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**Opening Extract from...**

# The View from the Tower

Written by Charles Lambert

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DEDICATION

*For Jane.*

PART ONE

PART ONE

# 1
1

*Rome, Tuesday, 1 June 2004*

On the last morning of their marriage, Helen and Federico leave the flat together, shortly before nine. Federico has told his driver to wait on the far side of the square because the widowed sisters on the first floor complain about car fumes dirtying their scraps of washing; flannel vests, grey woollen tights, despite the early June heat. How sad, thinks Helen, glancing up at their balcony as a drop of water catches her arm. A whole life lived, a line of dripping cloth. So she and Federico have these final moments together, down the dark stairs and across the square, barely time to exchange a dozen words and say goodbye before their separate days begin.

By the time they reach the car they have both fallen silent. In any case, everything was organised before they left the flat. Helen will shop for that evening because Giacomo, their oldest friend, is coming to dinner with his new wife. As usual, Federico has planned the meal and written the list of items Helen has to buy. He's decided to keep it simple: cold cuts, veal liver and artichoke, summer fruits and cheese. On the way to the ministry, he will tell the driver to stop off in one of the narrow streets nearby, where he will pick up some Stilton from a shop that imports it directly. This evening, Helen will set the table and fill up glasses while Federico cooks and serves. He always cooks; it relaxes him after work. Helen will sit at the breakfast bar with a glass of wine and listen to his stories of the day's events at the ministry, of people who form an intimate part of Federico's world and a less intimate part of hers.

Federico takes his seat beside the driver with his briefcase lodged between his feet, the briefcase he has had since university and refuses to replace, now cracked and stained and stitched together with sailmakers' twine – a task he performs himself each summer to the amusement of Helen, who has never mended anything in her life. In the back sits one of the bodyguards assigned to Federico: two drivers, two bodyguards, what Helen calls his government issue, shifted around on a bi-weekly rota. Today's driver is Massimo, her favourite; the other one never seems to notice her. Federico is supposed to stay in the back, with the bodyguard, but prefers to sit beside the driver, whose risk is greater. He enjoys taking risks.

Massimo raises his hand in a crisp salute to Helen.

"When can we come and see your mother again?" she says.

Massimo spreads his hands as if to say she only has to name the day. "She's been bottling the new tomatoes. She hasn't forgotten you, don't worry. She's put some aside."

Federico has already picked up the pile of this morning's newspapers from his seat and is rifling through them. Helen hesitates beside the open window, then turns away as Federico grimaces at something he's read, his face disappearing behind a sheet of tinted glass. She steps back to watch the blue car cross the square, drive down towards Via Giulia and the flow of traffic on the Lungotevere, its passenger invisible behind the dark rear window.

She stands for a moment, distracted by the fluttering of rainbow peace flags from the windows opposite, then walks over to their local bar and orders a cappuccino, which she drinks while glancing at the headlines of the *Messaggero* on one of the tables. The banner is devoted to videos of the hostages in Iraq, but she ignores that and glances down to the front-page account of a minor government crisis, comparing it with what Federico told her the night before. She has that familiar feeling of being at the centre of events and yet excluded. She is tempted to tell the barman the truth of the matter, but she resists. The barman, the rest of the world, will always prefer to believe what they read. Even when events prove her right, her version will have been forgotten.

The barman's mother, wrapped in an apron, her sparse grey hair pushed up into a nylon cap, is working in the kitchen behind the bar, preparing sandwiches for later that day, cheese and ham, artichoke hearts and mozzarella, tuna and tomato. She glances through to the bar, waving the large broad knife she uses to spread mayonnaise, and shouts across to Helen that the world is going to the dogs, with a tone of immense cheerfulness, even hilarity. Helen nods and raises her empty cup in agreement.

She has three hours before work. Her shift at the news agency begins at noon, the light shift after the early morning roundup. She leaves the bar and walks across Piazza Farnese and through the market in Campo de' Fiori, remembering the way it was when she'd first come to Rome, the rickety wooden stalls, the sacks of dried beans like dusty counters, all of it smoothed away now, tamped down and neatened up. She checks to see what's on at the cinema; a Japanese film she's never heard of that won something in Venice last September. She wanders down Via dei Giubbonari, pausing to glance through the table of books outside the second-hand bookshop in the small square halfway down, where the man she thinks of as the Sad Man is sorting through old magazines by the door. He smiles at her, she smiles back; they have friends in common, well, Martin, really, but she can never remember his first name, except that it's English. Anthony? Andrew? He has red hair going grey, worn too long and held back with a rubber band, and one of those waistcoats with pockets all over it that fishermen wear. She feels she should talk to him, but doesn't want to talk to anyone this morning, she's too distracted by thoughts of the dinner this evening, and of Giacomo. She's never met his new wife, Yvonne, and doesn't particularly want to. She nods her goodbye as she walks away.

She decides to spend an hour in the American Library. She's supposed to be writing an essay on Toni Morrison, for a second degree in modern American identities she no longer sees the purpose of. It was an idea of her husband's, who worries she's stagnating, who sets her small but demanding intellectual tasks to ensure her mind remains alert. But the minute she's inside the library, she ignores the bookshelves and picks up this morning's copy of the *International Herald Tribune*.

The first two pages are devoted to the war in Iraq, but Helen is looking for stories about Italy – looking for mention of Federico. It's odd to see news of the government crisis repeated, downscaled to a squabble among minor parties, a storm in a teacup; two brief paragraphs on page three and a hint of irony entirely lacking from the domestic account. She thumbs through the rest of the newspaper, then glances round the reading room to see who else is there. A group of students, teenage boys and girls in low-slung jeans and T-shirts, two soberly dressed women, perhaps lay nuns, in the political history section. No one she knows. She's restless, waiting for something to happen. She wonders if Giacomo is already in Rome, and what he's doing if he is. She finds herself trying to imagine what Yvonne will be like, and how she'll behave with her, how polite she'll need to be. She's in no mood to study.

Leaving the library behind her, she stands in the empty courtyard, already bleached by sunlight at 9:20am. High above her head, an army helicopter crosses the bright blue square of sky, like a furious insect. The noise reminds her of her mobile. She fumbles for it in her bag, then stares at the blank display to see if she's been called, but it's still turned off from last night, her final act before she slept, with Federico reading in bed beside her from a pile of official-looking papers. Leaning against the warm stone of a column, she closes her eyes against the light. And all at once she has a vision of Federico, his tall, stooped figure, his creased blue suit, the fine hair falling across his face, as though he is standing in front of her and shaking his head, his smile both irritated and perplexed, yet still a smile addressed to her and to no one else. She almost cries out and reaches her hand towards him, her body urging her forward towards Federico, to hold him.

And just as abruptly he is gone. She looks at her watch to see what time it is. 9:27am. She thinks, I'll ask him where he was over dinner. Or maybe not. Maybe it's better not to mention it. Federico has become so superstitious these past few months, with a thousand odd ideas about fate and coincidence: the notion that it's all bound together and has sense, which reminds her of Jung and synchronicity and that business about a butterfly's wing, and strikes her as lovely and meaningless at the same time. She has always been puzzled by the need for saints and miracles, the need for connectedness; not cynically, almost with envy, as something beyond her grasp.

She holds her mobile in her hand and then, with a shiver at what she will call, for want of any better term, her vision of Federico, she turns it on. She has three missed calls and a text message, all from the same number, a foreign number she recognises from the code as French. At last, she says to herself. She opens the message.

Bored, alone in Rome. Free for half an hour? Il tuo G.

Giacomo hurries her into the hotel room, then takes both her hands in his and steps back to take a better look. She laughs and tries to pull away a little, unexpectedly self-conscious.

"Helen, Helen, my dear sweet Helen," he says. "How good it is to see you."

He is speaking English with her, as he always did, however much she complained; but he's acquired a French accent these past few years. He's also put on weight since she last saw him, a matter of months ago, although it seems far longer. He hugs her to him, his belly warm and firm against hers. And immediately, as though the light in the room has changed, she wishes she hadn't come. It's stupid to see him here in Rome like this, the minute he's arrived and without Federico, in a hotel room booked for him by Federico's staff. It's not just indiscreet; her being here will spoil what's supposed to be the surprise of their meeting up, the four of them, for the first time this evening. For a moment, she wonders whether it might be wiser not to tell Federico where she's been; but then she will feel like a child who has opened her birthday present the night before and has to fake her pleasure. She can be honest and spoil it for Federico, or lie and spoil it for herself. Either way, it's a risk, and the bigger risk is that he'll find out anyway. It might be Giacomo's fault – she's here with Giacomo's connivance, after all – but she knows she has made a mistake. She squirms until he lets her go, only to place his hands on her shoulders and stare down into her face with an affectionate, challenging grin until she's forced to turn her head away, laughing again, with a trace of anxiety she tries to hide. And then the mood passes as quickly as it came – how complicated life can be if you allow it, she thinks – and there is nowhere in the world she would rather be than here with Giacomo.

"So good." He pulls her across the room to a pair of armchairs near the window. "I'll phone for coffee?"

"Not unless you want some. I've had enough for one day." She glances round the room. There's an open suitcase on the bed, a magazine beside it. *The Economist*. "You're on your own. Your wife?" She listens to her voice for sarcasm, or hurt, but all she can find is casual interest.

He waves a hand in the air. "Yvonne arrives sometime this afternoon. Late. She had business to attend to in Paris."

"She's in fashion?"

"Oh yes, always." He grins again. He's misunderstood deliberately, she knows that. As if they have never been apart, and there is no new wife between them, she relaxes.

"And you didn't wait for her?"

He shrugs. "You know me. Always restless. She had some lunch to go to." He stares through the window, down towards Via Veneto and its silent flow of traffic. "Whose idea was it to put us here? In this lap of bourgeois luxury?"

"One of Federico's people. I told them you wouldn't like it."

"On the contrary, I'm delighted. These days, I only ever stay in places like this. I have a reputation to maintain."

She isn't sure if this is a joke. He pulls out a packet of cigarettes. *Gitanes Légères*. In Turin, he'd smoked *Nazionali*. Giacomo has always believed in blending in.

"You haven't stopped?"

"I haven't been quite forced to. Not yet, anyway. Which is one of many reasons for continuing to prefer Paris to other less civilised capitals." He lights up, then offers her the packet. "I assume you're still resisting."

"Yes."

He nods again, draws deeply on the cigarette. When his eyes close for a moment, she sneaks an appraising look. He's older, stockier, his good looks faded by now, but his greying hair has been cut by someone who knew what he or she was doing, and she's never seen him dressed so well, so stylishly, nor with such highly-polished, almost foppish shoes. Federico would refuse to wear a suit this perfectly tailored, on political grounds. She can already see his face when he looks at his old friend dressed like this, perplexed and disdainful; she wonders, when he does, which side she'll be on. She's glad though that she's wearing something decent.

"So tell me about Yvonne," she says.

He shrugs. "No, let's not talk about Yvonne. You'll meet her soon enough. You can make your own conclusions when you do." He stubs out the barely smoked cigarette; Federico would be shocked by the waste, as though the fact of the cigarette itself weren't wasteful enough, in a world of limited resources. But she isn't here to think about Federico.

Leaning forward, Giacomo reaches across until he can touch her knees with both his hands. She has on her favourite linen dress, buttoning at the front; it has fallen open at the hem but she doesn't want to pull it closed. He'd call her Anglo-Saxon if she did, as though nothing has changed since Jane Austen; as though he doesn't know her better than that.

"The last time we were alone was almost three years ago," he says, "in that wonderful convent you found for us."

She nods. You don't need to remind me, she thinks. Partly to avoid his eyes, she looks around the room, at the curtains with their heavy sashes and swags, the darkly reflecting surfaces of the framed reproductions of ancient Roman views.

"It wasn't quite as luxurious as this, if I remember," he says. She still can't tell if he's sneering, or enjoying the luxury. She's never been able to tell with Giacomo. "Perhaps you prefer it here."

"I'm not interested in luxury. You know that."

He is silent for a moment, as if to acknowledge her reproof. “I almost didn’t come, you know. I still don’t understand why Fede invited me.”

How odd it is to hear him say *Fede*. Almost nobody does any longer, apart from her, and his parents; no one else is that close to him. She isn’t sure she likes it in Giacomo’s mouth, although it was what they both called him then, when they were a threesome, if that was the word. The three of them in Turin, setting the world to rights.

She wishes he’d straighten up. She can’t talk about conferences, or convents, with the dead weight of his hands on her legs. This isn’t the moment to tell him whose idea it was that he be invited. He’d be mortified if he knew how hard she’d had to work to bring Federico round.

“He thought you’d make an important contribution,” she says.

Giacomo snorts with laughter. “Only you could say something that absurd without even smiling a little.” He holds her knees, his thumbs working their inner sides in a leisurely, circular motion, quite independently of his voice and eyes.

“I’m not sure you should be doing that,” she says, but she doesn’t move her legs or push his hands away. She turns her head to avoid his gaze and sees through the window a surveillance helicopter, hovering like a soundless gnat, the sunlight picking it out. Behind it, blurred by heat and pollution, is a second, and a third. The American embassy is two hundred yards from the hotel, there must be dozens circling above their heads that she can’t hear. She’s about to make some comment about the hotel’s double-glazing, about the price one pays for silence, when Giacomo sinks to his knees before her and buries his head between her thighs. She can feel his breath on her skin, a fluttering heat, a beating wing; she has the sensation he’s trying to speak to her, to tell her something she needs to know. She wants to lift his head, not to stop him from doing what he’s doing, or not entirely, but to listen. To find out what he wants to say. But instead of that, she parts her legs a little, to let him in.

Here we are again, she thinks.

Helen can't free her mind of Giacomo as she walks to Piazza Venezia and along the Corso. She takes her usual route, skirting the Trevi fountain and up the hill that leads to the Quirinale, where the crowds thin out as the road rises, dust-white in the heat. Federico's office is just round the corner from the room in which she and her colleagues at the English desk are gathered, five tables squeezed into a room. He has calculated the distance as three, maybe four hundred yards and she sometimes imagines the walls are glass and they can watch each other at their business, Federico slouching behind his large dark desk, cluttered with papers and bulging pastel-coloured files as though the computer hasn't been invented, Helen crouched over *her* computer in the nervous birdlike position she adopts to read from the screen, her glasses halfway down her nose. Normally, she finds it comforting, this sense that he is near, almost within reach. This morning, though, with the after-touch of Giacomo's mouth still on her, the idea of Federico being so close to her is less welcome. All he would need is to see her and he'd understand at once what she'd been doing. She'd be caught out. How wonderful, though, to find herself with Giacomo like that, his need for her so obvious, without the slightest hint of flirtatiousness. Each time it happens, even when she's planned it herself, she's taken by surprise. And how hard it is to stop her mind shifting from one to the other the way it always does, from Federico to Giacomo and back, as if they are part and parcel of the same thing.

She stops in a bar for some water, holding the empty glass against her cheek to cool it. She's five minutes late, but she isn't worried. Martin will forgive her, she's covered for him in the past, more than once. She walks through the arch, turns into the foyer and greets the receptionist, whose face changes when he sees her, as though he has seen a ghost. He stands up and walks across, placing his hand on her shoulder to guide her.

"Sit down," he says, his voice unnaturally quiet. He leads her to one of the low soft chairs arranged along the wall, where visitors wait to be met. She sits down, shaken, not curious at all, because she already knows. He picks up the phone, his back to her, and she can't hear what he is saying although she hears her own name quite distinctly, not once but twice. She doesn't know how she knows, but she does; her blood knows.

Federico is dead.

ROME, Italy (CNN) – Shortly before 9:30am today, Federico Di Stasi, a consultant at the Ministry of Employment, was assassinated in the centre of Rome. According to initial investigations, two or three men on motorcycles shot him dead in Via Rasella, less than one hundred metres from the Quirinale, the official residence of the President. The driver of the car, Massimo Monesi, 28, also died in the attack. A third man, the bodyguard, is expected to be released from hospital in a matter of days. The attack is believed to have been carried out by internal terrorists, although no organisation has claimed responsibility for the attack. There is believed to be no connection with the Republic Day celebrations tomorrow, nor with the official visit of US President George W. Bush, scheduled for Thursday.

Di Stasi was most recently responsible for controversial plans intended to dismantle the few remaining state-owned enterprises and place them on the open market. Despite government pressure, he is believed to have insisted on the need to protect those currently employed by these enterprises, most of which are concentrated in the south, by establishing a series of government-financed "buffers". These have been fiercely contested by members of the government as "hand-outs". Di Stasi has also spoken out recently against military intervention in Iraq.

"It has all the hallmarks of a warning," Attorney General Lorenzo Gaeta told reporters in Via Rasella shortly after the murder. "Even the choice of site is significant. Via Rasella was the street in which partisans killed 33 German soldiers during the last war." When asked if he saw a link between this assassination and the murder three years ago of Davide Porcu, Home Office adviser, Gaeta refused to comment.

Government spokesmen are already talking of a fresh outbreak of terrorism, accusing the so-called no-global movement, as well as unions and parties on the left, of bearing at least part of the responsibility for the murder because of the recent intensification of protests against the government's economic policies.

Federico Di Stasi was born in Rome in 1952 to the journalist Fausto Di Stasi and life senator Giulia Paternò, partisan and among the founders in 1948 of the Italian Constitution. After studying in the United States and Britain, he was briefly involved in extra-parliamentary activities during the late 1970s. He began collaborating with the Ministry in 1982 under the first centre-left administration. He leaves a wife and no children.

# 4
4

As soon as the police have finished with her, Martin Frame comes into the room and slumps into a spindly gilded chair in front of Helen. He takes her hands in his and holds them for a moment without speaking. He isn't sure what to expect, what to do; he's hopeless at moments like this. The last time he spoke to Federico they had talked about his chances of coming through the reform process alive, and Federico had said you had to live each day as if you were eternal, which is a wonderful sentiment, of course, as Martin remarked at the time, but offers little actual protection against attack. That kind of talk, thought Martin then, is one of the many ways we ward off the nastier business of reality; Federico had been involved in government long enough to know that. But none of this seems to matter now.

Martin's still shaken, shaken and appalled to have lost a friend like this, in a morning. God only knows how Helen must be feeling. She's not the type to cry, but still, how hard it must be to hold oneself together. She looks up and attempts a smile, then shakes her head, as if to say, Who would have expected this? He sighs. If it hadn't been Federico, he thinks, it would have been someone else, although he won't be saying this to Helen. Why on earth should Helen be interested in someone else?

He looks down at their hands: Helen's, lightly tanned and delicate, engulfed in his own, large nicotine-stained, like the paws of some beast, nails bitten down to the quick as they have been for the past fifty years. He's scared of how fragile she must be, as though a simple gesture might crush her. He feels he should speak, say something helpful to her, but doesn't want to seem banal, or uncaring, and can't think of anything to say that isn't one or the other, or both.

"Oh, Martin," she says finally, breaking the silence, the words little more than a sigh.

He moves and the chair creaks beneath him. For an awful moment, he imagines it breaking beneath his weight. He sees himself struggling to his feet, the chair in splinters beneath him; how unbearable that would be, how close to farce. Abruptly, he lets her go.

"One of us should be at the desk," she says, her forehead suddenly creased with worry.

"You needn't think about work, my dear. The desk is the last thing you need to worry about. I'll take care of all that." He lets her go.

"I'll be back," she says, her face set, oddly determined. "Just as soon as all this is sorted out." He wonders what she thinks she means by "this". The specific business of the police and everything that will have to be done? Or the infinite business of Federico's death?

"I know you will," he says. "I rely on you. You know that."

"I just can't believe this has happened." She stares at the ceiling; he watches her throat as she breathes. "I know it's what everyone says, Martin, but it's true. I never knew. People talk to me and I feel as though they're talking about someone else. They asked me all these questions and I kept wanting to tell them I wasn't sure, I couldn't remember, I'd have to check with Federico." Her gaze moves down towards him, as if to beseech him for an answer he doesn't have.

"You have to give yourself a chance."

"To do what?"

"To take this on board," he says. He wishes he had found something better than this tired phrase, then makes it worse by adding: "You'll need all your strength."

She looks away again, this time at the window, its weighted gauze curtains like a shroud. "They told me I'd be needed later, at the hospital." She pauses, then shudders, clutching her elbow with her hands as if to shield herself against the cold. "I suppose what they meant was the morgue."

They are in one of the rooms reserved for interviews; a long table, a score or so of brittle ornate chairs like the ones they are sitting in, over- and under-decorated at the same time. Martin is rarely obliged to attend events in here; his work is at the English desk. The walls are a pallid institutional green, the row of windows framed in swathes of heavy rust-coloured velvet, held back by gilded cord that would take the skin off a sailor's back. Outside, beyond the filtering veils of gauze, is the side wall of the President's palace. A shelf of television screens on the wall behind Helen's head flicker green and black as the stories roll in, but he doesn't read them. He can imagine what they're saying. Stories and comments on stories and the whole self-feeding business of news, to which he contributes daily as a jobbing journalist; and now the business is turning on Helen for nourishment, as she must know. She hasn't looked round to see what's being said, not while he's been here anyway, and he can't blame her for that. The longer she goes without witnessing Federico's death reported, the easier it will be for her to pretend it hasn't happened. But he can't help wondering what she's thinking; she seems so distant.

"Were they difficult?" he says.

"Who? The police?" She shakes her head. "On the contrary. They treated me with kid gloves." She shudders again. "The last time I was questioned by the police they treated me like shit."

"That must have been some time ago," he says cautiously.

“I’m sorry, Martin.” She opens her bag, her manner distracted and fidgety, then snaps it shut. “No, they were fine. They just asked me a lot of questions, that’s all.”

“What did they want to know?” he asks, on firmer ground now.

But she doesn’t seem to have heard. “You know what I’ve been thinking about?” she says. “Condole. The word, I mean. Is that how we say it in English? Only it sounds so strange when you say it out loud. Are you condoling me, Martin?”

“I’m trying to, my dear. Not very well, I’m afraid.”

“I’ve been here too long,” she says, and sighs. “I’m forgetting everything.”

Martin has known Helen since she first came to Rome, over twenty-five years ago. A call came through from reception one morning to say that a young woman wanted to speak to someone at the English desk. Send her up, said Martin. His latest intern, a newly-arrived English graduate who drank too much and fancied himself as a revolutionary, had walked out that morning after being ticked off about a piece he’d written. Perhaps she’ll be looking for a job, he thought, we could do with some fresh blood. When she came in, he was disappointed; she looked younger than he’d expected, and unconvinced, as though she didn’t expect much good to come from this. It didn’t take long for him to change his mind. She’d been teaching, she said, in Turin, but hated the work. She’d moved to Rome and wanted to write; she had some pieces she’d done with her and could leave them for him along with her CV. He asked her to try out the following day – he’d square it with management if she worked out, and if she didn’t, they’d pretend it hadn’t happened. How did that suit her? It made her smile, a smile that lit up her face; he remembered thinking, so it isn’t just a cliché, it actually happens. Smiles can light up faces. By the time she’d left he was infatuated. He stayed that way for almost two months, as she learnt the job and they shared the odd coffee break, not quite in love with her, but almost, toying with the idea of it as she toyed with her spoon and packet of sugar, before leaving it unopened. Until one evening she invited him round for dinner and introduced him to a serious, blond young man who might have been her brother, but was in fact her husband, the economist Federico Di Stasi, she’d said with unashamed pride, and Martin had shaken his hand and raised an eyebrow. Yes, Federico had said before anyone else could speak. My ill fame goes before me. I don’t think we say it like that, she’d said, and whisked Martin off into the small living room they had then, still filled with boxes and piles of books after what must have been months in the place. Federico will do the cooking, she said. He loves to cook.

“What was Federico doing?” Martin asks now.

“What do you mean?”

“Where it happened,” says Martin, unable to say *where he was shot.*

“He was buying some cheese,” she says. “For this evening.”

“I thought you normally did the shopping.”

“I do,” she says. Is she correcting him? It’s hard to tell. Perhaps she simply hasn’t realised, not fully. You can know something and not know it, Martin’s more than aware of that. Sometimes he thinks it’s the human condition.

“Cheese?” he says, prompting her. He’s on safer ground, somehow, with questions.

“Stilton. The shop he was going to imports it from a dairy near Leicester.” She looks at Martin, her face contorted by pain for the first time. “That’s the sort of thing Federico finds out. You know what he’s like. Everything has to be authentic.”

Martin reaches across and takes her hands again.

“We needed it for this evening.” With a sharp, unexpected gesture, she pulls her hands away. “I can’t do it,” she says, panic in her voice. “I can’t do dinner for people now. Not her, anyway.”

“Her?”

“Giacomo’s wife.”

“Giacomo?”

Helen nods. “You know him,” she says. “I’m sure you’ve met him, years ago. He’s an old friend of ours from Turin. He’s here for the conference.”

“You don’t mean Giacomo Mura?”

“Yes,” she says.

“Giacomo Mura’s here in Rome?”

“Yes.” She sighs, an odd resigned sigh, as if she’s just remembered something inconvenient that can’t be changed. “He adores Stilton, you see, he always has. That was the point.”

“Mura knew that Federico was getting Stilton in for this evening?”

She looks startled. “No,” she says. “It was meant to be a surprise.”

“So who did know?”

“The police asked me that as well,” she says.

They can’t have been ordinary policemen, thinks Martin, Federico was too near the centre of things for that; they must have been secret service, the branch that deals with terrorists. He saw them on their way out, two men and a young woman, attentive, polite, their jackets on, an almost embarrassing display of rectitude and concern, with the woman behaving in a hugging, sisterly fashion she must have been trained to adopt and Helen standing there, rigid in her arms like a mannequin being dressed. But for all their concern, they hadn’t seemed satisfied, Martin thought as he watched them pick up their papers and leave. Of course they asked her who else knew where Federico would be that morning. He’d like

to know if she answered them, because she hasn't answered him; but he doesn't want to push. He's never seen her this pale, almost grey beneath the early summer tan. He wonders now what else they must have asked her.

"Were they difficult?" he says again.

"No, I told you. They were very good with me. They just asked me about Federico, if he had any enemies. I didn't know what to say. Of course he does. He travels with an armed guard, I said. I think I may have lost my temper with them a little. Isn't that your job, I said, to know who his enemies are? And then they kept asking me about this morning, about what he normally did, what I normally did." Her voice begins to tremble. "Oh God, Martin, it was awful." She opens her bag again, closes it; he wonders what she's looking for; a handkerchief, her mobile; or if this is some way of keeping busy, of distracting herself. "It was almost as though I couldn't remember, as though everything had been wiped clean. I could see they weren't happy."

"That doesn't matter," he says, to comfort her. "What did you remember? Try and tell me. Perhaps it will help."

She tells him about a cappuccino, the American library, walking through the market. "I saw that friend of yours," she says at one point, "the bookseller. He's bound to remember me," and it sounds like a clumsy attempt to construct an alibi. She's staring into his eyes as she speaks, as if she's trying to convince him. In the end, her voice falters. "I just wandered round," she says. "Window-shopping, I suppose. Looking at people."

"Your phone was turned off?" he says.

"Yes," she says, then corrects herself. "Well, not all the time." She looks anxious. "They can check that sort of thing, can't they?"

"When did Mura arrive?"

"Giacomo?" She rubs her eyes with her fingers. "I don't know. Today, I think."

He moves in his chair, cautious, feeling it give beneath his thighs. He can't understand why she's lying. He hopes that, whatever her reasons might be, she made a better job of it with the police. He decides to try one more time. But before he can ask her anything else, her face has puckered up like a slapped child's and she's fighting back tears.

"He didn't die straight away, Martin," she says. "He was still alive when they took him to hospital. If I'd had my mobile turned on, I might have been able to get there in time. He was conscious, they said, he wanted to know where I was." Martin has found a clean handkerchief in his pocket and is holding it out to her, but she's reached across the table to a box of tissues encased in the same dark velvet as the curtains, which are not so much rust-coloured, it occurs to Martin now, as the dark and powdery hue of the dried blood gardeners use on their roses. She pulls a tissue out. She wipes her eyes, then blows her nose with surprising vigour. "I'll never forgive myself," she says.

Before he can comfort her, she glances at the clock on the wall. He follows her eyes. A quarter to three. Siesta time for some, he thinks, but the police or their assistants will be talking to the people in the bar, her neighbours, the bookseller, perhaps, the library staff; checking the times they gave against her account. A reconstruction of her morning, an ordinary morning, a *normal* morning, perfect in every detail. A morning that led her, step by step, to a place in which Federico is dead and nothing will be normal any more. That must be what she's thinking. When she closes her eyes again and leans her head back into the emptiness behind her, Martin wonders where she really was this morning and why she is lying. He would do anything he could to help, if she will only let him, because what she needs, at this moment, matters more to him that the truth. You foolish child, he thinks, anxious for her but also hurt that she should feel he can't be told.

"I didn't realise it was this late," she says.

"You must be hungry."

"Not at all." She covers her mouth with her hand. "I'd be sick if I tried to eat anything."

"Still, something to settle your stomach? A sandwich, perhaps? I could have one sent up."

She shakes her head. "Thank you, Martin. I'm fine. But you go and get something to eat. I'll be all right here for a little while."

"I'll leave you then? You want me to go?" Is this what she means? She's trying to get rid of him?

"Yes. Leave me alone for a moment."

"You're sure that's what you want? I can wait outside if you like. I don't want to leave you like this, Helen."

"No, please," she says, almost sharply. "Just for half an hour."

Martin heaves himself up, pushing his hair back from his forehead, smiling down at her in what he hopes is a reassuring way, not wanting her to see his resentment at being sent away like this.

He's standing by the door, about to turn and ask her one final time if there is anything she would like, when he's pushed to one side. A man a few inches shorter than he is, bulky, in a dark light-weight suit, is rushing across the room. Helen has half-risen from her chair, her arms reaching out. Martin can't tell if she's pleased to see the man, or shocked beyond measure, if she's stepping away from the table and holding out her arms to welcome him or to fend him off.

"So, this is where you've been hidden," the man cries, in an accent Martin can't place. "I practically had to fight my way in. I've been searching all over Rome for you!" He wraps his arms around Helen and Martin feels a stab of jealousy as she softens against the man and allows herself to be comforted, as she might have allowed herself to be comforted by him if he'd only tried. He's never been good at hugging; he's never thought of Helen as the hugging type. Martin can hear the man whispering into her ear, as one hand strokes her hair away. "I can't believe it," he's saying, "we have to be strong," and then her name, without the "H", as though she were Greek. When he lifts his face away from Helen's hair for breath,

Martin sees his face clearly for the first time and recognises Giacomo Mura, older but still indisputably the man Martin remembers, from his photographs at least. Martin's gaze is returned, but Mura's expression is one of curiosity and affront, as if to say, "What do you want here? Who do you think you are?" Martin feels once again that he's being dismissed, and stands his ground, waiting for Helen to see him, acknowledge his leaving. Finally, she pulls away, her face flushed. She looks at Martin.

"I suppose I'm free to go?" she says.