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'Will keep you hooked'
Simon Kernick

KILLING IS HIS WAY OF LIFE...

WIPER



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by
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Prologue

The Bay of Naples

Francesca Di Lauro had the kind of eyes you never forgot. Hypnotic, almost translucent. An indefinable shade between blue and green. More hologram than optic.

They were fixed on the man in front of her. Fixed very firmly on him as he watched her naked body. Francesca's faultless skin and tumbling black hair were backlit by the golden flicker of a newly lit fire. The two of them were alone. Outside, in the pine-smelling woodland. No one to disturb them. Perfect privacy.

Only this was no romantic encounter. This was the worst moment of her life. The flames around Francesca's feet crawled up the metal stake she'd been tied to. Wind tugged her hair and suddenly the jaws of an orange dragon were chewing her flesh. Francesca twisted hopelessly, the agonizing heat searing her paraffin-soaked skin.

He stood a few metres away, mesmerized by the slow murder, stroking himself pleasantly. His eyes fixed on the curtain of flames. *This would take time. A deliciously long time.*

Francesca had been tied with coils of wire around her feet, hands and neck. He'd learned from past mistakes.

Rope burned, then they tried to get away. He didn't want any more messiness. *No mistakes this time.*

Bricks were stacked waist-high, all around her. A kiln to funnel heat up her body. Rags stuffed in her mouth and then bound around her face to choke off any screams. Though sometimes he liked to hear them. Liked to hear the air leave their lungs for one last time.

Francesca's head slumped limply on her chest. She was a quiet one. Flames ate her hair. The smell of burning flesh, sweet and greasy like a hog roast, carried in the cold night air. He sucked it in. Savoured it. Fed on it.

Amid the crackle of the fire he waited. Listened now for the moment when he heard her skull crack and sizzle. *Popping chestnuts! How he just loved to peel away those crisp, burned outer shells.*

He'd removed all her jewellery and, while he watched, he played with it in his pocket, turning the trophies in his hand like beads on a rosary.

The blaze illuminated the pit that he stood in. It was almost three metres deep, seven metres wide and fifteen metres long. It had been dug by the landowner as foundations for a house that never got built. *Dead dreams.* These days it was more commonly used to burn some of the overflowing stinking rubbish that clogged the city's vermin-infested streets.

He stayed until darkness had faded seamlessly into the dawn, then he raised a gleaming stainless-steel spade and began softly singing. He sang in English, complete with a near-comical Dean Martin accent.

*When the stars make you drool joost-a like pasta fazool,
that's amore;*

He scraped Francesca's bones from the blackened wood, grey ash and red embers. Slammed the blade of his spade across the snake of her spine.

*When you dance down the street with a cloud at your feet,
you're in love;*

The metal sliced through her pelvis –

*When you walk in a dream but you know you're not dreamin',
signore,*

– through her skull –

'Scusa me, but you see, back in old Napoli, that's amore.

– through her hips and ribs and any other major bones that had survived the inferno.

He searched the scorched ground. Made sure he'd been his usual thorough self.

And then he chopped again.

This time he used a small hand-axe on the troublesome hip, cleaving through the sacrum, coccyx, ischium and pubis.

He was dripping with sweat when he climbed out of the pit, carrying Francesca's young life in two dented steel buckets, her total existence reduced to ash and broken bones; ash that blew away in the wind as he walked to his car.

Would her beauty have stayed with her into her thirties, forties or fifties? Would her children have inherited those hypnotic eyes?

The ponderings amused him as he drove to the sacred spot where he laid them all to rest.

He dug again. The blood-red sunrise painted his skin as he upended Francesca's remains into a shallow grave.

He slapped the old steel buckets with his hand. Cleared the last of the dust – the last of Francesca – that stuck to the sides. A couple of smashed bones were still larger than he liked. He stomped them into the earth.

The first coral-blue hues of morning fought their way into the angry sky as he completed the burial. He bent his head, closed his eyes and slowly prayed: *Domine Jesu Christe, Rex Gloriam, libera animas omnium fidelium defunctorum de poenis inferni et de profundo lacu.*

Before leaving, he urinated on the freshly dug grave. Partly because he needed to. Mainly because he liked to. As he zipped up, he wondered whether God would indeed heed his prayer to free the soul of the faithfully departed from infernal punishment and the horrors of the deep pit.

But then again, he asked himself, did he really give a fuck?

He sauntered back to his car, singing in Italian this time: *Luna rossa lassù, mare azzurro quaggiù: questo è amore!*

ONE

Five years later

I

Poggioreale Jail, Naples

Camorra mobster Bruno Valsi got a five stretch for frightening the life out of people due to testifying against his gang boss father-in-law. It was a walk in the park compared to the life sentences he should have served for several murders and countless sadistic assaults.

Few had cheered when he'd gone down. Few had been that brave. Maybe the fact that three of his arresting officers had been shot in the legs, and the local carabinieri headquarters had been burned to the ground, had something to do with the silence.

The Camorra message had echoed around every street corner. Cross the Family – get brutally punished. No one needed telling twice.

As witnesses withdrew, even the local cops heeded the warnings. Vital evidence vanished from inside the station house. The case against Valsi's father-in-law crumbled. But the young Camorrista wasn't so lucky. One young woman came forward and testified about being threatened. It was enough to get him the five stretch. One day – soon – he would find her and make her pay.

Three guards marched the Camorrista into the discharge area for him to collect his personal effects and change out of his prison clothes. He gave them the finger as they watched him strip. Above his left breast a tattoo declared who owned his heart. Not a woman. No way. It belonged to the Finelli clan. The guards' eyes were drawn to the distinctive image of a red viper, slithering down a switchblade. From its mouth dripped three blood-red words: *Onore. Lealtà. Vendetta*. Honour. Loyalty. Vengeance. The Finellis were one of the few Camorra clans to wear gang markings. Valsi jabbed a finger at the word *Vendetta* and his jailers looked away. '*Andate tutti a fanculo – fuck you all,*' he called to them as he struggled into his old, grey Valentino suit. Prison life had made the trousers too big in the waist and the jacket too narrow across the chest. That's what happens when you pump iron twice a day, every day for 1,827 days behind bars. You get hard. Jail rock hard. Prison had changed him in other ways too. He was meaner. And better connected than he'd ever been.

One of the bigger and more senior guards walked him the final distance to the front gates. Valsi stood inches from his face. '*Caccati in mano e prenditi a schiaffi?*' The insult was well known, *shit in your hand and then hit yourself*, but until now, no one had ever dared say it to a prison officer.

Jacket over shoulder, he blinked as he walked into the sunlight. To the far east rose the slopes of Vesuvius and Mount Somma. Up close and all around

him inner-city slums skulked incongruously in the shadows of the slick and shiny skyscrapers of the city's business district. Hardly anything of value had been built here without kickbacks to the Camorra clans – the Families who ran the System – an invisible web of corruption that supported and strangled the socio-economic life of the Campania region.

Valsi gave the guards the finger for a final time. Prison gates creaked shut behind him. Giant bolts slammed. Heavy keys turned. In the safety of the jail the guards cursed back at him. Across the road, locals cheered and clapped as he walked free. He smiled for them and they cheered even louder. Journalists flashed cameras from a polite distance. Valsi's notoriety and good looks sold papers, the Camorra was akin to celebrity. Within hours his new images would become screensavers on the cellphones of thousands of teenage girls across Naples. He was the ultimate bad boy. The rebel whom girls couldn't help but fantasize about. The man even their mothers glanced twice at.

Almost in unison the doors of five waiting Mercedes swung open and a legion of black-suited Camorristi stepped out. It was more than an act of respect, it was a public display of defiance. Heavily armed, their weapons were brazenly on show. No one dared challenge them.

Valsi soaked up the sight. Cameras clicked again. Another smile for the press and his public. Then he coolly walked towards the one car that stood out

– a new chauffeur-driven Mercedes Maybach – the type of limousine that cost more in extras than most Neapolitans earned in a year. Only when he was a metre away did his proud and grateful father-in-law step out and embrace him.

If Don Fredo had known what was on Valsi's mind, he'd have had him shot dead before the prison gates had even shut.

Carnegie Hall, New York City

A howling nor'easter had bowled up the coast and airdropped a thunderous delivery of snow and ice on a New York City that had complacently thought it was in for a mild winter. Rosy-cheeked kids stretched cold hands at falling flakes. Yellow Cab drivers snarled from rolled-down windows. Their cursing breath froze in the early December air as traffic hit gridlock. Winter was going to be savage.

Jack King, his wife Nancy and four-year-old son Zack had arrived at her parents' house in Greenwich Village barely two days before the biggest pre-Christmas snowfall since 1947 had shut down both JFK and Newark airports.

Nancy had closed Casa Strada, her booming hotel and restaurant business in Tuscany, for two months to enable extension work to be done. Straight after New York she'd be in Umbria, buying property to convert into a second hotel. Jack, meanwhile, was mixing business with pleasure. *Pleasure* being the chance to catch up with old friends and family that he and his wife had left behind when they'd emigrated to Italy. *Business*

being a well-paid keynote speech in his capacity as a freelance psychological profiler.

He commanded the stage of Carnegie Hall as surely as any entertainer who'd trodden its famous boards. 'Given the inclement weather, I want to leave you with some chilling thoughts,' Jack told the International Serial Offender Conference. 'People are like icebergs; we only ever see ten per cent of them. The really interesting – and sometimes deadly – ninety per cent lies mysteriously hidden in the dark waters of personal secrecy.' He peered out from the stage in the Isaac Stern auditorium. Almost three thousand people, spread five tiers high, peered right back at him. 'Bergs are pieces of ice that have broken off from giant glaciers. Similarly, serial killers are people who have broken off from civilized society. Some bergs are small fry, they're maybe only a metre high. Others are massive and murderous, reaching up to a hundred and sixty-eight metres, about fifty-five storeys high.' The select audience, comprising law enforcement officers, psychologists and psychiatrists, hung on his every word. 'You mustn't let those killer bergs grow. You've got to be alert, every step of your long journey, through each investigation.' Through the stage lights he could see people scribbling, fidgeting and frowning. Some, he guessed, were recalling encounters with their own bergs.

'Serial killers, like those bergs, come in all shapes and sizes, and all of them are potentially lethal. You have to spot them early. Catch them after murder

one, while they're still small fry. And remember, to do that, you have to concentrate damned hard on the ten per cent that's on view above the surface.'

Jack took a final look around. His gaze stuck for a second on the front row, where one man, thin and pale, stared up at him with black empty eyes that seemed to be hunting for his attention.

'In your investigations, please pay particular attention to these three things. *Thought*, *Feeling* and *Action*. Right now, right at this moment, you're all doing the same thing. You have a uniformed, shared *Action*. You're all just sitting and watching. That's your visible ten per cent. Your action is very much in full public view. But *Thought* and *Feeling* are complex masses that make up your private ninety per cent, and that's what we can't see; that's what you're keeping hidden. A few of you may still be *feeling* shocked or sickened by some of the murder-scene slides we looked at earlier. Some of you may have been bored or fascinated by them. Whatever your emotions, you've all kept those *feelings* hidden. Similarly, as I come to a close, I know you are almost all *thinking* different things. I hope many of you are *thinking* that your time at this conference has been worthwhile. I'm sure some of you are worrying about how you're going to get home through the snow tonight, and I'm confident that there'll be several of you who are hoping that your own dark secrets of infidelity, sexual deviation or petty theft from work will never be discovered. Well, don't bank on it, they might well be.'

Embarrassed laughter rippled through the audience. Jack let the tide settle, then finished his speech. 'Remember, *everyone's* an iceberg, and only ten per cent of each of us is on show. You can't spot a killer berg without looking beneath the surface. Search for that hidden ninety per cent. Find it and destroy it, before it destroys us. Thank you for your time. I wish you all a safe journey home and a peaceful and merry Christmas.'

Applause rang out. Jack mouthed several 'thank yous' left and right of stage. As he clapped back and started to head for the exit, his eyes caught again on the thin, pale-faced man staring up at him from the front row. The man with the blank, unblinking gaze. The only person in the auditorium not clapping.

Centro città, Naples

The black snake of Mercedes slithered north through the rubbish-strewn side streets of Naples.

Bruno Valsi swivelled in the backseat and glanced through the rear windshield. ‘We’re not heading home?’ He tried not to sound suspicious.

Don Fredo, sitting alongside him, smiled reassuringly and lit a Cuban cigar. ‘It is your first day of freedom and we are going to honour you. I know you are anxious to be alone with your wife and son, but my daughter and grandchild will have to wait a while longer.’

Valsi relaxed a little, though the incident made him realize his vulnerability. He was unarmed and at anyone’s mercy. Five years in jail had left his street instincts rusty. He made a mental note to sharpen up.

‘Don Fredo, it is not necessary to *honour* me. To have served you as I did was honour enough.’

The 64-year-old Camorra *Capofamiglia* raised the palm of his right hand, signifying that protest was futile. ‘Bruno, you gave up many years of your life to protect me. You broke the case that the police were assembling.

All their allegations of false accounting, tax evasion and corruption have been withdrawn. All of them. You made a personal sacrifice for the Family, and tonight it is time for the Family to show their gratitude.'

Valsi bowed his head in respect. 'I am moved by your generosity. I only did what any of your soldiers would have done.' His heart thumped double quick time, a physical reminder that this was a moment he had long pondered over during the endless dark nights in his cell. *Would Don Fredo welcome him back as a hero? Or have him killed because he might emerge as a threat?*

The Don lowered the side window and exhaled a long breath of hot cigar smoke into the chilly air. 'Do you know Positano?'

Valsi shrugged. 'Not well. All my life has been spent in Naples.'

'Then you should. It is very beautiful. Very romantic. You must take my daughter there. Legend has it that the journeying Ulysses was drawn to Positano by the sound of irresistible sirens.'

Valsi smiled. 'The only sirens I've ever heard were from the polizia.'

Don Fredo ignored him. 'There is a hotel near Positano that is special to me. It is where my wedding reception was held, many, many years ago.' He paused and made the sign of the cross in memory of his wife Loretta who'd passed eight years back. 'Tonight it will hold another reception. In fact, it will hold two. If I recall correctly, you were taken from us the night before your son's first birthday.'

‘That’s correct.’

The Don nodded. ‘Quite. So, tonight, we will start with Enzo’s birthday party. One big one to make up for all the ones you missed. I have jugglers, clowns, acrobats; everything needed to light up his life.’

‘I’m sure he will love them. That is very kind, very generous of you.’

Don Fredo took another pull on the Havana and looked at his son-in-law through the smoke. ‘And then, when Enzo has been put to bed by Gina, we will be joined by members of our *other* Family and we will have *your* reception, a very special “welcome home” party.’

‘Thank you, Don Fredo.’ Valsi sounded distant as he contemplated for a moment what life would be like again with his wife. He’d forbidden Gina to visit him in prison and knew things were going to be horribly strained as they started over.

The Don had smoked only a fraction of the cigar but he was already finished with it. As a teenager, he’d struggled to break into the tobacco-smuggling racket rooted in the port of Naples. Fifty years later he had the lion’s share and could afford to be wasteful. He pushed the Havana through the gap, glided the window shut and turned to Valsi. ‘Now, there is something else, Bruno. Something a little more serious that I have to discuss with you.’

Valsi felt a shiver slide down his spine.

4

Carnegie Hall, New York City

Jack escaped a pack of flesh-pressing professionals who swamped the stage following his speech. He headed out of the auditorium and searched for a washroom.

A hand touched his shoulder. ‘Can I please speak with you a minute, Mr King?’ The request came from the thin, pale-faced man that Jack had spotted on the front row. Standing, the guy was barely five-five. Jack guessed he was in his late twenties, though the dark shadow of his beard made him look older. His frame was almost skeletal. Eyes black and empty. Teeth so poor you could tell straight away that he wasn’t American. And there was something else; a bitter-sweet stink of salty body sweat that made Jack wince. ‘Sure. Will it take long? Only, I need to find the men’s room.’

The man looked over his shoulder. ‘It’s around here.’ The accent was now recognizably Italian. ‘Come, I’ll show you.’ He headed off so quickly that Jack had little option but to follow.

‘Thanks,’ said the profiler, as his escort held the

door and then followed him in. Jack used the urinal, all the time conscious of the strange Italian standing by the washbasins, watching and waiting for him.

Think I've hooked myself some serious creep, he thought as he washed, then dried his hands beneath a blower.

'You want to talk here? 'Cause I thought maybe outside would be better?' Jack motioned outside, his patience already wearing thin.

The Italian got the message. He opened the wash-room door and found a space in the crowded lobby. 'I am Luciano Creed.' He extended his hand.

Jack shook it. It was limp and sweaty. 'Pleased to meet you, Luciano. Now, how I can help?' He fought an impolite urge to wipe his hand on his trousers.

'I work in Naples. I'm a psychology graduate . . .'

A female theatre worker in tight red jeans walked by. 'I am being, how you say . . .' he stammered, 'on attachment to the police there.' He was so distracted by the woman that he dried up completely. His head even swivelled as she walked past.

'*How* can I help?' repeated Jack, irritation now obvious in his voice.

Creed gathered his thoughts. He unzipped an unfashionable blue checked cardigan and pulled out a polythene document case that had been tucked partly down his pants and pressed close to his chest. 'I came all the way to New York to hear your lecture and to show you these.'

Jack grimaced. Work was supposed to end today.

One speech and then a chill-out Christmas at Nancy's mom and dad's. That's what he'd promised her.

'I'm sorry, buddy, you're probably about to show the wrong thing to the wrong guy at the wrong time.'

Creed ignored him. 'Five women, all reported as missing. I think there's more to it than that, more than just missing.' He unzipped the case and produced a map of the Bay of Naples. 'I've mapped seventy different aspects of behaviour in the five cases, used Multidimensional Scalogram Analysis to combine variables and connections in the incidents. I'm sure they are connected.'

Jack was well versed in geographical profiling. He'd studied what the Brits and the Germans had been doing with Dagnet and he'd been particularly impressed by the Canadians and their Criminal Geographic Targeting programmes.

'Look at these papers and tell me what you think.' Creed held them out. Jack tried not to look. Finally, he took them and glanced down at the map.

Red dots marked Casavatore, Santa Lucia, Barra, Soccavo and Ponticelli. At first glance there was no obvious connection. Then, like old-fashioned photographic paper developing in a darkroom tray, Jack saw the links. None of the women's homes were very close together; they probably didn't know each other. The marked sites were spread across the outskirts of Naples, and all were served by fast motorway routes spreading north, south, east and west. Their killer

– if indeed there was one – most likely met them in Naples itself, offered them lifts home. Maybe he picked them up at nightclubs, perhaps he was a cab driver, or even knew them personally and they felt comfortable enough to travel willingly with him. The A56 beltway bisected the map. He guessed that at night you could travel fast down there and likewise along the A1 and A3 that ran off it. Jack looked up at Creed. ‘In non-scientific, non-sociolinguistic language, just tell me straight, why do you think these women aren’t just walk-aways?’

Creed stepped forward and talked excitedly. His voice, basted in garlic, was hushed and confidential. ‘Five women, all within a twenty-kilometre radius of each other; none prostitutes, all respectable; none showing any previous signs that they wanted to leave the neighbourhood.’ He paused and saw the interest register in Jack’s eyes. He took a slip of paper with their names written on it and pressed it into the profiler’s hand. ‘Mr King, none of these women, not a single one of them, took any clothing or personal possessions with them when they disappeared.’

Jack’s face showed surprise. He didn’t want to get sucked in, but he couldn’t help seeing red flags. He looked down at the slip of paper and the list of five names. ‘What do the cops in Naples say? If your case is that convincing, then I guess they’re all over it?’

‘Mr King, every day there are so many murders in Naples that there is no time to look for those who are merely missing.’

Jack made one last effort to block him off. He glanced pointedly at his watch. 'I'm sorry, but I have to go. The weather's really bad and I've gotta make a family dinner.'

Creed snatched the mapped papers and returned them to the plastic wallet. His face was red with anger. 'I have come all the way to New York to ask for your help.' He nodded in the direction of Jack's hand and the list of names. 'Those women are dead. I *know* they are dead. And if you turn your back on me now, then more will die and both you and I will feel like we have blood on our hands. Of that I promise you.'