



Dead silence.

A man dressed completely in black was sitting behind the big, solid desk.

In the last few hours, he had gone over and over his carefully worked-out plan until it was burnt into his mind. He couldn't afford to make a mistake. The fateful moment was drawing near. Only a few minutes now, at most a few hours. He didn't want to leave anything to chance, which was why he was weighing up all the things that could possibly go wrong.

All at once he took his hands away from his temples and rubbed his eyes. Maybe it was the light from the candelabra bothering him. He took a deep breath.

Abruptly, he turned his armchair towards the wall behind him and looked at the brocade curtains covering the windows, on which the light in the room seemed to throw unsettling shadows, then at the big oil painting hanging just behind the desk.

It was a portrait of a man with a thick grey beard, wearing a severe uniform and a long dark cloak over his shoulders. It had struck him immediately as soon as he had entered the room: the man seemed to be staring at the spectator, the eyes so piercing that they seemed alive. The longer he looked at the painting, the more the hate boiled up in him. He wanted to tear the man's heart from his chest, erase all trace of him from the face of the earth for ever.

After a moment or two, he looked again at the curtains then turned and folded his hands on the desk.

Just then, the silence was broken by the creaking of the front door, a sound that was like heavenly music to his ears. He turned to the half-closed door of the room and listened. Now he could hear footsteps in the corridor. Someone was coming closer. He quickly glanced at his watch: the fluorescent hands showed 11.47.

He was really close now.

How he despised him!

After a few moments the door opened and an old man, impeccably dressed in a dark blue lightweight suit with a carefully knotted matching tie and shiny black shoes, appeared in the doorway. He was extremely thin, with a pale face and a slim moustache. When he saw the stranger, he froze, and a shudder went through him.

How could it be? he wondered. How could it possibly be *him*? But those hard, ice-cold eyes were unmistakable.

Calmly, the man in black raised his right arm. The old man saw the barrel of the gun pointing straight at him, and understood.

*At last!* the man in black said to himself.

The hour had come: his journey was about to begin. His adventure. The real thing, just as he had imagined it.

*The first piece of the jigsaw.*

It was the night of Saturday 28 August 2004. A night that would be long remembered. The Florence police would come to call it a night of horror, the start of a new nightmare.

A sudden cry rang out.

Just one.

'Go to hell!' the man in black whispered.

His finger squeezed the trigger.



*That was just the beginning.*

The man in black was outside now, beneath a starry sky, lit by a weak crescent moon. Around him, quiet and calm. All he could hear were the sounds of the night, the hum of insects, that buzz that disappeared during the day. The hill was deserted. There was nobody and nothing in sight, not even the headlights of a car.

It was so peaceful here.

He knew the place very well. Here and there he could see a few weak lights outside sleeping villas and cottages. Cautiously, keeping a safe distance, he passed a few of them, breathing in the scent of wild herbs. At the end of a narrow path he came to a security fence. It was about eight feet high, but there was no barbed wire at the top. He stretched his arms up as high as they would go and grasped the netting, at the same time bracing his feet against one of the posts. He put his left arm over, then the right, then one foot after the other, and in the blink of an eye he was on the other side. He landed on a lawn.

Then, camouflaged by the darkness, he walked along the edge of the road. For a while he was accompanied by the song of an owl. From time to time he paused amid the undergrowth to catch his breath. He calculated that the first glimmer of dawn would soon appear on the horizon; the outlines of the hills would become ever sharper, the countryside ever greener.

Coming to a small clearing among the trees, he stopped for longer.

He had planned this, too.

He took off the black tracksuit, from which he had removed the label. It was splattered with fresh blood in several places. From his backpack, he took a change of clothes and shoes and put them on. He dug a hole in the ground with a small stick and hid the clothes he had been wearing, and then, in a separate hole a short distance away, the shoes and the gun. He was not the least bit concerned that the police might find them, assuming they were capable of doing so. He took another gun from his backpack, a Beretta 7.65 semi-automatic, which, like the first gun, had had its serial number filed off, and tucked it into the back of his jeans. Then he tied his long fair hair into a ponytail and set off again. The only sound was the noise of his steps on the little cobble road.

His one aim was to get away from here as quickly as possible. That was all that mattered. He was sure he had left no clues behind: no prints, no traces of DNA. Nothing at all. The police would be driven crazy. Their investigations would lead them nowhere, he was sure of that. The most dangerous part was behind him.

And as he continued walking at a steady pace, he had to hold back a laugh. He had really enjoyed himself, more than he had done for a long time.

He had watched the bastard die!

He went over the whole sequence of events in his mind, from the beginning, as if it were a horror film. Down to the smallest detail, the slightest gesture. It hadn't been a fleeting, elusive dream. It hadn't been the death scene he'd imagined every time he'd closed his eyes to sleep over the last few days. No, this time, it had all been real. No longer a fantasy, but pure reality, the realisation of his evil dreams.

One of many.

He would remember tonight as one of the most beautiful of his life. He was as sure of this as he was that nobody would stand in the way of his plans.

The man had collapsed at his feet, arms dangling like a puppet's, imploring him with his eyes, moving his lips once or twice, but to no avail. He knew why, he knew what had been going through the man's mind. Then the final touch: the blood spurting from his head like water from a fountain.

He had been patient, and he had been rewarded for his patience.

He suddenly heard a noise and turned. It was only a night bird. He watched it as it disappeared into the woods.

He felt free. Incredibly free.



*7.35 a.m. Chief Superintendent Michele Ferrara's roof terrace*

Ferrara was enjoying the slight coolness of the morning. It wouldn't last long: in a few hours the summer heat would descend on Florence, as it had in the past few days. Even though summer was coming to an end, this infernal heat seemed to be holding on for as long as possible. And today, as every day, time would move as slowly as the people in the streets.

He had been back in Florence for a couple of weeks. While he was away, he had really missed this view – from the Ponte Vecchio to San Miniato al Monte and beyond, as far as the wonderful hills – which he enjoyed from the roof terrace of his apartment on the Lungarno degli Acciaiuoli. He had bought the apartment ten years earlier, when the property market in the city, as in the rest of the country, was in crisis, and the prices were affordable. Both he and his wife Petra considered this one of the most beautiful spots in the historic centre.

The city would soon come to life. In Florence, Sunday was a day like any other. You could already see the first street vendors pushing their stalls towards the nearby Uffizi Gallery, where in just a few hours' time the usual queue, made up of visitors from every corner of the earth, would form, drawn by

the museum's outstanding collection of Tuscan and European art.

The street artists and performers would also be showing up soon: painters, portrait artists, mimes. The bars had already started to serve their first coffees and the few shops that opened on Sundays would shortly be ready to welcome tourists, mostly Japanese and American, devoted customers of those fashion brands that could boast the prestige of a branch in Florence.

Ferrara glanced at the hills, where the morning mist was evaporating in the sunshine.

As he waited for the usual hearty breakfast that Petra was lovingly preparing in the kitchen, he opened the newspaper. The front page headline announced twenty-one deaths on the Italian roads the previous day. Another bloody Saturday: all too common at this time of year, he thought, shaking his head. The most serious accident had occurred on the autostrada between Salerno and Reggio Calabria, the notorious A3 with its endless roadworks. A family of four, husband, wife and two teenage children, had burned to death after a terrible collision with a speeding four-by-four. There had also been tailbacks and long delays on the roads to the major northern cities and around the border areas.

So staying at home at this time of year wasn't such a bad idea after all, he thought.

'My parents send their love,' Petra said with a smile, putting the tray down on the Caltagirone tiled table.

'Did they ring again?' he said, his voice tinged with gentle sarcasm, as he folded the newspaper. His parents-in-law had phoned the night before and talked to him for nearly half an hour, as well as to Petra.

'*Ja, die Mutti rief an,*' Petra replied: the odd sentence in her native German slipped out from time to time in spite of the many years she had spent in Italy.

'Your mother again? Has something happened?'

'No, Michele. She wanted to know how you'd slept. That's all.'

‘That’s nice of her.’

Ferrara had just returned from a period of convalescence after receiving a bullet wound to his left shoulder during a shootout in Germany, which was why his parents-in-law, who saw him as a son, were so worried about him.

They started eating. On the table were slices of locally produced cured ham, fresh cheese, butter, blackcurrant jam, and sliced Tuscan bread, one of those baguette-style loaves, in their opinion the best thing their local baker sold, the only kind that kept its flavour right through to the evening.

Just five minutes later, as Ferrara was buttering a slice of bread, the telephone rang.

It was the inspector from the Operations Room at Headquarters, calling to tell him that a body had been found.

It looked like a homicide.

‘I have to go,’ he told his wife once he had hung up.

Same as usual, Petra thought, nothing ever changed. She looked at her husband anxiously. These days, she didn’t make any attempt to conceal how worried his work made her, especially since he had been wounded in a shootout with Leonardo Berghoff, the crazed killer who had terrorised Florence earlier in the summer.

Ferrara had already gone back inside, carrying in his nostrils the scent of the rambling roses and jasmine that Petra grew in the greenhouse which occupied a small area of the terrace. It was her favourite hobby and kept her busy for a good part of each day.

He got dressed, gave his wife a goodbye kiss on the lips, and went out. He never left home in the morning without that loving gesture.

Never a moment’s peace, he thought to himself as he hurried down the stairs.



‘Well?’ Ferrara asked. ‘Did he say anything else? The victim’s name?’

They were crossing the city, the blue light rotating slowly on the car roof. The driver, Giancarlo Perrotta, had just summarised what he had learnt from the Operations Room.

A man had phoned 113 to report, his voice shaking with emotion, that he had just found his employer dead.

‘No, he didn’t say anything else. He hung up straight after giving the address and directions how to get there.’

The driver spoke with a noticeable Neapolitan accent. He had joined the force a couple of years ago and had only recently been transferred to the *Squadra Mobile* here in Florence, one of the most sought-after postings for young police officers eager to experience the glamour of detective work.

They drove along the Via San Domenico towards Fiesole and its surrounding hills. Having left the built-up area they drove in silence for a few miles. Then the radio began to crackle.

‘Car One calling Central,’ they heard.

‘Come in, Car One!’

It was the team that patrolled south of the city. They had been the first on the scene.

An officer communicated the victim’s particulars, gathered from his identity card.

As soon as Ferrara heard the name, he swore and instinctively grabbed the microphone to tell the team to make sure they didn't specify their location in case anyone was listening in. It was now common knowledge that journalists, criminals and even curious members of the public tuned into the frequencies used by the State Police and the Carabinieri.

Then he put the microphone back and started thinking, eyes fixed on the strip of asphalt stretching ahead of him. Apart from the sound of the air-conditioning, which wasn't working very well, it was quiet in the car.

Coming to the turning they had been told to take, the driver steered left off the main road onto a narrow but paved private road. They drove along it for about half a mile until they came to a heavy iron gate. For a moment, Ferrara's gaze lingered on the rectangular slab of Tuscan sandstone on which the owner's name was carved in capital letters. They drove through and found themselves on a tree-lined avenue surrounded by flowerbeds and manicured lawns. At the end of it, they could see a large, austere classical villa, like some Medici residence from the Renaissance. The driver stopped the grey Alfa Romeo 156 in the space set aside for parking. The crunch of gravel could be heard beneath the tyres.

There were already a few police cars there, some white and blue, some unmarked, together with an ambulance. Next to the ambulance, two paramedics stood talking. They both looked nauseous and were inhaling great lungfuls of smoke from their cigarettes. There was a stretcher on the ground by the back door, but it was too late for them to do anything. They were only waiting for someone to give them the green light to leave.

At least there weren't any journalists, Ferrara thought.

'Good morning, Chief Superintendent!'

A uniformed police officer had seen Ferrara arrive and had rushed up to greet him, pausing first to grab his regulation cap from the dashboard of one of the cars and put it on. He had a

boyish face, which was perhaps why he had grown the beginnings of a beard. He must have been twenty-one or twenty-two at the most.

A short distance from him stood his female colleague. She too was quite young. She wore her long blonde hair in a plait and her face was as white as a sheet. Ferrara thought about the feelings the young policewoman must be experiencing. Fear? Anxiety? Horror? Something she had probably never thought about before, at least not seriously. When she saw Ferrara she tried to pull herself together, quickly checking her uniform to make sure it was neat and tidy, and assuming an alert stance. She didn't want Ferrara to think she was just a woman who got scared easily: you needed strength and determination to work in the presence of death.

As he returned his greeting, Ferrara realised the young male officer was looking just as nauseous as the two paramedics and the young policewoman. Maybe they're just tired, he thought as he walked towards the solid wooden door, his footsteps crunching on the gravel.

At that moment, Teresa Micalizi, the senior officer on duty, appeared in the doorway. She was wearing a cotton jacket over a crumpled T-shirt, a worn pair of jeans and a pair of plimsolls. Her face, too, bore unmistakable signs of disgust. After a moment's hesitation, Teresa approached the young policewoman, who was holding a tissue pressed to her mouth, and tried to reassure her, glancing from time to time at Ferrara, then at Superintendent Rizzo, the deputy head of the *Squadra Mobile*, who had come out of the villa just after her and was now conferring with Ferrara in a corner of the parking area. Teresa wondered why Ferrara had not gone straight in to look at the crime scene.

There was, in fact, a good reason.

'All right, Francesco, give me your first impressions.'

Ferrara knew his deputy well: down to earth, a man of few

words, in many people's opinion the perfect embodiment of what a detective should be. He was of average height and solid build, but over the past few months he seemed to have aged rapidly. His greying hair bore testimony to that. He had been working at Ferrara's side for several years now and their understanding was so great that they each knew what the other was thinking with a mere exchange of glances.

That was why Ferrara had decided to trust in his colleague's intuition rather than immediately ascertain the facts, which he would learn soon enough anyway. To him, intuition – the first impression – was the most reliable interpretation of what was observed at a crime scene, and he had almost always found that indulging that intuition had set him on the right path.

'Definitely the work of a professional, I'd say, chief. It has all the characteristics. We could be looking at a revenge killing.'

Ferrara nodded.

'He may well have got rid of anything that could connect him to the murder,' Rizzo went on. 'We'll have to check every dust-bin in the area.'

'Let's get every available man on it,' Ferrara said. 'And we'll need to go over the lawns carefully with a metal detector. I think we should also interview the staff at the restaurant near here and the residents of the neighbouring villas – in fact, any potential witnesses we can track down.'

It was highly likely that, before committing his crime, the killer would have reconnoitred the area, presumably at the same time of day that he intended to strike. It must indeed have been a professional, with such careful planning, but they could not rule out the possibility that someone might have noticed him.

'I'll get right on it, chief. We'll speak to the owner and staff of the restaurant as soon as it opens, and the neighbours as soon as we can.'

They both knew that most of the residents in the area were doctors, lawyers, engineers and well-known businessmen. In

other words, the upper-middle class and nouveaux riches who had abandoned the centre of Florence, where they no longer felt safe, and taken refuge in the hills around Fiesole, protected by high walls and hedges, convinced they could live a more peaceful life there. They were bound to feel a lot more vulnerable now.

‘Have the pathologist and the deputy prosecutor arrived yet?’ Ferrara asked Rizzo.

‘Only the pathologist. He’s already checked the temperature of the corpse and how far rigor mortis has progressed. He’s just finishing the external examination now. The victim was shot in the forehead, that’s one thing we can be sure of. It looks like a genuine execution.’

‘Which deputy prosecutor is on call?’

‘Luigi Vinci, theoretically. I spoke to him on the phone and he said to go ahead with the crime scene investigations and he’ll join us later. He’s at his holiday home by the sea, at Follonica.’

So, Ferrara thought, Vinci was ‘on call’ more than a hundred miles away!

‘Any witnesses?’

‘Not at the moment.’

Ferrara took a few steps forward, then turned and gave Rizzo a long look. Rizzo nodded. ‘Francesco,’ Ferrara said, ‘we need to handle this very carefully. We don’t want to get into any trouble over this. Leave the official stuff to me. When I’m back at Headquarters, I’ll contact the Commissioner and the Prosecutor’s Department and deal with the media . . . the usual crap. I want you to stay here and coordinate the investigation.’

‘Of course, chief. I’ll call you if anything turns up.’

They moved back to the villa and Ferrara, glancing up and to his right, noticed a surveillance camera trained directly on the front door. He had not spotted it when he arrived. They might be in luck after all!

‘Have you checked that?’ he asked Rizzo, indicating the camera.

‘Yes, chief. It was the first thing I did. Unfortunately, it wasn’t working, so there’s no footage.’

Ferrara put on the plastic overshoes and latex gloves that the driver had brought him in the meantime. There was always at least one box of them in every car from the Headquarters pool. He ordered Teresa Micalizi to take some officers and start a search of the garden, the secondary crime scene, and at last walked up the two sandstone steps and crossed the threshold after Rizzo, who was a few steps ahead of him.

He was prepared for the worst.