



**PART ONE: PALIERI****Chapter 1**

The first thing he noticed when he stepped off the train was the smell. He'd felt the weight of the air on and off for the past hour and a half – each time the so-called 'Express' had squealed and shunted to a halt. It was a weight he'd felt elsewhere, even in the cooler capital, on those muggy summer saints' days just before the heavens rolled open. It brought a dullness, a certain slowness of the brain, something not quite an ache in the centre of his head, a fraction in front of his ears. It pulled the moisture from his eyes, while at the same time causing his white cotton shirt to snag – not stick – on his shoulder blades.

Only here, unlike home, there wasn't a hint of lead in the air. There wasn't the choking din of the city, only a simple quiet weave of contradicting smells. The sharpest had been with him all the way: the smell of the train. An acrid, battery acid blend of diesel, hot metal and stale urine.

The station's natural aroma was quite a different mixture: a baseline of damp wood, a morose reflection of the thickness of the air, and above it a delicate flowery whisper. He'd tasted its sweetness once before, back when he was younger, and he closed his eyes and pictured a single white and yellow flower. The single frangipani he'd scooped up off the promenade and taken home to his wife. In the early days, before it had become a habit.

Someone was calling his name.

"Rilassato, Sir," said the ageing constable, shaking the Inspector's hand before he stooped and lifted both suitcases. "My apologies: I wasn't expecting the train to be early."

Inspector Palieri looked at his watch then squinted disapprovingly at his new subordinate. "We're an hour and a half overdue," he pointed out.

"Instead of two," the constable nodded. "It's always here at ten past four, give or take ten minutes."

"And nobody thought to change the timetable?"

"Everybody knows," the constable said with a shrug.

"Everyone but me, it would seem," said Palieri sourly.

The constable readjusted his hold on the suitcases. "Not anymore," he observed, with the glint of a welcoming grin, and gestured softly with his head for the Inspector to follow.

The car was old, a short rounded model he remembered from his childhood. He imagined it racing through the streets of the city, siren wailing, lights flickering intermittently, his slow motion chauffeur at the wheel. And for the first time since he'd waved goodbye and folded himself into the taxi, Palieri's pencil-thin moustache twitched with a smile.

He wouldn't be long.

"I take it there's still no sign of the body?" he asked, conscious of the silence.

"No sign, no clues, no nothing," Constable Rilassato confirmed.

Palieri wound his window right down and rested his elbow on the doorframe. At the speed they were going, it made precious little difference.

“You’ll get used to it,” the old man assured him amicably.

“I’m hoping to be on my way home a long time before that happens.”

Rilassato nodded. “They said you were confident.”

“Confident,” Palieri repeated hollowly. “Not ‘good’ or ‘effective’? Or maybe ‘successful’?”

The old constable tapped his nearside ear. “Perhaps, but my hearing’s not so good these days.”

He was being polite. Even if they’d used those words when they’d told the southerners he’d be coming to help with this case, it would have been purely to keep the small town police in their place. The city wasn’t in the habit of sending its most successful police officers to the middle of nowhere.

But they’d needed someone of a certain seniority – not an epaulette-flapping paper-pusher, but someone of high enough rank to have the necessary impact. Bodies seldom vanish from police morgues without some kind of internal collusion, after all. Hence his hopes for a swift return to the North. He’d slide his aquiline nose where it really wasn’t welcome, hand the traitors to the Inquisition and be on his way.

If the place had been more important, the Inquisitors would be here already. If the case really mattered, he would never have been booked on the train. Similarly, if he’d been any more important himself, he would have been given something more useful to do.

“I was told to bring you straight to the station, Sir,” the constable told him. “But, as we’re early, we could pass by your hotel on the way. If you like?” He glanced across and down at Palieri’s shirt. “We’ve enough time for you to freshen up – change, perhaps.”

Palieri followed the constable’s eyes, noted the criss-cross of creases in shirt and the patch of sweat already spreading across his stomach. “Perfect,” he said.

Palieri’s ‘hotel’, The Olive Grove, was a fragile-looking accident of wood, brick and breeze blocks that squatted at the end of a long, winding red-dirt track. There *were* indeed olive trees – more than twenty of them in four neat rows. It *was* situated in picturesque surroundings – halfway up the hundred foot wall of a dry valley that also boasted carob, orange and lime trees. It *did* have a view of the mountains, behind which – he knew from the limp, frayed map in his shirt pocket – lay the lure of the sea. But the building itself was a desperate disappointment.

Originally, a farmhouse, The Olive Grove’s central half stood two stories high. At one end lay a single-storey annex. At the other was a strange, circular tower of bare wood and peeling paintwork. The whole place leaned drunkenly backwards into the valley wall. Both entrances – one a classic stable door, the other plain white metal – opened onto a cracked, uneven patio that was shaded from the sun by a weave of vines and trelliswork.

It was onto this patio that Palieri emerged, flannelled fresh and dressed in a ludicrously expensive shirt. It was a shirt he’d often worn in the presence of authority figures. The landlady, a gaudy and flirtatious woman on the cusp of old age, had pressed it perfectly

while he'd washed. She'd brought it to his room, burst in without knocking and eyed his naked torso salaciously.

"Carmello," she'd shouted downstairs to Rilassato. "You could have warned me he'd be so handsome."

"He's from the city, Mrs Appassito," had been the reply. "What did you expect?"

Standing on the shaded patio, serenaded by a host of lazily buzzing wasps amongst the overhanging grapes, he could already feel the heat moistening his armpits and the small of his back. By the time he was back in the car, he was avidly anticipating the fresh, air-conditioned environment of a modern police station.

"Sorry, Sir, it doesn't work."

"Yes, I can see that. When is it going to be fixed?"

"Fixed, Sir?"

"Yes, fixed. Made to start working."

The desk sergeant frowned. "It's not going to be fixed, Sir."

"It's not going to be fixed," Palieri echoed. He glanced at his chauffeur, who had settled at a desk across the room and was now engrossed in oiling an old-fashioned type-writer.

"What's your name, Sergeant?"

"Floscio, Sir. Bennitez Floscio."

"Well, Sergeant Floscio," Palieri said, taking off his jacket. "How about you show me to my office?"

"Your office, Sir?"

"Yes, my office."

"You don't work here, Sir. You don't have an office."

In spite of himself, Palieri stepped closer to the man and leaned across his desk. He lacked a threatening physique – lacked the height, breadth or musculature required to intimidate a six foot youngster like Floscio – but he could pull a good sneer and figured his superior intellect and status as a senior officer from the city would do the rest. "Until this investigation is complete, young man, I work here. Until you get me an office, I'll consider you an obstacle to the investigation – which means you get to be interrogated as my first suspect."

Floscio looked more disappointed than afraid. "We only have one office, Sir, and it belongs to the boss."

Palieri sagged a little, enough that his jacket skimmed the damp dust that had clung to his soles since he'd walked through the door.

"So, where am I sitting?" he asked, knowing he had to.

Floscio's eyes said it all.

"I'll find you a desk." Rilassato's announcement, so close to Palieri's ear, made him flinch. "As you can see, there's not much space here. Don't tell the locals but Sola Critura's little more than a village. We don't get the kind of budget that buys lots of desks, offices and all

those other things you're used to back home. We could probably get you an office with your own phone up in Pasparados, but you'll be a long way from the crime scene."

*Pasparados: the regional capital*, Palieri recalled from the map in his pocket. "How long?" he asked, the authority utterly drained from both his posture and his voice.

"To Pasparados?"

"Until I get a desk."

"In our currency or yours?" the older man smiled.

Palieri's shrug was a mummer's show of nonchalance.

"I'll find you a desk," the constable repeated with a light touch on the shoulder, then he left him there and returned to his dried-out typewriter.

A brief moment of silence while Palieri re-gathered his thoughts. He noticed a dark patch on the ceiling. Once upon a time, he would have been standing in the wake of a ceiling fan – back in the days before air conditioning.

"Okay, let's see where you were keeping the body," he said to the desk sergeant. "Is there anywhere I can hang this jacket?"

The desk sergeant reached out for it but Rilassato called out from across the room. "You'd best keep hold of it. It's freezing downstairs."

The police station was hardly a modern building but it had been built on the foundations of one much older. It was into these that Floscio took him, into a damp dingy space that would never have passed muster back in the city. It certainly couldn't have housed cells. The bureaucratic behemoth of the federal administration wouldn't have tolerated the flickering yellow lighting or the powdery mortar that drifted in illuminated sworls, sucked at his lungs and settled on his beleaguered jacket – the jacket that was still entirely unnecessary. No metropolitan suspect would have been expected to risk the slippery steps or tolerate the persistent drip drip in the middle distance. No city newspaper would have overlooked the amateur electricians, haphazard plumbing or the lack of basic sanitation in the cells themselves.

That the cells were presently vacant suggested they might be relics of some defunct pre-Unification regime. But there was a part of Palieri that revelled in the possibility that the guilty might be sent to places like this. Father Mio, the most memorable priest of Palieri's youth, would definitely have approved. A man of fire and brimstone, Father Mio had delighted in spouting great tracts from the Book of Revelation, many of which had haunted the young Palieri even more than his dreams of unobtainable teenage girls.

"And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice," he remembered as Floscio stepped into an unexpected shaft of sunlight fed through a gutter in the street above. "Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals and mighty men... and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great."

He looked around him. Yes, it didn't take much to imagine St John's vision starting – or ending – here.

There was a flicker of bright light ahead of him, the buzz-buzz-ding of a more clinical world. Floscio was looking back at him, waiting. Cool air, cold air, washed over them.

Palieri pulled on his jacket and followed.

The room beyond was tiled in a white that glowed a pale blue in the harshness of the light. There were no shadows here: not under the sink; not around the base of the altar-like coroner's workbench at the centre of the room. Everything was the same bleached blue-white. Everything except the stainless steel drawer-fronts in the far wall.

There were twelve in all. Three storeys of four 'beds' each.

"Anyone else in residence?"

"Sir?"

Palieri sighed as quietly as he could. "Any other dead people in the drawers?"

"No, Sir," Floscio replied hastily. "We've never had more than one at a time – not in my time, anyway."

"And how long is that?"

"Five years, Sir."

Palieri turned slightly to take in the profile of the man standing next to him. Five years ago, Floscio's muscles would have been taught; his slight potbelly might even have been flat. "Five years?" he repeated.

"Yes, Sir."

"Where were you before?"

"Working, Sir."

"Yes, Floscio, but where?"

A pause, a flick of the eyes, then "On my father's farm, Sir."

"And where is that? Rilassato implied that neither of you is a local."

"Just outside Calimenti, Sir." As he said it, the sergeant pushed his shirt further into his trousers with his thumbs.

"A nice place?" Palieri had never heard of it, but then he'd never heard of Sola Critura, either.

"A good place to grow up, Sir. Not the best place to build a career."

"They don't have police in Calimenti?"

"Two officers, Sir. It's not a place known for... excitement."

"And no space for a young apprentice?"

Floscio's close-set eyes hardened and the muscles in his jaw tightened.

"Something wrong, Sergeant?"

"Nothing, Sir," the younger man replied. But the tension in his face remained. For the first time, Palieri observed, he looked capable of passing a sergeants exam.

He let his gaze drift from Floscio's eyes, back to the drawers. "So, which one was he in?"

It took a moment for the sergeant to respond. When he did it was by walking across the room and hauling one of the drawers open. Palieri followed for a better view.

He'd expected the drawer to be empty – although he hadn't asked himself why, in that case, he'd be keen to take a look inside. It wasn't empty, though. In it was the dead man's body-bag, outstretched and unzipped.

"What's that smell?" Palieri asked, almost rhetorically.

"Vinegar," Floscio said flatly.

"No, there's something else, too. Sweeter."

Palieri leaned forward into the drawer and inhaled a lungful. It was a strange combination of aromas: a fresh smell, like a sweet fruit that still carried the scent of the tree and the earth it was grown in.

"Smell this," he told the sergeant, stepping back and pointing at the body-bag.

Floscio's incredulity lit up his face.

"Smell it," Palieri said again.

Floscio stepped up uncomfortably. He leaned gingerly forward, his head maintaining its distance from the drawer as his body grew closer.

"What do you smell?"

"Vinegar," Floscio repeated.

"What else? Get closer. Get your nose in there."

"Plastic," the sergeant said, looking sideways up at him. "Plastic and a dead body."

"You don't smell anything sweet?"

Floscio straightened up before he answered. "New plastic, then. Fresh plastic for a fresh corpse."

Palieri folded his left arm across his body and stroked his stubbled chin. "Why vinegar? Why would the corpse smell of vinegar?"

The sergeant shrugged. "Maybe it's not vinegar. Maybe it's embalming fluid."

"You said the coroner hadn't seen the body yet. Why do you think a corpse would have been embalmed prior to an autopsy?"

"I don't know, Sir."

*Ah, so the 'Sir' is back now,* Palieri noticed.

"Then I suppose we had better find out, hadn't we Sergeant?"

## Chapter 2

Two women constables had been on duty when the body was taken: Joanna Sorora and Juliette Diosamenta. Sorora was due in shortly. Diosamenta had been signed off on medical grounds – “shock”, apparently.

“Now, what about the man himself?” Palieri asked Sergeant Floscio. They were still stood near the wall of drawers, lit by the white-blue light of the morgue beneath Sola Critura police station. “Who was he? The report we got was vague to say the least.”

Floscio cleared his throat and developed a sudden inexplicable fascination for the empty spaces either side of Palieri’s feet. The Inspector waited for a moment, the sweat chilling across his chest and beneath his armpits. As always – although he was working on it – it wasn’t long before Palieri filled the silence.

“Sergeant Floscio, do you actually work here? I’m noticing a certain... lack of clarity... in your appreciation for this case.”

“I wasn’t here when it happened, Sir.”

“Understandable, but I asked you who he was, this man. If you’re the one who’s briefing me I’d expect you to have learned at least that much.”

Palieri watched as the two distinct expressions he’d seen earlier battled across Floscio’s face. *Which one are you?* he wondered to himself. *The disappointed junior officer or the steely farmhand?*

“No one mentioned a briefing, Sir,” he said at last with appropriate discomfort. “You asked me to show you the crime scene, so I am.”

Palieri watched him for another long moment, unsure what to make of the man. The eyes were too young to stare at so he allowed his own to wander: the precisely pressed shirt that had lost much of its snap in the heat of the day; the broad shoulders and slightly sagging muscle they carried beneath them; the stiffness with which the sergeant carried himself... Features that reminded Palieri of his father and brothers. *There’s something of the military about you, young Floscio*, he figured.

This time Floscio folded first. “It *was* here you meant, wasn’t it? Where the body vanished from, I mean.”

Palieri nodded but said nothing, a trick he’d learnt from a superior but wasn’t yet comfortable with.

“Maybe you should speak to Rilassato about it,” the sergeant suggested, visibly embarrassed.

“The man I’ve spent the past hour with? Don’t you think he’d have told me all he knew already?”

Floscio shrugged.

Palieri’s thin black brows narrowed. “And why do you think he might know more than you, given that he wasn’t here that night, either?”

An intake of breath, but no response. It was clear in Floscio's eyes that he'd vetoed whatever he'd been about to say. *Another sign that he might be smarter than he appears*, Palieri noted.

Palieri cocked his head and waited inquisitively, resisting the urge to speak.

"Rilassato has a way of finding things out," the sergeant eventually offered.

"A way? And what way is that?"

"He picks things up, Sir; things other people wouldn't notice."

"You mean he pays attention? Listens to things? Walks around with his eyes open? That kind of thing?" In retrospect, Palieri would soon be wondering whether he should have been more explicit in his implied criticism of the younger man.

"It's more than that, Sir."

"More than that?"

"It's hard to explain, Sir."

"Hard to explain? And that's it?"

"You'll see it yourself, Sir. I mean, I'm sure you have similar skills, Sir, but..."

Hard to explain or not, Palieri was yet to be convinced – and whether they had "similar skills" remained to be seen.

He could smell the woman before he saw her. Her perfume was a heady release from the dusty claustrophobia of the cellars below. 'Heady' indeed. In less humid surroundings he would almost certainly have enjoyed the smell of it – a curious blend of roses, spices and almond oil. Here, it felt a little too intimate, a little too... present... in his nostrils – a little too thick, perhaps, as if it might settle on his tongue like the first sip of some unfamiliar wine.

She was talking to Rilassato, who was sat before her at his desk. In front of him, on top of a thin layer of documents, lay a collection of scattered keys and levers – the remnants of his typewriter.

Palieri stood expectantly for a moment before he realised neither had noticed his arrival. It took Floscio clearing his throat to attract their attention.

"Ah, back from the crypt," said Rilassato with a smile.

"Any luck?" the woman asked, coming towards him.

Palieri frowned. "Luck?"

"I was wondering if perhaps we'd overlooked him and he wasn't missing after all," she said. "My father was forever swearing his socks were missing when they were staring him right in the face."

"Joanna Sorora," Rilassato announced with an avuncular flourish. "*Constable* Joanna Sorora. Joanna, this is Inspector Palieri."

He took her hand, aware that beads of sweat were already forming in the small of his back. *Should have gone slower up the stairs*, he reflected.

Sorora was an unremarkable looking woman. An inch or two shorter than average and a pound or two heavier; plain faced with a bob of lightly curled black hair, sliced in a fringe just above her sharp brown eyes. Her uniform was tidy but casually worn. The only

distinctive thing about her – other than her attitude – was the elaborate design of her earrings. Hollow orbs of silver mesh formed by triangle after filigreed triangle – twenty faces apiece, though Palieri himself didn't count them.

"You're shorter than I expected," she told him. "And not as confident looking."

"I'm afraid we couldn't spare any taller, more confident officers," he replied, though it took him longer than he'd have liked. "We only send the tall ones if the corpse goes missing from the top drawers. You're lucky your man was in a middle drawer: any lower and they'd have sent you one of our agoraphobic dwarves."

The quip earned him a smile. What it meant he wasn't sure: he was too busy noticing that he was still holding her hand.

Then she let go.

"Inspector Palieri would like to talk to you about what happened on Monday night," Sergeant Floscio told her.

"Sure," she replied. "Shall we use the boss's office?"

She walked away from him, headed for a windowed door in the corner of the main room. Palieri slipped off his jacket, handed it to Floscio, then – conscious not to move too quickly – followed her into the office.

The blinds were already down, but she was twisting them closed as he entered the room. She gestured for him to take a seat, and it wasn't the seat behind the desk. That one she took for herself. There was a fan stood on the desk but she didn't switch it on.

"So, Inspector Palieri from the City," she began, rolling his name as if she were tasting it. "What would you like to know?"

"How about we start from the beginning?" he suggested, realising he'd left his brown leather notebook in his jacket.

She relaxed into the chair and her eyes drifted to the ceiling. For her, she said, the beginning was Saturday evening – when the body had arrived. She'd been on duty – she and Intendent Giardineri, the 'boss' whose office they were using. Whose wife and children beamed from a photo frame on the desk between them.

"He's a good man, a good boss," she said when Palieri asked about him. "He knows his stuff and he's as pissed off about all this as the rest of us."

"All this?"

"The body going missing when Juliette and I were on duty; the fact that he hasn't been trusted to run the investigation himself; the fact that the body... - never mind. The bottom line, Inspector, is that he's not a happy man. A good man, but not a happy man."

"And you?" Palieri was stalling, trying to gauge her.

"Me?" She'd withdrawn into the chair again. "Are you *really* asking me whether I'm happy?"

"Pissed off," he said. "With me being here, running what's essentially an investigation into you and your team here. You do seem a little... agitated."

She leaned forward, eyes full of spite. "I do, do I? How do you know I'm not always like this?"

"I like to think of myself as an optimist," he lied. "I'm *hoping* you're not always like this. As far as I'm concerned, the sooner we can get this... case... resolved, the sooner we can all get back to normal. I can go home; you can get on with..." With what? What did police actually do in the most parochial municipality he'd ever visited?

"Directing traffic?" she suggested. "Reuniting wandering children with their parents while you big city boys hunt down murderers and rapists?"

Acutely aware that he was hot, tired and miles from home with no obvious allies, Palieri stared at the middle of the desk, his eyes drifting to the fan. Would switching it on now be a sign of weakness? He'd have to twist it towards him, too.

"You know, Palieri, I'm torn."

He looked up, into those sharp eyes that seemed made for boring into him. The last few weeks had stolen a part of him. *Perhaps Rubino was right*, he thought, thinking of his long-term partner and friend back home. *Perhaps I should have waited longer before I took another case.*

"They said you were confident," she continued. "I just don't see it. Arrogant, maybe – with your city shirt and assumption that nothing important ever happens in the provinces. Confident? No. I see a man who's scared of a woman three ranks below him. Who has no idea what he's doing here and would rather be at home with his wife – a woman who looks after him and tells him what a good little man he is."

He felt his little finger rub against his wedding ring, grateful that his hand was out of sight.

"I see these things and I'm torn," she continued. "I don't know whether to despise you or pity you." He opened his mouth to respond, but she interrupted. "That's why I closed the blinds. I didn't want to embarrass you in front of the others."

Her words reminded him of his father – initially because the old Turk had frequently embarrassed Palieri as a child and would never have done so in private. But there was another, more useful lesson the man had taught him: *strike fast, fearless and first*, he had repeated as a mantra in those early years. It had served Palieri well, with his four older brothers and throughout his career. But he feared that, lately, he'd lost the old Palieri edge.

"I suppose I should be grateful," he said.

She smiled a victorious smile and he let her savour it a moment before he continued. *Strike fast, fearless and first*, he reminded himself. *Two out of three isn't bad.*

"I'm grateful because it means I can give you the dressing-down you deserve without any witnesses. And it means you don't have an audience for your theatrics."

"Theatrics?" she sneered again. "You... -"

"Let me finish, Sorora. After all, I *am* your superior officer. Even Floscio out there is your superior officer. Do you talk to him like this? No, of course you don't. I imagine all you need to do is glare in his direction and he'll scuttle away. And Rilassato? I imagine either he's immune or indulges you like some wayward niece. Constable Diosamenta's a woman, so I suppose there are three options: one, you treat her as an equal, figuring there's strength in numbers; two, you resent her femininity, which you feel lets the side down. She's currently

unavailable for the usual abuse so you're getting your fix with me. Option three: she's even more caustic than you, which leaves you feeling inferior and keen to prove just how nasty you can be. This seems the least likely. If she was nastier than you she'd probably not have been signed off with stress – unless she faked it, of course, which would suggest she's involved in the disappearance of the body.”

Sorora leaned forward, mouth open, to respond. Palieri didn't let her. That she didn't persist was a sign he was getting somewhere – as was the reddening skin around her throat.

“And then there's 'the boss', Intendent Giardinieri,” he pressed on. “You called him a 'good man', so you either believe it or want me to believe it. Either way, there's some kind of loyalty there. You also said he was pissed off – that I'm here, that the body's gone at all. Not 'distressed', 'concerned' or anything like that. Pissed off. So I'm hearing that he's a passionate man and probably – but not definitely – a man you wouldn't pull a stunt like this on. Maybe once, but I'm guessing you wouldn't have got away with this kind of posturing again. So, we're left with all that viciousness, all that anger and nowhere for it to go. Maybe at Diosamenta, but that probably wouldn't satisfy you nearly as much as this performance against a man, a man who outranks you and – quite frankly – could ruin your career.”

It was her turn to stare at the desk now; her turn to glance uncertainly at the buttons on the fan.

“I'm here to do my job, Sorora. I don't need you to like me. Frankly, I think it's unlikely that we'll get on. But I can't afford to let that get in the way of this investigation. And neither can you. After all, you are one of my prime suspects.”

He leaned over and switched on the fan, then stood up and walked out.

### Chapter 3

He emerged to find Floscio and Rilassato staring at the office door expectantly – Rilassato from his desk, Floscio from the same space he'd been occupying when they went in. The sergeant was still holding Palieri's jacket.

Floscio looked awkward as Palieri took the jacket from him. Rilassato exuded a lazy curiosity.

He heard the office door open behind him, tried to focus on something else – his jacket, his notebook – but found he had to turn, had to follow the other men's eyes.

Sorora was standing in the doorway, leaning nonchalantly on the frame with a smile on her face.

"He's okay," she said.

"Glad to hear it," an unfamiliar voice rang out across the room. Floscio snapped to attention; Sorora took her weight off the doorframe; Rilassato merely turned his head to face the new arrival.

"Not that he needs your approval," the stranger continued as he let the door to the street close behind him. His uniform marked him out as an Intendent, the highest rank warranted in such an insignificant backwater – although an Inspector could probably have done the job. He was a couple of inches taller than Palieri and probably a couple of years older – maybe forty five, forty six. In physique they couldn't have been more different. Where Palieri was relatively wiry – pot-belly aside – this man wore his shirt tightly stretched over a hard, bulging stomach, a barrel chest and thick, heavy arms. His dense eyebrows sprouted from the cliff of a sloping forehead that accentuated his jet black widow's peak hairline. And beneath his rounded, veiny nose lay a finely-trimmed goatee that was speckled with white and did little to disguise the double chin that rested on his bulging neck.

A few minutes later, he and Palieri were sat at a table outside a dingy café opposite the police station. Thankfully, Intendent Giardinieri had chosen the only one of the three empty tables that boasted a parasol. He offered Palieri a cigarette, lit his own and took a long drag which he held for a moment then exhaled. The cloying scent of cloves was another reminder of Palieri's father. The look of pleasure on the Intendent's face brought other memories – of Palieri's own years as a smoker, of his pact with his wife that they'd both give up, of her infallibility in doing so and his handful of secret lapses.

"I see Constable Sorora has been to work on you already," Giardinieri said, exhaling across the table. "You obviously impressed her. They said you were confident."

"She'd rather I wasn't here. It's understandable," Palieri ventured.

"It's not you. It's what you represent. It's hard to imagine, I know, but the memory of Unification is still pretty fresh in these parts. Even the unionists resent actual interference from the people at the top. They still call our Chief Superintendent in Paspardos as 'The Major' – not officially of course."

"And what about you? Unionist or separatist?"

“Me? I’m from Perea.”

Palieri’s palpable ignorance caused Giardinieri to roll his eyes. “You city boys... Perea’s the next province inland. Probably the least politicised place in the South. We’re simple people. Even our politicians are pragmatists with little interest in the intrigues of central government. Most people didn’t even notice when we were absorbed by the North. Osannato here’s a very different province indeed. Same goes for Roderia further north – and Vigilancia, though we’re not supposed to call it that now that the old provinces of Osannato and Vigilancia have merged. And don’t get me started on that. Things are a little more... complicated here than in Perea. It’s nothing on what you’re used to back home, I’m sure. But to me...” His lips curved in a shrug of their own.

“So why are you here?” Palieri asked.

“Originally, for my wife – ex-wife. She always wanted to live near the mountains. Now, it’s for the kids. It’s all they know, this town. They hate it back west. Too parochial, if you’ll believe that.”

“And how do you feel about me being here?”

Giardinieri smiled again, then took another long drag before he answered. “I feel like an idiot. I feel like you’re going to poke fun at my operation and find me guilty of incompetence. Not because of who you are, of course – you seem nice enough. It’s what you represent.”

“Interference.”

“A higher power,” Giardinieri nodded. “And the man I might have been if I’d not tied myself to Sola Critura.”

“You’re an Intendent,” Palieri said. “You outrank me.”

“No doubt you earned your stripes through arresting mobsters and cracking all sorts of exciting cases. Me? I’ve been sitting here, outlasting the competition. Twenty years I’ve been in this job. I got the clock last month to prove it. Only Rilassato’s been around longer than that.”

“But he’s still a constable.”

Giardinieri shook his head. “He’s a different breed.”

“So you’re worried I’ll be the black mark that ruins it all.”

“This is all I have, Palieri. I can’t make Superintendent without moving to Paspardos. Even then it’s dead man’s shoes. All I can do is do the best I can with the team I have, keep our quiet little town ticking along and watch out for my girls. If you or the Chief in Paspardos decide I’m not capable of doing even that little, I’ll be hung out to dry. And there are no private security firms looking for washed-up police officers in this part of the world, I can tell you that.”

“All I want is the truth, Intendent,” Palieri told him, unsure whether it sounded warmly reassuring or coldly threatening. “I get it, I go home. I need to be seen to be objective but I’m not here to report on how you run the place. I’m here to find out how a body went missing, that’s all. Very specific and, if we work together, it should be fairly straightforward.”

Giardineri looked more than a little embarrassed by his disclosures. “Sure. What do you already know?”

As Giardineri told it, Constable Diosamenta had called him in tears at 5am on Tuesday morning. He was out of bed and at the station in a matter of minutes. He’d found the constable alone and the body gone. Constable Sorora had arrived few moments later. She’d been on duty with Diosamenta but had apparently “popped” home for half an hour or so to tend to her sick mother – the woman was stricken with Huntingdon’s.

Giardineri described Diosamenta’s state as “hysterical”. It had thrown him, clearly. He insisted under questioning that she was normally a steady sort – emotionally and in the way she worked; a smart but unexceptional woman. There had been a particularly happy phase, though, a few months back. “Like women get when they’re in love,” the Intendent said.

“How long did it last?”

“A couple of months, maybe, but it didn’t suddenly end. More faded – the honeymoon ended, I suppose.”

“Is she in a relationship now?”

“I don’t know. We’re not that close.”

“No one comes to pick her up from work? No talk of the weekend or what she does of an evening?”

“Not with me,” Giardineri replied. He gestured at Palieri’s wedding ring. “You know what it’s like. I’ve tried not to get too close to the girls. Professional distance and all that.”

“And Constable Sorora? Would she know?”

“She might. You’d have to ask her.”

Palieri scribbled this into his notebook, then bade the Intendent continue. Constable Diosamenta had told him she’d heard a scraping noise downstairs – like metal on metal – and had been to investigate. She had found the drawer standing open, and the body-bag inside it unzipped and empty.

He stopped, a pensive look in his slightly piggy eyes. There was something he wasn’t saying.

“Anything else?” Palieri probed, wondering afterwards if he should simply have waited in silence.

Giardineri sipped his coffee. Palieri knew already that the cup was essentially empty. Then he took another drag on the clove cigarette before leaning forward and asking “Off the record?”

“Intendent, we need to be as transparent as possible here.”

Intendent Giardineri leaned back in his chair and gazed across the road at the police station. “It’s nothing.”

Palieri tilted his head and regarded the man like a piece of art. “It’s evidence. Evidence you are now considering withholding.”

Giardineri leaned forward again, placed the cup on the table and ground his cigarette into the ashtray. For the first time since they’d sat down, Palieri was once more aware of

the man's significant physical presence. "It's not evidence, Inspector. It's the ramblings of a frightened woman just before dawn. It's entirely out of character and it doesn't belong in a report. She's already been signed off with stress. She doesn't need anything else tarnishing her record."

Palieri laid his notebook and pen on the table. "Intendent Giardinieri – Luca – I think we're getting on well here. We're similar men at similar stages in our lives, with similar hopes for how this investigation will play out. Please don't make yourself an obstacle."

"It's not evidence, Palieri. Just leave it. She saw no one come into or leave the premises. That's everything. Please, I'd consider it a personal favour if you'd forget I said anything. Trust me, what she said doesn't have any bearing on your investigation."

"Trust you? Intendent, I barely know you."

"And I barely know you, but you're asking me to trust you."

Palieri skimmed what he'd written in his notebook. Not an awful lot, it had to be said.

"Hopefully that adds something to the report we sent your superiors?" Giardinieri commented. There was something odd about the question but Palieri didn't want to be distracted.

"A little, but nothing to actually investigate. Obviously I'll need to formally interview Sorora now that we're... acquainted – and Diosamenta herself, of course."

"Of course."

"Tell me," Palieri continued. "Do you normally man the station at night? I'm not sure how it works in..."

"... the middle of nowhere? You're going to need to work out what to call this place – and the people who live here – if you want to make any headway, Palieri. Some people are sensitive to that kind of thing."

They didn't normally man the station at night. On this occasion, though, they'd been ordered to do so by the region's chief of police – Chief Superintendent Dioscuri, the man more commonly known by the pre-Unification rank of Major. "It was meant to be ironic," Giardinieri explained. "He's originally from the capital, like you."

Apparently, 'The Major' was concerned that the dead man's friends or enemies might come after him.

"So we did as we were told," Giardinieri said. "They sent us the body and we looked after it... - well, we were supposed to look after it."

"They sent you the body? He didn't die here?"

Giardinieri was profoundly surprised at Palieri's ignorance. It was so blatantly evident on his face that the Inspector could feel himself blushing. "So where did he die?"

Giardinieri's best guess was the regional capital, Paspardos Creencias.

"So why send his body here?"

"To hide it from the people who took it?"

"Why the interest in taking his body? Who was he?"

"No one really knows," the Intendent admitted. "The only name we've heard is Muktidata."

The name sounded Asian, but the description Giardinieri gave of the body was anything but. To make matters worse, there were no photographs. There'd been no reason to take them. The only way forward was to head for Paspardos and speak to The Major.

"Rilassato can drive you," Giardinieri offered as he stood up, pocketed his lighter and tossed some coins on the table. "It's a long way, but it beats the train."

## Chapter 4

Palieri sat at the tiny desk in his room at The Olive Grove, writing longhand with the pen his wife bought him for their ninth anniversary. He paused for a moment, rolling the pen between finger and thumb, then looked up at the watercolour above his bed. Venice. A view of St Mark's from across the Grand Canal. Venice: a good anniversary; a memorable one. He'd never have used the words she'd chosen to describe that long weekend – he'd never been that sentimental – but she'd been right to choose them. "Like falling in love all over again," she'd said of their time there. The argument they'd had on their last day had come close to ruining it. *I over-reacted*, he reflected as he sat there with the picture of Venice above his head – something he'd failed to admit at the time.

He checked his watch: seven thirty. Time. He placed the lid on the pen, then laid it next to the letter on the table in front of him. A letter to his wife Isabella, or the start of one. There wasn't much to tell after just twenty four hours away, but he'd felt compelled to write to her, to make some kind of connection. It reminded him of being much, much younger, when letters had been a much more... frantic affair. But it was a practice they'd reignited over the past few years. It had become something they would always do on those rare occasions that they were apart for more than a couple of days.

Like this – another tradition, albeit newer. He shifted from his chair to the floor, sat cross-legged with his face to the little window and closed his eyes. His breathing was slow already but he slowed it further, conjured up the sound of his doctor's voice – a woman's voice, stern but caring – and let it guide him. As usual, his own self-consciousness slowed his progress. As usual, Isabella's voice cut in – encouraging him to keep trying; that he needed this, they both did.

It wasn't him, he'd insisted those first few times. It wasn't who he was and it wasn't how he did things. He was a realist. He didn't do this kind of thing. But he'd conceded. Of course he had. For Isabella – and for Dr. Fallimentare who, in all ways but this, displayed a zealous pragmatism that put Palieri's to shame. All part of the treatment.

Twice a day at seven thirty. They would do it together when he was at home, simultaneously when he was away. He'd missed it just once – blamed it on work when in truth it was simple scepticism. He'd insisted he hadn't and she'd known it for a lie. Ever since then, he'd approached these moments with increasing alacrity. In the past few weeks, they'd become a necessity.

He followed the breath as it entered his nostrils and threaded down into his lungs. Took the air deep, felt it in the small of his back, then ever-so-slowly released it. As always, the thoughts rushed in. The journey south; those initial conversations that had been the start of the investigation; home; the illness... In the early days, he'd have tried to force them from his mind. Now, he treated each as the first section of a train of thought and simply didn't attach additional carriages. He felt the familiar peace settling into him.

For twenty minutes he sat there, fully present in his body, removed from the stresses of the past and his concerns about the future. Then he conjured up a picture of her, sat on their veranda, wrapped in a shawl reading his letters. The image brought a smile, which he enjoyed for a moment before bringing himself back to the room.

As well as their effect on his mood, Palieri had noticed fairly early on that these moments brought him greater clarity – helped create significant changes in direction in more than one investigation. With this in mind, he extended his awareness beyond the room – past the cicadas and the landlady’s shrill singing in the kitchen downstairs. His head lolled forward as he reached out in some imagined way to the morgue in Sola Critura. He pictured himself lying in that drawer, ‘felt’ the plastic body-bag on his skin, heard the low buzzing of the blue-white light above, smelled the strange combination of scents he’d encountered there.

*I’m not Asian, but I have an Asian name. Why?*

He drifted backwards, searching for the time when the name would have changed. *Some crime or person to hide from? No, I’d have chosen something far less exotic. What does changing to an Asian name say about me? I’m changing something core to me, something more than just a name. I’m changing who I am, what I stand for. I’m making a statement, standing out from the crowd – not trying to blend in. I am, or my parents were when they named me.*

“Pasparados?” Rilassato guessed as Palieri climbed into the car the following morning.

“No,” Palieri replied, shaking his head and tossing his jacket onto the back seat. “I think we’ve some more work to do before we bother ‘The Major’. I still need to properly interview Constable Sorora, and then there’s Diosamenta herself. First, though, I may have a lead on the identity of our missing corpse.”

Rilassato fumbled a gear change as he turned to look at his passenger. “Really?”

“Really. Are you aware of any religious groups in the area?”

“You think he was a priest?”

“Nothing so mainstream. I’m thinking non-Catholic. Something Indian. Some kind of cult, perhaps.”

“Not my area,” Rilassato said. “But I’ve a friend in Calimenti who I’m sure can help us. He’s a priest. Knows about these things.”

He left Palieri sweltering in the car and headed inside to borrow the landlady’s telephone. Ten minutes later he was back, travelling at his usual leisurely pace. Palieri was stood sweating in the shadow of an olive tree. “Consuelo or Casa Fichi?” the constable asked cheerfully. “There’s a group near Consuelo that meet on a lake. He said the one at Casa Fichi is led by some fellow by the name of Kanja.”

“Any names for the group in Consuelo?”

Rilassato shook his head.

“Kanja... Sounds promisingly foreign. Which is nearest?”

“Casa Fichi. It’s just under an hour from here – east; the other side of the railway.”

“How far is Consuelo?”

Rilassato's face wrinkled in disbelief. "It's the capital of Rodera."

Palieri squinted as he worked the name over in his mind. *Rodera, the next province north. We're in Osannato, the northern half of which is what used to be the separate province of Vigilancia. And past there it's Rodera.*

"Yes, but how long would it take us to drive there?" he asked.

"Six hours; maybe seven."

"Then Casa Fichi it is."

"Tell me about Sorora," Palieri asked as they headed down the red dust track to the main road.

"What do you want to know?"

"How well do you know her?"

The constable shrugged with his lips. "Not too well. She keeps herself to herself..."

"Doesn't strike me as the shy, retiring type," Palieri interrupted.

"Oh, she's outspoken, certainly," Rilassato agreed. "But she doesn't make a habit of sharing things about her personal life."

"Like about her parents, you mean?"

Rilassato's eyes narrowed but he kept them on the road. "What do you mean?"

"Just fishing, but I'm guessing from your reaction that I've touched on something."

"Her mother's ill. That much I do know."

"And what's she like? Sorora, I mean."

"What's she like?"

"Come on, Constable. You know what I'm getting at."

"Do I?"

"You've got an eye for things, Rilassato. I can see that. I'm sure the years you've worked together have given you an impression of her."

"An impression, maybe, but you and I are both in the business of gathering evidence – not cultivating rumours."

"In my experience, Constable, at the heart of every rumour is a gritty truth. Work the grit and it becomes a pearl – and that pearl's what breaks a case. But rumours aren't what I'm asking you for, although I'd be interested to hear them. I want your sense of the woman."

"To what end?"

"To help me decide whether she's a suspect, a potential obstacle to the investigation or someone I can trust."

"And you trust me enough that you'll use my 'impressions' to guide your decision as to whether or not to trust someone else?"

"Put yourself in my shoes for a moment, Constable. Carmello." Mrs Appassito, the landlady, had used Rilassato's forename repeatedly – and very flirtatiously. "I'm an outsider here, a stranger. I have a sneaking suspicion this case is going to be much more complicated than I initially thought. I have two witnesses, one of which wasn't actually present when the incident occurred and the other who's been signed off with stress. I'm not exactly spoilt for

people to trust. You seem like a decent man and you've been around longer than even the Intendent. You know things and you know people. You're clearly not driven by ambition..." He paused for a moment, caught by a thought. "And why is that?"

"What?"

"The lack of ambition. Twenty five years and still a Constable... –"

"Constable First Class," Rilassato corrected him.

"Noted. But in all this time why no promotion?"

"I like the job I have."

"Really? You've never aspired to anything... I don't know... bigger? More..."

"Epaulettes?" Rilassato smiled. "More epaulettes? No. I've never been one for elaborate wardrobes. More responsibility? No. I've enough of my own. People to order around? No. I'd rather take orders than give them."

"More money, then?"

"For what? I can afford everything I need on the salary I'm given. The house is big enough for the three of us. We've always saved well for our retirement and we never go on holiday."

"And your wife wouldn't appreciate a nice holiday every now and again?"

For the first time since they'd met, Palieri saw sadness in his eyes. "We're fine as we are."

"And you've always been like this?"

"Fine as we are?" Rilassato thought for a moment then shook his head. "Not always. Has anyone always been happy with what they have?"

"I suppose not. What about when you were younger? When you first joined the force. What were you hoping for – from the job, I mean, from your career?"

"I was hoping to please the right people."

"You didn't want to join?"

"Oh, I wanted to join. I'd always wanted to be in the police. But for some people it was a passport to something... 'bigger' – that was your word, wasn't it? They had high hopes for me. Well, maybe it was less about hopes. More about demands, I guess. I'm not sure they ever had any great hopes for me; not really."

"Your parents?"

Rilassato shook his head. "Her parents. And her brothers. My wife's, that is. Senna. As far as they were concerned, I'd married above my station. They pushed her and she pushed me."

"Must have been hard, dealing with that," Palieri sympathised. "I was lucky in a way. My wife's family reckon she married upwards. I've never been so sure. My lot have a better reputation than they deserve, really: they're milking their history more than living up to it. So, they pushed her and she passed the pressure on to you..."

"For a while. The first two years of our marriage. But they were also pushing for a son. When they got that they gave up on everything else."

"That's reasonable of them."

Even in profile, there was a crookedness to the smile Palieri's observation brought to Rilassato's face. They sat in silence for a moment or two, long enough to spike Palieri's curiosity.

"Something tells me there's more to this than you're letting on," he said cautiously.

Rilassato said nothing.

"You don't need to tell me," Palieri reassured him.

More silence. They passed under the bridge that carried the railway. The Constable licked his lips, quietly cleared his throat and spoke.

"We haven't seen them in a while," was all he said at first. Then, "They weren't happy with what they got. In the grandson stakes, I mean. Their heir."

"And they blame you?"

"They probably didn't know who to blame at first. Bad stock, I'm sure they thought. The same bad stock worried them when Senna first told them she wanted to marry me. They were too proud to ever admit his... disabilities could have come from their side of the family. In the end, though, who they blame is irrelevant. We had a few awkward family moments when he was a child and as he grew up we heard from them less and less. The second time they failed to send him a birthday present, we knew they'd finally come to terms with it all – in their way."

"How old is he now?" was all Palieri could think to ask.

"Twenty two. Still has a mental age of seven, but it's better than it was. Tiring for Senna, but better than it was."

"I'm sorry. It must be hard."

"You're right. It's hard. But don't be sorry. We're happy, in our way. We love each other and we have each other. He's a good natured boy, just a little slow and easily led. I stopped hating him a long, long time ago. It's hard to imagine it now, the venom. All that bitterness. Hard to imagine."

"I can imagine I might feel the same way," Palieri responded, sure he would. After all, he'd had a similar experience himself once and it wasn't only the child at which he'd aimed his unvented anger.

They spent the rest of the journey in silence. Palieri had questions. Pertinent questions. But they were questions about the investigation. They had no place in the space they'd created between them.

All too soon, Rilassato was guiding the car back onto dirt tracks and heading into the foothills of the densely carpeted mountains that separated them from the coast. For the first time, there was a hesitancy to the way he drove. He slowed to read the road signs – or what passed for a road sign here. He stopped twice and asked locals for directions – a wizened old woman sat on a wall, a stout middle-aged man herding goats across a crossroads. But eventually, after two or three wrong turns, they were bouncing up a track to Casa Fichi.

## Chapter 5

Casa Fichi was a sprawling place, a place of historic importance that Rilassato explained was well-known – to the folk of eastern Osannato at least – but not well-visited. In the dim and distant past, long before Unification, it was home to a succession of powerful families. Crusader knights, forgotten nobles, friends and enemies of the renaissance, catholics and atheists, separatists and unionists alike.

Even before they arrived, Palieri saw signs of its faded importance in the expressions of those who had given them directions. He saw it in the great gates that stood open on their approach – centuries old, with a poorly preserved but highly ornate crest at their centre. He saw it in the collection of interconnected buildings, gardens and fields that had evolved over the centuries, adapting and adapted to suit the needs of its owners. The numerous cottages, barns, outhouses, stables, towers and sheds in varied states of collapse, decay and disrepair.

The car slowed once they were close to the main cluster of buildings.

“Something wrong?” Palieri asked.

“I’m hoping someone will come out and say ‘hello’,” the Constable replied. “Unless you can work out which building to head for.”

Palieri looked from ruin to ruin, searching for signs of life. “There,” he pointed, spotting a dim light in one of the windows.

“It’s a start,” Rilassato agreed. He took them as close as he could then switched off the engine. Palieri grabbed his jacket from the backseat, then followed him out into the late afternoon sun. A less punishing heat than he’d suffered the day before.

“Hello!” Palieri shouted as they advanced on the door nearest the dimly lit window. Birds took flight from two trees that had grown among the chaos, cawing in irritation. Palieri felt suddenly vulnerable, miles from backup with only an even older man for protection.

“What do we know about the people who live here?” he asked as they crossed the open, broken ground between the car and the building in question. “I’m assuming we know someone lives here? You had heard of the place.”

“It was Senna’s family home once,” the Constable told him. “Before my time. A couple of generations back. She brought me here once, when we were young. She was trying to help me understand them; what they’d had, what they’d lost, their fear of descending further into the marshes of mediocrity.”

“And now?” Palieri was fighting the urge to crouch as he walked.

Rilassato seemed much less aware of their vulnerability. “I don’t know about now,” he said nonchalantly, “But twenty five years ago it was almost as much of a shadow of its former self as it is today. I forget their name but the unionists who lived here were a family of little consequence at a provincial level, let alone regional. They were struggling to pay for the upkeep of the place and didn’t have the will or know-how to capitalise on the value of the land. Senna said the rumour was that they were looking to sell.”

"I have to confess, Constable, right now I'd appreciate some more up-to-date local knowledge."

"I can't help noticing that you're a little... jumpy," Rilassato pointed out.

"City living," Palieri smiled at him. "Hones the reflexes – and an irrational fear of anything rural."

"Have you always lived in the... - " Bang!

They threw themselves to the ground. Palieri scanned the buildings for the source of the noise. There was nowhere to hide out here but there were plenty of vantage points around the farm. A *sniper's paradise* – a term Palieri's father, then brothers, had used often. "I take it you're not armed?" Palieri asked Rilassato in a hushed, raspy voice.

The constable shook his head. "You?"

"No. Feeling rather stupid, too."

A second bullet ricocheted off the ground beside them. Palieri was sweating profusely. He'd been in a similar situation with his partner Alberto Rubino just a few weeks before. It had ended very, very badly. Palieri tried in vain to slow his breathing, clear his mind, focus on the present – not the past or concerns for the future.

"Police!" Rilassato shouted.

"Prove it," came a harsh, female voice from up ahead.

Palieri glanced behind him at their car. From where he was squatting, it clearly belonged to the police.

"We have identification," Rilassato assured the sniper.

"Let's see it then," came the response, no less harsh than before. "And no sudden movements or I'll take your head off."

Rilassato slowly took his badge from his back pocket and held it in the air.

"I don't care who you are," the woman shouted after a moment's consideration. "You're not invited and you're not welcome."

"We have some questions for you," Palieri yelled back, fishing his own ID from his dust-laced jacket. His legs were beginning to cramp and the stress of the situation was beading sweat across his brow and between his shoulder blades.

"I'm not in the mood for answering questions," she responded angrily. "How about you find someone who is?"

"We're looking for a missing person," he told her. "Someone we think might be close to you."

She was silent for a moment. Palieri renewed his attempts to guess where she might be hiding.

When she shouted back there was a sudden desperateness to her voice. "Not Stella Maria? Please, no. Or Lazzaro? Is it Lazzaro?"

"Can we come and talk to you properly?" Palieri ventured, lifting his arms above his head and rising slowly.

She stepped out from between two of the buildings, from where she'd been hidden behind by a split water barrel. A broad woman, early forties, not unattractive but somewhat

flat of face. Her clothes had a bohemian feel to them: a long, many-pleated skirt hemmed with tiny bells; a billowing paisley shirt beneath a tightly woven waistcoat; a silver ankh at her throat. Her long, slightly curled jet-black hair was held back by a colourful bandana worn like an Alice band. For all that, though, she carried her shotgun very comfortably in the crook of her elbow.

"Which is it?" she asked anxiously as they approached each other.

"It's a man we're looking for," Palieri told her as he eased his notebook out of his jacket pocket. "We're still trying to identify him, but the trail has led us here. You mentioned the name Lazzaro. Is he a friend of yours?"

"My brother."

"Has he ever been involved with any kind of religious group?"

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Would you mind telling me what this is about, exactly?"

"The person we're looking for, we have a name for him but we think it was an alias of a sort. Not his actual name but a name taken as part of his religious practice – maybe given by his... peers, or priest."

"And why are you looking for him?"

"We think he might be in trouble," Palieri lied.

"In trouble with the police?"

"That depends on a number of factors," he said calmly. "At the moment, though, we're looking for him because we're worried about him."

She looked no less suspicious.

"Does the name Muktidata mean anything to you?" Rilassato offered, continuing oblivious to the sharp glance Palieri threw him. "Or Kanja?"

Her eyes rolled at the latter. A smile spread across her broad face.

"Who sent you?" she asked.

"We're not at liberty to share that information," Palieri told her before his colleague could open his mouth.

"Well, they sent you to the wrong place. You're not the first and you'll probably not be the last, although it's been a while – maybe a year or so. There's another Casa Fichi *way* west of here. To be honest, there are probably Casa Fichis in Perea and Rodera, too. It's not an unusual name. This is just the best known this side of Pascarados. The one out west is where I send the people who come here looking for 'the guru'. It's by the Bajarri River; some people call it Casa del Guado, though I'm sure there's plenty of them, too."

"And how much do you know about this 'guru'?" Palieri asked her, desperate to get some value out of their journey.

She shrugged. "About Kanja? Only what his would-be followers have told me. Wise beyond words, pure in mind and body, preaching love and harmony... The usual stuff. They seem a peaceful bunch; harmless enough. Not my kind of people, but each to their own. You need anything else before you go?"

Palieri shook his head disappointedly. "No, that'll be all, Miss..."

"Escopeta. Delma Escopeta."

“Really, I’m sorry.”

Palieri looked at the Constable but didn’t answer him.

“It was an easy mistake to make,” Rilassato continued, just a hint of defensiveness diluting his customary calm. “My friend didn’t specify and this was the only one I knew.”

Again, Palieri said nothing.

“I’m sorry,” Rilassato said flatly as the dirt road brought them to a tarmac junction.

“Where do you want to go?”

“How about the right Casa Fichi?”

“It’ll be a good four or five hours from here. We could be in Paspardos in two and a half – *and* it’s on the way.”

“I don’t want to go to Paspardos. I want to find out about these people first.”

“With all due respect, Sir, what we’re following here is a hunch. We know they know more than us up in Paspardos. If this ‘Kanja’ is relevant, they’ll probably have been investigating him already. Why don’t we just go and see what they have to tell us?”

Palieri sighed. Was it just bloody-mindedness that made him want to chase this lead, however long it took? “You’re right,” he admitted at last. “I just need to see some progress here, that’s all. I’m not used to being so ill-informed and I want that fixed before I head to Paspardos. I know I’m not particularly welcome here and I need to add some value before I start encroaching on the Chief Superintendent’s turf.”

Rilassato nodded appreciatively. “Any ways we can add value before we commit to that five hour drive?”

“Maybe it’s time to speak to Diosamenta. I take it she lives close by?”

“As far as we know, she’s still in Sola Critura. Giardinieri asked her to stick around.”

“Where else could she have gone?”

“Her mother has a place on the coast. About the same distance from here, but in the other direction.”

“Can we call her?”

“Sure, once we’re back at the office. We’ll have her number somewhere.”

“Sola Critura, then. If Diosamenta’s not around, I’ll take the chance to speak to Sorora while you call and arrange for us to visit later this afternoon. Or in the morning. We’ll get what we can, then head to Paspardos tomorrow.”

Rilassato nodded, bottom lip thrust upwards in agreement.

“Is it always this slow here?” Palieri asked him.

“Normally, we just talk to the people with the answers rather than purposefully avoiding them. Calm down. I’d probably be doing the same in your position.”

Constable Juliette Diosamenta *was* home. Unfortunately, so was her mother Estelle. Mrs D was a formidable woman, grown in the same earth as the generations of Osannato matriarchs who had resisted outside authority down through the centuries. Palieri was

merely the latest of a long line of interfering men that included the agents of kings and popes, unionists and separatists, French emperors and fascist dictators.

"I told you, she's sleeping," she was telling him again, arms folded over her swollen chest, eyes fixed in patient defiance.

Palieri refused to be beaten. Aside from his run-in with Sorora, he'd had precious few victories since he'd arrived twenty four hours before. It was clear, though, that belligerence would only be met with belligerence. "Madam Diosamenta," he began. Smoothly, collusively. "I'm worried about your daughter, as I know you are. She's had a significant shock and it's not surprising she needs time to recuperate. I'm here to make things easier for her, not to get in the way of her recovery. I've been brought in from the outside to find the answers that will set her mind at ease. In order to do so, I need to hear her side of the story."

"Her side of the story?" the woman growled, her sizeable forearms flexing angrily. "You make it sound like someone's disagreeing with her."

"Forgive me. No one is disagreeing with her. I just need to hear it in her words. She's the closest we have to an eyewitness."

"She sounds more like a suspect to me."

Palieri's left hand slid into the opposite armpit; with the other hand he pinched his bottom lip. "Technically, she is a suspect. But only technically. That's how investigations go. I know from talking to the others that she's really just a witness, a victim even. It's protocol, that's all. A few minutes of her time, then Constable Rilassato and I can tick the box and move on with the investigation. If we have to go and come back another day, your daughter's going to have this hanging over her. You and I both know that when we put it off, even a small conversation like this one starts to play on the mind. We start to worry we'll say something wrong, or that we won't remember some important detail. Once it's done, she can relax. I know you're looking out for her, but so are we."

"You don't even know her."

"The Constable here does, as does her Intendent. They both speak highly of her and both are concerned for her well-being, as are the rest of her team. They paint a very compelling picture of her, and I'm a reasonable man. I have a child of my own so I know exactly how you feel." It was a lie, but one he'd used to great effect before. "And she's one of us. She's Police. We look out for each other."

She nodded at that. Whether it was the parent-appealing-to-parent façade or the all-Police-together angle, he could tell he had her.

"You can come in. She has a migraine, so we'll have to keep the shutters closed, and no more than ten minutes. You promise?"

"I promise."

With the shutters closed, the room was as stuffy as it was gloomy. The slow-moving ceiling fan simply stirred the stagnating air. Constable Diosamenta lay propped up in bed, barely visible beneath the lank hair that lay plastered across her face. Palieri couldn't help but

notice the effect her appearance had on the man beside him. Even in this dim light, Rilassato's face was a vivid portrait of shock and concern.

*All this because of a body missing from the morgue?*

"We won't keep you long," Palieri promised her.

"Just a few questions, then we'll be gone," the Constable confirmed.

"I already told Luca everything," the woman insisted, referencing Giardinieri in a weak voice that might have sounded melodramatic if she hadn't looked ready for her final confession.

"Apologies, Constable, but my superiors are quite bureaucratic with this kind of thing. If I don't speak to you myself, they'll accuse me of doing a less than thorough job. My Intendent will come down on me; his Superintendent will come down on him... And before you know everyone's in the Chief's office shouting about wasted budget and taxpayers' money. Then, when the shouting's over, I'll be branded incompetent and left flying a holding pattern, five to ten years further from promotion."

"Can't you just say you've spoken to me?"

"Can't I just speak to you? The truth is so much simpler, and we're all here now. Who knows, something may even come to mind you haven't mentioned to Giardinieri – or something he forgot to mention to me when we spoke yesterday."

Finally, she conceded. She sank even further back into her pillows and told her story with the bored detachedness of a witness revisiting her statement for the fourth or fifth time – albeit punctuated by a nasty rattling cough that must have been hell with a migraine.

It had been a slow day. She and Sorora took over from the Giardinieri and Sergeant Floscio at eight – Carmello had the day off. She confirmed that they didn't usually work nights – neither she nor Sorora had ever done it. They'd noticed nothing untoward outside the station, though they'd not to look. They'd played cards and Sorora had introduced her to poker. The one interesting nugget, added entirely as an afterthought, was a telephone call they'd received at around 10pm.

"Someone from headquarters in Pascarados, checking we were there," she said. It was a male – young and bored-sounding. She couldn't recall if he'd given a name, but he'd asked for theirs "for the record".

"And you're sure he was from Pascarados?"

"As sure as I can be. He called on an internal line. It rings differently."

"Would you recognise the name, if we could get you a list?" Rilassato offered.

"I don't think there was a name," she said, with more certainty this time.

It was all she could say about the mystery phone call, so Palieri turned his attention to the dead body. She hadn't been there when Muktidata's corpse arrived. Neither had she been down to the basement in the three days prior to its disappearance.

"So you never actually saw the body?" he said.

The coughing again. She reached up for a glass of water that stood on the tall chest of drawers beside the bed. "No. It was gone."

"What did you notice when you went down?"

“Have you been down there?” she asked him. “Then I imagine it’s not an experience you’d care to repeat,” she rasped.

He looked around him. *No more than I’d like to come back to this stifling sweatbox.* “Only if the investigation demands it,” he said.

She confirmed Giardinieri’s account that she had heard a noise in the basement. After some initial hesitation, she’d gone to investigate. At no point, she insisted, had the only way into the building been left unattended.

He glanced uncomfortably at Rilassato, then said to her “I’d like you to close your eyes. It helps us remember the scene.” When she did so, he encouraged her to focus on her breathing – “Just bear with me”. When she’d relaxed to a point where the coughing had subsided, he helped her conjure an image of the main office in the police station – “The sounds inside, the sounds outside; the smell of the wood, the feelings that you had before you heard the sound downstairs. Now hear that sound.” She flinched. “Tell me about it.”

“Like a metal box hitting the ground,” she said. “It reminds me of my father’s toolbox.”

Palieri smiled in spite of himself. *It works.* “Now, tell me what happens next. Tell me what you see, what you hear, smell and feel.”

She played along, though Rilassato threw him plenty of disapproving looks. With Palieri’s slow, soft voice to pace her, she gave them a vivid description of her journey down the steps into the basement and up to the morgue door – including the tension between her abject fear of rats and her determination to prove to Constable Sorora that she was bold enough to go down there alone.

“Let’s not go inside yet,” he said. “Just focus between the steps and the door. Can anyone get past you?”

“Perhaps, if they were quiet enough. But... No, I’m listening for rats. Straining my ears. Hardly breathing.”

“I’d like you to open the door. Luca’s told me what you told him, but I want you to really see it now as you open the door. Hear the sounds; catch the scent of vinegar and that other, earthy smell...”

Her eyes flicked open. She coughed hard and reached for the water beside the bed.

“You should have seen the look on his face when I told him,” she said, with what looked in the gloom like the hint of a smile. “I didn’t think he believed me. I’m stunned that he shared it with you. What did you think?”

Palieri was thrown. “What do you mean?”

“When he told you. What did you think?”

He scrabbled for a suitable word. “Unusual. But unbelievable? No. I’ve had witnesses say stranger things.”

“Stranger things,” she mused. “Maybe one day you can tell me about them.”

“You’d be amazed. Even things that are frankly impossible. To me they’re just part of the investigation. Part of the witness’s experience. Some of it’s relevant; some of it isn’t. Some of it eventually makes sense, some of it doesn’t and some it probably never will.”

“So you believe me, then?”

"I've no evidence to the contrary," he shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant but not convinced he'd pulled it off. "But, again, it'd be good to hear it in your own words. He may have left something out – or you may have overlooked something when you told him. Some tiny detail. Please, indulge me."

She sipped at the water, put it down and closed her eyes again.

"I don't think you should be doing this," Rilassato hissed in his ear.

"The sounds, the smells... See the scene in as much detail as you can remember," Palieri continued.

"The door is open," she reported. "I don't know whether it was open when I first came down the stairs. I don't remember looking. I'm scared, but tell myself I'm being childish. Someone else must have left it open – or maybe Joanna's playing some kind of trick on me."

"Is it something she's done before?"

An almost imperceptible shake of the head. "Not exactly, but she likes to keep me on my toes."

"Is the light on?"

"No." She cleared her throat in a way that was much too ladylike to actually clear it. *She's monitoring herself – holding back from it.* "I'm walking forward, shining the torch in there. Now I'm turning on the light."

"And that's when..." He left the sentence hanging, hoping she'd continue to assume he knew what she about to tell him.

"The first thing I see is the drawer. Open. There's a jolt in my toes and fingers. My shoulder blades feel tight and cold. I'm afraid, confused, angry and ashamed. All at once. All in one big panic."

"Why ashamed? Why angry?" Even in this light Palieri could see that she was trembling. Rilassato grabbed his arm.

"Ashamed that the body is gone and I was the one looking after it," their witness continued, eyes still closed. "Angry at Joanna if it's her playing tricks on me."

*A practical joke that got out of hand.*

"And then I see the footprints.."

"Footprints?" Rilassato echoed. Her eyes flicked open as she erupted in another fit of coughing.

"I hadn't told him about the footprints," Palieri told her once the coughing subsided. Through the bedroom door, he could hear Constable Diosamenta's mother headed towards them, chastising them for pushing the girl too hard. "Why don't you fill him in?"

"By the drawer," the girl continued. "Two footprints on the tiles. Bare feet, side by side, facing away from the drawer. Like he'd just sat up, swung his legs out and walked away."