Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Few

Written by Nadia Dalbuono

Published by Scribe

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

the few

NADIA DALBUONO

SCRIBE
Melbourne • London

Scribe Publications
18–20 Edward St, Brunswick, Victoria 3056, Australia
2 John St, Clerkenwell, London, WC1N 2ES, United Kingdom

First published by Scribe 2014

Copyright © Nadia Dalbuono 2014

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publishers of this book.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Typeset in Dante MT by the publishers
Printed and bound in England by CPI Group (UK) Ltd.

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication data

Dalbuono, Nadia, author.

The Few / Nadia Dalbuono.

9781925106121 (Australian edition)
9781922247674 (UK edition)
9781925113303 (e-book)

1. Detective and mystery stories. 2. Criminal investigation–Italy–Fiction.
3. Political corruption–Italy–Fiction. 4. Politicians–Italy–Fiction.
5. Organized crime–Italy–Fiction.

A823.4

scribepublications.com.au
scribepublications.co.uk

For my family

Part I

Prologue

From his window on the fourth floor of Palazzo Chigi, he watches the skyline blacken, and feels the same stirrings of anxiety he'd experienced as a boy when he'd sensed a storm blowing in across the Aeonian sea. It is time to make the call, but he lingers at the window and tracks the shifting scents moving up from the garden below. The charged air runs across his skin, stirs his hair. In the garden the blossom is newly out, but he sees it hours from now, broken and battered by the rains, smashed into a thousand pieces against the stone. He closes his eyes and tastes the earth as it releases its ripeness, hears the pounding torrents as they tear the pavements, feels the Tiber on his lips, in his nose, as it breaks its banks and engulfs the city — all the filth of Rome momentarily washed away.

He crosses his office to the oak desk at its centre. Three telephones face him, but he pulls a mobile from his pocket followed by a scrap of paper. He carefully punches in the number, arthritic fingers struggling with the tiny keys. It has been a long time.

It rings just twice. 'Garramone.' It is a hard voice. Thirty years later, and the boy is now a man, tired and beaten by a life of work.

'It's Pino.'

'Don't know a Pino.'

A pause: 'Think back, to Gela.'

Silence, then a whisper: 'Pino? That Pino?' He takes a moment. 'Why?'

'Can we meet? I need your help.'

Hesitation and something else, maybe fear: 'I work for the police now.'

'I know.'

He laughs, tightly and awkwardly. 'But don't you have a whole army? Secret Service, whoever you want?'

'I want you, Garramone.'

Silence again, then a fragile breath: 'When?'

1

The rain had turned the streets to chaos. Roadside repairs had been abandoned, broken concrete lost to sludge. Frustrated pedestrians wound their way between rows of illegally parked cars, desperately seeking out a gap that would allow them access to the pavement. Up ahead by Piazza Repubblica, the traffic had come to a halt, red necklaces of brake lights morphing through the windscreen.

Scamarcio slammed his hand against the dash, then did it again because it brought some muted sense of something that wasn't quite relief. How he hated this city: it was impossible, uninhabitable, corrupt, overpriced. Eight in the evening on a Friday was not the time to call a meeting in Via Nazionale, but he couldn't say no to Garramone. Last month's hand smash had knocked one of the chief's framed certificates irreverently off-balance and had left a hole that needed repair. There had been the usual trite jokes about southern blood, but he knew that Garramone was watching him now. It was common knowledge that Garramone had been uncomfortable about Scamarcio's appointment from the start, but had gradually grown to trust him as a man he could count on. Then had come the foul-up of last month and the unequivocal sense that the relationship had been pushed back to another, uncomfortable start, regardless of any previous victories. He wondered idly why he found it so hard to control his rage — whether it came from the maternal or paternal side, whether he should invest in some anger-management courses, whether he was beyond help.

The traffic was starting to shift up ahead, the furious horns of the drivers backed up behind him dying away as they sensed the change. The miserable column of cars edged slowly around the curve of the piazza, and the fountain came into view, bleached grey and cold. The rain had stripped it of its splendour, and the usual cluster of threadbare pigeons had fled. He swung a right into Nazionale. Garramone had said Number 42. Why here and not HQ? Was the chief on the take? He had him down as clean.

He found the building, and swung the car onto the kerb. There were no normal spaces, so parking in front of a goods entrance was the only option. Garramone had said to ring the bell for Bevilacqua. He did so, and the chief's baritone crackled out over the intercom.

'Fourth floor, first on the left. Make sure nobody sees you.'

Scamarcio made a quick scan of the street and then pushed the door. He took the stairs because he needed the exercise. The chief was waiting for him in the doorway, his gaze shifting nervously. He looked like he had just been roused from a deep sleep: there were darker rings than usual beneath his eyes, and his greying hair stood up in greasy tufts.

'Get inside.' He placed a hand on Scamarcio's back and almost pushed him into the narrow hallway.

The flat was pokey and barely furnished. There was a door off to the left, and then ahead of him down the hallway a small room with a window facing the street. He saw a plastic desk to the right of the window with several cheap-looking chairs on either side. The floors were tiled and dirty.

'Whose place is this?'

'No idea,' said the chief.

He thought about making a joke, asking whether the chief was planning to seduce him, but decided against it. 'What's going on?'

He ignored the question and reached for the chair nearest the window, beckoning for Scamarcio to do the same. From a

briefcase, he pulled out a thin cardboard file and slid it across the desk. He offered no explanation, and just nodded.

Scamarcio opened the file. It seemed to consist of a series of grainy photographs, blown up to A4. A fit-looking man was in various stages of undress. He was surrounded by two muscular men in their underwear, both of them raising champagne glasses, with several spent bottles resting on a side table next to overflowing ashtrays. The furnishings were expensive; the lighting, low. They were smiling, toasting each other — it looked like the end of a good night. Then the photos suddenly became a whole lot more graphic. Scamarcio looked away for a moment, trying to catch his breath, and in the same instant he realised two things. The first was that one of these men looked young, perhaps slightly too young — there was a fullness in the cheeks, a brightness in the eyes, that gave it away. The second was that the man in the midst of it all was the foreign secretary, Giorgio Ganza. It hadn't been clear at first because he'd been photographed in profile, but the final images left no room for doubt. The date stamp indicated that they had been taken three months ago.

Scamarcio looked up at the chief. There was no smile, no sense of them sharing an amusing secret. He struggled to keep his face sombre, to match the mood.

'Who took these?'

'No idea. But the photos were handed to two of your colleagues four weeks ago.'

'My colleagues?'

'Two officers from Salaria precinct. Some guy they had never seen before gave them an envelope, and then disappeared.'

'So why are we only hearing about this now?'

'They've been blackmailing Ganza, and it's only just been brought to my attention.'

Scamarcio wasn't completely surprised. It wasn't unheard of for colleagues to try to supplement their meagre 1,200 euros-a-

month salary. But something wasn't making sense.

'How did you hear about this?'

'From the prime minister.'

'What?'

The chief barred his arms across his chest, saying nothing.

'How?'

'He called me.'

Scamarcio had no idea that Chief Garramone was on speaking terms with the prime minister. He didn't quite know how to feel about this, and wasn't sure how it reflected on the chief.

'Anyway,' said Garramone, 'I don't want to get into the whys and wherefores. We don't have time. The PM learned about this because someone tried to sell the photographs to one of his magazines.'

The prime minister presided over a sizeable media empire that included magazines, newspapers, publishing houses, bookshops, and several TV channels. He had begun his career as a business consultant, and had then set up a successful IT company that had allowed him to purchase a football team. The media empire had followed on from there. It seemed that everything the man touched had turned to gold — until, that is, he became prime minister. As Scamarcio saw it, Italy had not turned to gold under his stewardship; it had turned to shit. Some people wondered whether the problems were insoluble: if a dynamic businessman like the PM couldn't do it, who could? Then there were others, like Scamarcio, who questioned whether he had the will — whether running the country was nothing more than an amusing personal project, the ultimate power trip at the expense of the millions of unemployed and underpaid.

The chief was eyeing him closely now, as if he was testing a personal theory and observing whether Scamarcio was responding as expected.

'This will be your case, Scamarcio. I am giving it to you as a

demonstration of my faith in you.'

Scamarcio shifted in his seat and rubbed his neck. He didn't like the feel of this. He had the sense that he was here because no one else wanted to be, or because the chief needed to keep it under the radar. He knew that Scamarcio was a loner at work and would best be able to do that.

'It goes without saying that this must be kept solely between ourselves. It's not on the books at HQ yet. For now, I am handling it unofficially and have passed it to you in the same capacity.'

Scamarcio nodded. There was a moment of silence, and he heard the slap of tyres wet and slick on the street below. Had he missed something? 'I'm sorry, but what is it exactly that you want me to do?'

The chief picked up a photo, and then laid it down again.

'The story is about to go public. *People* magazine has bought the pictures, and most of the media knows about it. It will probably break tomorrow. Ganza has already packed his bags, and has spent the last forty-eight hours safely installed in a retreat outside Florence where he will enjoy several weeks of rest and reflection.'

'So you want me to pin down our guys — tie them up for blackmail?'

The chief waved a hand away. 'No, that's an internal disciplinary matter — I will deal with it.'

Something wasn't adding up. 'Why are you trying to keep this secret if it's about to break in the media?'

The chief rubbed tiredly under his right eye. His skin held an early tan from several May weekends at the beach at Sperlonga, but right now it looked liverish and sickly in the ebbing light.

'It's not that part of the story I'm worried about. It's the second part I want you to deal with.' He pulled a photo towards him, scanned it, and then turned it to face Scamarcio. His index finger was resting on the man to the right of the foreign secretary.

'His name is Arthur.'

He was striking — with dark brows and burnt-amber eyes — but there was something about him that wasn't quite right, that remained perhaps just the wrong side of legal.

'Arthur … as a name, I'm not sure it suits him.'

The chief sighed. 'Doesn't matter now. He was murdered this morning — stabbed to death in his flat in Trastevere.'