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Opening Extract from...

Broken Chord

Written by Margaret Moore

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25th July

PROLOGUE

It was impossible to tell what the victim had looked like when alive. Dead, and now unidentifiable, the face was reduced to a bloody mask. His immediate thought was that the ferocity of the attack must have been in direct proportion to the hatred that had inspired it. Jacopo Dragonetti, State Prosecutor for the Province of Lucca, was known to most people as Drago – Dragon – but he wasn't breathing fire today, it was bile he felt rise to his throat. He swallowed hard and his face shuttered over the compassion he felt. His large green eyes half closed as though to cancel out the abomination he had been called to witness.

His eyes travelled the length of the body, where further outrage had been committed. The nightclothes had been hacked and ripped while a knife had plunged over and over again into what surely must have been, by then, a lifeless body. He sighed, sick and angry. He found detachment difficult in the presence of mutilation and made an impatient gesture, his fists clenching at his sides, as he looked at this horror.

July is always a hot and humid month in Italy. Today was no exception. The room was stifling, the air still and heavy. Dragonetti was aware that moisture coated his face and even his scalp was damp. Drops of sweat ran down to wet the collar of his white linen shirt. His over long black hair clung to his neck. He wanted desperately to be out in the open air, preferably with a breeze caressing his face, not standing over a corpse. Death was

never very dignified but in this case it was worse than that; it was a desecration of life. He hoped he wouldn't faint and abruptly stood aside to let the official predators have their way with the body.

Through the faint humming in his ears he heard a voice exclaim, "This is butchery!" and looked back at the body again. One accusatory eye angled unnaturally towards him, staring balefully like a glutinous marble. It was hard to look at but at the same time it was compelling, drawing his eyes towards it. He wrenched his glance away from the fascination.

"Cause of death was probably this wound here," muttered the police surgeon pointing at a cut in the chest, "It went straight to the heart. The rest is superficial and was done post-mortem as far as I can see, but it's a really savage attack." The man continued his rummaging, exclaiming at intervals, "Good God!" and "Unbelievable! Why do all this?"

There was a lengthy silence. The room seemed to grow hotter and there was a faint but pervasive odour; the smell of death.

"Perhaps he wanted to make quite sure," Drago suggested, more to break the silence than because he believed it to be so.

"Looks more like a frenzy to me. I'd say it was very personal. Either that or the guy was completely crazy."

In an irritable tone of voice Drago asked, "Have you finished here?" He wasn't interested in the man's opinion, just facts.

"Yes, I'm done. The lab boys will do the rest. I need a drink after this. What about you?"

Drago looked at the surgeon carefully; he was overweight and he too was sweating copiously in the stifling bedroom. His cheeks were mottled with tiny broken capillaries sullying what once must have been a handsome face. It was eleven o'clock in the morning which was not a time that he would have ever considered drinking alcohol. With an effort he limited himself to saying, "No, thanks. I've got a lot to do here."

He turned his attention back to the body. He noticed a ring on a finger that had been partially severed. It looked valuable. Theft could hardly have been the motive for the death. Lab technicians bagged the hands, ring and all. Then they zipped the body up in a

plastic bag like so much rubbish.

Well, he'd wanted something to relieve his summer boredom, to shake him out of the lassitude caused by the heat and he'd got it; a VIP murder. Perhaps he should have been pleased to have a challenging case, but he wasn't. He found it quite depressing to see this carnage and had the feeling that the doctor was right; this was such a personal murder he was probably going to be arresting a family member or a close friend of the victim. He left the room, his mind busy with what he wanted to do next.

17th July

CHAPTER ONE

Jacopo Dragonetti pulled Vanessa's suitcase out of the car and wheeled it through to the check in. She was off again, leaving the stifling heat of Florence, for a music festival on the southern coast of Italy; her job as a music critic entailed frequent travelling.

He thought she was looking quite stunning; her freshly washed, chestnut coloured hair covered her shoulders and swayed as she walked. She was wearing a simple off-white linen dress and flat sandals. Her legs were tanned and slim and very long. He let her walk ahead and admired her lithe figure.

"I know you're looking at me," she said over her shoulder.

"Admiring you."

"Now you walk ahead and I'll admire you."

"No way!" He laughed.

She stopped and gave him a critical stare. He was wearing jeans and a pale green Lacoste polo shirt. "I love that colour."

He grinned and suddenly looked much younger than he was.

She looked kindly at him, "I'll be back before you have time to miss me."

"You always say that but I do miss you."

"Stop sounding so sorry for yourself, Jacopo."

He reflected that she was the only person who called him by his name. "That wasn't how I meant to sound. Don't you want me to say that I miss you?"

"Yes, if you really do, but don't expect me to say it. I won't

miss you a bit. I shall have a great time and be far too busy to even think about you."

"What a heartless wench you are. My problem is that I'm not busy at all. Really. Nothing's going on. Everyone's on holiday, including the Chief Prosecutor, so I'm in charge of all this nothing. My office is freezing because of overactive air conditioning and I think I'm actually getting a summer cold."

"You'll feel better when Bruno comes back from his holiday."

There was some truth in this. He missed his colleague. Their temporary transfer to Lucca from the State Prosecutor's office in a town near Florence had made him feel isolated.

They reached the head of the queue and Drago heaved the case onto the scales. Vanessa always had immensely heavy suitcases that were stuffed with her laptop, an enormous amount of clothing and at least five pairs of shoes. She insisted that her feet required frequent changes of shoes.

Vanessa clutched her boarding pass and moved away. "Come on, we've got stacks of time. Let's have a coffee."

He waited till she had gone through to the boarding area, then left the airport and drove away. It was still hot and he planned on a lengthy shower and an early night, but when he parked the car and got out he nearly tripped over a small ginger kitten. It rubbed against his leg and mewed at him. He bent down to stroke it. He could feel the bones beneath the rough fur. He stood up and looked around as though hopeful that a mother cat would materialise out of the shadows and claim it as her own. He walked through the tunnel under the Palazzo, his family home, and into the garden with the kitten stuck to him, still crying. When he went into the building it rushed past him and up the stairs.

"Well, it looks as if you've decided to join me for dinner, so I'll have company after all," he muttered, while he mentally reviewed what food he had in the house that would be suitable. A tin of tuna set on a saucer was devoured with enthusiasm by his starving guest. He knew he should put it outside. It probably had fleas and sundry other parasites but, when it jumped onto an armchair and curled itself into a purring ball, he hadn't the heart to.

After showering he dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. He caught sight of himself in the mirror and stopped to take stock. He was of medium height and slim. He patted his flat belly, glad he hadn't gone to fat like so many men over forty. He was forty-seven and he hoped he looked younger than his age, mainly because Vanessa was twelve years younger. It was still a mystery to him that she loved him.

He pottered about preparing himself a simple meal of mozzarella and tomatoes with lamb's tongue lettuce which he was very fond of. Music filled the flat. Tonight he had chosen a Bach violin sonata. Music played an important role in his every-day life. It had brought him into contact with Vanessa. He'd met her at the *Teatro della Pergola* where they'd been seated next to each other for the season. After weeks of smiling and nodding at each other and then with increasing familiarity, commenting on the music and the performers, he had finally asked her out for a drink. Things had moved on from there until a couple of months ago she had moved in and now shared his life.

After his meal he read a crime novel, which demanded total suspension of disbelief, while waiting for Vanessa's phone call that would reassure him she hadn't fallen out of the sky on her way south. It was peaceful in the house and without music, too quiet. He remembered when the house had been filled with his children's noise and the clutter of their daily lives, the toys strewn about and the paintings waiting to be finished. He walked over to his fridge where he kept a few of their childish artistic efforts stuck there with magnets. The stick-like figures and the childish block capital letters spelled out Mamma and *Babbo*, the Tuscan word for father. Now his daughters were nearing adolescence and lived with their mother and David, her wealthy husband. Another life for all of them.

He went to bed straight after Vanessa's call. In the sitting room, sleeping in an armchair, there was a little ball of fur and bones, which he hadn't the heart to put out. He was restless and tossed and turned for what felt like half the night. He turned his pillow several times to cool his hot head and began to despair of

sleeping at all, but in the end he did sleep, dreamt that Vanessa with him, and woke up feeling momentarily surprised to find himself alone in the bed.

On the outskirts of Lucca, in a huge and recently restored eighteenth century villa, just outside a small hill town, Ursula von Bachmann was in the vast *salotto* which in her mind's eye was already thronged with notables. She turned towards the massive and ornate mirror, placed in the centre of the end wall, which perpetuated the length of the room and gave the impression of even greater size. In one corner her beloved cello was leaning against the wall. As she looked at her reflection, a small figure in the huge room, she was aware of movement and watched as the slim elegant figure of Guido glided into the room, came up behind her and placed an arm round her waist.

"Don't we look amazing together, in this fantastic room?" he whispered as he kissed her neck. She felt a moment's irritation. She knew he was really admiring himself.

"Guido, the mirror was an inspiration," she said warmly.

"As you know, I'm very fond of mirrors," said Guido, "but you're right. It's perfect on that wall." He stood back from her and smoothed his shirt as though afraid that contact with her had sullied it in some way. "You're ready?"

"Yes. I just have to put my necklace on. Will you?" She handed him the box, and Guido opened it reverently and lifting the jewellery from the faded velvet, admired the way the emeralds caught the light. He loved beautiful things and if Ursula wasn't beautiful, she was as near as it was possible for her to be, given the available resources. She was elegant and exuded wealth, and that was far more attractive than physical beauty. It was magnetic. He closed the clasp and turned her round.

"Fabulous. You look fabulous as always." The white dress which he had chosen for her sheathed her body and looked good against the tan she had all year round. He admired himself again in the mirror. Thick, wavy, dark hair that just touched his collar, a heart-shaped southern physiognomy with strange dark blue eyes,

a slim body dressed in clothes that were impeccable.

"Let's go. The limo's arrived."

They left by the front door, went down the steps into the warm evening air and got into the waiting car. The uniformed driver closed the doors and set off at a sedate pace.

On the top floor of the villa, a blonde girl flicked a cigarette butt down from an open window and watched it bounce and land on the bottom step. She turned her head towards the room and said, "OK they've gone."

A tousled curly-haired young man joined her and looked at the tail lights of the car.

"How can she stand him?"

She stared at him with expressionless blue eyes. "Guido? He's not as bad as some of them. At least he keeps his hands to himself."

"If he wasn't so obviously servicing her, I'd have said he was queer as a coot."

"God, you are vulgar."

"Well, what else would you call it? Love? I mean she's nearly sixty and he's all of thirty-five."

"Come on, he's nearer forty and Mamma's fifty-five."

"So what. He's a gigolo, a toy boy, whatever."

"If she was the man and he the woman, you wouldn't find anything extraordinary about it."

"Well she's not and neither is he and it's revolting." Roberto couldn't keep the disgust out of his voice.

"And you're sexist."

"Yes, so what? Come on, Marianna, you don't like it either. Why are you defending them?"

"Am I? I'm not really, but you're right. I find it hard to believe she really loves him and I'm absolutely certain he's only out for what he can get."

"Well then, what are we arguing about?"

Marianna seemed to lose interest in the subject. "Have you got anything?"

"Of course." His eyes flicked towards his jacket.

"Well then shut up and get it out."

He grabbed his jacket from the chair and after patting the pockets produced a small packet. He held it up out of her reach.

"Money. This stuff costs and I'm poor."

She went to a drawer pulled out a few notes and threw them at him. "You're beginning to sound like Guido."

"Oh no, I'm not, Guido is a pretentious jerk. He makes out he comes from an aristocratic family that lost its money, whereas I'm just a normal guy and never had any." He grinned at her, holding the packet just out of reach.

She darted forward and snatched the packet from his hand. "You're my lovely bit of rough."

He grabbed her and held her arms tightly, "Don't say that."

"Oh for Chris' sake make up your mind. First you're working class and proud of it, then you're not my bit of rough." She looked at him with those clear blue eyes that were so dead she almost looked like a doll. "You don't really love me."

"I do. Do you know what I'm risking getting you this stuff? I wouldn't do it for anyone else. I don't do it for anyone else." Well that wasn't strictly true, but it was only for close friends.

"Really?"

"Didn't you realise?" He managed to sound astounded.

"No, sorry, I thought you were dealing."

"Great, so that's why you're so mad about me."

"No, I love you as well, but it's very handy to be in love with my dealer."

"Marianna, I don't deal and I'm not working class. Got it? I'm just a common or garden council surveyor. I don't deal and I don't snort coke or shoot up and I wish you didn't either."

"Poor little Roberto, what a good person you are, or were, until you met me."

Roberto thought there was more truth in that than she realised. He was hopelessly in love, hopelessly out of his depth and he was risking a lot for her. She'd wanted coke and he'd got it for her. He remembered those first times and how terrified he had been, looking over his shoulder expecting to be arrested at any moment. That was how it had started and then, somehow it had become

easy, so easy that it seemed silly not to get some extra and make a bit from it. He needed money and this was a relatively simple way to make it. The discrepancy between their wealth was enormous and this made a little difference. It meant being able to pay for meals out and enabled him to buy her little presents. He knew she would never marry him and although she thought she loved him now, he was quite certain it wouldn't last long. Even so he had no choice but to stay with her. Four months into this relationship he could see with absolute clarity that it would never grow, or come to anything and that he might well ruin himself if he didn't get out. He watched while she snorted the coke and knew that he was never going to leave, and that he would do anything she asked him to, anything at all.