



*Monday 27 September 2004, Pisa*

The three weeks in the infirmary had seemed an eternity to Daniele De Robertis. They had treated a gunshot wound to his right wrist, the hand with which he'd been holding the gun during his shoot-out with the police.

He had been in that cell with its rusty bunk for three days now. It was a narrow space, a little under ten feet square, a squalid hole where he felt in constant danger. If nothing else, he was alone. Many would have considered this a privilege, but that thought did not even occur to him. It would never have crossed his mind that someone might show him any favouritism.

He suddenly felt as if he were suffocating, as if his life was coming to an end.

Gripped by panic, he looked around him: even the grimy walls, their original colour no longer identifiable, made him breathless. And then there were the unbearable odours of urine and sweat stagnating in the air. They had insinuated themselves into his nostrils and he couldn't get rid of them.

But there was something else tormenting him. *Those* terrible memories, which had returned several times to rob him of his sleep the last three nights; deep, indelible traumas, distant yet ever-present because they were seared into his memory. They

hadn't left him for a moment, not even when day began to dawn.

He was still short of breath. And he was irritated by everything going on outside the four walls of his cell, too: the coughing fits, the cacophony of noise, the stink from the kitchens, the invisible subterranean world inhabited by horrible insects that seemed to want to attack him by night, to torture him and suck the remaining life out of him. He even thought he saw an army of enormous cockroaches emerge from the corners, crawling up the side of the bed and clambering all over his body.

This place is sucking out my soul, he thought. It's worse than death.

Being in prison made him feel like a man without a future at the age of thirty-six.

The pain was spreading through his bones now, worse than ever. He could feel his nerves twisting, and he had to bite his lip to stop himself crying out.

Stretched out on the thin, sticky mattress, he tried to regain control while he still had some energy left. He glanced at the window, on the other side of a solid metal grille, and saw dust motes floating in front of him and a glimpse of the clear blue sky. Nothing else. But he imagined the outline of the hills undulating in the light of the sun, and, beyond them, the mountainside where he had spent his childhood and adolescence. The place where, through a vile twist of fate, all hope of a normal life had been brought to an end when he was not much more than a boy. It was there that he had been first a defenceless target, then a killer with scores to settle, until finally he was hunted down like prey, with no means of escape.

His entire existence had been caught up in the circle of his own evil, a spiral from which it was impossible to escape.

There were so many questions in his head.

Too many thoughts.

He looked away from the view of the world outside and returned his gaze to those four walls. In addition to the damp

patches, they were covered in graffiti, although much of the writing was indecipherable. Some were bold slogans, carved with the most unlikely objects by those who had been there before him, perhaps to combat the boredom and the sadness, perhaps to leave one last trace of themselves.

One seemed to shout louder than the others: FREEDOM COMMANDS A HIGH PRICE, FIND THE COURAGE TO PAY IT!

He was reflecting on those words when the sound of approaching footsteps made him turn towards the door.

'Hey, De Robertis! You've got a visitor,' announced the guard in a strong Calabrian accent. In his right hand was a bunch of keys that were fixed to his uniform belt with a long chain.

He got up reluctantly from the bed, put on his laceless tennis shoes and shuffled out without changing, still wearing the black tracksuit he'd slept in.

His face sported a three-week-old beard and he looked like someone else, someone completely anonymous, no different to everyone else in that place. Even his hair, which he was always dyeing different colours, and which, combined with his six-foot-plus athletic physique, used to catch the eye of the most beautiful women, had been shaved off.

His hard, icy gaze was but a distant memory. His eyes, which could be grey, or sometimes green or blue, depending on the situation, were hollow and expressionless now. They no longer had that cold, ruthless look that told of another life comprising too many dark days and too much suffering for such a young man.

Until that point nobody had come to see him, and deep down he would never have expected a visit. The only person he had left lived in Paris and was dependent on an electric wheelchair to get around. She was a rich heiress in her seventies who had invested her capital in real estate in France and Italy. A noble-hearted woman, she had become his guardian a long time ago and had then gone on to adopt him.

No, it couldn't be her.



A man of about sixty was waiting for him in the interview room of Don Bosco Prison, which was named for the patron saint of young boys. His short hair was peppered with grey and his sideburns were completely white. A thin, Zorro-like moustache adorned his face, which was tanned from hours spent sitting in the sun, and he had light-coloured eyes. He was six foot tall, a fine figure of a man, elegant and distinguished in a dark suit from a high-end tailor, rendered more serious by an extremely shiny black leather briefcase.

‘Go and sit at the table,’ the guard ordered his prisoner, pushing him forward with a hand on his right shoulder.

Daniele De Robertis obeyed in silence, stopping in front of the lone metal table whose legs were screwed to the floor. There were only two scratched grey plastic chairs. The bare, cold room was small and the same indefinable colour as his cell. On the ceiling the blades of a fan that had seen better days turned lazily, stirring up dust and dead mosquitoes, and a crude neon strip-light gave off a constant buzzing noise. The only ornament was a sign declaring NO SMOKING. The unmistakable odours of sweat and damp hung in the air.

The building was so decrepit it was falling to pieces. The plaster was crumbling, a section of the changing rooms had been closed for some time due to water leaking in and some of

the rooms were out of use due to the risk of the ceiling collapsing.

The man put his briefcase on the table and walked towards him. He held out his right hand and introduced himself with a confident air.

‘I’m Amedeo Russo, a lawyer with offices in Florence and Rome.’

Daniele De Robertis briefly shook his hand and said, ‘I don’t understand. I haven’t requested a lawyer.’

The other man gave a shrug. ‘I know, but I’ve been nominated by the Prosecutor’s Department of the Florentine Republic. You need to be questioned as soon as possible and the law requires the presence of a lawyer.’

De Robertis felt an overwhelming sense of oppression at the prospect of having to face interrogations, proceedings, court-rooms, photographers, journalists and, most of all, the public, who would doubtless be loath to miss the opportunity to stare at him and treat him like some animal in a zoo. And then there were the TV stations. One of the channels would broadcast the entire proceedings live, hoping for indiscretion on the part of the prosecution, the lawyers and the witnesses at the end of each hearing.

The very thought of it made him wish he hadn’t survived the firefight. That police officer should have aimed for his heart, not his wrist.

The guard gave him a gentle push to make him sit down, then turned to the lawyer, who was also taking his seat, and said, ‘Let me know when you’ve finished. I’ll be right outside the door. You’ve got half an hour maximum, though.’ Then he left, so they could have their conversation in private.

Seen from behind, his uniform shirt was stuck to his back with sweat. He closed the door with an annoying metallic noise and positioned himself in front of the spyhole to keep an eye on whatever went on inside the room.

The prisoner began to study the lawyer more carefully. His hands were long, slender and well cared for, like a pianist's; his eyes were small and moved constantly, as if ready to notice the smallest thing, and his face showed no sign of sagging in spite of his age. He vaguely reminded De Robertis of some actor, but he wasn't sure which one.

'I hope you're satisfied with your cell,' began Russo. 'I knew they'd want to lock you up in the maximum-security wing as soon as you were out of the infirmary, but you're all right where you are for now,' he said, running a hand through his hair.

Lost in his own thoughts, De Robertis was barely listening. He sat hunched over, his muscles tense, his expression unreadable, almost uncertain, and he didn't blink at all. The lawyer's face seemed so familiar.

Suddenly he realised: yes, he had seen him before. The memories fell into place.

He was one of those lawyers who paraded their clients under the spotlights to increase their own notoriety. He had seen him on TV several years ago on a news broadcast. His expression triumphant, the lawyer had been filmed alongside a client who'd just been acquitted of serious charges. It had been a professional triumph; no one who'd followed the case had seen it coming. He could even remember the client. He was a criminal called Fiorenzo Muti, and De Robertis knew a thing or two about his past.

Amedeo Russo, meanwhile, had turned his attention to his briefcase. With two hollow clicks he released the metal clasps to open it.

'I'll speak frankly,' Russo began, looking De Robertis in the eye. 'Yours is an extremely difficult case. I've read the police statements, particularly the one listing all the crimes you've been charged with: double homicide, kidnapping, sexual assault, rape – in effect, a fair chunk of the penal code.'

He paused, waiting for the prisoner's response. But his wait

was in vain. There was silence but for the whirring of the fan and the whine of the electric light.

Daniele De Robertis was like a marble statue. Not a grimace crossed his face. Nothing at all.

The lawyer took two packets of cigarettes out of the briefcase and put them on the table in clear view. Then he took out a folder containing various sheets of paper, picked some up in his right hand and waved them in the air. 'This is the police report. It's very detailed and among the attachments is the arrest report with all the allegations. It's an open-and-shut case.'

There was another pause while he waited for questions. But he was disappointed once again, so he shook his head and continued speaking, 'We have only one path open to us: to plead insanity. It's the only way of avoiding a life sentence . . .' And he explained that, because of the need for a psychiatric evaluation, the trial would have to be delayed. Only once that was complete would the doctors be able to declare his inability to stand trial. 'The timetable for proceedings against you will come to a standstill,' he concluded.

After a few seconds of silence, the accused finally spoke. And he did so in a resolute tone. 'No. I don't want to be declared mad. Because I'm not.'

The lawyer burst out laughing, showing off the work he'd had done to his teeth. They were dazzling, whiter than white. He knew how to take care of himself. For a long moment he drummed the fingers of his left hand on the tabletop.

'It's the only way to avoid life imprisonment, don't you understand?' he asked, raising his voice slightly. Just enough for his words to reach the ears of the guard, who became more watchful, practically pushing his head through the spyhole like a huge guard dog, eager to leap forward and start snapping.

Inside the room, silence fell once more.

The two men continued to stare at one another. The lawyer

was still gripping the police report in his hand. It was all De Robertis could do to control his temper; he would have tipped the table over on top of Russo or hurled it against the wall if it hadn't been fixed to the floor.

He took a breath and then began to speak again. 'I don't want to be shut up in a high-security mental hospital,' he said in a monotone.

'So do you want to plead guilty to all charges?'

'No.'

'Well then, do you want to collaborate?'

'No.'

Silence again.

'I won't say anything. Justice *must* run its course, but I won't answer a single question,' he explained in his usual cold manner.

The lawyer started shifting in his seat. He'd defended many important criminals in his career but never had he faced such a complete lack of cooperation. He went over to the door and asked the guard for a bottle of water while he pondered what to do next.

'I'll get them to bring one right away, Signor Russo.'

So he came and sat back down, still pondering how he could regain control of the conversation.

He didn't want to give up.

As he waited, he wondered for the first time why the Prosecutor had nominated him since he wasn't even on the list of state lawyers provided by the Council of Lawyers. He knew that there were exceptions; every once in a while the Prosecutor or Deputy Prosecutor on duty would ignore the list altogether and choose a lawyer of his or her own liking. An expedient in 'unusual' cases.

But was this an 'unusual' case?

He would soon find out.

\*



'You have to trust me. You can speak freely and tell me your version of events and anything that might prove useful for the defence, even any dark secrets that are on your conscience.'

The lawyer had drunk a glass of water in one gulp and now he started speaking again in a professional tone, which he was trying to make as convincing as possible. He refilled the glass and drained it.

'You have to put your trust in me,' he continued. 'I'm your lawyer and I will act in your interest. But you shouldn't talk to journalists or any police officers who might show up wanting to chat about the investigation, and, since you have dual nationality, you shouldn't speak to officials from the French Embassy. Don't speak to any of them. And don't reply to any letters, especially the ones from people who are fascinated by violent crime.'

He was referring to the floods of letters murderers received. Some correspondents were driven by a fascination with evil, others by a desire to vanquish boredom, loneliness and suffering. Along with the insults and invitations to repent, there were letters of support, of admiration, if not outright declarations of love. In some cases this led to weddings conducted through the prison bars or once the prisoner was released. The news was full of such stories.

'I don't know what to do with your advice, Signor Russo. I won't speak to anyone, least of all you . . . ' replied the prisoner. He paused, his eyes fixed on the lawyer, who seemed to have frozen. 'Unless *you* tell me something,' he continued, leaning forward for the first time, both hands on the table. Now his eyes shone with a new light.

'Me? *Me* tell you something?'

'Yes, *you* tell me something.'

'And what do you want to know about *me*?'

'If you want me to tell you my "dark secrets", you'll have to tell me *your* secrets first,' replied De Robertis, leaning even further towards the lawyer.

Amedeo Russo frowned. 'Secrets? What secrets? I don't understand.'

De Robertis could smell fear in the air. Once again his instinct had proven correct.

The lawyer closed his briefcase with trembling hands. The veins in his forehead had swollen. In almost thirty years of honourable work he had never found himself facing such a bizarre request, or felt himself compelled to allow such a reversal of the client-lawyer roles.

'I have no idea what you are referring to.'

'To the sex parties . . . To that client of yours – Fiorenzo Muti, the one you made so famous on television, and not just in Italy. Have I made myself clear? Or do I need to be more explicit?'

The lawyer stared at him open-mouthed, as still as if a dagger had pierced his heart. Then he sprang to his feet. 'I've no idea what you're talking about . . . This is absurd . . . You really are insane! The most sensible thing would be for you to be locked up in a high-security psychiatric hospital. I'll send a report to the Chief Prosecutor, Luca Fiore, immediately.' And he gestured to the prison officer that the meeting was over.

'OK. We've understood each other,' replied De Robertis with a disdainful look. 'Go ahead and report. And you can keep your cigarettes – I don't smoke. I have one last thing to tell you. Trust me: the moment has come for *your* secrets to come to light. They could be a kind of life insurance.'

Reeling from the impact of these words the lawyer hurried from the room, grim-faced. He missed Daniele De Robertis's parting shot: 'Go fuck yourself, you and that Prosecutor Fiore who sent you here!'

Drops of sweat shone on Amedeo Russo's forehead as he made his way through the corridors. It was blackmail. Foul blackmail.

*The moment has come for your secrets to come to light. They could be a kind of life insurance.*

He walked rapidly out of the prison and made his way towards the car park to collect his car. His hands were shaking as he took a packet of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket and lit one. From the whirlpool of thoughts that flooded his mind, two floated to the surface:

Who was Daniele De Robertis – nicknamed ‘Genius’, according to the paperwork – really?

And why had Prosecutor Fiore nominated him in particular as the public defence lawyer?