started to come back to her.

After forty five minutes Lucia rose to leave *"I must be going now. It was very nice talking to you."*

"A great pleasure. Please do come again"

"I look forward to it, Signora ... I'm sorry but you know that I don't know your name."

"How rude of me not to say. The problem with this town is that you get so used to everyone knowing everyone else's business that you imagine everyone knows your name. Amelia di Fiori - La Contessa di Fiori in fact although I rarely use the title nowadays." She held out her left hand which bore a wedding ring. *"You see our family crest on my ring. It is a 'fleur de lys' design, a lilly, a little like that of the French Royal family crest - but in this case it stands for 'Fiori' ... 'Flowers' you say in English."*

⁴⁰ Buon giorno - good morning

⁴¹ paste - cakes or buns

“That’s interesting. It’s nice to be able to trace your family like that. Well I must run ... See you soon then.” In English ... then *“Arrivederci”* The old woman was nicer than she thought. Funny how people acquire a reputation which can go unchallenged for years.

Lucia walked back to the surgery where already a queue of assorted animal customers was forming outside. She let herself in and asked Luigi if she could use the phone in his small study. He was working on Bruno’s leg.

“Lucia, I presume you are taking Bruno again today. I won’t ask what he was up to yesterday ... The plaster was a real mess but luckily the wound has healed over so I thought it best to take the cast off completely. He should be OK now but please do try to stop him digging with that foot.”

“I’ll try my best ... but you know what he’s like. By the way, no chance of returning to the Moderno I’m afraid ... I asked the Contessa and she won’t hear of it”

“What? You actually took on the old battle axe?”

“She’s not a battle axe actually, she’s quite a sweetie underneath it all”

He raised an eyebrow as she walked to the study and closed the door. She rang the solicitor’s office

“Peggy, is that you?”

“Bennett and Bennett, can I help you?”

“Peggy?”

“I’m sorry Madam. You must have the wrong number.” Lucia explained who she was *“Oh, I’m sorry ma’am, I am from the agency. The regular secretary is off sick this week”*

“OK never mind, I’ll ring her at home. Any messages?”

There was nothing urgent. Lucia gave brief instructions on how to deal with a couple of queries and hung up. She tapped out Peggy’s home number.

“Hello Lucia.” A weary voice. “Sorry I did not see you on Friday. I’ve had a few problems to sort out”

Lucia was not sure if she wanted to get into this. Peggy’s problems could take for ever to talk through. But would she be up to giving Lucia the information she needed if she did not give her rein with her agenda first? She decided she had to risk delay and jump in. *“Sorry to hear that Peggy. Is everything alright now?”*

“Not really ... in fact not at all ...” tears *“I’m glad you rang because I need to talk to you about it ...I thought I should speak to you first , before I did anything.”*

“Right, so what’s the problem?”

“It’s difficult to talk about” loud sniffing *“I don’t know why people do these things. ... It’s my Tommy ...”*

“Yes? Is he Ok?”

“You know he started going to that kid’s self defence class at your club?”

Lucia had thought it might give him self confidence and help him come to terms with his fears. *“Yes, has he injured himself?”*

“No, it’s no that ...it’s ... well the instructor ... there’s this bugger ...” She hesitated not being able to get her words out. Unlike Peggy. Then she launched in with a rush. *“Well, my Tommy said that this bastard started touching the kids in the class. He was coming up behind the older boys in the shower and ...you know, ‘trying it on’ . Tommy said he had tried to touch him up when he was getting changed ...once when he was late coming out ...and my boy ... I was proud of him really...”* sniffing again *“Tom, he told him to bugger off ... he shouted ‘Push off you f’ing ponce’ as loud as he could so as to attract attention. Clever of him wasn’t it?”*

“So he left him alone?”

“Yes, he did then.”

“You mean he’s done it again?”

“Well not with my Tommy ... But, on Thursday night it was. ... On Thursday night the scum bag had kept one of the boys behind for some

extra coaching ... everyone had gone home but Tommy had left his bus pass behind in the changing room ... so he went back ... and he caught him at it”

“What? Oh my God!”

“Well the bastard had the kid pinned to the floor and he was face down on top of him. My Tom ... My Tom ... My Tom can't stand any of that stuff ... cos” She choked on her tears.

“Take it slowly, Peggy. I understand. We've talked about Tom's problems and how he feels about violence to kids ... and remember I know about the teacher who assaulted him when he was little. You don't have to explain...”

“Yes, of course ... you know ... Anyway Tom saw this bastard on top of the boy. He got so angry ... He grabbed up the fire extinguisher and hit the guy on the back of the head. I think he may have knocked him out, the bloody thing is heavy ... anyway he was certainly stunned. Then Tommy grabbed the kid's legs and pulled him out and they ran like bats out of hell all the way home.”

“Sounds like Tommy can handle himself ... even at his age ... I'm impressed!”

“He's sharp, my boy, you know he set off the fire alarm as they went out ... smashed his hand through the glass ... to attract attention so the bastard would leave them alone.”

“So is he alright now?”

“Not really. Well, he's got a bad gash in his hand but that will heal up all right ... Now he's scared stiff that he might have killed the guy 'cos he never saw him move after he hit him ... And he's afraid to go back to the club. Both of the kids are scared to tell anyone and they're even more terrified that if the bastard is still alive, he might kill them cos they know his game”.

“Well, so far as having killed him, I can reassure you on that point because I almost did the same on Saturday. He came on to me and I kicked him in the balls ...twice in fact . Looks like Simon Daniels had a bad week!”

“Tommy will be pleased to hear that” Her voice was stronger now.

“So far as reprisals go, that could be more serious though Peggy. This guy really is a scum bag. He has to be dealt with and the kids need protecting. Ring my friend David and he will sort all that out and get the police on to it. He was going to talk to my Dad about this guy anyway.” She gave Peggy the details of how to reach him.

“Thanks Lucia, I’ll do that. And thanks for talking .. I feel a lot better now. Especially hearing how you hit him. Hah!”

“Felt good to me too”

“One of the reasons I felt extra bad was because I had been out myself on Thursday night. Tommy was supposed to be staying with a friend of his who lives down the road. He was going there after his lesson and stay the night. He sometimes does that when I have a night out. He goes to school with his mate in the morning. I didn’t know what had happened ‘til I got home on Friday afternoon. He had gone home on his own and stayed there”

“Well you weren’t to know Peggy”

“That’s right. Otherwise I would have been there for him.”

“Of course ... and I’m sure he knows that.”

“Yes, yes he does. I stayed out ‘cos I met my friend , you know the one who was getting me the information. He took me to dinner and then we talked for ages ... and ...well in the morning we made lots of phone calls” She conveniently missed out the night stop over ... Lucia chuckled silently at the other end of the phone. *“ And we went to see people in the know ... it was quite exciting really.”*

“So you found something out?”

“DID WE!” She emphasised the words triumphantly *“I’ve got so much to tell you!”*

Lucia hoped Luigi would not be waiting for the phone. *“That’s marvellous, Peggy”*

“So ...” She gathered herself ready to launch into her tale. “First of all there’s the Helena Foundation charity ... that’s the one with Helena Van Stockert and Belinda Moore and Sabrina Parker as the trustees ... you remember I told you that already?”

“Yes, Peggy, I remember”

“Well as we said, they have not done anything at all for years. In fact I’m surprised they were not liquidised or whatever you do with inactive charities”

“You mean liquidated don’t you?”

“Yes, that’s it ... liquidated. We managed to find some old stuff about them and apparently they got money from the sale of some old masters which were donated by Helena Van Stockert ... and the money was donated to a small home in Deptford which looked after about a dozen young women.”

“Sounds a bit strange ... what young women?”

“Now this is interesting ... My friend has a mate who was a beat bobby in Deptford ... he’s long retired ... but he remembered the home and we think he might be able to remember a couple of girls’ names. We only managed to speak to him on the phone so far ... and he remembers the place because he used to get called out quite often ... apparently the girls were a bit wild and there used to be some fights ... he said it was a sort of refuge place for abused girls and some of them had been ‘on the game’⁴² ... It’s quite likely that if we get time to talk to him face to face he might have some more information”

“Odd thing for Helena Van Stockert to be involved in don’t you think?”

“Well I don’t know about that ... but it seems it might have been fairly much a personal thing because it seems nothing much has happened since she died and the home has closed down.”

“Well thanks Peggy, that’s very helpful”

“Hold on, there’s more!” Peggy sounded offended

⁴² on the game - prostitute

“Sorry, Peggy. I didn’t mean to cut you short. You must have been working really hard.”

“Well, yes, it was quite tiring ...” Fishing for praise. *“Now this was more difficult ... the porn : prostitute theme continues in a way... It’s that other company we found in Long Island ... you know, ‘VS Productions’. Well, they are into making adult films ... really dodgy stuff if you ask me!”* She sighed and took a deep breath as if trying to decide whether to say something. Then, resolved, she continued. *“You know, Lucia, I don’t like to ask questions ...but it seems to me you are somehow tied up with some very unsavoury characters here and I just hope you know what you’re doing?”* Peggy spoke partly from concern and partly from a need to find out the ‘juicy’ details as a reward perhaps for her investigative prowess.

“Look Peggy, I’m immensely grateful to you ... I do know this is a nasty mess and there are some pretty awful characters crawling out from under the stones we turn over, but I am trying to be careful and although there are things I can’t really talk about now. ... I will tell you the whole story eventually ... I really will.”

“Well, that’s OK then. You watch your back!” She breathed deeply ... *“Right, so this film company ... as I said it makes porno stuff, videos and things like that. It’s registered in Long Island but trades through Amsterdam as far as sales go ... that gives you a clue to the content doesn’t it?”*

“Yes, the main traffic for paedophile videos and films is through Holland. I dare say that Van Stockert is originally Dutch with a name like that”

“I think so ...anyway his name figures as one of the directors .. and then there’s a Leo Morrison and a guy called Walt Moore”

“Moore again! So let me see, Helena’s companion was called Moore ... Things might be coming together at last ...”

“Getting back to this film company ...” Peggy seemed impatient with the interruption *“You know, I just can’t believe how much my friend ...by the way his name is George ... I just can’t believe what contacts he has ... and influence”* She sounded genuinely impressed and somewhat infatuated.

“You must thank George for me, Peggy ...”

“I will ... So, the film company ... They did try to make an adult feature film in 1954 ... it figured in the company returns because it was a big expense and they put it down as a tax loss. It flopped in a big way. I suppose they thought it would be an ‘Emmanuelle’ type of film ... but it was before it’s time and one of the actresses was found to be under age. So there was a scandal and the director ... this guy Moore was nearly jailed.”

“Sounds like he saw himself as the porno Walt Disney!”

“Well there was a lot about it that we read in the back copies of the New York papers on the internet ... George has got a really fantastic computer at his place ... so Moore got away with it because the Morrison guy was a bent cop.”

“Any idea who the actresses were ?”

“Their names were all in the news articles ... ” Tantalising her now ...

“So ?” Lucia’s impatience mounted.

“Lucia” Luigi put his head round the door “Will you be much longer? I will need to use the phone in a minute to order my supplies”

“Oh Sorry, I won’t be a minute”

“Ok ...I’ll come back in five minutes.”

“Sorry Peggy, I’m using someone’s phone and I have to ring off soon ... quick tell me the rest”

“Alright then” Peggy seemed a bit offended by being asked to hurry over her news. “The actresses were ... now I’m reading you what I copied down from the article ... it says ‘ the so called star of this ill conceived ‘turkey’⁴³ is Helen Farmer, 21 who it is rumoured is set for a modelling career as long as she can keep her clothes on for the catwalk. ” She read ponderously and irritatingly slowly ... but at least Lucia had time to jot down a few notes.

“Her co-star with whom she shared some intimate scenes which thankfully the public at large will not have the pleasure of seeing, is the

⁴³ turkey - flop

untalented and somewhat badly cast 17 year old Belinda Moore, child bride of director Walt Moore, who might in future do better to take a male role in her husband's future productions. The under-aged girl at the centre of this scandal cannot be named due to reporting restrictions imposed by the court but it is rumoured that the 15 year old London girl who has fled back to her family, was previously known to Moore who spent the greater part of World War Two imprisoned in London for desertion."

"Wow, wonder who the girl was ... bet she came from Deptford. Looks like Helen Farmer changed her name to Helena when she married Van Stockert. I suppose he was the financial backer..."

"He's not actually mentioned at all"

"Probably paid to be kept out of it ..."

Luigi opened the door *"OK sorry, finished"* Then to Peggy *"Look Peggy, I've got to go. That was great. I can't thank you enough. Listen... I hate to ask but if George is wiz at the computer ..."*

"Oh yes , he certainly is..."

"Well if it's not too much bother ... do you think you could ask him to email me the information and copies of the articles that you got off the internet?" Lucia knew Peggy would regard this as a challenge.

"Of course we will ... speak to you soon"

"Thanks again ... and love to Tommy" She gave her the details of Luigi's email and hung up.

* * * * *

Marcello was waiting outside the Questura when Lucia picked him up. She filled him in as she drove. It had become burdensome having to continually find somewhere safe to talk. Marcello did not trust his office, his home or his car to be bug free and he did not want to tamper with them and alert the opposition.

They drove up towards the Monastery of Santa Barbara with Bruno patiently waiting on the back seat and thinking of his walk ahead. It was a nice place for a walk with lots of open space free of listening devices and this morning the air was warming up nicely under a bright spring sun.

Lucia stopped the car just below the Bertoni house at a small bar where they stocked up on some rolls and buns which would serve as a picnic lunch. As they passed the house on their climb, the garden was cordoned off by police tape and several assorted Carabinieri vehicles stood outside.

“They haven’t found anything else yet” Marcelo remarked. He had brought a police radio with him today and had asked to be kept informed of any developments.

A team of officers had already spent more than twenty four hours going over the Bertoni property without coming up with the two missing adults. Had the parents killed their own children and run off? Not likely to take the furniture. Someone definitely had wanted it all to look innocent and pretend they had moved. So where was the furniture?

Gattini, Marcello’s superior officer, sent groups of Carabinieri to raid furniture stores and depositories throughout the region without success. The call went out to enquire after any unusual lorries in the area at about the time of the disappearance and for anyone noticing dumping of large amounts of property. Marcello asked for copies of all complaints about illegal dumping of rubbish to be forwarded to him.

“I have been wondering why the Bertoni should be targets. It must be something to do with that road scheme with the tunnel that he was promoting.” Lucia suggested

“Probably. I wonder where it was supposed to run.”

“Nonno used to joke about it going under the house but I think the test tunnel was dug higher up because it was more of a shaft to test the type of soil, to see if it would support the tunnel and if the roof would be likely to fall in. I always got the impression that it was somewhere above the monastery”

“I tried to get the plans from the Town Hall but they were not filed where they should have been. Someone has removed them by the look of things.”

I'm going to have to request a duplicate copy from the regional office in Ancona."

"That's very suspicious isn't it? ...But why don't we ask the monks? If there was digging up near the monastery I bet one of them knows about it. Monks are always very inquisitive about such things. They can't resist a bit of nosiness... I dare say it relieves the boredom of monastic life!"

"It's not supposed to be boring you know, they are supposed to fill their empty moments with prayer for the likes of us!" Marcello laughed at her irreverence.

"Well, it would bore me to tears! ...Changing the subject slightly, will you be able to look up some information about Belinda Moore? It would be interesting to see what her maiden name was ...and maybe you could get some information about that under age actress in the porn film."

"I can get to the Interpol information with the various access codes that I have but I don't want to use my terminal in the office here in case it's being tapped. I'll have to go down to Ancona for that. So that's two things I need to go there for."

They had reached the monastery and let Bruno stretch his legs on the grass to one side while Lucia found a dry spot for them to sit and eat a roll. As they ate they looked out over the hillside and were able to glimpse Mediano nestled in the valley beneath. Francesco's house was not quite visible from here hidden by an outcrop and by the densely wooded slopes.

"Lucia!" A voice calling jolted her momentarily. She looked up and saw a rather unfit Franciscan friar ambling towards her.

"Don Virgilio, nice to see you. Are you staying up here?"

"Not on a regular basis, I live at the school house in town most of the time, but I'm up here for a few days sorting out some affairs for one of the brothers who died recently. Padre Patrizio. Did you know him?"

"I've heard the name, but I don't know him."

"The oldest inhabitant of Santa Barbara. He was ninety three last birthday. Sad really ... he had a stroke two years ago and was not really able to do much after that. He was such a good man. The old fashioned

sort of holy man who never believed in the evil there is in the world and always saw the best in everyone.”

“I suppose that’s a good way to live these days” Interjected Marcello, “It’s sometimes better not to know about some of the dreadful things that go on.”

“Well in your line of work you must see the worst of people.” Don Virgilio shook his head. “I have enough of that in hearing people’s confessions. ... I’ll be up here for a few days now. ... The bishop asked me to inventory the valuables up here and check up on some of the monastery affairs because he thinks that now Padre Patrizio has died we might have to close the monastery. There are not enough new people coming in and the friars are a dying race it seems...” He stopped to think about what he had said and then brightened up “Would you like to see round the Church?”

“Yes, thank you. I’ve never really seen inside” Lucia accepted the invitation and Marcello nodded agreement.

Don Virgilio was a competent guide and animated historian. They were soon steeped in stories of past Abbots, visits from Popes and tales behind each painting and relic. He proudly showed them the cell which was his home when he first arrived as a novice to the order and the side chapel which was rumoured to have been the oldest part of the building and possibly frequented by St Francis himself during one of his visits to the area.

“You know the story of him speaking to the wolf of Gubbio? Well that’s just a few miles away from here and we think he probably visited and helped to build our first chapel. ... Now I’ll show you another interesting thing ... you know about all the Jews who were hidden in Marche to save them from the Nazis? Well, we have a hidden chamber here where many of them were kept until they could be moved out to safety.”

He led them behind the altar and down some steps leading to the crypt. To one side was a heavy marble tablet describing the death of a seventeenth century abbot.

“Here. This is a secret opening. The Latin inscription and general appearance makes people think that it is a gravestone ... but in fact it is a way out to the secret room and passage ... see Lucia - do you remember your church Latin?” She grimaced, hoping he would not ask for a

translation. “ *Here ... ‘Benedictus qui fugit in nomine Domini’ .”* He traced his finger across the chiselled letters. “*Blessed are those who flee, or escape, in the name of the Lord ... and the second line ... ‘Deus perducatur vos ad lucem’ ... God will lead you to the light. Clever don’t you think? You would imagine it means ‘heavenly light’ but it actually means the light above. The chamber has a little passage and trap door up to the fields above the Church”*

“*Can we see inside?*” Lucia had the eagerness of a school child. Anything involving secret passages or old sealed chambers had always excited her. She would have made an excellent modern day female Indiana Jones.

“*I don’t suppose that door has been opened for thirty or forty years. It will be completely stuck I would think. I remember going in there when I was a young boy. That’s when I used to be altar boy before they let me become a novice. Let’s see... I must have been about twelve ... so it would have been about 1947 ...just after the war. There was nothing in there after the last escapees moved on.*”

“*Oh, let’s try and open it ... it would be so good to see a secret room ... Please...*”

“*Well if the gentleman would like to try? But don’t imagine you will find St Francis’ bones or anything like that Lucia ... it’s empty”*

Marcello looked long sufferingly from Don Virgilio to Lucia and back again. He could see there was no getting out of this ... even the old priest was looking expectant.

“*What do I do ...just push?*”

“*You can slip your hand into the hollow behind the rose moulding in the top right hand corner and it will swivel down like a latch. Then the door can be pushed and it pivots on the centre. I remember that it was not as heavy as it looks - It’s only a thin marble sheet mounted on a frame. ... but it has not been used for so long...*”

Marcello felt the latch opening with his fingers and the moulding swivelled fairly easily. “*So far so good ... Ok now ... Lucia you push me as I push the door. Then we will have more momentum. On three ... One, Two, Three ... HEAVE!*”

Momentum they did not need as the door swung open suddenly catapulting them into the dark dusty interior. Lucia landed comfortably on top of Marcello who swore as his knees grazed the stone floor.

“Per l’amor di Dio!⁴⁴ My goodness, are you alright?” Don Virgilio fussed around, helping them off the floor.

“It certainly looks as if that door has been opened fairly recently. It gave way as if it had been oiled and regularly maintained.” Marcello rubbed his knees and dusted off his trousers.

“Yes, and it’s not exactly an empty room is it!” Lucia pointed to the walls which were lined with packing cases and boxes covered in dust sheets. There were strip lights visible hanging from the ceiling and a cursory examination of the wall near the door revealed a fairly modern light fitting. *“Let there be light!”* She cried triumphantly as she threw the switch.

“I don’t understand” Don Virgilio scratched his head. *“What are these things? This room was empty. These boxes do not belong here”.*

“Well let’s see what they are” Marcello pulled off a sheet and tore at a brown paper package. *“Looks like paintings ...”*

“I can’t quite get this case open, but I bet it contains antiques ... this is a cache of smuggled art treasures I’ll be bound!” Lucia was struggling with a metal band around a wooden case.

“Right. We had better not touch any more. I’ll have to call in some officers and also the Guardia di Finanze⁴⁵ if it turns out to be contraband. There are a lot of rumours about remote churches such as this being used for illegal art trafficking in these mountains. God there must be millions worth here.”

“You don’t mean millions of lire do you?” Lucia joked sarcastically

“No, course not ... millions of dollars ... or your sterline ... pounds sterling”

⁴⁴ Per l’amor del Dio - for the love of God

⁴⁵ Guardia di finanza - customs officers

“I will have to report this to the Bishop. I am sure these things do not belong to the monastery ... Oh I do hope there will not be a scandal, I would not like poor Padre Patrizio’s memory to be sullied by this, ... this ... Oh I am so confused...” Don Virgilio wrung his hands in distress. He was an honest man who was not comfortable with crime and disorder.

“Don’t worry yourself Don Virgilio, I am sure there will be an explanation. Padre Patrizio most probably knew nothing about all this.” Lucia reassured him.

“I’m sure that must be the case. He would never be involved in anything dishonest. If he knew these things were here he would have declared them as possessions of the Church and they are certainly not in his inventory.”

Lucia decided to stick her neck out. *“How about the other friars? I understand there was a Don Angelini up here.”*

“Don Angelini? No I have never heard of him. As I said we are a very small community here ... there was Padre Patrizio, Don Paulo, Fratello Amato, Fratello Giordano and we usually have a handful of novices. Giordano returned from Africa seven or eight years ago, he travels a lot to missions all over the world. Paulo is on a visit to the Vatican library with some school children who won an essay competition and Amato is in hospital in Loreto at the moment. He has lung cancer and has gone to be healed by the shrine of the Black Madonna. So no Angelini ... Are you sure you have the right monastery?”

“Well I think it was here ... although one address I had for him was ‘Church of Peace’ here in the Marche region” Lucia recalled the beneficiary of Charity funds. Marcello continued to look around the room and seemed to take no notice.

“There is no Church of Peace that I know of”

“So there was never a Don Angelini? Not even say twenty years ago? Do you remember anyone with a similar name, perhaps when you were a young man?”

“There was never a ‘Don’ Angelini ... not a priest ... but I do remember a novice called Angelo some years ago. He never finished his training. The poor lad was a deaf mute and he used to help around the place. It was when we used to use the north wing of the monastery for the sisters.

We had some sisters of Santa Chiara⁴⁶ who ran a small infirmary.” An aside ... “You know she was San Francesco’s⁴⁷ dear friend? ... It catered mainly for women who were recuperating from long term illness or operations and I seem to remember that there was only one patient here when Angelo was around”

“When was that then?” Lucia attempted to pin him down.

“The place closed down ... let’s see ... when was it? Ah, now let me think ...you were a baby ...I remember your mother coming up here with you to have you blessed by the sisters when she first brought you from England ...that was when you were about a year old and the sisters left a year later”

“I was born in 1974”

“So the Convent closed completely in 1976. The last sister stayed to care for a woman patient who had damaged her face in an accident. And Angelo used to work there.”

“What happened to him? Did he leave?” Marcello seemed to prick up his ears and take notice. He belatedly joined in the conversation.

“I’m not sure about that. He may have gone to Assisi when the last sister returned to her home convent after we closed. It is probable that the Church cared for him because he had served the Convent well.”

“Can you enquire after him please, Don Virgilio. I have a feeling that he plays an important part in this puzzle.” Lucia wondered at Marcello’s change of attitude. He seemed almost too interested in this rather small part player.

“Certainly” Picking up on the urgency. “I will get in touch with Assisi right away.”

“Just a moment, aren’t we forgetting something?” The two men looked enquiringly at Lucia. “What about the passage? Don’t you want to look at it?”

⁴⁶ Santa Chiara - Saint Clare

⁴⁷ San Francesco - St Francis

“Oh the passage.” Don Virgilio had forgotten about it in the excitement. *“Well. The entrance should be at the back of the room. There used to be a wardrobe pulled across the opening and then a door behind it. The door was not so well hidden from this side because one would assume that an intruder would not actually find this room anyway.”*

“Ok ... so who is going to move the wardrobe?” Lucia asked.

“No need, Lucia” Marcello pointed to a fairly obvious small door in the shadow cast by a large wooden wardrobe. *“Looks like someone moved it already”* He tugged at the door which failed to yield. *“Must be stuck. Perhaps it’s warped with the damp from the outside”*. He heaved harder and braced his body against the wall to put his full power into the pull. *“I’m sure it does open inwards ... one more pull”*

Lucia added her strength and Don Virgilio, despite his frailty, held her round the waist and pulled her too. The door groaned and gave way a fraction making a scraping sound and letting dust into the room. *“Again! It’s shifting!”* Lucia yelled as they put all their strength into another attempt. This time the door moved inwards six inches cascading a pile of soil, dust and rubble into the room. *“Oh no! It looks as if it has caved in. I wonder if it’s just a small amount of earth or if it’s completely filled in”*

“Looks pretty solid to me, although I can’t see beyond the dust cloud!” Choked Marcello coughing violently. *“I don’t suppose anyone’s been through there for a while.”*

“Where does it lead to? Maybe we can explore it from the other end?” Lucia did not want to be cheated of an opportunity for exploration.

“The passageway from here comes out in the old cemetery area just behind the monastery Church. They arranged it that way in the old days because they thought people would be afraid of the ghosts of the dead monks and not poke around to find the entrance among the gravestones. There is not much left of the cemetery now, just some uneven ground and a few fallen slabs hidden in the grass. One of the slabs covered the entrance. It was never intended to be easily found. It was an escape passage for the monks long before it became an escape for the Jews.”

“Perhaps someone was trying to get out into the tunnel from here and so they moved the cupboard. But then they could not go any further because of the cave in” Lucia suggested.

“Perhaps. Or they may have just been poking about to see if there was an alternative escape route if they were surprised in their activities or if the police came up here. The cave in is probably not complete but I don’t want to be a human mole this morning Lucia” Marcello dusted off his jacket as he spoke.

“It’s a pity about the earth movement, but I’m not surprised ...there was a lot of vibration when they did the trial digging for the road tunnel.” Don Virgilio remarked.

“Oh, where was that?” Marcello began to wonder if her might avoid a trip to Ancona to retrieve the plans.

“I don’t think I could say exactly after all this time. They did a trial dig. Somewhere in the scrub land above the monastery. The shaft was not deep. I remember them digging it when I was in my thirties so that would be ... just a moment ... I remember ...it was the year your parents were married Lucia.”

“1970?”

“Yes - nearly thirty years ago. They came up with survey equipment and a drill mounted on a big lorry and sank a test thing down into the earth and pulled up samples. They had a tent at the edge of the field and I watched them a few times. They were there for about a month on and off, digging a bit and then drilling. The cave in must have been caused by the shaking.”

“So could you find the opening?” Marcello hoped Don Virgilio’s memory would be jogged by his stories.

“I doubt it. It was a long time ago. The tunnel entrance was never very obvious because there are bushes and vegetation and the ground is uneven and there are a lot of hollows.”

“That’s the same round by Nonno’s house you can be walking down a grassy slope and suddenly you fall into a hole. These mountains are riddled with caverns and little pot holes. Now it might look just like another small cave.” Suggested Lucia.

“I only saw it once or twice and since then the bushes have grown up. There are some big junipers that cover some of the cave entrances very effectively.”

“It is amazing how these things can be hidden - I suppose you heard about the boys from Ancona who were exploring the hillside above Frasassi and quite accidentally found a small hole under a bush which on further examination led to them discovering the biggest cave in Europe! My parents took me there when I was little and there were queues all the way down the mountain - it was such an amazing find.”

“Quite ... but you’re digressing again, Lucia”. Marcello was beginning to realise he would have to get the plans from Ancona after all. “Lets stick to the point. Is there any way of finding the tunnel entrance from up here?”

“Unlikely. One of the survey people told me that they were going to sink an access shaft which would provide an air duct to the centre of the road tunnel when it was finally built. But then they suddenly stopped work and left ...apparently the funding had run out ...but the surveyor had told me things were looking promising ... they thought that the work might go ahead within the next year or two.”

“Apart from money - have you any idea why they might not go ahead with it?” Marcello was curious.

“ Well of course things get delayed and then they stated talking about it again a couple of times ...but then when it was raised again in 1976 the official report was filed saying that the soil was unsuitable. Which is not what they had said originally”

“Ok ...time for action!” Lucia sprang to her feet “I’m going to have a hunt round the field with Bruno while you two have phone calls to make.”

* * * * *

It didn’t take Lucia long to realise that she was on a fruitless mission. Bruno enjoyed a rough and tumble run around the pastures and then flopped tired on the monastery forecourt with his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

Don Virgilio had more success in his quest. Angelo was still living with the sisters of Clare tending the garden for them in Assisi. Marcello had

organised for the officers to come and check out the antiquities and paintings.

“Look, it won’t take long to get to Assisi from here on the back roads. Why don’t I go with Don Virgilio to speak to Angelo while you go to Ancona?” Lucia suggested.

“No, I need to speak to him myself ... and you would have to take me back for the car anyway.”

“I can run you back to town and drop off Bruno - there will still be time to ...”

“NO.” Marcello was unnecessarily abrupt as he cut her off in mid sentence. Seeing shock on her face he added “Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap, but I do think Angelo’s part in this could be important and I want to be in on the questioning.”

“OK so let’s go together then”

“Look, I can go on my own later”

“Hey, just a moment” She jibed “I discovered him in the charity returns ... he’s my witness”

“Well, maybe I’ve stolen him away from you. He’s mine now.”

“Children, there is no need to argue.” Don Virgilio interceded, “If you wish me to accompany you to see Angelo we will need to go now because tomorrow there is a special day of prayer for Padre Patrizio so I cannot leave the monastery”.

“Right that settles it, we will have to get going.” Lucia called Bruno to the car and settled him in the back pushing him to one side to make room for the priest. “I hope you don’t mind being slobbered on a bit”

“Well rather you than me” Marcello laughed.

* * * * *

It was getting too late to make the diversion back to Mediano to leave the dog or pick up Marcello's car so Lucia drove quickly into Umbria and along the Assisi route. It was nearly three thirty when they arrived outside the convent and Don Virgilio asked for admittance at a side entrance where he spoke briefly to a sister through a metal grille.

"The sister says that we can see Angelo for a few minutes in the library but that we should not keep him long because he gets upset by strangers."

They made their way through an ancient cloister to a tiny walled garden at the far side of which stood a stone building with huge oak doors. A smaller door was inset in the large panel and Don Virgilio swung this open to enter a darkened anteroom. To the right of them lay the entrance to the dimly lit library. The walls were lined with manuscripts and books and several tables also groaned under heaps of papers. Don Virgilio cleared a small table under a dusty window and they sat to wait for Angelo to appear.

As he entered the room he looked enquiringly at Lucia who smiled her warmest smile of reassurance.

"Buon giorno Angelo ..." Don Virgilio stood and shook Angelo's hand. He spoke first enunciating his words carefully and making sure his face was in the light where Angelo could see him and lip read. *"Do you remember me?"* Angelo looked him in the face and a glimmer of recognition spread across his worried features. *"It was a long time ago, I was a lot younger then. Remember Santa Barbara?"* Puzzlement. Perhaps he had not understood. *"Santa Barbara"* He emphasised every syllable.

Angelo nodded and smiled as Don Virgilio motioned him to a chair.

"No-oe-on -e-e-n-d-o"

He made an attempt at the words 'non sento' - I don't hear - but produced a barely intelligible sibilant-less phrase as he pointed to his ears. He was profoundly deaf but could distinguish some sounds and combined with lip reading he managed to comprehend the basics of what was said to him. Understanding his replies might be more difficult.

Marcello pulled out a notebook and sat back leaning against the panelled wall. He decided to leave the questioning to the friar in the first instance.

“*Si, I know, don’t worry*” Don Virgilio would use gesture as much as he could. Angelo never learned ‘official’ signing and was barely literate so message writing was not a good proposition. “*These people have come to see you because they are interested in your work at Santa Barbara.*” he pointed and acted out his words.

“*Aa-nn-a Ah-a-a*” He nodded smiled and pointed to himself.

“*Si, you were at Santa Barbara and helped the sisters, le Suore⁴⁸.*” Nods all round. “*And you did the gardening*” Gestures of digging copied with nods by Angelo. “*And you served the food*” More gestures of eating and carrying trays ... followed by more nodding and mimicking.

“*This is going to be hard work*” Lucia interjected. Angelo turned to her confused at hearing an indistinguishable noise. “*Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt ...*” She smiled at Angelo.

“*Ee-y-l-aa*”

“*I think he means ‘bella’⁴⁹*” Don Virgilio explained.

Lucia took up the subject. She stroked her own face and repeated ‘bella’ ... then added “*Santa Barbara ... Brutta⁵⁰?*” She screwed up her face as she tried to indicate ugliness and drew her thumb across her cheek simulating a scar. The woman they were looking after was apparently scarred.

Angelo looked confused as Lucia repeated her mime. Don Virgilio joined her in trying to explain. He pointed to Lucia and mouthed “*Bella*” and then looked questioningly while mouthing “*Brutta?*”.

Lucia then decided to motion as if a patient was lying down. She cleared a wooden bench and stretched out while the priest attempted to pretend to be looking after her and tending to her face.

Eventually a dawn of recognition ... “*Aahh*” nodding “*D uu-u-eh*”

⁴⁸ Suore - sisters - nuns

⁴⁹ Bella - beautiful

⁵⁰ Brutta - ugly

“Well he seem to have understood something ...but what is he trying to say? Sounds like ‘due’⁵¹ or did he say ‘donne’ women?”

“It must have been ‘donne’ there was only one patient at the convent.” Don Virgilio decided to try a different approach. He held up one finger and pointed to Lucia who was still lying down on the bench pretending to be a patient. *“Una donna, one woman”* he swept his hand along the length of her body *“Ill”* He then held his head in his hands and simulated pain.

Nods and laughs as Angelo joined the play acting. He copied Don Virgilio’s actions regarding the woman on the bed. While making sounds to punctuate his actions.

“Uu-a-a-ah” He pulled a face as if trying to say the word ‘brutta’ ugly. He then rumaged in his pocket and pulled out a grubby handkerchief which he lay over Lucia’s face.

She cringed. *“Don’t move, play along with it”* Marcello urged her from the shadows behind Angelo.

“It’s disgusting” She held her position.

Angelo continued to act looking after his patient with the cloth on her face. He then walked to the other side of the room and Don Virgilio was concerned in case he was leaving. *“Where are you going, Angelo”* No response.

Angelo returned to the ‘bedside’ He whisked the handkerchief off Lucia’s face to her relief, and raised his eyebrows as high as he could in a comical attempt at ‘surprise’. He held up his hands and looked skywards.

“Ahhh!” Amazement. *“Ee-y-l-aa! ... Ee-y-l-aa!”* He shouted.

Lucia sat up and recapped. She pulled a face and pointed at herself saying ‘brutta’. Nods. Then covered her face with her hands as in a children’s game of peek-a-boo ...she removed her hands and said ‘bella’ acting surprised. Nods and laughs. Yes this was it. *“So it looks as if this woman patient had some treatment.. she looked ugly when she came in and then looked good afterwards. She was bandaged during the transition. It’s like an ugly ducking story isn’t it?”*

⁵¹ Due - two

Again from out of Angelo's perception "*Sounds as if she had plastic surgery. It would be interesting to find out who she was.*" Marcello spoke in a matter of fact tone and seemed to have lost his previous urgency. Had he not heard what he expected to hear?

Angelo was fired with his acting prowess and gestured as if he had big hips and a fat face. He blew up his cheeks and waddled across the floor. He then stopped and theatrically motioned a 'hey presto!' type of gesture followed by a mincing gait, sucked in cheeks and he motioned curvy hips.

"Ah so miss 'ugly' went to the convent fat, and ungainly and scarred and came out thin, beautiful and healed." She enacted a reprise of Angelo's actions as she spoke. Angelo nodded along until she motioned the scarred face at which he shook his head.

"Right Angelo, so she was not scarred" To the others *"If she wasn't scarred then she must have been having plastic surgery. I think you were right Marcello."* She wondered at his disinterest. He had been so insistent to handle this himself. He just sat taking notes and looking disappointed.

Angelo grabbed at her hair *"Owch, what are you doing. Get him off"* He let go and then grabbed up a swatch of faded gold coloured paper from an adjacent desk. He pointed furiously from one to the other. *"Oh I see, she changed her hair colour too!."*

"What about the money. I want to know if he was paid. Has he got a bank account." Marcello reminded them.

"Soldi⁵²" The priest rubbed his fingers together in the common gesture for money. *"Did she pay you?"* Acting again.

"I-ie" Could be 'si' - as he nodded and rubbed his fingers against his thumb.

"How much? Is it in the bank - banca?"

"Aanh-ha" He repeated the word and ran from the room.

"Looks like we've lost him" Marcello yawned. He had been getting little sleep and was not looking forward to the long drive home. *"I expect he stole money and now he's afraid we will find out. At least you did not*

⁵² Soldi - money

refer to me as the police otherwise we would not have got anything from him at all”

“I’d be surprised if he stole anything. He has no concept of money. He has lived in the convent atmosphere all his life”

“I don’t mean to be rude Don Virgilio, but I would find that really spooky. Especially here. Marcello, did you know that they actually have the mummified body of Santa Chiara, saint Clare, lying in state in the main Church. They say it has been preserved all these years. When I saw it as a kid, I thought it looked like Bates’s mother in Psycho. It was all black and mummified - you can see it through a glass case. Good grief it’s been there about a thousand years”

“A slight exaggeration Lucia, but it is very old. .. Look here is Angelo”

Angelo bounced triumphantly into the room clutching an envelope which he thrust at Don Virgilio. He nodded vigorously encouraging him to open it.

“It’s a bank book in the name of Don Angelini” Angelo proudly pointed to himself as the name was read out. *“He obviously thinks it is his name - he was never very good at reading.”*

“That was the name of the beneficiary of the various charity grants. Angelo must be a millionaire by now.” Lucia exclaimed

“Does he look like a millionaire to you?” Marcello drew attention to Angelo’s ragged appearance. *“Let me see that”* He got up and reached across the table.

“Aahhh ... eerhh” Angelo made unintelligible sounds as he looked with fear and shock into Marcello’s face which was lit by the window for the first time.

“He doesn’t want me to see the book. Must be a guilty conscience”

“No. Let’s calm down” Don Virgilio comforted Angelo and gently passed Marcello the bank book. Angelo made no resistance to the book being handed over but continued to look at Marcello with confusion and fear.

“There are no entries here. We will need to check with the bank. It looks as if he has never been there since the account was opened or they would have updated his account details. The bank is local to Mediano so I’ll check that out tomorrow. Ask him if he minds me keeping it for a day or two”

“Easier said than done, Marcello. Why don’t you try? We’ve been prancing around all afternoon!” Lucia was a bit peeved at his detachment.

“Angelo. Banca. Domani”⁵³ Don Virgilio tried to explain that the bank book would be kept until the following day. He pointed to the clock and motioned the hands going round several times. Angelo seemed to grasp the drift and nodded quietly. He seemed subdued.

They got up to go and thanked Angelo for his help. Marcello went to walk past Angelo who stood with his head bowed. He shook his hand to say good bye and as he did so the deaf mute looked up into the Carabinieri’s face and squeezing his hand firmly he started to cry.

“D uu-u-eh ...D uu-u-eh” He moaned.

“What’s wrong, Angelo” Don Virgilio came to the rescue. *“Sounds like he’s trying to say two again”*

“May be there really were two women” Lucia suggested.

“No we’ve established there was only one” Marcello cut her off again. She took no notice.

“Angelo” In her sweetest voice and offering him a tissue from her bag to wipe his tears. *“Angelo, were there two women?”* She pointed to herself and said *“Due?”* Holding up two fingers.

He nodded and continued to cry.

“So you looked after two women. At Santa Barbara?”

He shook his head. *“Nooo-o.”* It was almost a bovine sound like a cow that had lost a calf. Chilling in it’s sadness.

⁵³ Domani - tomorrow

“So you looked after two women, one at Santa Barbara and one somewhere else ... Where? Dove⁵⁴?” She acted ‘where’ by glancing around the room and looking enquiringly.

“On-ia-no ... on-ia-no-o”

“Could be Mediano” Don Virgilio tried to be helpful. *“He worked in the town sometimes when the sisters were asked to help a family. He probably was sent to care for someone in their own home.”*

“Brutta?” Lucia asked if the woman also was ugly.

Angelo tore himself away from Marcello, wiped his eyes and yelled something unintelligible. He then proceeded to beat himself about the face.

“My son, my son, figlio mio don’t harm yourself” Don Virgilio was distressed by this sudden passion.

“I think he means the woman was beaten up.” Lucia was serious but she noted that Marcello had turned white and as she reached for his hand it was bathed in a cold sweat. Why such a reaction?

“So the woman was beaten, Angelo?” He nodded to the friar and indicated scars across the cheeks. *“Did she die?”* No he shook his head. He motioned that she was very sad. That she cried. *“She cried because she was beaten?”* he shook his head. *“Why did she cry?”*

Angelo held his arms as if holding a baby. He then pretended that the baby was being torn from his arms and he ran off to the side of the room. When he came back he held his empty arms limply by his side.

“Oh my God, she got beaten up and then her baby was taken away from her ... so she was depressed and ... hey maybe she was raped when she was beaten up and then the baby was taken away because it was illegitimate and ... and ... and ... maybe the rapist didn’t want the baby around ...” Lucia let her imagination run away with her as she took on Angelo’s distress. He did not understand half of what she said but he nodded, wept and then held her hand.

⁵⁴ Dove - where

“This is all very well, but it is a diversion. Nothing to do with our investigation” Marcello brought them back to earth abruptly.

Angelo approached Marcello and touched his forehead. He ran his hands over his face in the manner of a blind man trying to ‘see’ his features better. Marcello froze and looked deathly pale.

“Let’s go, it’s getting late”.

Lucia wondered what he had neglected to tell her.

* * * * *

They did not see much of each other on the following day but had agreed to meet at dinner time. Marcello had seen little of his visiting mother who was going back to Bolzano the following morning and he thought it would be nice for them to eat together. He wanted Lucia to meet his mother who was nagging to see this English girl that he spent so much time with.

For Marcello, Wednesday was a day for visits to Ancona and catching up on office routine. He had gone through the reports of illegal dumps again - nothing to associate with the Bertoni disappearance. He had squads of officers still going over the Bertoni house and a second group at the monastery checking the contents of the hidden room. This case was using up local manpower. He was not surprised when Gattini called him from his office to tell him that there had been a complaint from a prominent citizen that he was monopolising the local police and that the Carabinieri were using heavy handed tactics on local people. It did not take too much guess work to work out who the prominent citizen could be.

Mondini took particular offence at the investigation in the monastery and said that it was sacrilegious to invade Church privacy. Something he would never do, of course.

Lucia began the day with family business. Her mother had decided not to sell the house for the moment and had persuaded her sister that this was right. Fazzi had convinced them that if they waited for the scandal of a murder to settle, they would be more likely to get a good price.

After a family lunch Lucia wandered down to the surgery to use the computer. She had a lot of updating to do on her website. As she wrote up the previous day's findings she mulled over Marcello's strange reaction in her mind. Perhaps she should not entirely trust him. After all she had only known him for a few weeks - was he getting too close to her? Was the closeness hiding a need to keep an eye on her? She would keep an open mind.

Peggy had emailed the articles and information Lucia wanted. There was also a little greeting message from Peggy and George. Peggy was obviously proud of her efforts and of her George. Lucia sent back a thank you message and a little note to Tommy hoping he was feeling better. She posted the whole lot onto the website.

After a while at the screen she needed a break and called round to see her friend at the Moderno. Amelia was pleased to see her as usual and offered afternoon coffee.

"Why don't I take you out instead?" Lucia suggested. "You said nobody takes you out and we could go for a little drive in my car and then maybe have an ice cream and coffee at the bar Centrale"

"That would be nice, but you don't have to you know. I'm not really much of a 'going out' person. Even before my arthritis stopped me, I never went out much. You will have heard people say that my daughter was a bit of a recluse too."

"Well I think an outing would do you good. Is there anywhere you would like to go?"

"I would like to visit my daughter's grave. I have not been there for a long time and I could put some flowers there for her."

"OK let me fetch the car to the front entrance and I'll ask one of the maids to get you ready."

They stopped by the florist and were at the cemetery within half an hour. It was only a short distance and quickly covered in the car. Lucia helped the Contessa to walk the few yards to the di Fiori family vault which was in the more exclusive side of the plot near the Mondini's. Amelia tutted as she passed.

“I hate to think of my poor daughter lying so close to a Mondini. If it were possible to move the vault I would have done so”

Lucia propped Amelia against one of the pillars while she opened the wrought iron doors. The walls were adorned with cameos of past family members their names and inscriptions by their loved ones.

“Margherita di Fiori, what a nice name” Lucia remarked.

“I thought it would be fitting to be called Margherita - daisy - if your surname is di Fiori - of the flowers. That’s why I like her to have flowers here as often as possible.”

“Oh look, there are some fresh flowers here already! I wonder who put them there?”

“I can’t imagine. We don’t know anyone around here anymore. Perhaps the curator of the cemetery had some spare ones and just placed them at random.”

Lucia had an idea *“I see you have your family crest on the plaque and also above the door. It looks impressive. Do you mind if I make a rubbing of it. I have collected some rubbings from Churchyards in England.”*

“Not at all, please be my guest”

Lucia produced a piece of paper from her legal notepad in her bag and rubbed the outline of the fleur de lys. *“Another flower, a lilly. I’ll come back and do a better rubbing another time.”*

“Yes there are a lot of flower names aren’t there. You know in Italian the lilly is giglio ...plural is gigli it was the name of the most famous Italian Opera singer ‘Gigli’ who in fact came from this area.”

They lingered in the cemetery for a while ‘visiting’ old friends and Lucia showed Amelia her own family vault. They then cheered themselves up with an ice cream stop off and Lucia deposited the old lady back at the hotel.

It was then Bruno’s turn for a walk although not far this time. He had spent too long in the car the day before. By the time Lucia got him back she just had time to get herself changed to visit Marcello’s mother.

* * * * *

The meal went well apart from the fact that Marcello was late and Lucia had to introduce herself. Maria Gastaldi was welcoming and soon put Lucia at her ease. She was a good cook although used to ‘Northern’ dishes. It was a standing joke that people in the Bolzano area were almost ‘Austrians’ and did not know how to cook polenta⁵⁵. They made it in solid slabs rather than spread out flat as in the South.

Maria was a tall woman whose greying hair had once been blonde. Her eyes were blue-grey and she had a Bolzano style, slightly guttural twang to her voice. Marcello resembled her in accent only. As they ate their antipasto she noted Lucia’s eyes on her. *“I can see you are wondering how a woman like me could mother a dark southern looking man like Marcello. Did he not tell you that we adopted him when he was a baby?”* Lucia shook her head and almost inhaled an Olive. It was unusual for an Italian mother to come out with something like that. *“... It’s Ok,”* The older woman sensed her discomfort. *“... he does not mind people knowing. Nowadays there is a much more open attitude to such things. It is good for children to know I think.”*

“Oh, so does he know his natural parents?” She swallowed hard, trying to appear matter of fact in her conversation. This information seemed a bit intimate to be sharing with a practical stranger. Lucia supposed that northern mothers might be more ‘up front’ and Germanically pushy than those from her region.

“No. He did try to find out some years ago when he was an enquiring teenager, but we could not trace them. ... Ah here he is! ... Marcello, you’re late. Your food is getting cold!”

He apologised for his lateness. There had been an accident on the way back from Ancona. *“Accident or no accident, I’m used to your always being late. Lucia was worried about starting without you but I could see starvation in her eyes ...”* She giggled

Maria would not let Lucia help with clearing the dishes. While she sat and sipped coffee Marcello used sign language to indicate that he had the

⁵⁵ Polenta - dish made with yellow ‘corn’ maize flour

information but he motioned to Lucia to keep quiet. She had almost forgotten the 'bugs'.

Lucia took her leave early *"Thank you for the lovely meal and it was really nice to meet you"*

"My pleasure. It was about time we met, I had heard so much about you. And I do hope you will come and visit me in Bolzano some time. It's so nice to see Marcello with a friend. He spends too much time alone on his work ..." Blushes all round as she realised she might have said too much.

Lucia cut in *"Marcello, I'm going to settle Bruno for the night. Do you want to walk me over there?"*

"Oh that dog, Marcello told me how scared he was of being eaten the first time he was left alone with him!" Maria laughed *"He is still at the vet's isn't he?"*

Lucia nodded hoping that the listeners did not put two and two together about her spending time at the veterinary surgery. They walked there slowly taking a slightly longer route than necessary to give them time to talk.

"So what have you found out?" Lucia was impatient after an evening of small talk. *"Did you get to the bank?"*

"Yes and our friend Angelo would be a millionaire several times over, if he had been allowed to keep the money! There are big payments into his account at irregular intervals and matching automatic transfers to a Swiss Bank account in Geneva. He obviously knew nothing about any of it."

"Presumably whoever organised this gave him the first bit of money pretending it was payment for his services to the woman who had plastic surgery and he thought the bank account was just that little book."

"Yes, he never checked his account, never went to the bank and never made any withdrawals. It's true what Don Virgilio said that he has no concept of money."

"Poor man. To be exploited like that"

“Whoever owns the account in Geneva is a very rich person. Now while I was at it, I decided to check the bank records in the region to see if any of the other odd names came up - you know your Mr Twentieth etc ... well I have found some other ‘dead’ accounts and some that have the same mechanism as Angelo’s. The people involved obviously never existed but were all given accounts at a bank in Mediano ...it looks as if the bank manager had a bribe to let them go through without checking ...and all of them transfer money to a Swiss account too.”

“So perhaps they started out having false accounts with real people like Angelo and then when they managed to get some leverage on the bank manager they did it with false names and fictitious people.”

“Right, but they kept using Angelo’s account too because the more variety in the accounts, the better it looked.”

“I suppose it’s nigh on impossible to check the Swiss banks .. they won’t tell anyone who owns their accounts will they?” Lucia was grasping at straws.

“No we’re stuck there. ... We could just about manage to force the bank here to say where they were sending the money. We would need to start with Angelo’s account - that would be easier because he could give permission and then if he could sign to say the money was being stolen from him the Swiss might give a little.”

“They are becoming a bit less closed off in recent years. Particularly where things like Jewish money stolen in the war and that sort of thing is involved. You could say that you suspected it was money from sale of stolen Jewish treasures”

“I could give it a go.” Marcello sighed reluctantly. “I must say though that I can’t really face all that play acting again. I found that Convent rather depressing and overwhelming. I think I’ll give you back your witness! If I draw up the papers, can you persuade him to sign them?”

“Ok, I’ll stretch a point ... just this once” She said feigning reluctance. Inside she was excited at the prospect of another chance to question Angelo. “What else did you find out?”

Marcello had the survey plans of the test tunnel. They had to be registered in Ancona when permission was given for the drill.

“We can go up there and take a look first thing in the morning - I would like to be there at first light to get a look in before anyone can be alerted to what we are doing. So pick me up from home at about 6am. It gets light just before seven at this time of year. Make sure you wear some warm clothes, it will be cold ... oh and bring a torch”

“Hey, bossy ... I used to go caving when I was little ... I know what to bring!” She laughed.

“I suspect there is an ulterior motive for stopping the digging and it’s nothing to do with roads”

“Hopefully we will find it out when we get to the tunnel”

“And I bet Mondini is at the bottom of it all. I found the original survey results which were logged after the first week of drilling. They were required to lodge them with the authorities in order to prove that they were not causing ecological damage before continuing the drillings.”

“So were they good?”

“Excellent from what I could understand. Satisfactory terrain and no contraindications to sinking a shaft or eventually building the tunnel, they got permission to continue but stopped three weeks later when the first allocation of money ran out and submitted a second report which was similarly optimistic.”

“So where did the adverse report come in?”

“That was never officially filed. The so called report which Mondini produced in 1976 said quite the opposite of the original report and he changed his tack also. He had originally been pro tunnel as a vote catcher but then took the ‘ecological protector’ route and produced this new report to back him up.”

“Someone was obviously ‘got at’. And looks like something happened between 1970 and 1976 to make him back a different horse!”

“Yes, but what?”

“I know some things that happened between 1970 and 1976...” Lucia teased.

“OK mention some”

“Well ... to start with ...there was something very important ...” She hesitated jokingly *“I was born!”* She laughed and pretended to run away from him. He chased her and jokingly grabbed her arm. Their eyes met and for an instant they could have turned the encounter into a romantic episode ... it would have been very natural to kiss.

“Come on, be serious ... what else” They both laughed wanting to break the atmosphere.

“We spend too much time being serious ... we need some release!” She sighed.

“Let’s just get this case over and there’ll be plenty of time for release.” He brushed her forehead with his lips. He was right, the time was not right. Too much lay hidden still.

Bruno gave a welcome bark as Lucia unlocked the door. *“Look, we need an early start, but I want to check my email and sort out one or two things here before I go home. Why don’t you leave me to it and I’ll see you in the morning.”*

“I’m a bit worried about leaving you here at this time of night.”

“I’ll be Ok ...I’ve got Bruno”

The canine hulk wagged his tail and slobbered a kiss over Marcello’s hand as if to reassure him. He barked protectively as if to say ‘I’m in charge now’.

Lucia waved Marcello goodbye and then bolted the door. Bruno followed her into the inner office and she turned off the main lights. Better not to advertise her presence she thought.

There was another email from Peggy.

Hi Lucia (-:

Peggy was learning internet language. Lucia smiled to herself as she tilted her head sideways and saw the smiling face hello message. Well she had a good teacher obviously someone who could hold her attention!

First of all some news about Tommy and your club. I told your friend David all about it and he spoke to your Dad as well like you suggested.

Tommy had to talk to a special woman from the police and then the other boy was called in as well. His mother was very upset because he had not told her anything and she is a bit posh and did not want to think her boy might have been involved with perverts so it took a while for her to agree to talk to the police ...

Come on Peggy, get to the point, Lucia thought. She is as bad in written form as in speech!

There is a lot to tell you about that. Ring me tonight (Wednesday) and I'll tell you the rest. It is not so easy writing everything down. I will tell you about the other people too.

The message was frustratingly incomplete. Could she ring now, or was it too late? No it should be alright because of the time difference.

“Hi Peggy, thanks for the email”

“See, I got the hang of it didn't I?”

“Yes it was great, especially the stuff you sent yesterday. Those news articles were very useful. So what's been going on?”

“Well, like I said ...” She recapped the e mail message. “With this mother... the policewoman had to convince her that her son was telling the truth and that Tommy had not made it all up to get Reece into trouble ... that's the other boy's name. Then the police said that they were satisfied that the boys were telling the truth and they called at the club and interviewed Simon Daniels.”

“Good, good”

“He was apparently a bit stropky with them and they eventually carted him off to the station. They found drugs in his kit bag.”

“At last! He'll get his comeuppance now!”

“Yes and I don't think he will have a very nice time of it when he's interviewed either. Your friend David admitted to me that he told your

Dad about the attack on you ...you know I don't think the police take to kindly to people who assault a copper's daughter!" She laughed with glee at the thought of revenge.

"Is he still inside?"

"No they were going to keep him in on remand but that rich girlfriend of his posted his bail and he's out."

"What a pity, he would have got stick from the other prisoners if he had been kept in ... they don't like child molesters inside"

"Well, there's something else that'll keep him occupied!" Peggy chuckled. "George thought the papers should know about his shenanigans with miss nose-in-the-air Donaldson so he rang up the news desk and they've got a nice little article coming out tomorrow morning. I think that her poncey fiancée is going to choke on his breakfast toast!"

"YES!" Lucia whooped triumphantly. "Now the shit really will hit the fan"

"And land where it belongs!"

"Right Peggy, that's great news. Anything else?"

"We looked up the marriage records and found out Belinda Moore's maiden name" Great. Peggy was quicker than Interpol! "Belinda Moore was born 'Parker'

Lucia's brain shifted into higher gear. ... Belinda Moore, maiden name 'Parker' ... Parker. "Hang on a second, I thought Parker was Sabrina Donaldson's name from her first marriage. So this looks as if it was Sabrina's maiden name and she and Belinda were sisters"

"Right. Sabrina and Belinda Parker ... and guess who the younger sister was?" Not another of Peggy's guessing games. "The little sister Sabrina was none other than the underage child star of the porno movie!"

"Sisters! ...I would never have guessed it, they look so different in the pictures I've seen."

"Probably different Dads. The mother was apparently a real slag ... You know that retired beat bobby I was talking about? His name's Reg ..."

Well, we met him for a drink last night and he told us quite a bit about his old manor⁵⁶ in Deptford. He remembered the family 'cos he arrested the Mum several times for soliciting and the two girls had been in care apparently. Seems there were men in and out of the place like a dose of salts and you'd need one of your computers to work out who fathered who!''

“So ...just a moment, this takes some mental adjustment” Lucia was thinking out loud . “This means that the sisters were involved in porno movies directed by Belinda’s husband who she then dumped apparently ... and she then took up with Helena whose husband Van Stockert was the financial backer of the blue films.”

“Listen ...it looks as if the mother had been using her girls in child porn for some time. Reg says nothing could be proved but this Moore guy had been shady even before he got locked up for desertion early in the war. Then when he got out he went back to the Parker house and got up to God knows what with the girls ... Helen included. He was going to be extradited or deported or what have you, so he married Belinda to try to stay in the country but then he must have got an offer for this film shoot in America so he took the girls out with him”

“And when it fell apart did he stay out there?”

“Don’t know ...Probably ... He seems to have lost his ‘stable’ when Helen took up with Van Stockert. He had class and he got Helen into modelling ... she was a good looker and a nice girl underneath it all. Reg thinks it was just like her to want to help out girls like her with the hostel ... shame it closed down”

“... And Belinda divorced the Yank deserter?”

“Looks like it ...she didn’t have the looks for modelling but she hung around Helen and lived with the VS es . She seems to have been AC/DC. As was Helen by all accounts. She was her constant companion ...lover”

“That fits. So many of the girls who get sexually abused or used in child pornography end up Lesbian. They can perform hetero sex but don’t get any pleasure from it. ... same with a lot of prostitutes ... you’ll have noticed that with a lot of our clients Peggy.”

⁵⁶ manor - patch - area

“Yes and remember that film ...you know ...” She was fishing for the title “The one about the painting ... the one they filmed in your Italian Church in Clerkenwell ...”

“Mona Lisa?”

“Yes Mona Lisa ...the lead in that was supposed to be gay wasn’t she and had been abused”

“Yes that’s right, she had ...”

“Made my flesh creep that film ... when that disgusting guy came up behind that young girl uughhh ...” Peggy shuddered and sighed deeply. “I don’t know how you manage to work with people like that Lucia.”

“Sometimes I don’t know either ...” Lucia could feel the mood descending into some depth where neither of them wanted to go. “Come on Peg, let’s get back to the subject ... the girls”

“According to Reg, the three girls were friends from very early on. They went to the same school and were very close.”

“Until Helen or Helena, as she called herself, and Belinda go missing, or get bumped off, or whatever happened to them. That leaves sister Sabrina still hobnobbing with old Rosswell and getting a lot of money for her troubles. Meanwhile Ross marries his new bride Barbara ... and Sabrina has married Donaldson.” Lucia sighed “Well it’s complicated ... but we are getting there ... I wonder what Sabrina’s married name was then when she married lord whatsit. ... and how does Veronica fit in?”

“I can help with some of that” Peggy gloated. “Sabrina Parker aka⁵⁷ Miss nobody, failed porno movie star, married Victor Marsh, aka the Viscount Wanstead, that was her first husband, in 1960 when he was 22 and she was 21.”

“So that must be the year after they first met. That was when he had his birthday and she came out of the cake!”

“So you knew?” Peggy sounded disappointed

⁵⁷ aka - also known as

“Only about the twenty first birthday party ... David had heard about that ... but I didn’t know his name or any other details”

“So you won’t know that her daughter Caroline is ‘Marsh’ not ‘Donaldson’ ...she didn’t marry Donaldson until 1968 but the daughter was born in 1967.”

“So that explains the watch strap being inscribed with VM it was Victor Marsh ... so was this a different watch after all? Looks like it wasn’t the one in the Helena picture does it?”

“Maybe there were two?”

“Who knows? Anyway this also explains a bit about Caroline being so callous about Donaldson’s death. She sounded as if she despised the man... So he was her stepfather, not her father ... presumably that’s where the red hair comes from.”

“Right, Daddy died in a yachting accident off Cowes in 1979. I found that out, or rather George did, from the ‘Who’s Who’ ‘cos it lists aristos and all their details.” Peggy explained. “Interesting thing was that he had not had any other children and he hadn’t made a new will so his money went to Caroline although it was held in trust for her until her twenty first birthday.”

“So let’s see, when was that? She was born ’67 you say, so that makes her twenty one in ’89 ... ten years ago. Rich bitch! How much did she get?”

“Don’t know ... but it was a tidy amount. It’ll keep her in silk knickers for the rest of her life!”

“From what I know of her she’ll be spending more time out of them than in!” Lucia snarled.

“Like mother, like daughter ... and like grandmother I suppose! That Sabrina can put on airs and graces now but she wouldn’t like her mum to be paraded on the front page of the Sun would she! ... I should think that ...”

“Shh!” Lucia interrupted and dropped her voice to a whisper. “Sorry Peggy. Got to stop you ... I can hear a noise outside ...”

So could Bruno who was barking and jumping up at the side window of the surgery. There was a slight sound of feet scraping on the rough ground of the alley outside, being drowned out by the barking of the dog.

“Lucia!” Peggy spoke urgently *“Are you alright?”*

“Yes, yes, I’ll be fine ... I’ll have to ring off ... no-one knows I’m here so if I keep quiet, they’ll go away. Bye Peggy” She hung up quickly not wanting to be delayed or distracted by the other woman’s questions.

Lucia decided not to call off the dog. That might alert the prowler to her presence. The light was off anyway and the gentle glow coming from the computer screen would not penetrate to the next room.

Someone was dragging something under the window. Probably moving something to stand on to look in. The glass was frosted so he would not gain much of a view. Bruno was getting frantic. Would they shoot him like they had tried to shoot Pippa? No unlikely - it would attract attention, after all they were in the middle of town now, not on a lonely hillside.

Lucia crouched low on the floor and drew herself under one of the benches. Now she could see a silhouette on the window, a telltale shadow cast by the street light at the entrance to the alley. The intruder looked big, but that could have been a trick of the light magnifying his unwelcome form.

A gentle tap on the window followed by a tinkling sound as glass fragments scattered round Bruno’s paws. Lucia gasped as a hand appeared through the hole in the window. Someone was trying to reach the catch on the inside.

Bruno barked, snarled and jumped but a small floor-standing medicine cabinet obstructed his reaching the window. If only he could get to that hand ...

The fingers were closing on the catch, there was to time to loose. Lucia acted fast. She leaped from her hiding place and sank her teeth as deep as she could into the protruding flesh.

A scream resounded as the hand was torn out of the window slicing flesh as it passed through the gaping hole in the glass. A crash and loud cursing

told Lucia that her opponent had landed badly. The voice had a familiar ring to it .

Unrepeatable profanities followed by “*Cane da diavolo*⁵⁸, *I’ll kill you, you bastard devil dog! Jee-sus that hurts*”

She waited until the footsteps retreated from earshot and then decided it should be safe to move a little. She dared not go out or use the phone. They might hear her. Best for them to think the dog had bitten him, not that he had been savaged by a woman ... God knows what retribution that might bring.

She would have to stay put until morning. She whiled away some time on the computer and on her website and then fell into a fitful sleep curled up next to Bruno on his bed.

* * * * *

⁵⁸ Cane da diavolo - Devil dog

Part Five

The five am bus pulling into the terminal at the far side of the square woke Lucia from a bad dream.

... She had been in the tunnel running from someone who was clawing at the earth behind her as her feet slipped on the loose terrain. She knew he would catch her ankles and pull her down. He lunged at her, she jumped and reached for a post which pulled away bringing a cascade of rubble which buried her. She could not breathe, she was dying, slipping away ... then buried in an icy avalanche on an Alpine pass ... could she be saved by the trained St Bernard dogs they kept in the pass? ... One was pawing at her ... she could feel his hot breath ...

“Bruno ... Get off!”

The dog was licking the beads of cold sweat from her brow. She leaped up and rubbed her aching muscles. Her left arm felt dead from where Bruno had rolled onto her in his sleep.

There should be nobody lurking outside now. She quickly let Bruno out for a pee and then left him to eat a bowl of dog food.

“Sorry, boy. Better leave you here today. Could be dangerous for you”

It took another twenty minutes to go home, wash and dress. As she was leaving the house at twenty to six her aunt came out of the bedroom.

“Lucia, have you just come home?” She winked *“Getting to know the Carabinieri well are you?”*

“Zia, if you only knew! I’ve spent the night with a man alright ... but he had four legs and a wet nose!” She stepped out of the front door and called back *“Tell Luigi he has a broken window at the surgery ...I’ll explain later”*

“Lucia, Lucia, you’re always running...”

Lucia did not hear the final words as she jumped in the driver’s seat and sped to Marcello’s. He was ready at the door and they were on their way up to Santa Barbara in good time to see the first rays of sun break over the high pasture.

“You should have called me.” He admonished her as she explained her ordeal.

“Your phone’s bugged, remember. I thought it best to pretend I was not there.”

“So we have another clue to our assailant” He laughed.

“Yes, a bruised idiot with a cut arm and a hand with my teeth marks on it” Lucia giggled.

The terrain was difficult to delineate even with the survey plans. It took several false starts before they orientated themselves correctly and Lucia was feeling bruised and scratched as Marcello guided her towards one hollow and bush after another.

Finally success. A large juniper bush near the centre of the pasture hid a sizeable opening which sloped downwards out of sight.

“Attenti⁵⁹! Be careful ... Watch your step” Marcello led Lucia past some rubble at the entrance and switched on his torch. He had a head lamp which left both his hands free.

“This is not going to be pleasant” Lucia moaned as she slithered on a puddle of mud and caught her hair in a huge cobweb.

“You can wait here for me if you prefer. I’ll go in and take a look round”

“Not on your life! I want to see what all the fuss is about. This tunnel could hold the key to the death of several people, including my grandfather!”

“There are some rusty pipes down here. Careful you don’t trip ...”

⁵⁹ Attenti - careful

His words were too late. Lucia caught her foot on a discarded drill bit and fell headlong.

“Managgia!”⁶⁰ Are you hurt? I knew you should have stayed out of this ...” Marcello was flustered and upset for her safety.

“No, don’t worry, I’m fine...” Lucia struggled to get to her feet. One shoe was stuck beneath the drill and she turned her head to look at it as she made to pull it free. It was then that her eyes drew level with a grim sight. *“Marcello! Help! Oh God! Look!”*

He was at her side in an instant thinking her injured. *“What is it? Where! Can you get up?”* Then he saw it too. A hideous grin appeared out of the shadows. He turned his light on it to reveal a body propped against the wall, the face partially decomposed to reveal much of the jaw and teeth.

“Is it Bertoni?” Lucia asked choking back tears.

“Not likely. This body is too fresh. ...It can’t have been here more than a month or two. The Bertoni family would have died more than a year ago”

“Marcello ...Look behind you ...I think there’s another one” She pointed to a boot poking out from behind a pile of stones.

“Right. Let’s get out of here. We will have to call in the boys.”

“Can’t we go to the end? It’s supposed to be a short tunnel. There can’t be much further to go.”

“I know but we could mess up the evidence”

“I would think that there have been enough animals through here to mess up the evidence. Looks like fox droppings here on the floor ...”

“And on your trousers ...”

“Yuk! Well it won’t be the first time, it should wash off ... Aarghh ...what was that that pulled my hair?”

“Just a little pipistrelle⁶¹ ... it’s nothing more than a flying mouse.”

⁶⁰ Managgia - damn it

“Well I’m not that keen on mice in my hair either for that matter! Ok Let’s go. It’s quite smelly in here anyway.”

* * * * *

Don Virgilio greeted them with an offer of coffee and bread with salame. He seemed grateful of the company although not so happy with their news.

Marcello got on the phone to his regional office in Ancona and spoke to the chief. Gattini was not pleased with yet another cache of corpses.

“Guarda, Look Gastaldi, this has gone beyond a joke. What is going on in Mediano? Not much in the way of murder and mayhem for years and then we have the Vincenzi guy cut up, the thug on the road, the kids bodies, contraband art treasures and now two more stiffs! Are you trying to clock up points to get my job? I’m beginning to think you might be bumping these people off yourself to make yourself look good ‘solving’ murders”

“It’s as they say, Capo ... shit always makes it’s way to the surface and I think this toilet has been needing a flush for a long time.”

“Well. We don’t have the manpower for yet another search. I’ll call the men off at the Bertoni house ... nothing there so far. The kids bodies are in the morgue in Ancona and will stay there until we find the parents probably. We are going to shift the art stuff to the Guardia di Finanze depository so that they can be examined more closely. I’ve pulled our men out and their transport will pick the boxes up later today.”

“Right so I’ll get Pozzo down with his boys and a couple of juniors to do any digging OK?”

“Fine .. and slow down on the body bag rate will you?”

“Nothing would please me more”

⁶¹ pipistrelle - small bat

Lucia was tucking hungrily into her salame when Marcello returned to the table in Don Virgilio's little office. Finding bodies in old tunnels gave her an appetite.

"I brought the food in here" The Priest explained. *"I'm practically on my own up here now and the refectory is too big and cold"*

"It's fine. I needed some sustenance after our little expedition" Marcello told Don Virgilio about Angelo's bank account and that Lucia was going to see him again.

"I don't like to see that povero Cristiano⁶² exploited like that. I'll give you some of our home cured Prosciutto to take to him Lucia. By the way I checked the records here ...they go back a very long way ... centuries in fact ... So I checked with regard to our female patient and there is no name given. It says just female surgical patient. Admitted February 1975 discharged June 1976."

"That's a damned long stay for a plastic surgery patient. There must have been another reason" Marcello grew pensive.

"The whole 'plastic surgery' business is beginning to smell if you ask me. Even if she did have her face done, slim off and change her hair colour. Why do it up here and not at some posh clinic in Rome? Sounds like she was hiding from something or someone" Lucia was becoming irritated at the deception.

"The truth is out there somewhere ... just have to know where to look"

"Marcello, you're sounding like the X-files"

"Che? What's X file?"

"Sorry, I'm joking ... It's a television programme about aliens ... they're always saying 'The truth is out there ...' and getting all spooky"

"Do you ever stop bouncing? We've just found two bodies in a hole and you're cracking jokes! My boss is wondering why every time I go out with you we find corpses! Where are we going to look next?"

⁶² povero Cristiano - poor Christian

“Well I’m going to do some looking in Assisi” Lucia jumped up determinedly.

“Lucia, why can’t you ever do anything elegantly?” Don Virgilio just caught the bread as she knocked it off the table in her haste. *“Give me two moments and I’ll get the prosciutto for Angelo.”*

“Yes and wait for me to write a letter of authority for him to sign.” Marcello was feeling rushed.

“No need. Done it already. I’m a lawyer don’t forget! I ran it off on Luigi’s computer last night.”

* * * * *

Lucia stopped on the way to buy a small azalea for the convent garden. She imagined Angelo would like it and the gift would put him at his ease. She found him raking a flower bed and was glad of an opportunity to speak to him outside the gloomy surroundings of the library.

Angelo was pleased to see her and made appropriate welcoming noises as he shook her hand. He was overjoyed by the plant, obviously unused to receiving presents. She handed him the ham mouthing the words ‘Don Virgilio’ as clearly as she could in response to which Angelo nodded vigorously indicating he understood.

It took some time and a number of mimes before he grasped what she was trying to say about the bank account. In fact when he willingly signed the papers with a barely recognisable initial, Lucia felt guilty that he had probably not understood a word and was just complying to please her.

Angelo took Lucia’s arm and led her round the Convent gardens. She was aware that he was proud of his work and wanted her to appreciate the plants and layout. Despite the cold still in the air there were a number of flowers. Crocus, narcissus and some alpine varieties obviously brought from the north. She admired, gazed and smelled them all to his delight. Then inside to the greenhouse. This extended along the outside of one whole wall of the convent and housed mainly salad vegetables and seedlings of plants ready to plant out in the main garden as the air grew warmer.

Angelo pointed out some dark green seedlings with slightly hairy leaves which extended down one whole flower bed.

“Aar-err-eeey-ah”

“Che?”

“Aar-err-eeey-yah” He repeated. Then drew a daisy shape on the floor.

“Ah Margherita? Daisy?”

Angelo nodded smiling broadly. He liked daisies. Lucia motioned that she liked them too. She wondered would this be a good moment for her experiment? She reached into her bag and produced the piece of paper with the rubbing of the crest from the di Fiori vault. Angelo’s reaction was intense. So much so that she regretted her action. He slumped to sit on the path, grabbed the paper from her and held it to his breast moaning.

“Eee-or-ee ... eee-or-ee”

Lucia kneeled beside him *“di Fiori? You know this crest? It’s the di Fiori?”*

Nodding Angelo looked up into her face and pointed from the paper to the flowers. *“Aar-err-eeey-ah... eee-or-ee”*

“Margherita di Fiori. She was the poor woman you helped look after in Mediano wasn’t it? She was attacked by someone ... possibly raped ... then she had a baby which was taken from her and ...” She stopped, realising she had spoken too fast for him. Angelo looked puzzled and worried. They went through the details slowly and painstakingly.

So Lucia’s hunch was right. Angelo had looked after the Contessa’s daughter. It had been a familiar story in town but never had it been revealed that she had been raped or that she was a recluse because of the scars of her attack which she bore to her death.

Poor Margherita, poor Amelia. Living with a secret all those years. But who else shared that secret?

* * * * *

It was late afternoon by the time Lucia had made her way back to the monastery. The forensic team were hard at work and Don Virgilio was clearing old flowers from the Church.

“Marcello has been called down to Mediano ... something to do with the Bertoni family. He said he would be back up here soon. Would you like to wait or shall I tell him to call you when he arrives”

She could not face the prospect of another drive down to town at that moment and begged a plate of soup and a roll from the friar. The warm food increased her somnolence ... *“Do you mind if I stretch out on your bench for a few minutes. I didn’t get much sleep last night?”*

“Better still. There is a bed made up in the end cell for travellers. It is monastery tradition. Lie down and get some sleep. I can call you when the officer arrives”

She awoke to the sound of raised voices coming through the grille at the top of her cell door.

A familiar male voice *“Didn’t I pay you enough? Are you so incompetent that you let that interfering busy body meddle in our affairs”* Lucia wondered if Guido’s hand was still sore.

“It was the Bishop sent him to check up ... I didn’t even know he was coming here. How should I know the old man would die on us and give rise to an inventory of the place” A new male voice - one of the brothers?

“Since he was ninety three it was not exactly unexpected. You should have made contingency arrangements”

“Perhaps you’re not so smart either coming up here with the police around.”

A somewhat thready yet melodious female voice. *“My son is accompanying me to pay our respects like any good member of my family would. Padre Patrizio was well known and we have to be seen to support the local church. We have paid out millions of lire to keep priests like you in vestments. There’s nothing to link us to this sordid business.”*

“And nothing to tie me in either. So I hope you two are not considering a double cross. If I go down, you go down.”

“Priests like him! ... he’s no priest ... you’re forgetting yourself Giordano! You’d be nothing without my father so just take what you’re given and be grateful” Guido was getting angrier.

“There are a number of different ways that someone can go down, Brother Giordano and I would advise you to take care. Perhaps you should have hearkened to the advice of your founder St Francis who had no use of worldly goods.” This rather smooth voice must be Veronica she realised. At last the newspaper picture was coming to life.

“Well I do have a use. And right now it is a very good and urgent use. I want enough to get right away from here and set myself up in Australia. I have relatives in Melbourne and I would not be traced. I’m not going to sit around here as they open everything up. The game’s over Signora Veronica”

“We shall see if it is ... and you are going to sit tight and not draw suspicion on yourself ...do you hear!”

“Don’t threaten me! Remember I know every rotten detail! Even things your son might like to hear”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Dare me then!”

“Don’t speak to my mother like that, you mother-fucker!” Sound of a scuffle as Guido Mondini struck out at the Friar. *“Ahh ...sod it!”* He swore as his blow hurt his own hand more than his victim.

“I would think I’m the only thing your mother hasn’t fucked!” Sounds of a slap *“Bitch! ... Fucking dyke bitch!”* A blow and the sound of someone exhaling sharply followed by a thud. Lucia reckoned that Giordano must have been winded.

“That’s enough! Keep the noise down” Veronica urged.

“Nobody can hear. The old guy’s gone up to the pasture to take the police some drinks”

They don't know I'm here thought Lucia.

"Tell me Brother Giordano, how long have you been here at the monastery?" Veronica was at her smoothest.

Gasping *"Get that blade out of my throat and I might talk to you..."*

"Don't get any big ideas, it's right here beside you ...now answer my mother and keep your mouth clean ... Capito?"⁶³

Giordano obviously thought it tactically best to co-operate. *"Almost eight years ... remember your husband arranged my 'transfer' from Zimbabwe ... I was only there a month to get the feel of the place in case of questions. Before that I worked for a friend of his in New York"*
Sarcastically *"... Of course I have moved around quite a bit in service to the family ..."*

"You mean that certain areas have become too hot for you and you have had to move on. You should be more careful ...your American accent comes out when you are angry. I don't want any mess ups ... you were supposed to have come from Catania I believe?"

"Yes that was the story but I came over in '91"

"And how old were you then?"

"Let's see ... where's this getting us to lady? ...AHH!"

"Show my mother respect or I'll push this through to your tonsils"
Clearly the knife was back in evidence.

"No need for that ... ahh I was forty six years old."

"So that makes you fifty four ... fifty four ...enough time to start a new life in Melbourne I would suppose. Now there's a question that's been worrying me all these years and perhaps you can help me with it."

"Maybe .. if I have the right incentive"

⁶³ Capito - understood

“It is regarding an item of sentimental value ... a watch which belonged to a dear friend of mine. It seems to have gone missing in this area and I would like to retrieve it. I gave my friend the watch on her birthday. It had my initials on the back and I would not wish it to fall into the wrong hands. ... I understand that you may be able to locate this piece for me?”

“I would love to help a Mondini of course, but I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about Signora.” A sarcastic whine again.

“I thought that someone like yourself, living up here might come across certain items from time to time...”

“No sorry. If I had, I would certainly have informed you”

“Come on, you apology for a priest! You know perfectly well what we are talking about. We’ve checked all the others who could have got to it ... even the old man who walked his dog round here ... so it has to be you that took it!” Guido came in again.

“No, I tell you, No!”

“Let’s get rid of him Ma. What are we waiting for...He’s a waste of space”

“Shut up! Someone’s coming!”

“Damn! It’s that bastard northerner ... the car’s out at the back ... get going ...I don’t want to meet him here.”

Scurrying sounds and muffled noise. Lucia heard a car pull up at the front as simultaneously an engine purred on the other side of the building. She waited for Giordano to leave the adjoining room before she rose from her bed and greeted Marcello.

Giordano had made himself scarce so she was able to speak freely. She quickly brought Marcello up to date and gave him the papers Angelo had signed.

“We had better bring Giordano in for questioning. I would imagine a bit of protective custody would go a long way at this point. He may sing now that he knows he’s for the chop! Good work Mrs. Marple ... is that what you say?”

“Miss not Mrs ... but near enough!. So what news of Bertoni ... you were called away I hear.”

“I rang in to check on reports of rubbish dumps and the various bits of information I had asked for, and one of the locals from Valle Montagnana had left a message saying he wanted me to check something out with him. He came and picked me up and I’ve been there all day”

A chance complaint about rubbish being dumped in a nearby quarry had alerted the local police officer to investigate further. It had come to light when the disused quarry high on one of the mountainsides was visited by a local teacher and his class out to collect specimens of fossils for a class project. The area was known for its wealth of geological finds but the teacher was upset because his pupils could hardly get to the fossil bearing limestone past all the rubbish and they also spoiled their clothes walking through soot and debris from where someone had tried to burn it.

Marcello arranged for the site to be cordoned off and subjected to a thorough search. Amidst the remains of tables, chairs, beds, personal belongings and the general debris of a lost family life, were found the charred bones of two human beings.

There was no doubt in Marcello’s mind that dental examination would prove them to be Aldo and Rosa Bertoni.

* * * * *

Fabrizio Pozzo crashed into the room and threw his police anorak onto the bench followed closely by Don Virgilio.

“I thought I saw your car” He addressed Marcello. *“I’m wrapping up for the night. I can’t see straight I’m so tired. I’ve left an officer up there on guard and we’re taking two of the bodies down to the morgue”*

“Two of them? How many bodies are there then?”

“So far three. The two you found this morning have been dead about a month or possibly two. The cold weather could have delayed decomposition. We’ve done finger print checks and they are two of our

regular local riff-raff an unsavoury pair you might have come across - Dante Rossi and Andrea Casale.”

“Rossi’s a dealer and the Casale fellow is a low life pimp. Probably rubbed someone up the wrong way or got to know something they should not have done.”

“Anyway we have them in the truck but the third body needs more checking out in situ” Pozzo saw the question in Lucia’s eyes *“It’s a woman ...been there a number of years I would say. Not much more than some rotted garments and bones. Can just about make out the shoes, belt and more solid things. Most of the clothes have gone but looks like there was a heavy coat because some of that is still left.”*

“So the poor woman probably died in winter.” Lucia sighed *“Maybe she was sheltering from the snow and died of exposure .. and so close to the monastery ... how terrible ... ”*

Don Virgilio shook his head. *“Death is terrible at any time”*

Marcello’s mind was buzzing *“No connection between the deaths?”*

“Impossible to say. The only similarity was the apparent cause of death” Fabrizio looked at Lucia *“I don’t want to upset you Signorina, but the lady was not sheltering from the snow ... on superficial examination it looks as if all three died with a single bullet to the head.”*

“Huh! An ‘execution’ ...Do you think we have a hit man with a favourite disposal area?” Marcello smiled wryly.

“That would be convenient. But not the same man here ... Obviously years between them ... looked as if the woman’s body was disturbed recently though. The coat was stuck to the bones along a fair part of the forearms - just matted layers of fibre - but someone or something has torn it off the wrist area ...and not that long ago either ... ”

“Seems odd. Anything missing?”

“Don’t think so ... have to check that out. No signs of animal damage - probably a bit too deep in the tunnel.”

Lucia had been listening pensively. *“I bet I know what they were looking for on her wrist! ... And I know where it is!”* The three men turned to

look at her. *“Well I hate to state the obvious, but it’s the watch. Veronica and Guido are looking for a watch ... somebody disturbs the corpse looking for something at the wrist ... That watch is very important to them ... Why? ... because Veronica gave it to her lover Helena and it can identify her by the inscription on the back. Which reads ... ‘May our love endure like diamonds. For ever yours V.M.’ VM stands for Veronica Mondini NOT for Victor Marsh”*

“It fits ...But if so, we are saying that Sabrina Donaldson was involved in this murder.” Marcello was worried about the jump to a conclusion.

“How else would she get the watch?” Lucia was puzzled *“I certainly would not have put murder beyond the daughter’s capabilities ... But is the mother the same?”*

Pozzo came in *“This sounds like interesting detective talk, but I’m leaving you to it ... I must get some rest. Incidentally we had a match on the Guido coat fibre ... it was wolf! So you need to get an official sample now. When you have enough evidence to seize the coat I’ll check the button on the other cuff and see if it matches Lucia’s find.”*

“Thanks, Fabrizio, Buona Notte” Marcello realised it was getting late.

“Buona Notte ... and try not to keep me so busy!”

* * * * *

It did not take long to identify Helena’s body. Precise details had been kept in the Ancona police department since the disappearance, including copies of her dental records which had been cross checked on a number of previous occasions whenever an unidentified body was found. The file had not been accessed for more than a decade but Pozzo had it in his hands by eleven o’clock the following morning and was satisfied of his findings by early afternoon.

The police ‘diggers’ then set about even more furiously to find the second body. Where was the ‘companion’ Belinda Moore aka Parker?.

Marcello had Giordano picked up for questioning and he decided to give both Angelo and Don Virgilio a protective surveillance. Angelo’s had to

be an under cover agent posing as a restorer working on earthquake damage in Assisi. The poor Clares would not allow any police presence so they were not told.

Don Virgilio was also anti the idea saying he already had divine protection but Marcello told him that he should not rely on God alone at such a time and maybe God would like a Carabinieri to help him.

It was no good even trying to protect Lucia.

It was thought best not to contact Van Stockert to tell him of the discovery of his wife's body until the forensic examination was complete. He had waited twenty years for news and a few more days would make no difference. A first reaction interview with him would be important. He had never been totally ruled out as a murderer despite a watertight alibi. He had supposedly been in London where the couple were based at that time.

After his wife's disappearance he had spent his time travelling between Holland and New York with frequent trips to London and Rome. It took over a year to have Helena, and Belinda, pronounced dead in the absence of a body but no doubt the court finding would have brought him the reward of insurance pay outs in addition to freeing him to remarry. Following his marriage to Barbara in 1978 the couple mainly lived in Manhattan.

Marcello related the history to Lucia and Don Virgilio over a frugal late lunch at the monastery. It was best to eat little today since this was the evening when Marcello had been invited to eat with the Vincenzi. It was Zia Laura that had suggested it and she was renowned for her cooking prowess.

“So they lived in America and Caroline was supposed to have spent quite a few years in New York too. I bet she lived with them in Manhattan.”
Lucia was guessing.

“Not such a good idea to live with someone who might have murdered your aunt and her best friend don't you think?” Marcello retorted.

“But WERE they best of friends I wonder? By all accounts Helena is gay and Belinda is her lover. But then on her fortieth birthday she gets a hell of a present from Veronica ... I think we can safely assume it was her and

not a third VM can't we? So Belinda's lover is basically having an affair with someone else ... Veronica."

"That means that Veronica would have been unlikely to kill Helena ... unless she cheated on her with someone else. Who else might there be?"

"Could have been a man or a woman ... we've seen that they did seem to swing both ways ... but more likely a woman to engender a murderous rage. From my experience in my court cases I would say that gay jealousy can be even more intense than heterosexual jealousy."

"How about Sabrina? ... She is gay"

"No Marcello, I wouldn't think so. Her own sister would have been murdered too - she was the second missing woman wasn't she?" Don Virgilio came in, almost shocked at his participation in such a conversation.

"I hate to disillusion you father, but being her sister would have made no difference. More murders are committed by relatives than by strangers."

Lucia frowned and wrinkled her brow. *"You know, there's something that's been bugging me here. Something not quite right and I think I've realised what it is ..."* She glanced at Don Virgilio wondering whether to speak in front of him. Marcello picked up on her question and motioned her to continue. The priest had proved trustworthy thus far.

"It's this watch business. Now if Helena was killed wearing the watch, as Veronica seems to have believed, if you go by the conversation I overheard with Giordano ... then someone took the watch from the body and it then got into Sabrina's hands who gave it to her daughter. Sabrina might have been the killer or someone close to her. It probably was not Veronica because she did not know the watch had been removed until recently"

"So perhaps she was the one who sent the thugs up there to look?" The priest interrupted.

Marcello corrected him *"I would imagine someone else might have sent the two dead thugs but then Guido and his road-kill henchman went up to see if they had found it"*

“If I can finish my idea ...” Lucia was growing impatient “Has it not occurred to you that although Veronica did not know where the bracelet was, ... somebody else did. And if they did, why have they kept quiet? What I mean is that Marcello’s computer was got at. His office was searched AFTER I had sent the emails with the picture of Caroline Donaldson’s wrist. Whoever raided that office ... and I would imagine it was Mondini, knows that the watch is being worn by Caroline. That it is in London.”

“You have a point there, Lucia. It looks as if we may have dissension in the ranks. Perhaps one Mondini is acting against the other!”

Don Virgilio was confused *“But Lucia, you don’t think signor` Mondini broke in to a police office personally do you? Why, the man’s older than me ...he must be seventy years old.”*

“Perhaps not personally, although it would not take much physical exertion ... whoever did it had keys and codes supplied. But he probably had an accomplice” Marcello explained.

“Yes definitely ... the voice I heard on the phone, the ‘new receptionist’ who was so helpful to me ... that voice was not Mondini’s”

“So how did he manage to see the pictures on the screen?” The priest was having problems getting his head round modern technology.

Lucia helped him out *“There are two very simple ways that he could have received the images. First that specific email could have been forwarded to Mondini and secondly I am sure that they will have programmed it to relay on any future messages. Of course it would be relatively easy for Marcello to spot that and put it back to normal ...”*

“ ... but it might be best to leave them thinking that they have not been detected.” Marcello interrupted her.

“ ... Then there are all sorts of more complex ways that they could hack in or intercept messages but I doubt they would have bothered”

“Dio mio, modern technology ... What would the Vatican have made of these modern day Gallileos? ‘E pur si muove’⁶⁴ sounds rather inadequate in the present circumstances” Don Virgilio chuckled to himself.

⁶⁴ E pur si muove - And yet it moves

“If Gallileo was persecuted as a heretic for daring to suggest that the Earth moved around the Sun ... and now in fact the Earth moves round a couple of modern day ‘SUNS’ ... did you know that the internet is held up by a small group of old SUN computers?” She responded to the friar’s puzzlement. *“It’s a trade name ‘SUN’ ... Can you imagine Bill Gates shackled before the Papal inquisition, being made to recant and then after signing his tortured declaration, he is dragged away whispering with his last breath ... now what would he say? ‘... And yet we network’ ... or ...”* Lucia searched for the right analogy.

“How about ‘it still computes’ ...” Marcello suggested.

“I know ... ‘Microsoft internets with God’ ...”

“I can see I should not have introduced the subject ... this is verging on sacrilege” The friar smiled. *“Do you think that perhaps Mondini knew all the time that the watch was with Sabrina?”*

“It’s possible, but I would think not ... unless he personally killed her and took it ...”

“... but then why give it to Sabrina? He surely would not have wanted her to give it to Caroline and risk it being seen in the open.” Lucia interrupted. *“I would think that however Sabrina got hold of it, she then hid it away for a few years and then thought nobody would see it on her daughter or link it to Veronica.”*

“Caroline lived in America for a while so she was a bit out of the way and it doesn’t look as if she comes to Italy.”

“... And Sabrina had a perfect cover for the inscription ... maybe even Caroline does not know what VM really stands for!”

“Well, children I am going to have to take my leave of you to prepare for evening Mass.” He rose from his chair.

“Before you go, I had meant to ask you, did you ever know Rebecca Hillman? You must have been around when she died” Lucia wondered if she should introduce the subject but decided as usual to stick her neck out.

He looked surprised wondering at the connection. *“That was a very upsetting case. She died when I was an altar boy here. I did not know her myself ... well I saw her once ... but the Brothers were very upset because she had been one of the last people to be rescued by hiding in the secret room you saw downstairs...”*

Lucia cut him short in her enthusiasm *“... But if she was rescued how did she get sent to the camps?”*

The old priest shook his head. *“It was a betrayal. That was how she came to be more or less the last person we could help.”* He sighed and stretched his hands on his desk top. *“This is the way it was told to me. ...Rebecca had suspicions that she was going to be picked up by the Nazis. She put her affairs in order and ...”* He broke off and looked at Lucia. *“you know about the Jewish treasures she had?”*

“Yes, we heard about that”

“Well, she passed everything to someone else ... someone better protected and then fled up here. She was in hiding here for about two weeks. They used to have people ‘disappear’ here for a while before moving them on so that it would be more difficult to follow them. Then one night the time came and her group ... I think there were six of them ... her group was led out into the cemetery through the tunnel. ... The Gestapo were waiting! ... they shot all the men and took the two remaining women, Rebecca and her sister with them. We heard they were tortured and then taken to Dachau.”

“How terrible ...” Lucia shuddered to think that her family could have come under similar threat.

“It was a terrible time ...” Marcello stared out of the window towards the cemetery.

“We all thought that they were both dead ... but then about a year after the end of the war Rebecca walked up to the door of the church. She was like a skeleton and her eyes were sunken and dark. That was the only time I saw her. I was only a child ... I remember thinking she was some kind of spirit of the dead. Everyone was amazed to see her. Her sister had not survived but Rebecca had been in a British military hospital for almost a year. She was a tough woman. She survived in circumstances which I could not speak about.” He choked and tears were in his eyes.

“Don’t upset yourself Don Virgilio, I’m sorry I asked you ...”

“No, It is good to talk sometimes. I think it was because I was only twelve and things like that stick in your mind. I’ll ever forget the way she looked ... it was like seeing death ... but she was so determined ... I suppose she had come as close as we can to seeing death herself ...” He spoke despite himself. *“The thing was ... the most upsetting part ... was that after all her efforts to survive ... you see when the allies were moving through ... up through Italy and into Austria and Germany ... as they approached Dachau, the guards abandoned the camps in a hurry, they finished off their murderous tasks and ran. Rebecca was in a group herded into the gas chamber at the last moment and then the bodies were bulldozed into a mass grave. The Nazis didn’t have time to finish things properly and Rebecca was not quite dead. She was just unconscious and partly under a corpse on a pile of her dead comrades.”*

“Unbelievable! Christ! ... to survive all that and then hang yourself!” Lucia did not know if she was more angry or upset.

He ignored her blaspheme *“ ... It is hard for a priest to acknowledge so much evil in people ...but I do not think she hung herself. The brothers were sure she did not. She stayed here for a few weeks after she arrived ... in the cell where you slept, Lucia. That was when she told her story. She had crawled out from under her dead friends ... she had survived a year in hospital ... she had made her way back here and turned down an offer of a new home in Israel. All that to hang herself? NO! She was here to search for her friends and to give them back the money and treasures which were in safe keeping. She wanted to know if the brothers had news of her contacts. She never told us who held the money ... but we know she never retrieved it.”*

“But we can imagine ...” Marcello’s eyes grew steely as he turned and walked from the room.

* * * * *

“Come on Bruno, time for a walk, you lazy boy” Lucia ruffled Bruno’s ears as she roused the dog from his ‘siesta’. Luigi was out on a call and the surgery had a deserted Friday feeling as many of the patients had gone home to their families before the weekend.

They raced around the park for half an hour and then Lucia decided Bruno needed a drink and perhaps an ice cream. Always a good idea to have a child or dog to buy treats for ... a good excuse to treat oneself.

The bar in the park had a tall hedge running along one side which shielded an inner area of seating. As they walked alongside the perimeter the top of Lucia's ice cream cone came adrift and fell onto Bruno's head.

"Hold on boy, let me wipe it off. Yuk, you messy thing" Lucia grimaced as he shook his head spraying vanilla and chocolate all over her and a large dollop plopped on her shoe.

As she bent down to wipe her foot, her eyes drew level with a threadbare patch near the bottom of the hedge and she glimpsed part of the clientele seated at an adjacent table. An elegant hand held a slim glass possibly of Martini. It was pale female hand and bore a large diamond ring. She could see little else but the hand obviously belonged to someone with money, and plenty of it!

It was the ring that drew her attention. Who would wear something so ostentatious? Someone who loved making a splash with diamonds? ... Someone who might give their friends or lovers diamonds for presents? Like perhaps a diamond watch?

This had to be Veronica. Lucia could not clean her shoe indefinitely and would begin to draw attention to herself if she peeped under the hedge much longer. Bruno was already thinking this was a game and washing her ears with his sticky ice cream flavoured tongue. ... she had experienced better!

The noises of children playing and nearby traffic drowned out the conversation. This was very frustrating - a golden opportunity for espionage lost to her.

As she straightened up the hand put down the glass and took up an envelope which it placed on the table. Lucia stooped down again hoping not to be seen. The envelope was pushed towards the centre of the table. Who was on the other side?

A slightly bronzed male hand reached for the envelope and turned it over running the edge through his hand. I know that hand! Lucia realised. She

could not be one hundred percent sure but this looked very much like Marcello's hand.

No No! Surely he could not be taking a bribe! And surely not from such filth as the Mondini? Ah he was putting it down. He is refusing it, she thought. No ... he took it up again and seemed to be pocketing the envelope.

Lucia was frozen with horror and disgust. She felt betrayed and cheated. Here was the man she had grown to trust and for whom she was perhaps beginning to have some romantic feelings ... taking a bribe from a criminal who had probably engineered the death of her grandfather.

She suddenly realised that she had been sitting on the floor. She had slumped down to the ground with shock and Bruno was now trying to jump on top of her. They may be getting up from their table now the transaction was complete. They may see her. She had to get away quickly.

"Come on Bruno MOVE!" He was impeding her getting up off the floor. She shoved him and he thought this was great fun knocking her over again. She caught sight of the two forms rising from the table. *"Bruno out of the way!"* Their feet shuffled out of sight. *"Oh No I'll be seen"* ... Thankfully Bruno decided to jump back provocatively wanting her to chase him. *"Come on then boy!"* They raced across the park to the far perimeter and she grabbed the dog as he played peep-bo behind a tree.

From her vantage point she could see the entrance to the café and sure enough Marcello appeared, alone now, and glancing to either side, he exited the park.

Tears were burning in her eyes as she jogged Bruno back to the surgery. Should she confront him? No leave it alone. Just get on with the investigation and forget him. Just another double crossing man after all. Why should she have thought otherwise?

She calmed down eventually by getting angry and venting her feelings on Luigi's computer. She waxed lyrical on her blackwell.com website. Cried over the Hillman story, banged the keys as she mentioned Marcello. She still had not told him about the web. Protective instinct?

Time perhaps for a more 'proactive' approach. She felt she had let these bastards run rings round her, toying with her while she nipped at their heels like a terrier. "*Time to be a mastiff! Hey Bruno?*" She looked at the dog dozing with his head propped on her foot. "*Well, maybe a pit bull then! Still you can be brave and heroic when you want to be can't you boy?*" Bruno looked confused, not knowing whether he was being praised or scolded. He wagged his tail expectantly.

So she was going to take action ... but what?

If she assumed that Marcello had crossed sides, then what else was he lying about? Was the 'office break in' a hoax? Were the bugs really there or had he been trying to make out he was under threat to get her closer to him and to find out her information? She shuddered briefly and then resolutely thumped her fist down on the desk.

OK action.

First check the email. Peggy had left several short messages.

24th March 1999 23.30 What happened? Ring me back!

25th March 1999 09.00 Thursday Hello, Lucia. I'm worried about you. What happened last night? Ring me.

25th March 1999 22.00 No news. What's going on? Tommy sends his love. Got more information about Sabrina and Belinda's mother and her criminal record. Just confirms what we already knew. Nothing much new. Mother is 78 and in an old people's home. Very down market place in Greenwich. No help from her rich daughter.

26th March 1999 08.00 If you don't contact me by tonight I'll call the police.

Oh God, thought Lucia, did I really miss checking my mail yesterday? Feeling guilt she sent Peggy a quick reply reassuring her that she was OK.

Her finger clicked on the 'send and receive' button and winged her message out across the electronic ether. ... And as it did so another message winged in.

... What was this? A relayed message.

This message was created automatically by mail delivery software.
A message that you sent could not be delivered to all of its recipients. The following address(es) failed:

BarVS@ artloverrs.org

unrouteable mail domain "artloverrs.org"
>----- This is a copy of the message, including all the headers. -----

Return-path: <LuigiBosco @ medianovet.it
Received: from med-gw.medianovet.it ([195.144.77.202] helo=Boscomain)
by sand2.glovale.net.it with smtp (Exim 2.05 #1)
id 11NY7Y-0002Yy-00; Thur 25 Mar 1999 23:57:56 +0100
Message-ID: <00101bef77c4c038b5e0\$0200000a @ medianovet.it >
From: "Luigi Bosco" <LuigiBosco @ medianovet.it >
To: <BarVS@ artloverrs.org>

Subject: mutual interest
Date: Thur 25 Mar 1999 23:57:48
May our love endure like diamonds. For ever yours. VM
Let's talk. Meet at Bologna flight arrivals KLM 317 March 29th 13.25
Identify yourself with card bearing initials VM. I'll find you. Do not reply.
Insecure connection.

It went on with computer speak information about the message.

What was the date? Thursday 25th March ... last night just before midnight! Lucia could see immediately why the message was rejected ... the word artlovers had been written with an extra r as artloverrs - probably a simple typing error which the sender had not even realised.

It appeared to come from Luigi - but of course all that meant was that someone used his account - who would know it? Only herself, Luigi, possibly Laura and Marcello. Things began to turn from bad to worse!

So it was to BarVS - it took no genius to guess that was Barbara Van Stockert and of course Art Lovers Supplies was one of the family companies according to Peggy's researches. Presumably the sender must have rung the company to get her mail address or perhaps she had an address on their website - why hadn't she thought of cruising their company names?

She kicked herself mentally as she switched to the internet and tried artlovers.com ... nothing artlovers.co.uk ... again nothing artlovers.org ... yes! A simple corporate site with some advertisements and yes, email contact addresses. Nothing on Helena Foundation - which was not surprising since it had stopped trading before the internet boom. VS Holdings and VS Finance Corporation had simple webs under the .com domain - nothing relevant to the investigation, needless to say there was nothing on VS Productions and nothing on the Designers Charitable Trust - not wanting to publicise themselves no doubt!

Right - so BarVS@artlovers.org was Barbara Van Stockert's email and someone had sent her a message to meet them at Bologna airport on March 29th ... but she had not received the message.

Someone knew that she would be so upset or intrigued by the message including the inscription from the watch strap that she would travel from ... where? New York? Holland? To meet a stranger at an airport. ... But supposing it was a different stranger? How would she know?

Lucia recomposed the email, corrected the address and altered the date. The sender would go to meet the plane on Monday - but Lucia would meet the plane on Sunday!

As she pressed 'send' her future plan was sealed. Was this proactive enough?!

She waited a few minutes and then checked for email to make sure her own message was not returned ... no ... it seemed to have gone through OK. While she waited she updated Blackwell.com with the email information and the appointment details. Then one last precaution ... she went to the 'sent mail' folder and deleted her message so nobody would know it had been sent.

Now she would have to lay low and try to act 'normal' with Marcello until Monday. How would she endure the family meal tonight? She thought of a diversion. *"OK Bruno - you're coming to dinner!"*

* * * * *

It would be hard to say which of the two sisters was more annoyed by Bruno's presence at the dinner table ..

"Oh my God, you haven't brought that dog have you? What possessed you when we have guests?" Zia Laura began.

"The girl's crazy. You know I sometimes had the false hope that she would get better with time... but I could swear she get's worse!" Romina joined the chorus of disapproval.

"Well I think Bruno is a much better dinner guest than that policeman" Laughed Paula as she chased Bruno round the table.

Mother and aunt retreated to the kitchen, sighing and rolling their eyes.

*"Drin drin il campanello!"*⁶⁵ Little Silvia rushed to the door with Bruno barking at her heels.

Marcello looked stunned as he was nearly knocked down by the avalanche of children and dogs.

"I didn't know Bruno was living here now" He gasped recovering his breath from the winding he received as Bruno welcomed him in.

"Oh he's only visiting - he wanted to come to dinner" Lucia tried to sound matter of fact.

"Buona sera, do come in and make yourself comfortable" Romina attempted to maintain some civility. *"We can sit down right away because dinner is ready. I don't think there's any point in trying to have a quiet drink"* She glared at the dog and at her daughter.

"Here, Lucia, show Marcello to the table - Luigi will be at one end and Marcello can sit at the other end - two men at the heads. And you sit there next to him so you can serve him. Va bene?" Laura liked to be traditional.

Lucia tried to smile as she led Marcello to his seat but it came out more like a snarl. He looked alarmed. *"Are you feeling alright?"*

⁶⁵ Campanello - bell

“Absolutely fine thank you” She lied *“Let me pour you some wine ... You would like wine wouldn’t you?”* She had poured better. Some splashed on the table.

Her mother noticed. *“Lucia, what are you doing? Be careful it’s Chianti and it will stain Marcello’s shirt”*

“Oh, really? Sorry ... we can’t have that can we?”

“I think I had better serve the soup. Minestrone Marcello?”

“Yes, Thank you, Signora” He looked worried as the soup bowl was passed across. As he lifted the first spoonful to his lips, Bruno bulldozed under the table and sat on his foot. He continued eating with a frozen grin on his face trying to ignore the dog which was crushing his ankle.

Light conversation was difficult but Luigi and Marcello attempted to swap football stories as the meat course arrived.

“I hope you like lamb Marcello. This is a slightly early Easter lamb. I know it’s Lucia’s favourite” Romina continued to try hard.

“Oh yes, I love lamb”

Someone else did too and as Marcello’s plate was passed to him, Bruno decided to move. The plate crashed down onto the table amid cries of woe ... Lucia saw her chance and picked up a small chop and leaned under the table ... she pretended to be settling Bruno but in fact gave him the meat. *“Good boy”* she whispered as she held the meat just a little too near Marcello’s ankle.

“Aiihhyaa” He yelled *“He bit me!”*

Pandemonium ensued as the children howled with laughter, mother and aunt cried in anger, the dog barked, Luigi yelled at Lucia and Marcello looked stunned.

Lucia grabbed Bruno and led him to the door. *“What a fuss! OK, I’ll take him out!”*

Lucia gone, the room fell silent. The little girls looked at each other wide eyed wondering what would come next. Marcello continued to look stunned. Laura looked as if she was going to cry.

“I don’t think she is quite herself” Romina whimpered.

“Would you excuse me? I think I had better see if she is Ok”

“Perhaps you should leave her alone for a while. Finish your meal”
Luigi intervened. *“But perhaps you should clean up a little - you seem to have lamb chop in your hair!”*

Paula looked as if she would burst. Everyone was so serious so she was trying hard not to laugh. She held on and held on ... and then exploded with laughter. Luigi turned to scold her ... and burst out laughing himself. Romina and Laura wanted to apologise, this was no way to treat a guest ... but they laughed instead ...

Outside the window Lucia heard them all laughing fit to bust. She patted Bruno and laughed herself. *“Well done boy, we got him! ...and at least they had a good laugh out of it. It’s the first time the family have laughed since Nonno died”*

She walked briskly to the surgery feeling the cold of the night air. She had left quickly and forgotten her coat.

As she neared the door Bruno gave a low growl and Lucia turned to see what could be worrying him. Suddenly she felt as if her head was exploding and everything went dark ...

As Laura brought the coffee, Luigi rose from the table and told Marcello not to disturb himself while he checked if Lucia had shut the surgery properly. He had not yet reached the dining room door when Bruno was heard barking outside.

“Oh no she hasn’t brought that dog back has she” Romina held her head in her hands.

Luigi leaned out of the window. *“Well the dog’s here but no sign of Lucia ...”*

* * * * *

Part Six

Meanwhile, on the far side of the channel, someone was having a visitor.

“Wake up Ivy, There’s someone to see you” The care attendant shook the old lady’s arm rather less gently than was necessary.

“Oh leave me alone you little bitch, can’t you see I’m resting” She grumpily pulled her arm away and hunched herself deeper in her chair.

“Come on, you sleep too much anyway and you don’t have that many visitors”

“Visitors?” She opened an eye *“why didn’t you say so? Silly bitch”* She opened both eyes and sat up looking suddenly alert *“Fancy not telling me I had a visitor”* Turning to Mark *“Nice to see you young chap”* Her voice was slightly indistinct.

“Pleased to meet you”

“Sorry can’t talk to you properly without my teeth ... where are my teeth?!” She shouted at the girl *“Did you hear me - where are my teeth bitch?!”*

“My name’s Debbie” She retorted angrily. *“You left your teeth by the Tele last night and I expect they’re still there”* She huffed off and returned quickly with the teeth on a paper towel.

“Debbie does Dallas” Ivy muttered as she replaced the dentures. *“That’s better, I can talk now. Ever thought of hygiene in this place? Ever heard of tooth mugs or dis-en-fec-tant!”* Her voice grew louder as the girl moved away from her and left the room. She addressed Mark *“They think they’re nurses in this place ... dressing up in little uniforms but they’re*

just domestics ... no training ... little Hitlers” She put one hand under her nose to indicate a moustache and yelled again *“Little Hitlers the lot of you!”*

“I’m sorry it’s not so nice for you here. Look I’ve brought you something I hear you like” Mark opened a tub of jellied eels and set it in front of Ivy adding a plastic fork for her. *“You can eat it now you’ve found your teeth.”*

“Whey! Eels! You heard right, they are my favourite ... Haven’t had them in years. ... So who are you mate? A prison visitor or something?” She asked as she tucked into the eels.

“No, not exactly” Mark gave a little laugh. He had hoped she would not be quite so much on the ball and would not question his rather weak cover story. He fished for an answer. *“I have been working on a history of the area ... you know Greenwich has been in the news for the millennium and I’m visiting all the senior citizens over 75 to get their impressions of what Greenwich was like in the old days.”*

“Are you barmy? It was awful when I was a kid. I come from Deptford though ... next door ... Greenwich was a bit more snooty. But it’s no good looking at those grand buildings and that boat ...”

“The Cutty Sark?”

“Yes, that tea ship ... everyone thinks - Oh how nice” She put on a posh accent. *“How nice to have all these posh boats and navy people here ... see I can talk posh if I want to”* She giggled. *“But they don’t want to know about the likes of me and how we lived. Forget it mate. Let’s talk about something nicer”*

“Ok since I’m here ... Let’s just have a chat then” Mark was somewhat relieved that he could now concentrate on the goal of his visit. *“Do you get many visitors?”*

“Aaaaah!” The laugh came out so like a scream that Mark thought something was wrong. *“Visitors! Me have visitors? Once in a blue moon dear. No one cares about me now ... never did if the truth be known. I’m not a nice old lady boy, not someone people want to remember. I was a bit wicked in my time”* She put on a wicked smile and nudged him with her elbow *“You know ... nudge nudge wink wink!”*

“Well yes, but we all have a right to a past ... surely someone comes to see you?”

She looked a bit more serious *“Just my daughter ... she comes when she can ... but she lives a long way away ...”*

“In London?”

“Oh no ... no in America” She looked proud *“Done alright for herself she ‘as ... lives in New York but she ‘as to go to other places for ‘er business and then she pops in to see her old mum.”*

“Do you have just the one child?”

“Nahh ... I ‘ad two girls. Clever they was. Sabrina’s my youngest”

“Is she the one who visit’s you then?”

“Aaaaahh!” Another screamed laugh *“Sabrina visit me! Sabrina wouldn’t visit no-one if they was on their death bed! Nahh my Belle ... she’s the only one who sees me!”*

“Your Belle?”

“Yes - I calls her Belle - her real name’s Belinda you know but she only used that when she was in the films.”

“So she was an actress?”

“You could say so!” More winks and nudges.

Mark was beginning to wonder if this old woman knew what she was saying. Was she in a fantasy world, was she confabulating or had she just lost her natural inhibitions and defences in conversation as some old people do. Her frontal cortex could have been damaged by age ... he found himself going over his medical student texts in his head ... what was that diagram he learned in neuro-anatomy of the tracts going through to the brain and the areas defined for specific functions?. Who was the name of that famous patient - the building site worker who had his frontal lobe sliced off in an accident when an iron girder fell on his head? He lost all his inhibitions.

He was sure Ivy would not normally be telling him all this. Had he misunderstood - but wasn't Belinda dead? Maybe she was mixing the daughters up - old people do confuse individuals.

"I suppose Sabrina was an actress too was she?"

"Not really. Only to start with ..." Another wink. *"Then she married that gent and got into modelling. She's too good for us lot now. Very hoity toity crowd she mixes with. ..."*

"Any grandchildren?"

"My Belle can't ave any. Sabrina's got little Carly but I hardly ever seen her, 'cept once when she was a baby and about half a dozen times when she came to see me in my old place just before I come here"

"Do you have any pictures of them?"

"Nah. They never had any pictures except the modelling ones. I've seen Sabrina in the papers sometimes. But no family pictures. I had some from when they were little but they got torched when my place went up a few years ago. ... Just before I came in here ... They said I'd gone to bed with a fag in my mouth and set light to the bedclothes ... but it weren't me! I was asleep alright but I'd run out of fags that day ... my giro was late and I didn't have the money."

Another crime scene? Mark wondered if anyone might have tried to bump off this loose tongued old lady.

"So who found this place for you then?"

"Oh it was my Belle of course. Them others don't care" She sighed *"Listen mate ... I've had enough of your face now ... handsome as you are ... time to get lost"*

On the way out Mark decided to pump Debbie for information.

"Thanks for fetching her teeth Debbie. I'm sorry she was so rude to you"

"Oh don't worry she's like that all the time. I hope you got the interview you wanted out of her ... she's an awkward old bat."

“Well not much ... she wasn't very co-operative. What do you know about her?” Mark beamed a slightly flirty smile - he had his sister's tactics.

“Not a lot. She's been here about five years. The rumour is that she was some kind of Madam or gangsters moll. Her daughter put her in here when she came out of hospital after a house fire. I think most people thought she was a gonner then but she pulled through apparently. I think they had her in some private hospital somewhere first and then brought her here.”

“Who's her next of kin?”

“Oh her daughter Sabrina - she's the only one who visits her”

“Don't you mean Belinda? Belle?”

“Oh no, she's dead. Sabrina told us that the old lady wants to believe that she's Belle because she was her favourite and she can't believe she's really dead. So she lets her call her Belle. But she's Sabrina”

This was getting double difficult to understand! Was this a clever cover by Belle to make people think she was really dead? Or was this a confused mother reaching for her dead daughter? Would he ever find out?

* * * * *

Lucia could feel her heart beating in her head. She kept her eyes closed as she tried to work out what was happening to her. In any case she didn't feel that she would be able to cope with any light in her eyes. They hurt, her head hurt, her face hurt ... in fact everything seemed to hurt and she felt horribly sick too. Waves of nausea and vertiginousness rolled over her. She felt like death and was not quite sure if she was still alive.

Gradually as consciousness began to return she could hear sounds, then could distinguish voices. She kept still. Her brain was beginning to get into gear and she reckoned that if whoever was speaking thought she was still unconscious, they may talk more freely. She took care not to alert them by altering the depth of her breathing or to moan even though she desperately wanted to moan and cry.

“I really think this was a tactical mistake Mother. What are we going to do with her? It’s always messy to involve foreigners.” Guido’s whinging voice.

“She’s only half foreign”

“Yes but her father’s a policeman ... this won’t go down well. Apart from the fact that she has a Carabinieri as a boyfriend”

“Look I’m not going for any of that crude tactic you and your father are so keen on. No bodies, no art work, no clues left at the scene. I just want to know what she knows. Just dose her up, ask her the questions, do what you have to do and then give her so much juice that she won’t remember anything. It shouldn’t be too difficult for you ... just regard it as another of your dates.”

“Now that’s not fair. I don’t use drugs on all my girlfriends”

“No, not all, but quite a few I don’t doubt.”

“Mamma!”

He sounded outraged but Lucia reckoned that Veronica had hit the nail on the head. So she knew what they had in store for her. What would she do? Probably best to pretend to co-operate and tell them a different story ... or would the drugs take over and force her to tell the truth. For now she would fake a coma. They would not know how hard they had hit her. She could have been severely injured.

Where was she anyway? There was no particular smell or background noise to identify the place. In fact it was pretty quiet. Probably in a basement or office. No cooking smells, not musty or damp. Modern building maybe. She wasn’t very good at this - needed some more clues.

“I’m fed up waiting for her to come round. Put the TV on, Ma and lets see the football news.”

“You should not have hit her so hard perhaps. Keep the TV low we don’t want to attract attention”

“There’s no-one here”

“Maybe so, but I’d rather not have anyone think there was a break in and come and see what the noise was.”

“I can use my office any time I want”

“Yes, but you don’t do you? It would look odd for you to be working late, you never have before”

Ten minutes into the evening sports coverage Lucia’s cover was blown.

“Hey! The bitch is awake. I’m sure I saw her eyelid move. And she’s breathing easier ... I reckon she’s faking it”

“We’ll soon see” Lucia felt Veronica’s bony fingers pinch her ear lobe ... she winced. *“Wakey Wakey Svegliati Bimba!”⁶⁶*

There was no point in continuing the pretence. In their mood, they would only have hurt her more. Lucia slowly opened her eyes. At first it was difficult to focus. Then she saw the blur of Veronica’s contoured form in front of her - who else would wear Yves San Loren at a time like this?

Lucia could smell Veronica’s perfumed hand as it held her cheeks in a vice like pinch. *“Ah so ‘La Bella Addormentata’ our sleeping beauty awakes?”* Then to her son *“Guido get her a drink - she can’t sing with a dry throat.”*

Lucia tried to speak but nothing but a croak came out ... she coughed and went to move her hand to accept the glass of water Guido held at her lips. It was then she realised her arms were pinned behind her. She seemed to be tied to a chair.

“Sorry ragazza⁶⁷ zio Guido will have to hold the glass for you. See we’re both here to look after you, your uncle Guido and Zia Veronica ... and you don’t have to worry about us because you won’t be remembering a single thing about tonight”

Lucia hated the thought of drinking at his hands but there was no alternative - she choked down the water and it did help her feel a little better. Now she could just about speak.

⁶⁶ Svegliati Bimba - wake up girlie

⁶⁷ Ragazza - young woman

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing or what you want from me ... but if it’s information you want I don’t have any”

They ignored her protestations and busied themselves setting up a recording tape on the table next to her chair while Veronica opened up some small dark green capsules and tipped them into a glass holding a small quantity of water. Rohypnol the ‘date rape’ drug.

“Look, you’re wasting your time with that stuff ... It won’t work on me”

Veronica was angry. She struck Lucia across her cheek. *“Stop your whining! If you think you don’t need it then sing without! Do you expect us to believe that you have no information when you have spent every waking moment sniffing around like that ugly dog of yours ... poking your nose where it should not go ... stirring things up that have laid dormant for years!”*

“Nothing you didn’t already know, I’m sure”

“I’ll be the judge of that ... Now just tell me one thing ... Did he kill her?”

“Did who kill who?”

“You know perfectly well what I mean” She slapped Lucia again

“Mamma ... you don’t have to do this ... wait for the drugs. Let me give her them now”

“ ... My husband. Did he kill her” Her voice rose to a crescendo and she was beginning to lose control.

“You know he did” A voice rang out from somewhere behind Lucia. Someone was standing at the doorway. Lucia could not see who was there but the voice was familiar. Shock registered on the two faces before her as Amelia di Fiori entered the room.

“You old crone! What are you doing here. As usual putting yourself where you don’t belong interfering in other people’s business.” Veronica was very angry.

“Sometimes one has to interfere” Amelia was trying to be strong but even in Lucia’s weakened state she could see that the old woman was

struggling to keep upright and her breathing was laboured. Guido's office was only on the other side of the square from the Moderno but it must have taken an enormous effort for the old lady to walk that distance and up the stairs.

"How did you get in?" Guido's pride was dented.

"The cleaner always leaves the basement door unlocked by the dustbins so that her boyfriend can come round later and take some of the spare stationery to sell on his stall at Senigallia market"

"How did you know that - we never missed anything?"

"Perhaps you never bothered to look. When you are a semi-invalid like myself and you have all the time in the world to sit and look out of windows, you begin to notice things"

"And what other things might you have noticed?" Veronica spoke sarcastically.

"I noticed an elegant woman who should have known better, who should have learned her lesson and matured with age, becoming involved in even more dirty work than when she was young and lost her way"

"You self righteous old crone. You never tried to stop me!"

"No and I was wrong. Veronica I have stood by too long and seen your cruelty. Your family ruined my daughter and ruined the lives of many others ... but I'm not going to let you ruin this girl's life too! She reminds me of Margherita ..."

"Your Margherita was a whore and so were you! Sleeping with my husband ..."

Amelia interrupted her and tried to lunge at Veronica but instead collapsed in a heap at Lucia's feet. *"That's not true!"*

Veronica continued to goad *"It's true ... your precious aristocracy 'di Fiori indeed ... reduced to taking another woman's husband!"*

She had gone too far. Amelia pulled herself up and confronted the ex-model. *"Another woman's husband in words only. When did you ever sleep with him apart from when you wanted to get yourself pregnant with*

Guido. You only cared for your Helena ... and your other women! How do you think that made him feel? He only came to me because he had loved me before you came into his life."

"He never loved you ... you were too simple ... you disapproved of him ... you hated him!"

"Yes, I hated what he had become ... but he was not always like that. When we were very young we did care for each other. Then he began to change ... we grew apart ... we both married. It was after my husband died, after you distanced yourself from him, that he tried to come back to me ..."

"And you welcomed him with open arms!"

"No! No! absolutely not! If I had, things would have been very different ... and you know that Veronica. I would not have him. He was a married man. He desperately wanted another child and he wanted me to bear it for him. I refused. That was why he came back that night ... full of wine ... wanting me in his bed ... you know that so why do you lie about it now? Is the guilt of what you did becoming too much to bare?"

"It's not my guilt ... it was your daughter who was a whore"

This time Amelia connected. She reached into herself and summoned up the energy to strike Veronica across the face. Veronica retaliated but surprised and put off by Amelia's slap, her punch missed its mark catching Amelia only a glancing blow on her shoulder.

"Don't you ever call my daughter a whore! Your husband raped her! He would have raped me ... but he came across her first and the pig raped my poor innocent Margherita instead!"

"Yes and then he turned all lovey dovey when he realised she was pregnant. God what a nightmare it would have been to raise that bastard piglet!"

Amelia turned purple with rage and went to hit Veronica again. This time the woman was too quick for her and pushed her to the ground following up with a sharp kick in the ribs.

“Leave her be! Don’t talk Amelia, they’ll kill you!” Lucia was concerned that Amelia had used up too much of her failing strength. She was not cut out for such confrontation.

Amelia lay on the floor sobbing. *“She was only sixteen. I should have stopped you. ... Why was I so weak?”*

“Shut up you old hag!” Veronica kicked her again.

“Leave her alone! I’ll tell you what you want to know! Can’t you see she is too weak to fight you!” Lucia was sure that Veronica would kill Amelia.

“So our little bird is ready to sing is she? Make sure she sings the right tune Guido”

“Yes but we have a complication now. The old bat will have to go ... it’s no good giving her drugs ... she is resolved to fight us now ... we will have to dispose of the two of them.” Guido seemed pleased at the prospect.

“I won’t tell you a thing unless you let her go!” Lucia knew she was in a no win situation but she wanted to play all the cards.

“You’ll tell us anyway ... you have no choice ... the only option is drugs or no drugs” Guido gloated.

“Look Guido it will be dawn soon ... It’s no use continuing here. We have to get them out of here before they are seen. Let’s continue this elsewhere ... just get the information with the drugs when we are ready and then dump them”

“Where? The police have been in all our hiding places.”

“So let’s use that fact ... How about using the art store. They’ve cleared it out and they won’t be going back there. Giordano is in jail and that old meddling priest Don Virgilio can be called away while we open the chamber. Once inside no-one will hear them” It was Veronica’s turn to gloat.

“Ok ... let’s see how you sing” Guido placed the recording microphone next to Lucia’s mouth. *“We’ll record the message and ring him in a couple of hours - it will soon be morning. He will get suspicious if it goes*

through at this hour. I'll put some static on it so he will think it's a bad line and not ask you questions. Now leave a message asking Don Virgilio to meet you at your aunt's house ... and no clever stuff"

"Don Virgilio, Deus perducatur, I am sorry to bother you but I need you to meet me urgently at er ... at my aunt's house "

"What was that first bit? Sounded like Latin" Guido was suspicious.

"It just means God be with you or God guide you ... I always say that to him because he taught me Latin when I was little and it became like a little joke between us. I thought he would be suspicious if I left it out"

"Yes, it does mean that ... stupid thing to say but if they do say things like that to each other it might be best to leave it in - makes the message more genuine" Veronica deliberated.

"OK, but if it's a double cross you can kiss your priest goodbye!" Guido menaced.

Lucia suffered the indignity of being bundled in a blanket with a cover over her head and a gag over her mouth. She felt Guido lift her roughly and dump her in the back of what felt like a van. A thud beside her meant that Amelia suffered the same fate.

They bounced along some uneven roads and then the van came to a halt for more than an hour. Waiting for the phone call to go through no doubt. Guido seemed to be alone with them. Veronica had stayed behind.

Lucia tried to listen for clues to where they were. No traffic sounds - obviously a less used road ... they had seemed to climb ... maybe on the monastery approaches. This was confirmed when a car engine passed them ... a few minutes later the van moved on up hill again. That must have been Don Virgilio going down the mountain to meet Lucia at her aunt's house.

Would he understand the message - 'God guide you' - part of the Latin phrase from the door of the passage room. Would he tell Marcello? Would Marcello betray her? So many unknowns. She must try to make another move herself as soon as she had the chance.

* * * * *

Guido evidently did not want to carry Lucia twice. She was more awake now although her head still hurt her badly and her face ached from Veronica's slaps.

Guido set her on her feet still bundled up and forced her out of the van, into the church and down the crypt stairs. He seemed to have opened the door in preparation and pushed her through so that she fell unceremoniously in a heap on the stone floor. Her hands were bound and her head was still covered. At first she could not orientate herself and lost vital seconds while he went out to fetch Amelia. Had she been quicker she might have struggled to her feet and made a bid for freedom but he returned too soon and the chance was gone. Amelia slumped beside her, her breathing almost imperceptibly shallow.

“Buon riposo, have a good rest ladies. Try not to miss me, I'll be back. And remember to save your breath for our conversations. Nobody can hear you in here”

The crypt door slammed shut.

It was pitch dark and tomb like inside the chamber. No sound now except their breathing and Amelia's was becoming dangerously feint.

Lucia struggled against her bindings. The gag was fairly easy, it had been tied hastily and was not too tight. By working her jaw up and down she managed to work it down on to her chin and then to where it hung loosely round her neck. She manoeuvred the cover off her head and got rid of the blanket by rolling on the floor and dragging her forehead on the ground. Now she was bound only at the wrists.

Lucia's limbs were stiff and aching from confinement and the period she had been unconscious so she spent the next few minutes working her arms and legs as much as she could to get them loose and supple. She manoeuvred herself to a standing position and worked her way to the wall and then around the perimeter until she reached the light switch. She managed to throw the switch with her forehead and let light onto the desperate scene. Could she help Amelia in time?

Lucia's next move was to roll back and pass her arms forward over her buttocks and along behind her legs, finally passing her bent legs through the arch of her tied arms until her tied wrists were in front of her. It hurt a bit - particularly the last part of the movement and she had to really pull hard to get her legs right through however it was a life and death situation and she managed a move which she had always found hard if not impossible in other circumstances.

Once her arms were in front she worked hard with her teeth trying to loosen the knot. All the time she listened for breathing sounds. Amelia seemed weaker by the minute. Lucia shuffled over to her and nudged her gently. *"Wake up Amelia. Try to stay awake."* She must get her to breathe. The old lady was being slowly suffocated by her gag.

Lucia worked furiously until her mouth bled with the effort. Finally the cord began to give. Just a little movement. Then enough to free a hand. She let the cord dangle from her still bound hand as she tore the gag from Amelia's face and gently patted her cheeks to get her to breathe. *"Come on Amelia, you can do it, come on breathe!"*

In desperation Lucia decided to try mouth to mouth resuscitation she pinched Amelia's nose whilst breathing hard into her mouth. On the third breath Amelia began to cough and gasp. Lucia sat her up and thumped her on the back. Another gasp and she seemed to regain some colour. *"Come on Amelia, that's it ... Breathe!"*

A splutter and a sound. *"Basta!⁶⁸ It's alright. I'm still alive ... I think. Just let me rest"*

"Thank God you're Ok. But we can't rest for long. We have to get out of here."

"You get out and let me be. I can't do any more"

"If you think I'm leaving you to that pair! ... Over my dead body"

"This business has been over a very many dead bodies so far my dear and I don't want it to be over yours. You get away if you can. Leave me to face my fate. It was sealed many years ago when I let that witch take my baby's child away. It broke her heart"

⁶⁸ Basta - enough

“I know Mondini raped her and scarred her so she never went out. I found out from Angelo who helped you care for her. He said someone took her child but I had thought it was Mondini, not Veronica”

“No Mondini was a monster certainly. But he wanted the baby - it was his son. She was jealous and had it taken away. He was a beautiful little boy. She just came and tore him from Margherita’s arms. Nobody dared to confront her. She was a wicked woman.”

“And Mondini, he could not stop her either?”

“No she had the baby away before he knew of it and she threatened to take away his son Guido if he tried to find the child. ... Some years later he had his revenge though. It is rumoured that he was involved in the disappearance of Veronica’s lover, the model Helena and her friend”

“So that’s why he didn’t want the road tunnel reopened and presumably the watch would have identified the body. He sent Guido up to look for it and found it missing but then by intercepting my email he knew where it was. ... But Veronica did not! No that doesn’t make sense because if Guido was acting for his father, he would have known where the watch was and told his mother”

“You are right that he was against the road tunnel because the bodies would have been found. However Veronica found out about the murders some years ago. She then wanted the watch as proof so that she could hold this against her husband and get him condemned for the crime. That would have meant that she and Guido would take over the Mondini empire”

“So how did you find all this out?”

“Like all egotists, she could not keep things to herself. She told me this in one of her goading sessions. ... You know she has always been convinced that there was something between me and Carlo Mondini ... Eagh! The thought revolts me. But she would come to the Moderno and try to upset me with stories of how she could get at Carlo, hoping I suppose that I would tell him. Pathetic ... mentally unhinged” Amelia’s voice was getting weaker.

“Enough talk Amelia, rest now” Many things were coming into the open now but Lucia was left wondering about the missing threads. They all spoke of murders. In the plural. There had certainly been many murders

but of the two missing women there was only one body. Was Belinda's body so well hidden? Was she dead? And if not where was she?

Lucia had an appointment to keep on Sunday which might provide the answer to these questions. But now it was Saturday morning and she had to get out of this crypt.

* * * * *

Amelia had fallen into a fitful sleep. At least her breathing was regular now although Lucia worried whether she had any internal damage from the kicks Veronica had thrown at her frail body. Cracked ribs at least ... but who knows if she might be bleeding internally? There was no time to lose.

She removed the remains of her bindings and dusted herself off ready for her next move. Her clothing was in disarray and she remembered that she had left home without her coat. Fortunately she was wearing trousers which would make action easier. She still had the jeans she wore on Friday afternoon and a light jacket over a tea shirt ... she had made no preparation for the 'special dinner'.

She examined her pockets, they seemed not to have 'frisked her' presumably because the original intention was for her not to remember what had happened so they would want to create no clues regarding missing items. Her keys were still there, no money her purse was still at home. But ... wonderful! Her mobile phone was in her inside pocket.

This would save a lot of time and effort. She whipped it out and dialled Luigi. No signal. Oh no ... they were too deep underground perhaps.

Ok so she had to get out. The entry door had no catch on the inside. She tried to pull it in but there were no hand holds. Why did it have to open inwards she cursed.

Lucia turned her attention to the passage door. Marcello had managed to open it enough for her to squeeze through but she did not know how blocked the tunnel behind would be. Now that the dust had settled she could just about make out a slope of debris extending backwards and reaching up to the roof.

Right. Lucia had to get as far as she could into the tunnel to see if her mobile would work nearer the surface. She scrambled up the debris slope thankful to discover that there was a small gap between it and the roof ... a gap just big enough for her to squeeze through. She dragged her body through and pitched into the void on the far side knowing full well that she would not see light again and did not know what else she might find. This could be her last adventure. She might never get out. But for Lucia, there was no choice.

Fortunately the fall on the far side was not far and the slope of the debris was fairly gentle. She landed roughly and grazed her arms through her jacket. No serious damage though. It could have been a lot worse she argued to herself as she scrambled to her feet and felt for the tunnel walls.

Progress was painfully slow. The ground was uneven in parts where the floor had been damaged with time and damp - but in other areas seemed to be tiled or have some sort of covering making walking easier. She inched along the walls battling with her horror of grasping some awful insect. Reason told her that there would be few denizens of a completely dark and evidently sealed tunnel but memories of Indiana Jones took over and sent periodic shivers down her spine.

The tunnel for the most part was surprisingly dry. It had been well constructed so many centuries ago. The friars had done well. Perhaps it really had been one of Saint Francis's retreats.

Lucia shuffled forward in the dark for about half an hour and then tried her mobile again. The little glow from the screen was a welcome relief from the gloom but again no signal. Another half hour. She must be near the surface now although her progress was painfully slow. Still no signal.

Finally a few moments later she reached an obstruction. Her foot scuffed on a ridge of stone and she nearly hit her nose on the slab before her.

A dead end ... but somewhere there would be an opening. Don Virgilio said it came out in the cemetery. There would no doubt be a grave stone which covered the opening. It would be too heavy for her she guessed. But there again it had to open somehow. Maybe a counterbalance or a catch of some kind? Now would it be in the ceiling or the floor - would the opening be above her or in front? She guessed above her. It would

have to be a flat or semi flat stone or it would have attracted attention on the outside.

Lucia dropped to her knees and felt around the perimeter of the tunnel end. To her left she felt a step. Ah it must allow her to reach the trap door. Sure enough another step above. She teetered carefully on the steps. ... A third A fourth ... A fifth ...ouch! Her head connected with the roof. She reached up with both hands to steady herself and felt smooth stone.

Probably there had been times when it had slid open easily but Lucia's best efforts made no impression. There could be layers of earth and vegetation on top of it now.

Lucia reached up near to the surface with her mobile and pressed the call button. At last a service! Yes Luigi's phone was ringing! She cried in disbelief as Luigi's phone did not answer!!

What next. Her energy was draining fast. She could not see to dial and could not balance on the steps to tap the keys so had to rely on stored telephone numbers. She pressed to recall the last dialled numbers and paged back a couple to avoid calls to Marcello. She pressed yes again and the little screen lit up with a number - David's. That would do. Unbelievable - an answerphone! She would leave a message and started to speak ...

"David. This is the time to go to the website. I'm stuck in the tu ..."

As the battery gave out in the mobile, Lucia felt her hopes die too.

"No! I can't believe it! After all that! David, David!" Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Lucia slumped at the foot of the steps and closed her eyes. Maybe if she got some rest ...

* * * * *

David got Lucia's message as he returned from Gatwick where he had dropped Mark off on a flight to Bologna. They had already accessed the web site and hence Mark's visit to Ivy.

They did not like the thought of Lucia meeting Barbara Van Stockert alone. Mark would travel to Bologna on a Saturday afternoon flight and stay the night with Antonio. Travelling early was advisable to avoid being seen at arrivals. His face was not one which any of the protagonists of this drama would recognise - but it was best to be careful. Barbara might also travel early to check out the scene.

David had wanted to go too but this would have made the arrangements more complicated and it was best to have someone back at base. Mark had not decided what to say to Lucia when she saw him at the airport. He did not of course know that she would not be keeping her appointment.

The 13.25 plane from Amsterdam arrived on time. Mark had found a vantage point at a little bar where he could pretend to be drinking and was able to see arrivals file through. The plane was fairly full and several elegant women passed through - any one of which could have been Barbara VS. Mark went over her description in his head. Lets see she was sixty two years old, a blonde probably greying or gray - but there again could have dyed hair. Rich and well heeled. Not very tall.

A woman on the periphery caught his eye. She had not come on the plane. She fitted the description and she was watching. ... watching for someone waiting for a passenger. She did not seem to be interested in meeting anyone herself and never checked the arrivals screen. This made Mark suspicious. She looked at the line of relatives and tour guides waiting to meet people but never approached anyone.

This had to be Barbara. She had cleverly not taken the plane. Probably went via London and took an Alitalia back to Bologna to cover her tracks. She was playing a clever game. The spider waiting for the fly - but who was the spider and who was the fly?

Just as Mark was thinking he would have to make a move, another passenger came out of the arrivals lounge. A blonde with a hint of red in her hair - a familiar ring to her description. What was it Lucia had written - a strawberry blonde?

The woman was perhaps too young - but was muffled up and little of her face was showing. She was carrying a card marked VM. What would he do?

No sign of Lucia - why? Mark put down his long empty coffee cup and moved slowly towards VM alias Caroline ... all the while keeping the Barbara suspect in his field of vision.

Before he could confront VM a scene unfolded before him. From nowhere a dark young man jumped in front of her and was heard to say *“Mrs Van Stockert you are under arrest for the murder of Helena Van Stockert ...”*

What was going on? The rest was a blur. More police ... It was then he saw his father Paul Blackwell.

“Dad! What are you doing here?” Each was as shocked as the other!

“You don’t seriously think I’d let my children play detective on their own do you? Although your sister nearly blew our cover when she photographed our car outside her flat! But hey, where is Lucia?” Paul shouted with alarm.

“I don’t know! ... Look out she’s getting away!” Mark had seen Barbara move quickly out across the concourse and towards an outgoing flight. She obviously had planned a quick get away.

Mark ran as fast as he could and found the Italian policeman at his heels. They both bulldozed through a waiting queue of German tourists and jumped a luggage cart ending up cannoning into the dismayed Barbara. The three landed in an uncomfortable heap cushioned by Barbara’s mink coat. Both held on to their prey as the Italian raised his head to Mark ...

“Piacere ... I’m Marcello”

“Mark - pleased to meet you too!”

“Now where on earth is your sister!”

* * * * *

It is amazing how quickly the so called ‘honour’ among thieves falls apart when under arrest. Aunt and niece proved to be more than ready to

condemn each other. The women were interrogated in separate adjacent cells.

It seemed at first that Barbara would be the easier one to break. She had experienced years of hiding and almost seemed relieved that some of the subterfuge was over.

Barbara aka Belinda could not avoid admitting her true identity. True, she had changed her appearance since that newspaper item had published Belinda's description and maybe she even wanted that to be seen so that nobody would look for a blonde thin woman after her disappearance as a plump brunette.

Unfortunately for Barbara her finger prints were on Scotland Yard files from old prostitution charges and Paul had brought her records with him for Marcello to match up. Some days later Angelo was also able to identify the 'Bella' 'Brutta' he had tried to describe. ... Ironic that her name had also been 'Belle'.

It was Caroline who first began to 'sing'. She at first denied everything but as soon as she realised that Barbara's identity was revealed, she changed her tack. Caroline then refuted any part herself in the tawdry affair and was anxious to lay full blame upon Barbara. She insisted that her visit to Bologna had been merely at the invitation of her aunt who had arranged to meet her. Why was she carrying the VM sign? At first no comment. Then ... Barbara had asked her to, she thought it was some little joke.

Caroline had been only eight years old when Helena and Belinda disappeared but she had acquired knowledge gradually over the years of her childhood and now she ruthlessly shared it with Paul and Marcello to save her own skin.

Belinda had wanted Helena out of the way because of her affair with Veronica. She was jealous and it suited both herself and Rosswell to rid themselves of her. Carlo Mondini also wanted her out of his life. He had enough of the embarrassment of his wife's indiscretions and wanted revenge for the loss of his son five years earlier.

It had been Belinda who Francesco had seen fire the gun all those years ago. Belinda had Carlo help her dump the body down the tunnel shaft and

Belinda had taken the diamond watch from her dead lover's wrist after Mondini had returned to the car.

That watch had been a visible witness to Helena's love for Veronica and Veronica's control. Every day of the two years that Belinda saw her wear Veronica's diamonds she felt the misery of a displaced lover, felt her rejection and bitterness grow, felt the loss of the threesome which had endured so many years. ... Belinda, Helen and Sabrina ... through abuse, pain and hardship. ... Belinda, Helen and Sabrina ... under Rosswell's wing. ... Until Veronica and betrayal ...

Now the watch would be Belinda's safeguard if Mondini tried to betray her. It bore his wife's initials and she would keep it in case she needed to put pressure on the family. It was only years later that she decided to give it to her niece. The girl lived with them in New York, neither woman returned to Italy and Mondini would not see the watch.

So Belinda entered the convent. She had plastic surgery and was cared for by the sisters who had no idea what their long suffering patient was really up to. Angelo ministered to her. She kept away from the public gaze and only surfaced when she had pupated and emerged as an evil imago to regain her planned position with Rosswell.

Belinda died and Barbara was born, taking her new name from the Convent - Santa Barbara.

Barbara continued the art trafficking that she had performed when in company of Helena but this time at a distance. Carlo controlled the Italian end of the business and Rosswell Van Stockert travelled alone when he needed to check on the Italians.

Carlo fully supported Barbara's new identity and never revealed the subterfuge to his family. The world accepted the new Mrs Van Stockert but Veronica was dangerous. She would know.

Caroline neglected to mention her own mother's involvement. She denied receiving money from the art dealings via the advertising agency or the charitable fund. Caroline and Sabrina were completely innocent bystanders, portrayed in some ways as the victims of the evil of Barbara (Belle), Carlo and Veronica.

* * * * *

Beyond the initial cathartic relief of admitting her identity, Barbara refused to talk. Paul and Mark watched from a one way mirror as she was interrogated. She sat enveloped in her mink coat concentrating on her own silence like a Zen monk in meditation. After two hours of relaying Caroline's words to her and going over the same ground again and again Marcello was ready to call it a day.

Then a chance breakthrough. An officer knocked at the door and motioned Marcello to speak outside. He returned to the room some fifteen minutes later and addressed Barbara in solemn tones.

"Signora Van Stockert. I am sorry to be the bearer of sad news." She looked up surprised expecting some manipulation and was shocked as he continued. "I am very sorry to have to inform you that your mother Ivy Parker was found dead at eleven am this morning. We will allow you time to reflect on your loss before continuing this interview ..."

"How? How did she die? What happened? Tell me NOW!" Suddenly animated and breaking from her meditation, Barbara was beside herself more with anger than sorrow.

"A full investigation and post mortem is being performed and I cannot say any more at the moment"

"Yes you can, you bastard! What happened! Tell me!"

Marcello decided the moment would be right to use the information he had to his best advantage *"I cannot be certain of the facts you understand Signora Van Stockert, but I am informed that your mother collapsed soon after consuming a carton of something referred to as jellied eels?"* He paused raising his eyebrows and referring to his notebook unsure of the nature of this Anglo-Saxon culinary item. He was not surprised that someone could die after eating such a thing! He shuddered involuntarily *"... Apparently a duty nurse received a telephone call from a woman purporting to be from the local newspaper asking if their reporter had concluded his interview. She was told that a gentleman had visited and spoken to your mother on Friday. Upon hearing this the woman thanked the staff and said that the reporter would be sending a small gift in gratitude for Ivy's time."*

“The little bitch! She’s done it this time ... The cow! ... I can’t believe it! She can never leave anything alone. Has to go and foul things up! Well I’m not standing for any more of it ... I raised that kid and this is the thanks I get ... this is how she pays me back!”

“Who are you talking about? I must warn you Madam that you are in the process of interrogation and your statements are being recorded and can be used in a court of law. Are you sure you wish to continue without a lawyer present?”

“A fancy lawyer is not going to make any difference now, you idiot. Can’t you see that Caroline done my mother in!” Her accent momentarily slipped into it’s original cockney as she grew angry and thought of her mother.

“How do you mean?”

“She tried to get rid of her a couple of years ago when she thought she had a big mouth and was getting a bit senile and might give things away. Set fire to the place after she drugged the old bat’s coffee. Ivy never realised. I had her in a private hospital for a bit and then put her in the home. I made out she was do-lally and told the nurses she got me mixed up with Sabrina. They swallowed it so she could say what she liked and nobody took any notice.”

“And now?”

“I reckon she poisoned the Eels ‘cos she thought Ivy was talking to the press ... or to someone else ...”

“What makes you think she would do something like that?”

“Huhh You must be joking! What makes me think ...?” Barbara snorted with indignation and laughed a wicked little laugh. *“You don’t know the half of what that bitch is capable of! Cruel little madam ... I’ve seen some in my time but she takes the cake! My mum was a hard bitch and Sabrina took after her ... hard as nails ... Now Caroline ... she’s a real case ... seems to have inherited the worst parts of both of them ... and then worked on them. She’d slit your throat soon as look at you.”*

“Have you any evidence of her harming anyone before?”

“Evidence! Hah!” That wicked laugh again - hollow and unnerving
“Caroline never leaves any evidence - unless you want to drag a river to look for it! She was just a kid when she came to live with us. Just a little ordinary kid ... that’s what I believed. I thought how is she going to manage in new York after life in an English girls’ school? Hah! She taught them Yank kids something! We kept being called to see the principal ... they wanted her to see a psychiatrist. Brilliant, they said ... a really gifted girl ... but seriously disturbed ... psychopathic personality disorder ... that’s what they said. So we had her tutored at home ... got through a lot of tutors.”

“But was there anything particular that she did? Was she ever charged with any crime?” Marcello was sweating under the interrogation lights and the room was stuffy. He was beginning to feel swamped by the amount of information and was glad it was being taped. There was a lot to follow up here. School records, psychiatric evaluations, tutors notes, evidence from other pupils ... then there were still the bank accounts to be followed up. And behind all that information buzzing in his head he could not keep his mind off Lucia. Was she another victim of this ‘psychopathic personality’?

“There was always something with Caroline. You never felt comfortable with her ... never turned my back on her, know what I mean? When she was twelve she started on drugs ... just in a small way to start with ... but she wanted money and then she started stealing from us. Ross noticed and read the riot act. You know what she did? She just walked out the door calm as you please and went straight to children’s services and accused him of molesting her!”

Marcello wondered if there was truth in this accusation. Knowing the history he was sure there was, even though it suited Caroline’s purpose to ‘disclose’ at that point in time. This was not the best time to go into that side of things ... another interview could hone in better on the specifics of the sexual deviations and there were procedures to follow, but he could not avoid touching on it now.

“Did you ever suspect your husband of having inappropriate relations with your neice?”

“You bastard! What are you trying on now? Don’t try to turn things onto us ... poor little Caroline ... abuse victim ... look what she would have become if it wasn’t for the sexual perversions of her family! Look at me! I’ve done alright haven’t I? Houses in London, New York and

Amsterdam, more money than you'll ever see in your policeman's life ... so what would you say if I told you I was fucked by my father ... you can't say it ruined me!"

Marcello was thinking exactly that. The woman was beginning to lose it. She was saying things that she would normally keep to herself. Should he continue or should he stop now and let her regain her composure? He was torn between fairness and wanting to get all the information he could. If he continued would he be accused of placing undue pressure on a woman exhausted by her ordeal?

Barbara solved his dilemma by continuing her tirade. *"We gave that kid everything and she turned on us ... but she was clever too. Ross wanted to keep her in the business, she had talent, he wanted her on our side. So we sent her back to England for a few months and then when things calmed down we had her back with us."*

From behind the one way mirror Mark thought of Lucia's web site and wondered what business? He also recalled Leo Morrison the bent New York cop who had got Van Stockert off the porn charges all those years ago. Was there another or did he come in again to bail out his friends? Mark did some calculations in his head and reckoned Morrison would be about fifty at the time of Caroline's disclosures of abuse. Yes that would fit.

"So she went back to her mother?"

"Not then. Sabrina was in Italy with Donaldson doing fashion a show commentary. We wanted to keep Caroline away ... just in case ... So she spent the summer holiday with Marsh. Hah! Turned out to be his last summer holiday as it happens!"

"She inherited a lot of money. Did you ever suspect her in his death?"
Marcello decided to up the emotional pressure *"After all you seem to be accusing her of being involved in your mother's death?"*

"Involved?! She was more than involved! I'm not accusing her! I'm TELLING you she did it! Are you just thick or do you think I'm making it up? Haven't you been listening to me ... the girl's a basket case. A drugged up psychopathic basket case! I thought Veronica was one of the worst I'd seen but she puts Veronica in the shade! I always thought Marsh drowned in an accident ... but later I was not so sure, she was only twelve after all ... but then when she killed her own step father ..."

She shook her fist angrily at the mirror knowing someone would be watching. *“If you lot had done your job and nailed her for that, my mother would still be alive! Happy are you now Mr Poxxy Scotland Yard!”*

“You are saying she was involved in her step father’s suicide?”

“Jesus Christ! You policemen piss me off. Talk about beat around the bush! What’s with all this ‘involved’ stuff? Now watch my lips! She had Bill Donaldson butchered and made it look like suicide. Just because he was getting in her way. Well to tell it straight - he was getting in everyone’s way ... started asking questions ... started rooting about.”

And so the little birds sang in their separate cages

* * * * *

Eventually Caroline’s innocence began to give way. She had endured some hours in the interview rooms and was looking very tired. Her nose was running and she began to shiver and yawn ... early signs of withdrawal. She needed to get out and get a fix. Marcello noticed and piled on the pressure.

Paul joined him in the room and confronted Caroline with her aunt’s revelations. She sat impassive with the merest hint of a smile on her lips as she heard of her grandmother’s death.

She pouted angrily as he raised the subject of Donaldson’s ‘suicide’. As he continued to press her, angry passion got the better of her ...

“God this is so boring! Why all this concern over the bastard? Christ can’t you just leave me alone! Let me out of here! That boring old fart has caused me enough grief ... just forget him!”

“Unfortunately that is not an option Ma’am” Paul kept calm although under the table he was clenching and unclenching his hands as he felt his rage rising for this spoiled brat in designer apparel. *“Perhaps you could enlighten us as to the nature of your relationship with Mr Donaldson? Did you ...”*

She jumped in before he could finish his sentence. *“Relationship! We never had a relationship! He was my mother’s husband ... that’s all ... he was never anything to me! I hardly saw him when I was younger ... he lived in London and I was in Manhattan.”*

“But you went to Japan together”

“That was just business ... but he started to really piss me off when we were in Japan - I suppose he thought he could do the father daughter bit after all those years ... advise me to reform my wayward habits ... it made me sick. Bastard starting poking his nose in ... Then he really blew it! ... He went to see Ivy and got suspicious about the Barb/ Belinda thing ... so someone had to shut him up”

“So you did?”

“I didn’t say that”

“What of the Italian side of things? Was your father involved?”

“Step father PLEASE! Don’t ask me what he was involved with ... ask him ... she laughed aloud ... I know some good mediums ... Oija board ... is there anybody there ... I can just see it!” She was getting hysterical as she ran her fingers through the air simulating the movement of the Oija board glass. The two men sat silent tempting her to fill the soundless void. She laughed again , bitterly this time. *“The sap always knew about Veronica’s affairs and when I was a kid he tried to get her to lay off my mother - they had an affair too ... Veronica and mother I mean ... Veronica was quite predatory in that way but mother was no angel either ... that was the reason Sabrina split with my real father Victor ... mother’s tendencies. ... Bill should have known better ... he knew what my mother was like ... stuck up goody two shoes he was ... I’m bloody glad to see the back of him!”*

* * * * *

Part Seven

Don Virgilio reached the Vincenzi house soon after seven o'clock on Saturday morning. The house had been in turmoil ever since the dog had returned alone after dinner. Luigi was now out on a call and nobody had seen Lucia since the night before.

Marcello had alerted his officers and instituted a house to house enquiry in the immediate area. She could not have gone far in the time between leaving the house and Bruno returning alone. Someone must have seen something.

Don Virgilio feared the worst but busied himself in supporting and reassuring the family once more. *“You know Lucia, I’m sure she’s just on some mad cap exploit and will probably just walk in the door as if nothing happened and wonder what all the fuss is about! After all why would she tell me to meet her here ... she must be all right or she would not have been able to telephone me this morning!”*

“Why would she ring you? I don’t understand” Her mother puzzled as she paced the kitchen, spilling the coffee, picking things up and setting them down again.

The children were being prepared for school and were winding up the adults by asking questions and being difficult. Laura bundled them out of the door saying she would return as quickly as possible.

Luigi returned at eight and was surprised to see Don Virgilio. No news from Marcello as yet. He listened with puzzlement to the story of the telephone call.

“What exactly did she say?”

“Just to meet her here at her aunt’s house ... Oh and that it was urgent”

“Did she say what time she would be here?”

“No ... but I suppose that’s the answer ... she must be intending to return to meet me. Suppose she went to Assisi or somewhere and is on her way back. We should wait and she will be here I’m sure”

“Well, it’s possible she will turn up ... Lucia never ceases to amaze me, she is a law unto herself ...but her car is here so she can’t have gone far and she would hardly go to somewhere like Assisi in the middle of the night!”

“Let’s give her another half hour and then call the police again. Marcello will probably have located her by then” The priest suggested.

Half an hour passed ... no news. Marcello was out of the office. They left a message for him and he responded an hour later. It was now nine thirty. Lucia had been missing for approximately twelve hours. Nobody had seen anything. No clues to her whereabouts.

Don Virgilio decided to stay and wait it out with the family. He had few other duties on a Saturday now that the monastery was almost empty. He was unaware of their new guests!

Marcello continued to search and checked in at intervals to speak to Don Virgilio or Luigi. At two o’clock he was diverted to the Moderno. The waiters had missed Amelia di Fiori’s presence at lunch. She was always punctual. The morning maid remarked that she had missed breakfast too. The manager checked her room and found the bed had not been slept in. Where could the frail old lady be?

Marcello had been more worried about the telephone call than about Lucia’s disappearance. He had an appointment in Bologna and he suspected she had left on the night train for the same destination. There had been no record of her boarding the train but the guards were not very vigilant. Two things made no sense. She would not have left the dog to wander the streets and she would hardly have phoned Don Virgilio if she was on her way to Bologna.

Now the added complication of Amelia’s disappearance although of course the old lady could have got confused and wandered off? ...

Unlikely in her physical state and her mind had been very much on the ball.

He was frustrated by the lack of time. Passing the information on to his colleagues he decided to leave for Bologna. The arrangement was to meet Paul Blackwell on Saturday evening at the Bologna Carabinieri headquarters to exchange information and plan the next day's action. He knew Lucia would move heaven and earth to turn up in Bologna.

* * * * *

By four o'clock Luigi was really concerned. He had tried ringing Lucia's mobile phone and got no reply. He had left messages on the voice mail and nothing came back. The police had no news and no clues.

Don Virgilio had worn a groove in the marble floor from his pacing up and down and he had said several rosaries. So far without response.

"Look can't you think of anything that Lucia might have wanted to talk to you about? Anything at all?" Luigi was growing ever frustrated by the lack of progress.

"Well she may have wanted to discuss the investigations, but we had talked about everything in such detail that I can't think of anything else ... certainly not anything urgent"

"Well you could hardly call it urgent now ... God it's nine hours since you got here ... and she rang you before that"

"It certainly is strange" Don Virgilio shook his head.

"When she spoke to you did she sound normal? ... she was a bit odd last night ... not herself ... there was a bit of a scene"

"The line was quite bad I think she might have been calling from her 'cellulare' because it was quite crackly"

"Didn't you ask her what it was all about?"

"I did in fact. But she didn't answer me. She just hung up"

“Madonna Santa, that girl will drive me to an early grave!” Luigi scratched his head, rubbed his face and sighed *“Just go over it again. What exactly did she say?”*

It was the priest’s turn to sigh. *“She just said - Don Virgilio, I am sorry to bother you but I need you to meet me urgently at my aunt’s house - that’s all. Oh and she made a little joke I think”*

“How do you mean? What little joke?”

“Oh it was nothing. I always teased her about her Latin. She always got the cases or declensions wrong and she tried to give me the message in Latin but then got the words a bit wrong and gave up and went back to Italian”

“What Latin words? It might have been a message.”

“Now let me think ... what was it? The verb was perducere which means guide ... yes I know ... the line was bad as I said but I think she said Deus ... God ... she was trying to say God be with me or God guide me to her I suppose ...”

“Never mind the accuracy or the grammar ... what exactly did she say!”

Don Virgilio looked perturbed as Luigi seemed to lose his temper with him. *“It was ‘Deus perducatur’ ... yes that’s right ... Yes, I’m pretty sure she said ‘Deus perducatur’”*

“And then she got cut off?”

“Sort of ... cut off or hung up at the end of the sentence”

“Don’t you think it’s a bit strange she didn’t let you speak to her? It sounds more and more to me that she was under some pressure ... maybe she was being held to the phone or something like that ... perhaps she could not speak freely and that’s why she couldn’t finish the phrase ... maybe she was just able to put in a word or two but more would have raised suspicions”

“Luigi!” Laura’s voice calling her husband. *“Luigi pick up the telephone! It’s someone from England and I can’t understand ... Romina’s gone out.”* Romina in desperation had gone walking round the town with

Bruno to see if the dog would give her a clue to her daughter's whereabouts.

"Pronto?" Luigi was hesitant - he spoke little English and found it easier when the person was face to face with him and gave him visual clues to the subject matter. *"Scusi, piano ... aspetta ... non capisco"* Luigi turned to Don Virgilio. *"I can't understand ... you speak English don't you?"*

"Si a little." He took the receiver. *"Pronto. Hello sorry would you repeat that. Oh Davide ...and I am Don Virgilio ... Yes Lucia will have spoken of me ... yes that's right ... Oh you know me from Website ... I'm sorry you must be mistaken, I've never been there. Only London and Brighton. Oh sorry ... it's not a place ... never mind"* Don Virgilio scratched his head and looked at Luigi as if to say this man is crazy. As he continued to listen his face grew more serious *"Yes I understand ... so she phoned you too? Oh Madonna Mia"* He crossed himself. *"Thank you ... of course we will look into it right away. ... Yes the police are looking for her now ... Certainly ... Good bye"*

"Well?" Luigi was impatient.

Don Virgilio looked shocked. He struck himself on the head and yelled *"Stupido! Quanto sei stupido!"*⁶⁹ he ran for the door. *"Corri! Quick we must go ... Lucia is in the tunnel!"*

Luigi grabbed up his car keys and followed the friar through the door. He had never seem him move so fast. *"Where are we going?"* He asked as he rammed the car into gear.

"Santa Barbara. The Latin, I'm stupid but that was part of the secret phrase on the door of the hidden chamber. Deus perducatur ... 'Deus perducatur vos ad lucem' it means God Guide you to the light or in this case to freedom. Why did I not realise that before? So so stupid, Oh Lucia, Lucia I'm so sorry!"

"Don't punish yourself too much, father. We were all under stress. At least you have realised the message now"

"Yes it was that English man, Davide. He said Lucia and rung him and she only said she was stuck and then her telephone cut out. She apparently said 'stuck in the ... something' He thought the next word

⁶⁹ Quanto sei stupido - How stupid you are

might begin with a 't' sound. So I realised she could be stuck in the tunnel behind the hidden room”

“Well that sounds plausible. Knowing Lucia ... exploring tunnels is something that would appeal to her! Take my cell phone while I’m driving and ring the police”

* * * * *

Luigi had the crypt door open in minutes and was horrified at the scene. A body lay on the marble covered in a blanket. God! Lucia was dead! He could not bear it. How would he tell his wife that yet another family member had been killed.

Luigi rushed to her side and peeled back the blanket. *“It’s not Lucia? Who is it?”* He was relieved and confused.

“Goodness me. It’s Amelia di Fiori” Don Virgilio identified the woman who called him to confession every month.

“Poor woman, to die in here. But where is Lucia?”

“Wait! ... She’s not quite dead. I can feel a very weak pulse. She can’t survive much longer I would imagine. I will stay with her and give her the last rites. See if Lucia is in the passage ... there is an opening over there just past the wardrobe.”

Luigi squeezed into the tunnel pleased with the hope that his niece was still alive and cursing her for getting into such tight corners. How on earth did she get over the mound of fallen earth? Would he fit in the narrow gap. *“LUCIA!”* He shouted as loud as he could *“Lucia!”* Only the echo of his voice returned.

Luigi scrambled up the debris to the gap between the fallen earth and the roof. No way he could get through there. Maybe if he pulled some earth away. He began to tear at the mound with his hands and then pulled back near to tears with frustration as he realised he was making no impression on the dirt. He shouted again and again.

“Watch out behind you sir” The local firemen were entering the tunnel behind him as a cascade of earth struck Luigi on the back of the neck. He

jumped back fast spluttering and coughing. The men looked on impotently as an earthfall filled the small gap.

“Oh my God, Lucia! ... How can we get her out now?”

“Please sir, stand aside and we will get the cave rescue team to see if she can be dug out. Hopefully she is beyond the fall and should have enough oxygen for several hours. They will need special equipment to get through without making the fall worse.” The fire officer spoke with more confidence than the situation deserved.

Luigi returned to the crypt room to find a paramedical crew working on Amelia. She was barely alive and they had oxygen masks, an intravenous and tubes all over her.

Don Virgilio rang his hands and fiddled with the rosary in his pocket as she was stretchered out to a waiting ambulance. *“Poor woman, she has suffered so much pain ... to be taken like this ... pray God she will survive”*

Luigi grabbed Don Virgilio by the shoulders and led him outside. *“Is there another way? Is there another entrance to the tunnel? They will take ages to dig through and she might suffocate or be buried. They told me to keep out of it ... but I can’t just stand back and ...”*

“The cemetery” Don Virgilio spoke in a hushed tone. *“Quick before it get’s dark ... let’s take a look.”*

They made their way briskly past the gathering emergency services not wanting to be delayed by giving statements to the police or being hindered in their quest. This was a long shot - but it could pay off and there was no time to lose. They jumped in Luigi’s car and drove the short distance to the back of the monastery. It saved vital minutes and Luigi grabbed a shovel which he kept in the back of the car. It was useful to dig him out of ditches and snow drifts when he drove on country trails to deliver calves in winter.

They jumped out of the car and Don Virgilio led the way across to the perimeter of the burial ground behind the monastery church. *“I don’t know if I can find the opening. I told Lucia that one of the old headstones covered the entrance and it was never intended to be easily found. It was an old escape route for the monks when the various factions of the*

Catholic Church were quarrelling and the Franciscans came under threat because they advocated poverty when many of the abbots wanted riches.” He puffed out of breath by talking as he scurried along.

They stopped at the far edge of the rough overgrown area. *“I suppose it must be one of the outer stones - so that it was easier to get clean away?”* Luigi suggested.

“That’s right. It would have been a horizontal slab obviously rather than an upright headstone but now some of the stones have fallen so they will confuse us ... we need to read the inscriptions. I was only an alter boy when this was last used and I know that the Hillman escape was the last time anyone went through. I heard that the Germans machine gunned the opening and pushed the stone closed. So we might see bullet score marks on it. There should be some kind of inscription though saying something like the inner door - I can’t remember the words - but something to do with light and freedom I think” Don Virgilio was pulling aside tufts of grass and examining stones as he spoke.

Luigi followed the priests lead and they soon had uncovered a dozen stones with messages for departed brothers who would sleep in peace. Two stones remained unexamined. Both were covered with overgrowth and debris rendering their inscriptions unreadable.

“OK father, It’s fifty fifty. Which one shall we try to budge?”

Don Virgilio examined the stones carefully. One was marble. It had been damaged by the passage of time. There were score marks along one edge and a corner looked as if it could have been shot off.

Luigi decided *“Va bene. We start with this one. It’s been machine gunned as far as I can see”* He threw off his jacket and began tearing at the vegetation overlying it.

“No, no my son. The old monks would not have used marble. They were poor. They would have used ordinary stone. Limestone like that one over there. This was probably a more modern stone from a bishop or someone like that who just wanted to be buried here. It would not have been Franciscan”

“Ok Let’s get on with it” Both men worked furiously to uncover the stone. Don Virgilio pulled off the plants and grass to expose the edges

while Luigi dug away the earth overlying one end. *“Once we expose it all and get this earth off it should not be too hard to move. After all that was the intention ... so it must have been made relatively thin. Otherwise an escaping friar would never have been able to lift it from inside.”*

“That’s right” Don Virgilio puffed. *“The door in the crypt has the same design, it looks heavy and thick but it’s actually made specially thin so it can be opened easily”*

“Look. The earth was hiding the machine gun holes. You can see them clearly now. And if I’m not mistaken, there’s some kind of inscription here.” Luigi bent to clean the incised words with his hands. *“Some of the letters are missing by the look of it but I can just make out ‘Fra ...’ probably fratello - brother then ‘Lupo’ - wolf ... ‘Proteggi’ - protect us.”*

Don Virgilio broke in *“That’s it! That’s it! Quick there’s no time to read any more, just lift it quickly! I remember now it was something like ‘Brother wolf protect us in your den’ Because the wolf spoke to St Francis and it means that there’s safety in the wolf’s den or tunnel!”*

* * * * *

Lucia was roused from her fitful rest by the sounds above. At first she thought she was imagining the scraping and banging, but then it grew louder and more distinct. Yes someone was digging her out!

“David, David, I’m here” She shouted in her semi torpid state. Then she realised. What am I saying? David could not have reached me here. He was in England. Pray to God that this was a friendly rescue and not Guido coming to get her.

Whatever the reason for the rescue attempt, she needed to get out of there. She struggled to her feet although her legs were almost too cramped to hold her up. With all her available strength she pulled herself up the steps which she had climbed some hours before.

Now she could hear something ... someone was calling her name. *“LUCIA!”* It sounded like Luigi *“Lucia are you there?”*

“Yes, Yes. Get me out!” She stood on the topmost step and braced her back against the roof. She heaved. Nothing. *“Life the hatch Luigi. On three let’s go together!”* She did not know if he heard her but went for it anyway. *“ONE! TWO! THREE!”* Nothing.

Tears of frustration streamed down her face. *“Again! ONE! TWO! THREE!”* A superlative effort, a cascade of earth ... dust filled her eyes and she screwed them shut. Arms reached down to her and closed around her shoulders as she was pulled up blinking into the light.

Lucia saw the light only briefly as she fainted in her Uncle’s arms.

* * * * *

When Lucia next opened her eyes she found herself in a hospital bed surrounded by worried family. Romina was sitting beside her and Laura sat at the foot of her bed.

She was vaguely aware of someone else in the room and lifting her head from the pillow slightly she saw the figure of Amelia di Fiori in the next bed with Don Virgilio praying over her.

“Now don’t start trying to get up.” Her mother scolded. *“We have had enough excitement for a lifetime and you need to rest”*

“How long have I been here?”

“Since last night. The doctors gave you something to sleep and then they let us come in to see you this afternoon. Oh it’s Sunday” She added in response to Lucia’s puzzled look. She nodded her head in the direction of the other bed *“They just brought her down here. The poor woman was in intensive care until just now but they say she is holding her own now and wanted her to be with someone she knew when she woke up. Don Virgilio is talking to her a bit but she has not responded yet”*

“Sunday, Oh no , I should be in Bologna” She murmured.

“I don’t care where you think you should have been, now you’re in hospital and you’re going to stay put!” Romina was firm her anxiety veering towards anger.

Lucia tried to talk but thought the better of it. She fell back to sleep and during the rest of the day was only dimly aware of the comings and goings of family and medical staff.

On Monday morning Amelia called over to her. She was awake and gaining strength.

Don Virgilio was the first visitor. He gave Amelia communion and prayed with her. Lucia pretended to be asleep, she did not want to offend the priest by showing she was disinterested in the prayers.

A surprise visit followed. Paul and Mark rushed into the room followed by Marcello.

“Dad! Mark! What are you doing here?” Lucia was surprised and pleased to see them but looked suspiciously at Marcello.

“We thought we had better keep your appointment in Bologna” Mark teased.

“Yes and we have a couple of little canaries by the name of Barbara and Caroline singing away in their cages” Paul added with a wink.

Lucia glanced at Marcello as if to say - don't discuss this in front of him. Mark laughed. *“It's ok little Miss Marple ... Marcello checks out! He's one of the good guys!”* He stepped forward and gave his sister a hug.

“So? But how? I saw him with Veronica! He took a bribe!”

“Lucia. There was no money in the envelope. Just some photographs and a birth certificate. My birth certificate to be precise” Lucia looked confused. She glanced around the room for guidance. Amelia nodded at her and gave a weak smile.

“I think I know what you're going to say next” She looked hard from one to the other - Marcello and Amelia ... it was those eyes. *“Marcello, meet your grandmother!”*

Beams all round as Amelia smiled and cried simultaneously. *“He is so like my daughter. I glimpsed him once in the street and I knew! Of course*

I could not say anything ...but I hoped and prayed that our baby would be returned one day - it is sad that Margherita is not here to see him, to see how well he has grown” She laughed.

“I thought you might work it out, Lucia. You knew I was adopted. I have been searching for my natural mother for years. It was no coincidence that I was posted to Mediano. I managed to discover that my mother was probably from this area. I was taken to Bolzano by a local woman who gave me to a children’s agency which organised adoptions. I managed to trace her and she admitted that she had been made to collect me from a woman in Ancona. The description fitted Veronica although of course I did not realise that at the time. Nor did I know that my mother was raped, beaten and that I was taken from her against my will.” Anger rose in his voice.

“How can you forgive me?” Amelia cried.

“There is nothing to forgive. We are all victims of the evil perpetrated here many years ago. With your help Amelia, we can convict Guido, Veronica and Carlo and clear this whole mess up!”

“I’ll make it up to you my son” Amelia streamed tears of remorse and joy.

“There is one way that you can make it up to me.” He laughed and crossed over to her - he bent and whispered in her ear.

“Oh yes, yes!” She giggled “I’d be proud to!”

“Come on folks” It was Mark’s turn to speak. “I think we’ve all had enough excitement for one day. Lets get home and eat ... I’m starving ... and we need to let these two catch up on a few things. Eh sis?” He winked as he led his parents from the room. “Don Virgilio, would you like some pasta?”

“Oh I’m not sure if ...” he noticed Marcello looking at Lucia. “Oh yes, yes of course. Good night. We can talk tomorrow Amelia”

Marcello crossed over to Lucia’s side.

“What did you say to Amelia?”

“Oh I just asked her to be a witness”

“Just that?”

“Yes, just that. Of course there are a number of things that people can witness. Not only Veronica and Carlo’s trial”

“Really? What else then?”

“Oh Possibly a wedding?”

“Possibly. We’ll see about th...”

She was unable to finish her sentence as he kissed her.

“You talk too much!...”

* * * * *



About the Author

Teresa Bushida left her native Italy in her childhood and, like Lucia, is of mixed Italian and English parentage. Teresa lives in London with her musician son and actress daughter but travels widely in the course of her occupation, writing and working with underprivileged children and has written a number of books relating to her experiences. Her other interests such as Martial Arts, Computing, Music and breeding large dogs also feature in her writing, notwithstanding, this is a work of fiction and any resemblance to 'real' people and places is merely another '*coincidence*'.