He was three, maybe four years old. He sat quietly on a small synthetic leather armchair, chin bent over his green T-shirt, jeans turned up over his trainers. In one hand he held a wooden train which hung down between his legs like a rosary.

On the other side of the room the woman lying on the bed might have been anywhere between thirty and forty. Her arm, covered with red blotches and dark scabs, was attached to an empty drip. The virus had reduced her to a panting skeleton covered with lumpy dry skin, but it hadn't succeeded in robbing her of all her beauty, which showed in the form of her cheekbones and her turned-up nose.

The little boy raised his head and looked at her, grasped one arm of the chair, climbed down and walked over to the bed with the train in his hand.

She didn't notice him. Her eyes, sunken in two dark wells, stared at the ceiling.

He toyed with a button on the dirty pillow. His fair hair covered his forehead; in the sunlight that filtered through the white curtains it looked like nylon thread.

Suddenly the woman rose up on her elbows, arching her back as if her soul was being torn from her body, clutched the sheets in her fists and then fell back, coughing convulsively. She tried to swallow air, stretching her arms and legs. Then her face relaxed, her lips parted and she died with her eyes open.

Gently the little boy took hold of her hand and tugged at her forefinger. He whispered: 'Mama? Mama?' He put the train on her chest and ran it over the folds in the sheet. He touched the blood-caked plaster which hid the needle of the drip. Finally he went out of the room.

The corridor was dimly lit. The *beep beep* of a medical device came from somewhere or other.

He passed the corpse of a fat man crumpled up on the floor beside a wheeled stretcher. Forehead against the floor, one leg bent in an unnatural position. The light blue edges of his smock had pulled apart, revealing a greyish-purple back.

The little boy staggered on uncertainly, as if he couldn't control his legs. On another stretcher, near a poster about breast cancer screening, and a photograph of Liège featuring St Paul's Cathedral, lay the body of an old woman.

He walked under a crackling neon light. A boy in a night-gown and foam-rubber slippers had died in the doorway of a long ward, one arm forward, the fingers contracted into a claw, as if he were trying to stop himself being sucked down into a whirlpool.

At the end of the corridor the darkness struggled with gleams of sunlight that entered through the doors at the hospital entrance.

The little boy stopped. To his left were the stairs, the lifts and reception. Behind the steel counter were PC monitors overturned on desks and a glass screen shattered into thousands of little cubes.

He dropped the train and ran towards the exit. He closed his eyes, stretched out his arms and pushed the big doors, disappearing into the light.

Outside, beyond the steps, beyond the red and white plastic ribbons, were the outlines of police cars, ambulances, fire engines.

Somebody shouted: 'A kid. There's a kid . . .'

The little boy covered his face with his hands. An ungainly figure ran towards him, blotting out the sun.

The little boy just had time to see that the man was encased in a thick yellow plastic suit. Then he was snatched up and carried away.

Four years later . . .

Part One

Mulberry Farm

1

Anna ran along the autostrada, holding the straps of the rucksack that was bouncing on her back. Now and then she turned her head to look back.

The dogs were still there. One behind the other, in single file. Six or seven of them. A couple, in worse shape than the others, had dropped out, but the big black one in front was getting closer.

She'd spotted them two hours before at the bottom of a burnt field, appearing and disappearing among dark rocks and blackened trunks of olive trees, but hadn't thought anything of them.

This wasn't the first time she'd been followed by a pack of wild dogs. They usually kept up the chase for a while, then tired and wandered off.

She liked to count as she walked. How many steps it took to cover a kilometre, the number of blue cars and red cars, the number of flyovers.

Then the dogs had reappeared.

Desperate creatures, adrift in a sea of ash. She'd come across dozens like them, with mangy coats, clumps of ticks hanging from their ears, protruding ribs. They'd fight savagely over the remains of a rabbit. The summer fires had burnt the lowlands and there was virtually nothing left to eat.

She passed a queue of cars with smashed windows. Weeds and wheat grew around their ash-covered carcasses.

The sirocco had driven the flames right down to the sea,

leaving a desert behind it. The asphalt strip of the A29, which linked Palermo to Mazara del Vallo, cut across a dead expanse out of which rose blackened stumps of palm trees and a few plumes of smoke. To the left, beyond what was left of Castellammare del Golfo, a segment of grey sea merged with the sky. To the right, a line of low dark hills floated on the plain like distant islands.

The road was blocked by an overturned lorry. Its trailer had smashed into the central reservation, scattering basins, bidets, toilet bowls and shards of white ceramic over dozens of metres. She ran straight through the debris.

Her right ankle was hurting. In Alcamo she'd kicked open the door of a grocery shop.

★

To think that, until the dogs' appearance, everything had been going fine.

She'd left home when it was still dark. From time to time she was forced to go further afield in search of food. Previously it had been easy: you only had to go to Castellammare and you found what you wanted. But the fires had complicated everything. She'd been walking for three hours under the sun as it rose in a pale cloudless sky. The summer was long past, but the heat wouldn't let up. The wind, after starting the fire, had vanished, as if this part of creation no longer held any interest for it.

In a garden centre, next to a crater left by the explosion of a petrol pump, she'd found a crate full of food under some dusty tarpaulins.

In her rucksack she had six cans of Cirio beans, four cans of Graziella tomatoes, a bottle of Amaro Lucano, a large tube of Nestlé condensed milk, a bag of rusks, which were broken, but would still make a good meal soaked in water, and a half-kilo vacuum pack of pancetta. She hadn't been able to

resist that; she'd eaten the pancetta immediately, in silence, sitting on some bags of compost heaped up on the floor, which was covered with mouse droppings. It was as tough as leather, and so salty it had burnt her mouth.

★

The black dog was gaining ground.

Anna speeded up, her heart pumping in time with her steps. She couldn't keep this up much longer. She was going to have to stop and face her pursuers. Oh for a knife. As a rule she always carried one with her, but she'd forgotten to pack one that morning, and had gone out with an empty rucksack and a bottle of water.

The sun was only four inches above the horizon – an orange ball trapped in purple drool. Soon to be swallowed up by the plain. On the other side, the moon, as thin as a fingernail.

She looked back.

He was still there. The other dogs had gradually dropped away. Not him. He hadn't closed on her over the last kilometre. But she was running flat out; he was just loping along.

Waiting for darkness before he attacked? Surely not. Dogs didn't plan so rationally, did they? Whatever: she wouldn't be able to keep this up until nightfall. The pain in her ankle had now increased and spread to her calf.

She passed a green sign. Five kilometres to Castellammare. The white line between the lanes provided a sure guide to concentrate on. The only sounds were her breathing and her feet hitting the asphalt. No wind, no birdsong, no chirping of crickets or cicadas.

Passing another car, she was tempted to get in and rest, but thought better of it. What about dropping the rusks on the road for the dog to eat? Or climbing over the fence at

the side of the road? No, the mesh was too tight, and there didn't seem to be any breaks in it she could slip through.

Or the central reservation on the other side? Here some oleanders had survived the fire. Their branches hung down, heavy with pink flowers, their pungent scent mingling with the smell of burnt wood.

The partition was high.

But you're the kangaroo.

That was the nickname Signorina Pini, her old gym teacher, had given her, because she could jump higher than the boys. Anna didn't like it; kangaroos have long floppy ears. She'd have preferred to be associated with the leopard, a far more elegant jumper.

Hurling the rucksack over the bushes, she took a short run-up, used the concrete kerb as a springboard and jumped through the branches onto the other side.

She retrieved the rucksack and counted up to ten, panting. Then she punched the air, flashing her teeth in a full smile, a rare event for her.

She limped on. If only she could find some way of getting over the fence on this side of the road, she'd be safe.

Beyond the fence was a steep slope down to a narrow road which ran parallel to the autostrada. Not the best place to climb over with a swollen ankle. She slipped off the rucksack and looked back.

She saw the dog leap through the oleanders and come galloping down the road.

He wasn't black at all; he was white, his coat covered with ash. The tip of one of his ears was missing. And he was huge: the biggest dog she'd ever seen.

And if you don't get moving he's going to eat you.

She grabbed the mesh of the fence to climb up, but was paralysed by fear. She turned round and slid down onto the road.

The dog raced down the last few metres of the autostrada

and jumped over the guardrail and ditch. Then he jumped on her – all forty stinking kilos of him.

Anna stuck out her elbow, aiming at the dog's ribs. He collapsed in a heap. She stood up.

He lay there, an almost human astonishment in his eyes.

She picked up the rucksack and hit him on the head, on the neck, then on the head again. He yelped, struggling to get to his feet. Anna swung round full circle like a hammer-thrower, but the strap of the rucksack broke, she lost her balance and put out her foot to steady herself, but her sore ankle couldn't take the weight and she fell to the ground.

They lay there for a moment, looking at each other, then the dog sprang at her, snarling.

Raising her good foot, Anna rammed it into his chest, throwing him back against the guardrail.

He fell down on his side, panting, his long tongue curled under his nose, his eyes narrowed.

As he tried to get up, she looked around for a stone or a stick to hit him with, but saw nothing but burnt paper, plastic bags and crushed cans.

★

'Why don't you leave me alone?' she shouted, getting to her feet. 'What have I done to you?'

The dog stared at her, baring his teeth and growling.

She stumbled away in a daze, vaguely aware of oleanders, a dark sky and the blackened roofless shell of a farmhouse. After a while she stopped and looked back.

He was following her.

She came to a blue estate car. Its front was crushed, the rear window had lost its glass and the driver's door was open. She slipped inside and tried to close the door, but it wouldn't move. She pulled with both hands. The door creaked shut, but bounced back off the rusty lock. She pulled again, but

it still wouldn't close, so she wrapped the safety belt around the handle to hold it. Laying her head against the steering wheel, she sat there with her eyes closed, breathing in the smell of bird droppings.

On the passenger's seat beside her was a skeleton covered in white guano. The shrivelled remains of a Moncler quilted jacket had fused with the covering of the seat. Feathers and yellow ribs showed through splits in the fabric. The skull hung down on the chest, held up by withered tendons. A pair of high-heeled suede boots covered the feet.

Anna slipped through onto the back seat, climbed into the boot and crawled up to the rear window, hardly daring to look out. There was no sign of the dog.

She curled up beside two suitcases that had been stripped of their contents, crossing her arms over her chest, with her hands under her sweaty armpits. The adrenaline rush had passed and she could barely keep her eyes open. She tried to jam the suitcases into the window frame. One was too small, but she managed to wedge the other one into the gap by pushing it with her feet.

She ran her fingers over her lips. Her eyes fell on a dirty page torn out of a notebook. The first line read, in capital letters: HELP ME, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD!

Written by the woman on the front seat, no doubt.

The note said her name was Giovanna Improta and she was dying. She had two children, Ettore and Francesca. They lived on the top floor of Via Re Federico 36, in Palermo. They were only four and five years old and they'd starve to death if they didn't get help. There were 500 euros in the hall cupboard.

Anna tossed the piece of paper aside, leaned her head against the side window and closed her eyes.

★

She woke up abruptly, surrounded by darkness and silence. It was a few seconds before she could remember where she was. She badly needed a pee, but didn't dare leave the car. She'd be defenceless – and blind: there was no moon.

Better to do it in the boot and move over onto the back seat. She unbuttoned her shorts. As she pulled them down, a sudden noise took her breath away. The sound of dogs sniffing. She put her hand over her mouth, trying not to breathe, shake, or even move her tongue.

Dogs' claws scratched on the bodywork, and the car lurched.

Her bladder relaxed and warm liquid slid between her thighs, soaking the carpet under her buttocks.

She started silently praying for help, to no one in particular.

The dogs were fighting among themselves, circling the car, their claws clicking on the asphalt.

She imagined thousands of them surrounding the car, a carpet of fur stretching as far as the sea and the mountains, enveloping the whole planet.

She clamped her hands over her ears. *Think about gelato*. Like big, sweet, multicoloured hailstones. You used to choose the flavours you wanted and they'd scoop them out into a cone for you. She remembered one visit to the ice-cream stall in the private beach area, 'The Mermaids'. Peering through the glass top of the refrigerator, she'd decided on 'chocolate and lemon'.

Her mother had grimaced. 'Ugh!'

'What's the matter?'

'Those flavours don't go together.'

'Can I have them anyway?'

'Oh, all right, then. You'd better eat them, though!'

So she'd gone to the beach with her gelato and sat by the water's edge, while the seagulls strutted along, one behind the other.

Until the fire came, it had still been possible to find other

sweet things. Mars bars, flapjacks, Bountys, boxes of chocolates. Usually dry, mouldy or nibbled by mice, though sometimes, if you were lucky, you'd find them in good condition. But it wasn't the same as ice cream. Cold things had disappeared with the Grown-ups.

She took her hands away from her ears. The dogs had gone.

★

It was that phase of dawn when night and day have equal weight and things seem larger than they really are. A milk-white band lay across the horizon. The wind rustled between ears of wheat spared by the fire.

Anna climbed out of the car and stretched. Her ankle was numb, but less painful after the rest.

The road unreeled in front of her like a strip of liquorice. The asphalt around the car was spattered with pawprints. Fifty metres away, something lay on the white line between the lanes.

At first it looked like her rucksack, then a tyre, then a heap of rags. Then the rags rose up and turned into a dog.

★

THE DOG WITH THREE NAMES

He'd been born in a scrapyard on the outskirts of Trapani, under an old Alfa Romeo. His mother, a Maremma sheepdog called Lisa, had suckled him and his five siblings for a couple of months. In the desperate fight for her nipples, the frailest one hadn't survived. The others, as soon as they were weaned, had been sold for a few euros, and only he, the greediest and most intelligent, had been allowed to stay.

Daniele Oddo, the scrap-dealer, was a parsimonious man.

And since the 13th October was his wife's birthday, he had an idea: why not give her the puppy, with a nice red ribbon round its neck?

Signora Rosita, who had been expecting the latest Ariston tumble dryer, wasn't too enthusiastic about this bundle of white fluff. He was a holy terror, who crapped and peed on the carpets and gnawed the feet of the sideboard in the sitting room.

Without making a great effort, she found him a name: Dopey.

But there was someone else in the house who was even more put out by the new arrival. Colonel, an old, bad-tempered, snappy wire-haired dachshund, whose natural habitats were the bed, onto which he would climb thanks to a stairway made specially for him, and a Louis Vuitton handbag, where he'd sit and snarl at any other four-legged creature.

Colonel may have had his virtues, but they didn't include mercy. He'd bite the puppy whenever it strayed from the corner to which he had banished it.

Signora Rosita decided to shut Dopey out on the kitchen balcony. But he was a determined little guy; he whimpered and scratched at the door, and the neighbours started complaining. His precarious status as a household pet ended the day he succeeded in slipping inside and, pursued by his mistress, skidded on the polished parquet floor and got tangled up in the wire of a lamp, which crashed down on top of the row of china pandas arrayed on the cocktail cabinet.

Dopey was sent straight back to the scrapyard and, still with his milk teeth and a zest for playing, had a chain put round his neck. Lisa, his mother, on the other side of the yard, beyond two walls of junk, would bark at any car that came in through the gate.

The puppy's diet changed from canned venison nuggets to Chinese cuisine. Spring rolls, bamboo chicken and sweet

and sour pork, the leftovers from the China Garden, a foul-smelling restaurant on the other side of the road.

Christian, Signor Oddo's son, worked in the scrapyard. Or maybe 'worked' isn't exactly the right word for it: he sat in front of a computer watching pornographic videos in a container that had been turned into an office. He was a slim, nervy boy, with bushy hair and a pointed chin which he highlighted by wearing a goatee beard. He also had a second job – selling expired pills outside the local high schools. His dream, however, was to become a rapper. He loved the way rappers dressed, the gestures they made, the women they had and the killer dogs they owned. Though it wasn't easy to rap with a lisp.

Observing Dopey through sunglasses as big as TV screens, he felt that the puppy, which was growing into a quick, strong dog, had potential.

One evening, sitting in his car outside a shopping mall, he told Samuel, his best friend, that he was going to turn Dopey into 'a ferocious killing machine'.

'That name, though, Dopey . . .' Samuel, who was training to be a fashion designer, didn't think it suited a killing machine.

'What should I call him, then?'

'I don't know . . . How about Bob?' ventured his friend.

'Bob? What kind of a name is that? Manson is more like it.'

'You mean as in Marilyn?'

'No, you fool! Charles Manson. The greatest murderer of all time!'

Christian dreamed of some illegal immigrant or gypsy breaking into the scrapyard at night to steal something and being confronted by Manson. 'Just imagine some poor guy trying to get away by climbing over the fence with his guts hanging out and Manson snapping at his arse,' he guffawed, slapping Samuel on the back.

To make Manson more aggressive, Christian studied websites about fighting dogs. He bought a Taser and, using it and a broomstick wrapped in foam rubber, started a training course of electric shocks and beatings designed to turn the dog into a killing machine. In the winter he doused him with buckets of icy water to harden him against the weather.

Before a year had passed, Manson was so aggressive the only way of feeding him was to throw him food from a distance and fire a jet of water into his bowl from a hose. They couldn't even let him off the leash at night for fear of losing a hand.

Like thousands of other dogs, Manson seemed destined to spend his whole life chained up.

The virus changed everything.

The epidemic wiped out the Oddo family in the space of a few months, and the dog was left alone on his chain. He survived by drinking the rainwater that collected in the metal remains of cars and by licking up dry scraps of food from the ground. Now and then someone would pass by in the street, but nobody stopped to feed him and he'd howl in despair, his nose to the sky. His mother answered his calls for a while, then she fell silent, and Manson, exhausted by hunger, lost his voice too. He could smell the stench of the corpses in the common graves of Trapani.

Eventually instinct told him his owners weren't going to bring him any more food and he was going to die there.

The chain round his neck, about ten metres long, ended at a stake fixed in the ground. He started pulling, using his back legs for leverage and his front legs for support. His collar, now that he'd lost weight, was loose, and in the end he managed to wriggle out of it.

He was weak, covered in sores, riddled with fleas and unsteady on his feet. He passed his mother's body, gave her a perfunctory sniff and staggered out of the gate.

He knew nothing of the world and didn't stop to wonder why some human beings had become food while other, smaller ones were still alive, but whenever the live ones crossed his path he ran away.

It didn't take him long to get back into shape. He fed on street litter, entered houses to devour whatever he found there, and chased off crows feasting on corpses. During his wanderings, he met up with a pack of strays and joined them.

The first time he started eating a dead sheep, the others snarled at him. He learned by experience that there was a hierarchy in the group – that he must keep away from females on heat and wait his turn before eating.

One day, on a piece of waste land behind a warehouse full of tyres, a hare crossed his path.

The hare is a difficult animal to catch; it's quick and its sudden changes of direction can disorientate the pursuer. It has only one weakness: it soon gets tired. Manson's body, by contrast, was a mass of hardened muscles. After a long chase he caught it, shook it to break its backbone, and started devouring it.

A shambling hound slightly higher in rank in the pack than him, with pendulous ears and a mushroom-like nose, appeared in front of him. Manson retreated with his tail between his legs, but, as soon as the other started to eat, Manson jumped on him and ripped off one of his ears. Surprised and terrified, the other dog turned round, dripping with blood, and sank his teeth into the Maremma's thick coat. Manson backed away, then jumped forward and with one twist of his neck tore out the other dog's jugular, windpipe and oesophagus, leaving him writhing in a pool of blood.

Fights among dogs and wolves are seldom lethal; they serve to clarify the hierarchy, to distinguish the lower ranks from the leaders. But Manson wasn't in the habit of playing by the rules; he didn't stop till his adversary was dead. Christian Oddo's intuition had been right. Manson was a

killing machine, and all the pain and torture he'd undergone had made him indifferent to wounds and merciless in victory.

Blood excited him, gave him energy, won him the respect of other dogs and the favour of bitches on heat. He liked this world: there were no chains, no cruel humans, and all you had to do to gain others' respect was use your fangs. In a few weeks, without even having to fight the chief, who rolled over on the ground with his legs apart, he became the alpha male, the one who had first choice of the food and impregnated the females.

Three years later, when the explosion of a natural gas tank surprised the pack as they surrounded a horse in the car park of the Sunflowers shopping mall, he still hadn't lost his rank. What a horse was doing in the car park was a mystery of interest to none of them. Emaciated and covered in sores, it had got one of its legs stuck in a shopping trolley and was standing there in a cloud of flies, near the cashpoints, its big brown head hanging between its legs. The horse was in that state of dumb resignation that can sometimes come over herbivores when they realise that death has caught up with them and that all they can do is wait. The dogs were closing in slowly, almost casually, certain that they were soon going to eat some fresh meat.

Manson, as leader of the pack, was the first to attack the horse, which barely even kicked out when it felt his teeth sink into its hind leg. But a wall of fire, fanned by the wind, suddenly enveloped the scene in a blanket of acrid, scorching smoke. Surrounded by flames and terrified by exploding petrol pumps, the dogs sheltered behind a household appliance store. They stayed there for several days, nearly asphyxiated, under a vault of fire, and when everything had been burnt and they came out, the world was an expanse of ash devoid of food and water.

★

Anna pulled back her hair.

The Maremma crept forward and stopped, ear cocked, eyes fixed on his prey.

She looked at the fence. It was too high. And there was no sense in going back to the car: he'd tear her to pieces in there.

She opened her arms: 'Come on then! What are you waiting for?'

The dog seemed uncertain.

'Come on!' She sprang up and down on her toes. 'Let's get it over with.'

The dog flattened down on the asphalt. A crow passed overhead, cawing.

'What's the matter? Are you scared?'

The dog sprang forward.

She sprinted towards the car and reached it so fast she hit her hip against the side. Groaning, she slipped in through the door and shut it behind her.

There was a thud, and the car swayed.

Anna grabbed the seat belt, wound it round the door handle and tied it to the spokes of the steering wheel. Through the misty glass of the side window she saw the dark shape of the dog jump up.

She climbed into the back and crouched down in the boot, but almost at once the suitcase she'd jammed in the rear window came crashing down on top of her, followed by the enormous dog. She fended him off, using the case as a shield, and searched for some kind of weapon. There was an umbrella under the seat. She grabbed it with both hands and held it out like a spear.

The dog jumped into the back seat, snarling.

She jabbed the tip of the umbrella into his neck, and blood spattered her face.

The dog yelped, but didn't retreat. He advanced along the seat, rubbing his filthy back against the ceiling.

'I'm stronger than you!' She stabbed him in the side. When she tried to pull the umbrella out, the handle came off in her hand.

The dog lunged at her, the umbrella sticking out of his ribs. His teeth snapped shut a few centimetres from her nose. She smelled his warm putrid breath. Pushing him away with her elbows, she climbed over onto the front seat, falling among the woman's bones.

The dog didn't follow. His coat plastered with blood and ash, his mouth dripping with red foam, he looked at her, turning his head as if trying to understand her, then swayed and collapsed.

★

Anna was singing a jingle she'd made up: 'Here comes Nello, funny-looking fellow; his trainers are pink and his whiskers yellow.'

Nello was a friend of her father's; he drove over from Palermo now and then in a white van to bring her mother the books she needed. Though Anna had only seen him a few times, she remembered him well; he was a nice guy. She often thought about those whiskers.

The sun had risen among streaky white clouds, shedding welcome warmth on her skin.

She shifted the rucksack on her back. The dogs had torn at it, but hadn't succeeded in getting it open. The bottle of Amaro Lucano hadn't been broken.

Before leaving, she'd taken one last look at the big dog from the door. He was still breathing hoarsely, his dirty coat rising and falling. She'd wondered whether she should put him out of his misery, but didn't dare go any nearer. Better to leave him to die.

She started down a road which ran alongside the A29 for a while before curving away towards the sea through a retail

park. All that was left of the discount store where they used to buy food were the vertical supports and the iron frame of the roof. The Furniture House, where they'd bought the sofa and bunk bed, paying by instalments, had been burnt down. The white stone steps at the front were now covered with a thick layer of ash. The handsome flowerpots decorated with Moors' heads had gone. Inside there were only the skeletons of a few sofas and a piano.

Anna crossed the forecourt of a Ford salesroom lined with neat rows of burnt-out cars and walked out onto the fields. All that remained of the vineyards were some vine supports, stumps of olive trees and dry stone walls. A combine harvester near the ruins of a farmhouse looked like an insect, but with a full set of teeth. A plough seemed to be rooting in the earth like an anteater. Here and there shoots of fig trees appeared among black clods of soil, and light green buds could be seen on charred trunks.

★

The low modern structure of the De Roberto Elementary School floated on a black sea among waves of heat which seemed to bend the horizon. The basketball court behind the building was overgrown with grass. Fire had melted the backboards behind the hoops. The windows had lost their glass; inside, the desks, chairs and lino were covered with earth. A drawing of a giraffe and a lion by Daniela Sperno still hung on the wall of Anna's classroom, 3C. The teacher's desk was on the dais by the whiteboard. Some time ago Anna had opened the drawer and found the register, the little mirror with which Signorina Rigoni used to check the hairs on her chin, and her lipstick. Anna usually went in and sat at her old desk for a while. But this time she walked on by.

★

The ruins of the residential village Torre Normanna appeared in the distance. Two long straight roads like landing strips, lined with small terraced houses, formed a cross in the middle of the lowland area behind Castellammare.

There was a sports club with two tennis courts and a swimming pool, plus a restaurant and a small supermarket. Most of her schoolmates had lived in this village.

Now, after the looting and the fires, the pretty little Mediterranean-style houses were reduced to shells of concrete columns, heaps of roof tiles, rubble and rusty gates. In those that had escaped the fire, doors had been ripped off hinges, windows smashed, walls covered with graffiti. The roads were littered with glass from smashed car windows. The asphalt of Piazzetta dei Venti had melted and thickened, forming humps and bubbles, but the swings and slide of the children's playground, and the big sign of the restaurant, 'A Taste of Aphrodite', featuring a purple lobster, were intact.

She walked quickly through the village. She didn't like the place. Her mother had always said it was inhabited by nouveau-riche bastards who polluted the soil with their illegal sewers. She'd written to a newspaper to complain about it. Now the nouveau-riche bastards were no longer there, but their ghosts peered out at her from the windows, whispering: 'Look! Look! It's the daughter of that woman who called us nouveau-riche bastards.'

Outside the village she took a road which followed the bed of a dried-up stream at the foot of some round, bare hills that looked like pin-cushions, pierced as they were by vineyard props. Reeds grew thickly on both sides of the road, their plumes rising up against the blue sky.

A hundred metres further on, she entered the cool shade of an oak wood. Anna thought this wood must be magical; the fire hadn't succeeded in burning it, but had merely licked at its edges before giving up. Between the thick

trunks the sun painted golden patches on the covering of ivy and on the dog roses that swamped a rickety fence. A gate opened onto a path overgrown by long-untrimmed box hedges.

Just visible on a concrete post was a sign: 'Mulberry Farm'.