

Before the Earthquake

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Extract

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PART ONE

I

It was gone midday and Concetta was asleep, sunk into the central dip of the bed she shared with her sisters. Immacolata, on one side, waged her sleeping war of attrition, restless hands constantly pressing for more space. Nunzia, on the other, lay immobile and immovable, arms locked across her chest like a stone effigy.

They had been out in the fields since before dawn, raking for potatoes while there was still the thread of a chill in the air. The night would bring the dark moon, a phantom moon they called it, invisible and unwholesome, and nothing could be planted while it lasted.

Concetta woke for no reason that she could fathom. Perhaps it was the point of an elbow in her back or the sudden surfacing from a dream. She slipped a dress over her head and shuffled into sandals. She pushed the slats of the blinds apart and, through the glare, she saw how still the birds were, perched on trees like tiny black figurines. She walked through the other room where her mother and father and brother were sleeping and then out of the stone dampness of the house into a block of dense sunlight.

In the deserted street, she fancied she heard the strain of something uprooting. A metal pot clattered onto a hard floor somewhere and rolled around on its rim. Beyond the houses, a breeze moved through distant branches and, opening her hand to feel the wind's direction, she wondered where the push was.

A jolt, and she staggered. The stalled start of something bigger. She glanced up to see glass shooting out of windows. Shifting glitter against the sun.

A door opened and an old woman in black stumbled out. 'Earthquake,' she said. 'It's the earthquake.' Her voice, strangely flat, was like a bell tolling.

Concetta looked away and up at the sun.

It was the dust that made her cough. Everything on top of her shifted. More rising dust and she wanted to put a hand to her mouth but, wherever it was, it was heavy and she couldn't locate it. There was no feeling anywhere except for a burning pain in her left foot as though a flame were being held against it. An age seemed to pass before she understood that her foot was the only part of her body above ground and that it was skewered by a shard of glass. She could feel a lick of warmth on it from the sun.

Time passed. Slowly? Quickly? She couldn't decide. She felt herself slipping into blackness and then rising out of it, forgetting where she was, and then opening her eyes into the same blackness. She felt this happen again and again and she thought that this must be limbo. Later, though, she knew she was still alive because she could feel something, life she supposed, leaking out of her. Even the burning in her foot was lessening, an echo of the pain from before.

She thought more and more of her foot, the only part of her above ground; the glint of the glass flagging her whereabouts. She willed her foot to move and was

rewarded with a sharp bite of pain. The debris on top of her creaked and readjusted and dust came trickling down over her eyelids, her cheeks, her mouth. It seemed as if she were facing downwards even more now, falling head first into her grave. She could feel herself sinking again, the familiar lethargy creeping back. She could hardly breathe; the dust was in her throat now. She didn't know if it was the same day or a new day, but she thought she could still feel the warmth from the sun and she imagined the glass in her foot catching its dying rays.

A hundred shouting hands. Concetta was heaved up and passed along. It felt like levitation, not dead and rising, but almost dead and side-winding. She was finally placed on the ground. A disembodied shout. 'Who is it?' The rubbing of roughened fingers against her face. Nails to scrape away the grime. The smell of charred wood on them. The fingers stilled and she felt the eyes all over her face. Another voice, stopping, dog-tired but insistent: 'Who is it?'

She wanted to laugh out loud and shout, 'It's me, Concetta!' But she couldn't move a muscle, not even in her foot. She was mute. The fingers rubbed again, but gentler this time. They brushed the dust off the face of a girl far too young to be showing the first lines of wear. Thick, dark hair with no curl to soften it. A heavy stamp of eyebrows, a finer dusting in between. A sturdy peasant girl reared for survival.

He knew her. 'One of the Salierno girls,' he shouted over. 'The youngest.'

'Alive?'

She tried to open her mouth to speak.

There was a finger at her wrist. A pause. The voice was doubtful. 'Only just.'

*

Concetta could feel herself stretched out on dry grass on a blowy hillside, a crocheted blanket pushed under her head for a pillow. Her mother, Anna, had sat for a long time cradling her head and was now running her fingers over the nicks and grazes that patterned her body. She was astounded to find no broken bones and told Nunzia so when she arrived with a bucket of silty water from a nearby stream. They washed Concetta down together, removing the last of the earth and dust. The water was powerful with the smell of rotting reeds.

Nunzia unwound the bandage from around her foot. It already needed changing, the blood still running freely from the wound. When she finished, she sat stroking it, as if that simple action would stem the flow. Every so often, her mother leaned over and passed a hand over her mouth to feel for the soft passage of air. To prove she was still alive, Concetta exhaled the essence of a creature trapped in an airless room.

Nunzia began to cry. 'She must have known it was coming. She knew and tried to run.'

There was an edge to her mother's voice. 'She couldn't sleep and got up. Let her have some peace. She's in God's hands.'

Concetta was glad to feel Nunzia's hands on her foot. Before, the pain had been the only way that she had known she was alive; now her foot felt numb. She could feel the blood ebbing from it and the same weary feeling moving over her. It felt as if she were receding back into the ground again; there was no wind on her face any more.

She wasn't going down, though, but up. She felt herself lift off from the ground and circle above the bent heads of her mother and sister. Then, suddenly, she could feel the wind in all its briskness. She could feel the draughts of air from shifting bodies, blades of grass flattening underfoot. Higher still, she could see the masses of people grouped

on the hillside. Families banded tightly together, whole streets recomposed and neighbours reunited again. Relief in some stunted routine. Old enmities suspended only for the time that it took for the ground to stop rumbling. She could see the village to her right, broken on the crown of its hill. She saw the aftershocks as they shivered across from great distances and then, below her, the responding murmuring and stirring and moaning.

Concetta hung for a time above it all and then she felt herself drifting back down. Her father, Rocco, was there now, Immacolata and her brother, Tino, too. Ringed around her was a small crowd of people. They were drawing close and running their fingers over her. They were pushing back her hair, stroking her cheek, wrapping hot palms around her ankles. It was as though they might transfer the heat of them, the life that pulsed within them, and enliven the part of her that was dying.

Towards nightfall, the crowd shrank back to the distance of respect. Nunzia had her head in her arms. Tino and her father looked forlorn and her mother's sharp features seemed blunted. She had a pinched look, the one she wore when there was nothing more to be done. Everyone was on their feet.

Concetta was torn. A part of her was down there at the centre of the scene – after all, she could see herself lying on the floor – but another part was pulling away. She gathered her strength and willed herself to shout, but only Immacolata looked up towards the sky, her face with its usual vexed expression. Immacolata glanced down and back up again, frowning even more, and then fell forward onto her knees as though her legs had buckled from beneath her. In a great hurry, she picked up the empty bucket beside her and, before anyone could put a hand out to stop her, she brought it down with all her force on Concetta's bandaged foot.

The shock travelled up from her foot and her heart made as if to jump out of her body. It was pumping fast now; she felt the blood whirring in her ears, knocking against her skull. When it settled, she was back in the place where everything was cramped and dark again. Just her heart beating through her foot. A dull boom. She couldn't see the hillside or the village or her family, but she was most definitely down here again, and not up there.

As she felt more and more present in her body on the ground, she began to remember more. There had been an earthquake. She was lying here marooned like this because she'd been struck by something heavy falling on her. An earthquake, one that devastated, struck the village every fifty years or so. Once a lifetime, people said, sometimes twice. If the air was too still, they called it 'earthquake weather'. If the moon was bloated, red as fever, someone would pronounce it 'earthquake red'. The birth of a malformed goat, a coop of hens that wouldn't lay, end-of-summer rains that packed the skies but didn't fall. Earthquake. Earthquake. Earthquake. They'd been expecting it for as long as she could remember, and long before that.

As always, though, it had struck without warning. Even the women who slept with their eyes open, like the cows in the fields, had missed the deftness of its step. They were part of a long line of people, constantly being felled, always fooled. How could they not be humble? They lived their lives in this jittery way then, between one earthquake and another.

2

When Concetta woke, she was lying alone in the bed she shared with her sisters. It was daylight, though not yet hot enough to be midday. She tried to sit up, but her bones felt as though they'd been fused together and the mattress, impregnated with the familiar musk of bodies, chafed her in places already sore. She sank back down again and fixed on the wooden crucifix lashed against the wall opposite. It was the thing she always saw on waking in the grey first light. A long spidery trail radiated out from its tip across the ceiling and there was another one, fainter, which she traced all the way across the room to the door.

The door opened and Immacolata stepped in. She moved across the room without glancing towards the bed. Concetta closed her eyes again and tried to breathe softly but, after a moment, when she heard a rustling on the other side of the bed she couldn't help but flicker her eyes open. Her sister was busy rummaging through a chest of clothes. She could have been invisible, Concetta thought, or dead for all the notice her sister took of her.

Immacolata was the middle sister, the pretty one, taller than Concetta and Nunzia by a head and more solidly

built. She had black hair, thick and wiry, which she always wore in a single plait as wide as a man's fist. This she grasped now and threw behind her where it quivered like a live thing. She bent deeper into the chest and sorted through the mainly old work dresses and frayed underthings, pieces which were too threadbare to hand down, and the knitted shawls and stockings stored for the colder months.

A voice came from the other room, her mother's, calling Immacolata.

'In a minute,' her sister shouted, half turning towards the door. 'I'm washing her.' She turned back to the chest and bent in, elbow deep. After a moment, she stopped. She turned her head fractionally towards the bed and then back to the chest and began drawing something out.

It was Concetta's best dress, a gift from her *comare*, her godmother, given on her Confirmation day. It was the dress she wore on feast days, weddings and baptisms, on days to celebrate and be happy. It was modestly cut with a neat white collar that hugged the neck and a skirt that brushed the ankles. It was the pretty blue floral pattern, she knew, that Immacolata liked best.

Her sister held it out for a moment to take the full measure of it and then she pressed it against her to see where it fell. She kicked out against the skirt and then an idea seemed to come to her. Still holding the dress, she walked briskly towards the door and pushed it shut. She walked back again and slipped off her work dress and slid the blue one over her head. She had to tug to fit it over her hips and shoulders. It rode up slightly above her ankles and pulled a little too taut across her back. She patted the material down and, without even a glance at Concetta, walked over to Nunzia's side of the bed and thrust an arm underneath to find a piece of cracked mirror. This she held out in front of her. She put a hand up to smooth down

the finer hairs along her hairline, which had a tendency to spring up and frame her face in a dark halo and then stepped back to admire herself. The blue of the flowers, a dark cobalt blue, complemented her black hair and sun-darkened skin.

Concetta could see, despite its fit, that the dress suited her sister far better than her. She closed her eyes again and felt relief at blocking out the light. The room was warm and stuffy. She made to shift her left foot because it felt oddly numb, but an unknown dread came over her and she didn't dare. She wondered what she was doing here at this time. It must be mid-morning, not the hour to be lying in bed. She'd never been ill before, but her foot must be injured, she reasoned, and she was here resting up.

She opened her eyes again. The crucifix before her wavered and the lines leading off from it seemed to multiply. On the far side of the room, she saw a blue blur. She fixed on it until it clarified and she saw the smile first, a genteel one for an imagined audience. Immacolata was turning this way and that, admiring herself in a cracked piece of mirror. Concetta shifted her foot, which had deadened, and heard herself sigh loudly at the unexpected pulse of pain.

Immacolata dropped the mirror and screamed. The smile, both real and reflected, vanished.

Concetta couldn't speak. The pain had winded her and her mind was a fog. She wondered if she were seeing things. Her sister was standing in front of her wearing her best blue floral dress.

Immacolata opened and then closed her mouth, her hand fluttering at the collar. After a moment, she glanced down and seemed so taken aback at finding herself wearing the dress that she began to sob.

The door opened and Nunzia hurried in. She looked towards Immacolata first, frowning at the dress, and

then, as if afraid, she followed her sister's gaze and turned towards the bed.

Villagers, scrubbed up after a day out working in the fields, spilled through the door. They came to see Concetta for themselves, respectful cap in hand, an armload of figs or plums, some still draped in the black of mourning. It was rare for someone to come back from the dead, so it was no wonder they talked of miracles.

Concetta heard how on the hillside her mother, who was never mistaken about these things, had pronounced her dead. Tino had been sent to fetch *don* Peppino, the village priest, hours earlier when her mother knew she was slipping away. He had arrived too late to administer final rites and it was while he was giving words of comfort to the crowd of mourners that Immacolata had suddenly taken it upon herself to act as she did. Concetta was told how she had jerked with the force of the impact, and then sighed once and loudly.

Concetta's father had tried to grab at Immacolata and hadn't known whether to hit or embrace her and, in the midst of the commotion, *don* Peppino declared it a miracle. Concetta, he said, had returned from the dead. It was a gift from God at a time of profound despair. For the week or so that remained before the people returned to the village, they gathered around Concetta, their symbol of hope, holding vigils and praying for her to wake.

Nunzia had taken it upon herself to attend to *don* Peppino at the vigils and, later, during his visits to the house. She said that as the days and then weeks had dragged on, the priest had admitted disappointment. He'd wondered if he'd been too quick to declare a miracle. After all, there was only Anna Salierno's word that her daughter had died, and it was not uncommon for a mother to assume the worst.

After the move back to the village, Concetta had lain unconscious in her bed for three weeks. The well-wishers dropped away, the vigils ceased. Concetta's mother had quietly taken the precaution of calling in *don* Peppino to administer final rites. A coffin was put together and lined and Nunzia had even managed to find a bride's white gown to bury her in. The villagers, and even the family, were losing faith.

Concetta woke to more joy and *fêting* than she could ever have imagined. The miracle was intact, as reaffirmed by *don* Peppino. She'd survived an earthquake, burial and death itself. A mass of thanksgiving was celebrated a few days after her awakening to which she was taken, hoisted on the shoulders of her father and Tino. The villagers stood at their doorways clapping, lining the streets, and then thronged behind her in a singing procession towards the church.

Her mother had insisted she wore the bride's dress and draped a pale lilac scarf over her hair and across her shoulders. Immacolata was wearing the blue floral dress. It was her reward, she told Concetta, for acting so promptly with the bucket.

The church of San Rocco in the main square was roofless, and the whole of the left wall was dangerously unstable, but the villagers had cleared away the rubble inside and wiped down the pews as best they could. Concetta was placed on a chair at the front of the church and the first mass in the village since the earthquake was celebrated within its walls.

Concetta sometimes wondered whether she were still lying unconscious below ground. Her life on waking seemed far more likely to be part of an elaborate dream. The enormous relief, the *fêting*, the joy; it all seemed unreal. Yet, she didn't feel relieved in herself; she didn't feel joyous. She didn't feel anything at all.

She tried to take an interest in what had happened in her absence. There was a steady stream of well-wishers, who continued to troop through the house bringing her vegetables straight from the fields; flowers, nuts and berries. She caught fragments of how things had been. Some things she knew. They'd been preparing for the earthquake all their lives. They were from a long line of people who had always got on with life. She heard how there'd been no time to mourn because of the numbers of dead, how the incessant heat meant they'd had to bury in a hurry. She heard how every family had to tend to their injured and then had braced themselves for the suicides (a handful from shock and despair). They'd slept out in the open for a few weeks and, once the aftershocks had subsided, they'd drifted back to the village to begin the work of rebuilding.

It didn't last long, though. The first excitement of tearing down and starting anew was replaced by the bickering of families in overcrowded lodgings. Those that came to see her began to reminisce about how things had been in more settled times. Concetta's interest in the earthquake waned, too. She was beginning to feel stronger now, able to sit up propped on cushions. She smiled and nodded when she needed to because she saw that her mother still watched out for this, but more than anything now she wanted to forget. She wanted to put the earthquake behind her. She thought of that last memory, traced the trajectory of it. She'd roused herself from sleep. She'd walked out of the house into the street and had had to push her way through the heat, which came at her in waves. Then the ground had moved and glass was shattering above her and the old woman in black began to speak, the same words over again.

*

The end of summer brought the distant boom of thunder. Storms that never arrived. The expectation of them hung in the air. It made people scratchy, fussy about details, about how it was then and how it was now. One night after Concetta's godparents, her *compare* and *comare*, had gone home, they continued the dispute in the kitchen.

'Hand on my heart, I've never known heat like this year,' said Nunzia. 'We should have known it would bring no good. Earthquake weather.'

Half the village were talking like this. Looking back for omens.

'Ah,' said Immacolata, waving a hand at her dismissively, 'you see signs where you want to see them.'

'There was something different about the sun,' said Nunzia. 'That's what people were saying.'

'Listen,' said Immacolata, 'the sun looks the same today as it did then.'

'We said it was getting closer,' said Nunzia, turning to Concetta. 'Didn't we?'

'Everybody was saying that,' said Immacolata. 'Just copycat talk.'

'I don't remember,' said Concetta, laughing and shaking her head at Nunzia. 'I don't remember the heat being any different. Every summer seems hotter than the one before.'

Nunzia looked over at Concetta. 'You had your hands in bandages for a week.'

Concetta frowned. She struggled to recall an incident.

Nunzia leaned in. 'Your hands swelled up. They looked as though they'd been stung by bees.'

'But it wasn't bees, it was the sun,' said Immacolata. She stood up and yawned. It was nearly time for her to leave with Tino. They would head towards the fields to take their father's supper. Tino would remain there. He and his father often slept overnight at the *pagliaro*, the stone hut,

so as to be able to start work with first light. Everyone had lost valuable time because of the earthquake. 'And the dog,' Immacolata said. 'Don't forget old Paolo's dog.'

'Chained to a gate for a whole day with no shade and no water,' said Nunzia. 'Poor thing.'

Concetta looked down at her hands folded on her lap and spread out the fingers. She tried to recall them red and swollen, encased in white crêpe.

She thought of old Paolo's dog; a grey, scrawny thing with a long tail that curved underneath its body. It would often bound out from behind a small haystack by old Paolo's house on their way to the fields in the mornings. It would always bare its teeth at the girls and then trot along behind them for half a mile or so wagging its tail. It was said to be half-dog, half-wolf and Concetta always fancied that it was there to protect them against evil spirits.

'He's not there any more?' asked Concetta.

Nunzia looked at her oddly. 'Not unless it's his ghost come back from the dead.'

'Smelly, bad-tempered thing,' said Immacolata. 'Thank God we don't have to put up with him scaring us any more.'

Their mother returned. She'd walked some visitors back to their house a few streets away and now started busying herself wrapping some food in a piece of cloth, enough for a late supper and breakfast. Concetta smiled and nodded, following the thread of winding talk in the kitchen while desperately trying to think back to the weeks before the earthquake. The chatter about heat felt familiar to her, just the tired talk of summer that was bandied about at the hottest part of a long July day. The kind of day, though, that Concetta couldn't separate from those that had gone before and those that came after. Nunzia had expressed it well enough. Easily spent words. Throwaway talk.

But what about her swollen fingers? And the poor wolf-dog? She tried to imagine these events from the little her sisters had said. She tried to fix them in a time and place, hoping to spark a memory. But all she could see, when she tried to think back, was the giant orb of the sun just as it was when the earthquake struck.

Concetta was sitting in the kitchen shelling broad beans. Her mother still insisted that she keep only to light housework. Outside, she could hear the rebuilding work now in full swing. The banter of the men, the clanging of metal on metal, the whoops that went up when a wall was about to fall, the hiss of rising dust.

Immacolata came in, slamming the door. She brought half a loaf of bread and a couple of brown speckled eggs. She brought resentment, too. She and Nunzia had had to shoulder Concetta's share of the field work. The plums, apples, walnuts and figs were dropping off the trees, she said, and the sweetcorn were hardening inside their husks. Their mother and Nunzia had gone to see an old widow, *signora* Clara, who lived by the cemetery on the other side of the village.

'How is she?' asked Concetta.

'Bad,' said Nunzia. 'Crying all the time.' One of *signora* Clara's sons had died during the earthquake. They'd made a grave for him in the end, but they'd never found a body. 'She still says she won't believe he's dead until she sees for herself. She's been on her hands and knees digging. That's when they sent for our mother.'

Immacolata went to the fireplace, raked the ashes away and lit a fire. She put two eggs in a pan of water to heat through. She stepped back and opened her palms to stare at them in disgust. Her hands were sore and newly calloused.

They sat in silence for a few minutes and then Concetta walked over to the fire and fished the eggs out. She cracked

one into the heel of the loaf and handed it to her sister. She tore off a smaller strip of bread for herself; after all, she wasn't doing manual work now and needed less, and emptied the other egg in.

Immacolata finished quickly. She'd always liked her food. She watched Concetta eating for a moment and then eyed the remaining bread. She looked away and back at the fire. The rest of the bread would be for her father and Tino who'd spent yet another night at the fields. '*Signora* Clara still finds time to gossip,' she said, turning to Concetta with a sudden smile. 'She remembers you being at the cemetery gates. She told you it was too late for a girl on her own.'

Concetta laughed. 'Not recently.'

'No,' said Immacolata, 'before the earthquake.'

'It could have been anyone.'

'She says it was you.'

'Oh, it probably was me then.' Concetta turned back to the fire. She didn't have the energy to argue.

'At night? Waiting, like some loose woman?' Even Immacolata isn't prepared to believe this.

'The woman has just lost one son, and her other son is far away with never a word or message sent back.' Concetta tapped the side of her head. 'She's lost her mind, and it's no wonder.'

'I'm only telling you what she said.'

'She's an old woman with a broken heart.' Concetta got up to brush the crumbs from her apron into the hearth. She felt bad about losing her temper at *signora* Clara. 'Her eyes are failing, that's all.'

'Her eyes,' said Immacolata, 'are the one thing she doesn't complain about.'

Concetta's time to recover was coming to an end. There were no more visitors and, this evening, her family were

mostly absent. Only Immacolata was at home, kneading dough to make *fusilli* for the week. Her father had taken the night off to play cards at the *Vecchia Osteria*, the wayfarers' inn, outside the village on the old Roman road, and her mother and Nunzia were with *signora* Clara again and had sent word that they would be late.

There had been no word from Tino, and Concetta imagined that he would be working through the night again, as he so often did at this time of year, catching a few hours' sleep in the *pagliaro* with the sheep and goats. Instead, he turned up very late, entering the kitchen quietly. He hadn't eaten anything since breakfast and he had a wary look about him that spoke of real hunger. Concetta cleared a place for him at the end of the table and gave him a piece of dry bread and half a raw onion. She drained the last of the wine into a glass, dregs and all. He ate in silence. Tino was always frugal with his words.

Concetta had felt a surge of gladness at seeing him come through the door so unexpectedly. She was feeling low from spending her days alone in the house and she missed Tino in particular. She'd hardly spoken to him since her waking. He hadn't slept on the small wooden bench in the kitchen that served as his bed for a week or more and the times he did appear, like this evening, it was because he craved the comfort of the kitchen and the hearth. She didn't dare tax him with her silly cares. She was on the mend, as her mother said with a satisfied nod, and that was all that mattered.

Concetta took his plate away to clean outside and Tino waited for her to come back in before speaking. 'They found sant'Emidio.'

Immacolata stopped kneading and clapped a floury hand to her mouth. Concetta, still by the door with the plate in her hand, looked first at one and then the other. Sant'Emidio was the village protector against earthquakes,

a waist-high statue that stood on a plinth in the main church.

‘Where?’ asked Immacolata.

‘Behind the altar in Santo Stefano, under the floorboards.’

‘What was he doing there?’ asked Concetta. Santo Stefano was a dilapidated church in the south of the village, deconsecrated after it had been damaged in the last earthquake, over fifty years ago.

‘Hiding probably,’ said Immacolata with a laugh. ‘He knew what was coming!’

‘Is he in one piece?’ asked Concetta.

‘Except for his nose and that was from last time.’

Concetta came over to the table by Tino and sat down. ‘It’s more than a miracle. Found, and in one piece.’ Her voice was full of awe. The girls in the village had a lot of affection for sant’Emidio. At mass, they jostled to be on a pew close to him. They admired his dark blue bishop’s cape with its jewelled clasp and the boyish frizz of light curls under his mitre. His hands were raised, palms slightly turned out in restrained welcome. His feet were usually hidden by the disintegrating mulch of flowers pulled hurriedly from the roadside: bunches of daisies, all stalks and wilting heads, and sunflowers sweating petals that curled and died at his toes. ‘How could they lose him before the earthquake? How could they have let that happen?’

She looked up to find Tino’s eyes on her. ‘What’s wrong, *sorellina*, little sister?’

It wasn’t until Concetta heard herself speak that she acknowledged the truth. She hung her head. ‘I’ve lost time,’ she said. ‘I can’t remember things, a lot of things.’ It was as if she’d fallen down a well into a black hole. A yawning place without light or sound. She’d been bumping up against its edges for some time.

‘You remember the earthquake,’ said Immacolata, her voice sharp.

‘I remember that day. I don’t remember before . . . days, weeks, maybe months . . . I don’t know how much time before.’

‘How do you know that you can’t remember?’ asked Immacolata, her voice probing. ‘How can you tell?’

‘Things people tell me. I say I remember, but I don’t.’ She looked to Tino, but his expression was difficult to read in the dimness of the room.

‘Sometimes people forget on purpose,’ he said finally. ‘They don’t want to remember.’

‘Like what? What do I want to forget?’

Tino shrugged. ‘I don’t live your life for you.’

Immacolata suddenly clapped her hands and hooted with laughter as though she’d just thought of the funniest thing. ‘At the cemetery gates,’ she said. ‘It *was* you.’