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The Collaborator

Written by Gerald Seymour

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GERALD SEYMOUR

The Collaborator



HODDER &
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PROLOGUE

It was a hot afternoon, stinking hot, and the sun beat up from the concrete path, dazzling him. A ridiculous afternoon to be out in a London park. He'd met friends for lunch, arranged long back, on the south side of the park – two guys from college days – but they'd had their girlfriends in tow, like trophies, which had made him feel awkward, as if he, not they, were the intruders. And, truth was, he'd been bored because the togetherness of the couples seemed to shred the spirit of mischief that ran in him – some called it 'happy go lucky' and his dad 'Jack the lad' – and he'd wanted to be gone before the loss was terminal. It had all been too damn serious, which seldom fitted well with him.

He'd eaten the meal, coughed up his share of the bill, and walked away from the Underground station, had crossed Kensington Road and gone into the park, over Rotten Row, and been within a few yards of the dog-leg lake before his mind had kicked back into gear. By now, the couples would be talking mortgages and future prospects. He was in the park where heat reverberated off the scorched grass and concrete. There wasn't half a square centimetre of shade close to him, and it was a pretty silly place to be – no skateboarders or football to watch, no promenade of stripped-down girls.

He looked for a bench to flop down on. He wasn't stressed by the heat or the lack of entertainment – his own little world gave him no grief – but it was damn hot.

The bench he saw was blurred, but a haven. He heard, far away, the shouts of children playing at the water's edge, but round the bench there was quiet. His eyes were nearly closed as he sank on to the wooden slats, which grilled his backside and

lower spine. Jumbled thoughts loitered in his mind – home, parents, work, food, getting back to the north-east of the city, money – all easily discarded. With his eyes sealed against the light, maybe he dreamed, maybe he dozed. Time slipped on a July afternoon on the last day of the first week in the month.

The idyll was broken.

'Excuse . . . please.' A clear, uncluttered voice, an accent. He jolted upright. 'I'm sorry. I . . .'

Eddie Deacon never considered that responding might change his life, push it on to a road unrecognised and unexplored . . . His eyes snapped open.

He saw the girl – dark hair, light skin, dark eyes. Hadn't been aware of her coming to the bench . . . might even have been there when he'd taken his seat . . .

Mutual apologies. Sorry that he had been asleep. Sorry that she had woken him.

She wore a cotton skirt, short, not much of it, a white blouse, brief sleeves, and a textbook lay open on her lap, with an Italian–English pocket dictionary.

Strangers pausing, wondering whether to go forward – and blurting together.

'What can I do?'

'Please, I am confused.'

'How can I help?'

'I do not understand.'

They both laughed, chimed with each other. Eddie Deacon pushed hair off his forehead. He saw that when she laughed the gold crucifix, dangling from a chain bounced on her cleavage. That was what he saw – and she would have seen? Him writing the script: not a bad-looking guy, pretty well turned-out, good head of hair, a decent complexion and a smile to die for. And she would have heard? A laugh that was infectious, not forced, and a voice with a tone of interest that was honest and not patronising. Well, he was hardly going to short-change himself.

'What's the problem?'

'I don't understand this – "turn over". What is "turn over"?'

Eddie Deacon grinned. 'Is this "turn over" in bed? Or "turnover" in business?'

'Business. It is a book on auditing accounts in English – and it says "turn over".'

He asked, 'You're Italian?'

'Yes.'

He said, 'In Italian, "turnover" is *fatturato*. You understand?'

'Of course, yes, I do . . . and you speak Italian.'

He shrugged. 'A little.'

'OK, OK . . .' She smiled – her teeth glowed, her eyes were alight. She riffled again through the pages of her book. Her finger darted down and stabbed at a line. 'Here . . . For "balance" we have *soppesare* in my dictionary, but that is not the Italian word for the commercial balance of an account. What should it be?'

'To "balance" an account is *bilanciare*, and a "balance sheet" is *bilancio di esercizio*. Does that help?'

She touched his hand – fleeting, a natural, spontaneous gesture of gratitude. He felt the tips of her fingers on his skin. He liked girls, liked their touch, but would have admitted, if quizzed, that he was currently 'between relationships'. God, who needed commitments? He'd nearly been engaged, to a local-government kitchen-hygiene inspector, two years back but his mother had become too fond of her too quickly. He hadn't found a soulmate.

'I have a very good helper.'

Eddie Deacon said he should be good – he was a language teacher. He didn't add that if he'd put his back into it he might have made interpreter level and gone to Brussels or even the United Nations, but it would have been a hassle. He taught English to overseas students. His core tongues were German, French and Spanish but he also had useful Italian. She told him she was on two courses in London: in the morning she studied English language and in the afternoons she did accounting and book-keeping. Eddie Deacon wondered why a pretty girl in a tight skirt and a tight blouse, from Italy, bothered with any of that, but didn't take it further. The sun seemed, in mid-afternoon, to spear his forehead and shoulders. The men and women who

walked past the bench wore floppy hats or had white war-paint daubed on exposed skin, while little parasols shaded tots in push-chairs. There were squeals and shrieks from the lake, and splashing. He assumed that swimming in the Serpentine was forbidden and that the *gauleiter* men would be there soon, yelling that it was *verboten*.

He stood up. 'It's a bit warm for me. I prefer to be out of the sun.'

She said, 'Where is to be the new classroom? I need all opportunities to speak English. I have a teacher. I do not wish to lose him.'

It was, he thought, a challenge. She must have realised he intended to walk away, but her chin had jutted, her shoulders were back and now she was almost blocking his path. He reckoned that she was used to getting what she wanted. He didn't push past her. Now, for the first time since he had woken up, he looked at his self-enrolled pupil. She was lightly built, had narrow hips, a squashed-in waist and a good-sized, but not gross, bosom. Her face fascinated him: a fine jaw, a delicate nose and a high forehead, the hair pushed back. But it was her eyes that caught him. They had authority, did not brook denial. As a general rule, Eddie Deacon did not fight authority. He was one to go with the flow. He didn't look at the hips, waist or breasts of the girl before him but was carried deep into her eyes.

He asked where she was heading, and she told him. He told her he lived nearby – a small untruth: it would probably have taken him almost an hour to walk from Hackney to where he lived on the west side of the Balls Pond Road. He suggested they find a pub, with open doors, big fans and a cool interior. There, he said, they could have a hack at any accounting or book-keeping language that was giving her grief. Her books were in a bag now, and he took it, slung the strap across his shoulder. She hooked her hand into the crook of his arm.

Her hips swung as she walked, and she threw back her head, letting her hair fall between her shoulder-blades where the blouse collar had slipped.

'By the way, I'm Eddie Deacon.'

Her name was Immacolata.

On the north side of the park they took a bus and sat on the top deck with the window open beside them so that a zephyr of cooler air reached them. She leafed through the textbook, found English commercial expressions and quizzed him for the exact meaning in her mother tongue. They walked a bit on his territory – Balls Pond, Kingsland, Dalston – reached a pub and sat in a corner of the saloon. Eddie Deacon sensed that she was the most special girl he had ever spent an afternoon and early evening with. He was captivated. Couldn't think what he offered her beyond a few words in Italian and explanations of a few phrases of more colloquial English, but she seemed to hang on what he told her. Precious few stayed around to listen to him on where he lived or where the language school was, his anecdotes about the daftest Lithuanian students, where his parents lived, what excited or what bored him to death, and when he made jokes she laughed. It was a good rich laugh, and he thought it was genuine, not produced to humour him; he decided, in the pub, that she didn't laugh often the way her life was.

As dusk fell, they left the pub, her hand again at the bend of his elbow. Now he called her 'Mac' – had drifted into it without a prompt from her – and she seemed amused by it.

He walked her almost home, but at the end of a street off Hackney Road, she stopped and indicated they would part here. Now, a streetlight beamed on to her face. He had been with her a few minutes short of seven hours. He wouldn't have known what to do, but she led. She offered her right cheek and he kissed it, then the left. She was grinning – chuckling as she kissed his lips, and her smile was radiant. He asked if they could meet again. She told him where and when, without asking if it was convenient – which didn't matter to him because any time and any place were fine. She turned and left him. He watched her going away down a street of little terraced homes that the new rich had taken over. She passed the low-slung German sports cars and the gardens filled with builders' skips. She was

Immacolata, she was twenty-five, two years younger than himself, she was from Naples, and would meet him again in two days' time. What did he not know? She had not told him her family name, or given him her address and phone number.

She was between two lampposts and the light fell on her hair and on the white blouse. She went briskly and did not look back.

Why had she spent seven hours of her day with him, laughed and joked with him, listened? Because he was attractive and handsome? Because he was a success and taught in a language school? Because of his humour and culture?

Eddie Deacon thought the girl – Mac – was lonely. Sad too.

He would count the hours till they met again, and thought himself blessed.

She was round the corner, gone from his view. He would tick off every hour until they met again and hadn't done that for as long as he could remember.

Eddie Deacon kicked a can down the pavement then across the width of the street, and was euphoric.

I

She started to run. There was no pavement, only a track of dried dust at the side of the road. She ran past the stationary cars and vans that had blocked her brother's little Fiat. Faced with an unmoving jam more than three hundred metres long, she had had no alternative but to get out of the Fiat and head on foot towards the distant gates of the town's cemetery. To be late for the burial would have been intolerable to Immacolata Borelli.

She had left the car door open. Behind her she heard it slammed, then Silvio's call, his head protruding from the sun hatch perhaps, for her to run. Everything about the day, and the schedule, had been – so far – a disaster. The call had come to her mobile the evening before, from Silvio, the youngest of her three brothers. He had told her of a death notice in that day's *Cronaca di Napoli* detailing the passing of Marianna Rossetti, from Nola, the funeral to be held tomorrow at the Basilica of SS Apostoli, followed by the burial. Immacolata had been in the kitchen of the Hackney apartment she shared with her eldest brother, Vincenzo, who had been shouting questions at her – Who was on the phone? – because he was paranoid about her using a mobile. She had told Silvio she would be on the first flight the next day; she had told Vincenzo that the language school had changed the time of classes, and that she was required early. She ran past the cigarette smoke puffed from the motionless vehicles, and past the cacophony of car horns.

She had not been on the first flight out of Heathrow: it had been overbooked. Her wallet on the check-in counter, opened to display a wad of twenty-pound notes, had not made a seat available. The second flight had seats, but its takeoff time had

been put back forty minutes by a leaking toilet. Had anyone ever heard of aircraft stacking over the Golfo di Napoli before landing at Capodichino? There was work in progress on the runway, military flights from the NATO detachment had priority and . . .

She had not been able to find Silvio because some arrogant *bastardo* in uniform had not allowed him to park in front of the terminal, and that was more delay. Normally there would have been a minder to sit in the car and tell the official to go fuck himself, but this journey was not normal, had been made in secrecy and was far outside the business of her family. It was only twenty-five kilometres from the airport to the centre of Nola, but there were roadworks and the lights controlling the single lane of traffic were broken.

They had reached the basilica. She had grabbed her handbag off the back seat, snatched up the little black hat with the attached veil, flung herself out of the Fiat, dumped the hat on her head, glanced at her watch as she charged up the steps to the main doors, run inside, heard the crisp echo of her heels on the flagstones and allowed moments to pass before her eyesight could function in the gloom. The space in front of the high altar was deserted, as were the forward pews. A nun had told her that the cortège of the Rossetti family was now well on its way to the cemetery. 'Such a fine young woman, such a tragic loss . . .'

Immacolata had gone back down the steps at speed, had nearly tripped, had accosted three people – an idiot, a woman who was stone deaf, a young man who had ogled her – and demanded directions to the cemetery.

She hitched her skirt hem higher.

It was eight months since she had arrived in London with her eldest brother. They had driven all the way north to Genova, then taken a flight to Prague, driven across Germany to Hamburg and flown into the British capital. He had used doctored papers but her passport had been in her own name. In those eight months she had had no contact with her father – it would have been difficult but not impossible – had not spoken to her mother, which could have been arranged but would have brought

complications, and had relied on rare, brief conversations with the teenage Silvio. She was now familiar with life in north-east London.

The heat of the summer had gone. Two days after she had met Eddie, the heavens had opened and a thunderstorm of epic proportions had broken, sheet and fork lightning, claps that shook windows, torrential rain, and then cool. The day she had met Eddie, London had been as hot as Naples. It was as if that storm, biblical in its scale, which had caught them out in the open space of Clissold Park, had severed a link with her home city. The deluge had drenched them and they had kissed, then gone to his single room to take off the sodden clothes . . . and she had lost the link to her city, with the roasting heat, the stench of the streets, the strewn litter, plastic strips and discarded paper, the dumped kitchen gear and the slow rot of dog mess. All were with her now, as she ran on the dusty verge towards the cemetery entrance, as were, ever sharper, her memories of the young woman she had once been proud to say to her face was her 'best, most-valued friend'.

By hitching the hem of her skirt higher, flashing more of her thighs at those gawping at her from the cars, Immacolata could lengthen her stride. It shamed her that in London her best, most-valued friend had almost slipped from her mind. She was within sight of the gates. Eight months before, she had promised to stay in close touch with Marianna Rossetti; in London she could have justified the rupturing of the thread. Not now. Silvio's hesitant words resonated in her mind, and his stumbled reading of the notice in the *Cronaca*. She didn't know the cause of death, only that her friend had passed away in the Nola hospital. She assumed an accident had been responsible. There was, as she knew it, no history of illness.

Her heel broke. She had left the London apartment early, while Vincenzo still slept, but had taken the precaution of wearing clothes for a language class. She had put her black suit, stockings, shoes and handbag in a zipped holdall. She couldn't have guaranteed that Vincenzo wouldn't appear at his bedroom door, blinking and

bleary, to query why she was wearing funeral best to go to the school. She knew about security, the care that must be taken. It was ingrained in her, like grime embedded in the wrinkles of a labourer's hands. She had changed in the toilet of the delayed flight and had looked the part of a mourner when the aircraft had dropped down to the tarmac at Capodichino. Her trainers were in the holdall, which was in the boot of the Fiat, which was stuck in traffic more than two hundred metres behind her. Immacolata swore, and heard laughter billow from an Alfa level with her. She scooped up the damaged shoe, from which the broken heel hung at an angle, and pushed it into her bag.

She hopped and limped to the gate, sensing the softness of baked dust against her left foot, then wincing pain, which meant a glass shard or a sliver of metal. At the gate three or four families were with the flower saleswoman. She barged in front of them, dropped a fifty-euro note on the table, took a bouquet of white roses and greenery from a bucket and kept moving. If she had queued and waited for the change, the flowers would have cost her twenty euros at most. In Naples, she had learned that she had no need – her father's daughter – to pay for anything. She headed through the gate, wiped her arm across her forehead and went in search of a burial.

The cemeteries Immacolata Borelli knew in Naples were on the extreme edge of the Sanità district, where her father had interests, and out beyond the Poggioreale gaol. Both sprawled over many acres, communities of the dead, with myriad buildings for the cadavers to rot in. This one seemed smaller, insignificant, but it served a town of only thirty thousand. A statue faced her, a life-size image of a young woman of the same size and youth as her best friend, with a fresh daffodil hooked in her bronze hand. Her name, set in the stone wall beside her, was Angelabella, and the dates showed that she had died in her nineteenth year. Her face showed innocence. Immacolata was jolted – she had thought too much of the filth on the verge leading to the gates, her broken shoe, the size of the cemetery, and not sufficiently of her friend, whose death had brought her here.

She didn't know where to go.

She tried, twice, asking: where was the burial chapel of the Rossetti family? A man shrugged. A woman grimaced. She ran up the steps of the Reception, noticing how acute now was the pain in her stockinged foot – saw a smear of blood behind her – and demanded an answer from an official who sat at a desk and sipped rank-smelling coffee. He, too, showed no interest. She told him that the burial was taking place now and his shoulders heaved, as if to indicate that many funerals took place *now*. She swore, that word for excrement from the gutters of the Sanità and the Forcella districts. The official pointed above his head to a chart that mapped the layout of the Nola cemetery.

Immacolata went past the family chapels, where small candles burned and plastic flowers bloomed, where photographs of old and young fought against time's ravage. She crossed an open space where the sun shimmered on white stone grave markers. She went towards the far wall, using the pathways between the stones. She approached a small group, their backs to her. She saw two ladders above the shoulders of the mourners. An elongated bundle, wrapped in white sheeting, was lifted and two men climbed the higher steps of the ladders and took its weight.

Immacolata remembered the shape of Marianna Rossetti's body, where it was full and where it bulged, the width of the hips on which a skirt would twist when she walked, but the men on the ladders lifted her corpse as though it weighed nothing. The Rossetti family vault was on the fourth level. The bundle went above the names and dates of the lower levels, the plastic flowers commemorating strangers in life and companions in death, then was level with a gaping hole. It had been hard to believe, when Silvio had telephoned, that her friend was dead, harder now to believe it as her friend was lifted level with the hole, then given a decisive shove towards the back of the burial place. As the men came down the ladders, she heard women weeping. Now the men went back up the ladders and grunted as they raised the hole's cover, slotted it into place, then gave it two loud thwacks to satisfy themselves that it was securely

fastened. Perhaps an aunt of Marianna Rossetti, or a grandmother, or an elderly friend of the family, would come to the elevated grave in two years' time to clean the bones of the last decayed flesh and gristle, then stack them in a small space further back against the rear wall.

The noisy weeping was over. The ladders were carried discreetly to the side and the mourners started to shuffle away.

They came towards Immacolata.

She wondered whether Maria Rossetti would hug her, kiss her, cling to her. She wondered, also, whether Luigi Rossetti would shake her hand, composed, or whether his head would sink on to her shoulder and wet it with his tears. She hardly knew them, had never been to their home – it would have been impossible for her to reciprocate Marianna's hospitality, for her friend to come to the Borelli clan's apartment – but she had assumed that a daughter would have told her mother of a friend. She thought she would be thanked for the respect she had shown their daughter.

Lopsided, balanced on one shoe, she waited for the little group to reach her.

Peculiar. They seemed not to have seen her.

Maria and Luigi Rossetti were nearing her – perhaps a few of their brothers, sisters, cousins with them – but none in the group smiled in the wan way of the grieving. She might as well not have been there. They came on. She did not know what to do with the flowers and they were in her hand, which hung against her hip, and her hat had slipped to the side as she had hurried through the cemetery – the veil no longer covered her left eye.

She had met – engineered occasions – Maria and Luigi Rossetti at the college where she and Marianna had studied. It would be hard for her to step aside without standing on a grave, and, if she wobbled – as she might without a shoe – she would knock over two or three vases holding artificial blooms . . . It was not as if they hadn't seen her. The parents' eyes were now wide open, assimilating who was astride their path.

Immacolata knew that she was seen and recognised and the

greeting came first from Luigi. He stopped in front of her and, as she held out the flowers from which water still dripped, spat on to the concrete path, halfway between her feet and his own brilliantly polished toecaps. He looked into her eyes, unwavering, and the word came silently, so that his wife would not hear it cross his lips but Immacolata would read it. He called her a whore. He did not utter the word a historian would have used when lecturing on the sex trade in Pompeii or Ercolano, but the one that would come naturally to today's dockers in the port of Naples. To her best friend's father, she was a vulgar whore of no worth unless her legs were wide and her knickers dropped. And the father was a respected teacher of mathematics to eighth-year students. She gasped.

He stepped a half-pace to his right and made room for his wife to pass. His eyes were without life, as if grief had purged it. Not so the mother's. Her eyes burned with anger. Immacolata had a moment in which to evade the attack but her reaction was not fast enough. The mother was personal assistant to the manager of a well-respected insurance company and had a reputation for integrity, dignity and probity. She reached out and caught the tight-drawn lapels of Immacolata's blouse, ripping the buttons from their holes. Her other hand grabbed the pretty little lace bow between the cups of Immacolata's brassière and the fabric split. Immacolata fell back, feeling the sun's force on her bare skin before she ducked to cover herself. Then the mother said, soft and controlled, that a whore should display herself and feel no shame because she cared for nothing but money. Someone kicked her shin – she didn't know whether it was the father or the mother. She went down on her knees and saw the bouquet crumpled beneath her, the stems snapped.

The father snarled, 'You are a whore and you have no decency. I know everything about you. I know who you are, what nest of snakes spawned you, the poison that comes from you – which took the life of our beloved child. She died from leukaemia. We were told at the hospital by the oncology department why – how – she contracted leukaemia. You and your family are responsible.

You may be welcome beside the *autostrada* as you wait for your clients, but you are not welcome here. Perhaps the only language you understand is that of the gutter – so fuck off.'

The mother said, 'For four or five weeks, she complained of tiredness. We thought she'd been studying too hard. It was only when bruises appeared that we went with her to the doctor. She seemed anaemic. He examined her closely, particularly her eyes. They are trained to hide anxiety, but he rang the hospital, told them she was a priority case and sent us there immediately. I rang my husband at work and called him out of his class.'

Around Immacolata, cold, harsh faces blocked out the sun. When she dropped her head she saw the men's trousers and the women's knees, and if she stared at the dust there were shoes, men's and women's, and she feared she would be kicked again. She tried to make herself smaller, dragging her knees into her stomach, her elbows across her chest, but she couldn't shut out what she was told.

The father said, 'Of course, we know of the Triangle of Death – we've read about it – but we don't talk about it. In Marigliano, Acerra and Nola we're familiar with its mortality statistics, and the criminality of the Camorra in our town. They are paid to dispose of chemical waste – and dump it in fields, orchards and streams. That is what the Camorra, those foul gangsters, do. For two decades – starting long before we knew of it – the ground and water table were contaminated with poison so that the Camorra could get richer. They and their families have the scruples and greed of whores. You are part of a family so you're guilty too.'

The mother said, 'They found her platelet count was low. They took a sample of bone marrow to evaluate her condition, but there was no need to do any tests because that first evening her condition was obvious. First, she had an agonising headache until she lost consciousness. We were in a ward of twenty beds, most occupied, and had just a curtain for privacy as we watched the team struggle to save her life. We could see that they knew it was hopeless because they work in the Triangle and had been in such situations many times before. A neuro-surgeon was called, but

she died in front of us. They tried to resuscitate her, but within forty minutes she was gone, snatched from us in a public ward, festooned with cables and breathing aids. There was no opportunity for us to comfort her, or send for the priest because that day he had gone to Naples to buy shoes. Her death hurt too much for us to weep. We were so unprepared.'

The words rang in her head. She knew now that they would not kick her again. They would have seen her hands trembling as she covered her breasts and clutched the shredded blouse.

He said, 'A doctor told me she could have contracted the disease as much as a decade earlier, swimming in a stream, playing in long grass in a field or under the trees in an orchard . . .'

She said, 'I used to take her to the fields and the stream behind our home. She would swim, splash, play, then roll in the grass to dry herself. While I watched her, laughed, and thought of her as a gift from God, she was being poisoned.'

The father said, 'The doctor told me that the farmland around Nola and the water table are saturated with dioxins. If I wanted to know more, I was told, I should see the *carabinieri* . . . I didn't think they'd speak to me. But yesterday I saw a *maresciallo* – I teach his son. He told me of the Camorra's criminal clans who make vast profits from dumping chemicals in this area: they call them the eco-Mafia. He said the clan leader in Nola had sub-contracted the transportation of waste materials from the north to the Borellis from Naples. I believed him. You've prostituted yourself for greed. Go.'

The mother said, 'There's evil in your blood, but I doubt you're capable of self-disgust or shame. Your presence here is an intrusion. Go.'

In all of her life, Immacolata had never before been spoken to in such a fashion. She couldn't meet their eyes but kept her head low as she bent to pick up the destroyed flowers.

She passed a young man with a tidy haircut and a suit but no mourner's tie. He wore dark glasses and she couldn't read his expression. She made her way out of the cemetery. She had known for a decade and a half that her father dealt in long-distance heavy-

goods traffic, and for a decade that her brother, Vincenzo, was involved with northern industry, and she herself, had arranged the hire of trucks from far-away hauliers. At the gate, by the statue of Angelabella, aged eighteen, she dumped the flowers in a bin and hobbled out to look for Silvio.

She felt numb and shivered.

She looked at them from the door, but they seemed not to have heard her come in. She had got off the bus and walked the last mile, ignoring the drizzle. She had had no coat, and the shoes, torn blouse and black suit were in the holdall, with the ripped underwear. She was wearing what her brother would have seen her in when she had gone out early that morning.

Vincenzo and three friends were playing cards. She watched them through a fog of cigarette smoke, and waited for their reaction so that she could resurrect the lie and embellish it. Each held a fan of cards up to his face.

Since she had been dropped off at Capodichino to wait for the flight, she had thought of the bundle lifted by the men on the ladders, the accusation made against her, and had seen the crowded hospital ward as a life had drained away. The bundle had been so easy to lift that the wind, however slight, might have wafted it from the men's grip and carried it up and away into the cloudless sky.

Vincenzo was the heir apparent to their father. He was thirty-one, a target for the Palace of Justice, the detectives of the Squadra Mobile and the investigators of the ROS, the Raggruppamento Operativo Speciale of the *carabinieri*. He had made one mistake in the ten years he had spent shadowing his father, the clan leader: he had used a mobile phone and the call had been traced. The apartment in the Forcella district from which it had originated had been raided and scribbled *pizzini* had been recovered. From these scraps of paper, covered with microscopic handwriting – Vincenzo's – another *covo* had been identified and searched. There, a Beretta P38 handgun had been found stowed in greaseproof paper under a bath panel. It carried

the DNA signature of Vincenzo Borelli, and the ballistics laboratory had reported that it had been used to fire the bullets taken from the bodies of three men. He would face a gaol sentence as long as his father expected when he came, eventually, to trial. Vincenzo had disappeared from the face of the earth, and so had his sister: he as a fugitive, she dropping from view and gaining new skills in handling money movements.

In the doorway, she could have recited every word that had been said to her as she had lain on the ground. Every last word. And she could remember how the aggression had cut into her, wounding her. Never in her life had anyone spoken to her with such venom, or made such an accusation, while seeming not to care for the consequences of denouncing the daughter of Pasquale and Gabriella Borelli, sister of Vincenzo and Giovanni. It should have meant a death sentence. To humiliate and abuse the daughter of a clan leader was the act of a man bored with living. If her father, in his cell in the north, or her mother, who flitted between safe-houses, had been told what her friend's parent had hissed at her, that man would have been condemned. If she had interrupted the card game to say where she had been and what had happened, within twenty-four hours blood would have run on a pavement, a body would have lain at a grotesque angle and the authority of the clan would have been preserved. She had not even told Silvio, who had looked curiously at her torn blouse but hadn't asked.

Her brother won the hand. He always won. The game was for small stakes, two-pound coins. The heap on the table in front of Vincenzo was four or five times greater than the piles in front of the other players. London served two purposes for him. He was out of sight of the magistrates and investigators in Italy, but he was also in a position to do good deals, exploit opportunities and build the foundations of networks. He dealt in leather jackets and shoes manufactured in the small sweat-shop factories on the slopes of Vesuvio, then shipped out of the Naples docks – in secrecy after the labels of the most famed European fashion-houses had been sewn or stamped in place – to Felixstowe on

Britain's east coast, or to the Atlantic harbours of the United States. A leather coat, with a designer label, could be manufactured for twenty euros and sold in Boston, New York or Chicago for three hundred. Many opportunities existed for Vincenzo Borelli's advancement. The downside was that a prolonged absence from the seat of power – Forcella and Sanità in the old district of Naples – diminished his status and authority. His parents had decreed that in London he should watch over his sister while she qualified in accountancy. A clan needed trustworthy finance people. He treated her as a child, showing no interest as she stood in the doorway. The music billowed around her.

The cruellest images were those of the hospital ward. When Silvio had driven her away from the cemetery, down the via Saviano, they had come to the inner area of Nola and had gone past two of the hospital's entrances. It was dominated by a ruined castle on a hilltop. It was a modern building. Of any hospital closer to her own area, she could have said which clan had controlled the construction of it, which had supplied the concrete, and which had owned the politician whose name was on the contracts, but this one was too far from her home. She imagined the interior of the Ospedale Santa Maria della Pietà, death coming fast behind a cotton screen, a young woman's mother screaming as her daughter slipped away, the father beating clenched fists against the wall behind the bed, the equipment's alarm pealing because the medics couldn't save a life, the mutterings of a stand-in priest, the weeping of patients in the adjacent beds, and the squeak of wheels as the body was taken away, the medical staff shrugging . . .

Now Vincenzo looked up, gave a brief smile in greeting. He held up an empty beer bottle, then pointed to the kitchen door. Immacolata dropped her holdall, went to the kitchen, took four Peronis from the fridge, opened them, carried them back into the living room and found space between the empty bottles, filled ashtrays and cigarette cartons to put them down. She was not acknowledged. She closed the door behind her.

In her room, she lay on her bed. She did not weep. She stared at the ceiling, the lightbulb and the cobweb draped off the shade

and didn't think of the boy who had made her laugh. There was music playing in the living room and traffic outside in the street, voices raised in the apartment above and a baby screaming below. They meant nothing to her and she shut them out, but she couldn't escape from the raised bundle, the spoken savagery and cruelty of death.

The young man found his *maresciallo* in a bar to the right side of the piazza in front of the town's cathedral. He was from the Udine region in the far north-east, where there were rolling hills and valleys, civilisation and cleanliness. He would have hated Nola, his first posting after training for induction into the *carabinieri*, had it not been for the gruff kindness of his commanding officer. He still wore the suit that had been suitable for the funeral service and the burial, but his dark glasses were high now on his hair.

He waited until he was waved to a chair, then sat and handed the *maresciallo* the plastic folder he had prepared. A waiter approached. He ordered Coca-Cola. The folder, with the name on it of Marianna Rossetti and that day's date, was opened. His report covered five closely typed pages. He knew that, two days before, the *maresciallo* had met with the girl's father and was aware of the circumstances and cause of the girl's death. He himself had been ordered to the basilica and the cemetery to watch, listen – it had been explained to him that the family's emotions ran high. Also, he knew that a researcher at the hospital had published material in the foreign-language edition of the *Lancet Oncology* under a title that referred to *il triangolo della morte*, and that in the secure archive section of the barracks there was a small mountain of files dealing with the area's contamination. The *maresciallo* had read the first two pages, and he sat in silence. The waiter brought his Coca-Cola, with an *espresso* and a large measure of Stock brandy. He had known the *maresciallo* always spent time here in the evening and that he could be certain of finding him. He tried to read the other man's face, but saw nothing. He had hoped for praise.

The question was as blunt as it was unexpected: 'Have you drunk alcohol tonight?'

And he had believed that praise was due. The father and mother of the deceased had made no attempt to lower their voices so he had heard them crystal clear. Within minutes what they had said was written in his notebook as virtual verbatim. He had the accusation, the condemnation and the name. An older man, jaundiced and cynical, from long service with the Arma – what the *carabinieri* called themselves – might have hung back, lounged against a distant headstone, smoked a quiet cheroot and reflected on what a shit place Nola was. The young man had made certain he was close enough to hear every word and to see the violence shown towards the woman. He accepted that he would not be praised.

'No. I haven't had a drink for three—'

He was interrupted. The report was in the folder, which was pushed back across the table. The *maresciallo* had a mobile and was scrolling, then making a connection. The young man was shown his superior's back as a call was made. He couldn't hear what was said. The chair scraped as the *maresciallo* turned to him.

'If you haven't had a drink, you can drive to Naples. There's a barracks at piazza Dante. You're expected.'

'Excuse me.'

'What?'

'My report – is it useful?'

The *maresciallo* swirled the coffee, drank it, then some brandy, and coughed. 'I don't know. Perhaps, if you want praise, you should ask the officer I'm sending you to. My old mother does jigsaw puzzles to pass her time, and tells me that discovering where one piece fits will solve the rest. There may be a thousand pieces on the tray in front of her, but slotting one piece into its home makes the rest easy. I can't say whether or not what you have told me is that one piece. Twenty-five years ago I was at the training college in Campobasso with Mario Castrolami, who's waiting for you at the piazza Dante. He will decide whether or not you've helped to solve the puzzle or made it more difficult.'

'Thank you.'

He had the folder under his arm as he walked to the door. In the glass he saw the *maresciallo* wave to the waiter, who poured another measure of Stock. He went out into the late evening and felt the warmth on his face. He didn't know whether or not he had learned something useful that day. He started his car and drove towards Naples. He wouldn't be there, he estimated, before eleven, and wondered what sort of investigator was still at his desk at that time, and what a physical and verbal attack on a young woman at a funeral might mean.

'Fucking brilliant.'

He turned the third page, and started on the fourth. He saw, from the corner of his eye, the *carabinieri* recruit, the kid just off the training course, flush with pleasure.

'Not you. You want a lecture? I'll give you one. If you stand against the power of the Camorra clans, you'll have behind you tens of thousands of uniformed men. But still, I think, you'll hesitate. Luigi Rossetti – who stands behind him? Only his wife. But he had the courage, alone, to stand up against the weasel girl from a clan family. All you've done is listen. Don't think you have the courage of the Rossetti parents. Did the weasel swear at them when they attacked her?'

'She said nothing.'

'Did she challenge them? Do I need to offer protection to the parents? Can he go back to teaching, she to her work? Their courage was amazing, but should they spend the rest of their days in hiding? Are they dead already? What did you read on her face?'

'Humiliation.'

Castrolami finished reading and shuffled the pages, straightening them. He chuckled, but without mirth. 'Understand. This weasel is the daughter of Pasquale and Gabriella Borelli, the sister of Vincenzo and—'

The recruit interrupted him, which very few did. 'It was humiliation. Also, she's a member of the clan, yes, but also a

friend of Marianna Rossetti. She came to Marianna Rossetti's funeral and brought flowers. The Rossetti family have no connection – my *maresciallo* is definite on this – with the Camorra inside Nola or beyond it. This friendship crossed a divide.'

The pencil had a blunt tip and was chewed at the other end. Castrolami rapped it on his desk, found a small place, a few centimetres square, clear of papers and beat a tattoo. His forehead was cut with a frown. Mario Castrolami could accept preconceptions and believe them, but when he was confronted with a superior argument he could ditch them. The Borelli girl had been at the funeral.

'It's rare, but not unknown, for a member of a clan to have a friendship with someone outside it.'

'She didn't fight back. She was shamed.'

'I believe you.'

'Is it useful?'

On the desk, files and folders made foothills and mountains. Coffee had sustained him through the evening. Around his desk, against the walls, there were filing cabinets, some locked and others open, showing squashed-in paper. There were more files at his feet, and on the bookshelves that flanked the door. He could have pointed to them or to the chart Sellotaped to the wall on the right of the door, which listed the clans and the districts they fed off, with lines running between them, blue to show alliances and red to show feuds, or to the montage of mug-shots on a board that hung to the left of the door, a hundred faces, men and women, categorised as major organised-crime players. He could have waved his arms theatrically to demonstrate the scale of the war in which he was a foot-soldier, the numbers of the enemy, and spoken of a campaign without end. Had he done so, he thought he would have cheapened himself.

'In a year or two, what you've brought me may prove important – or in a week. I don't know . . . The problem is that you didn't see Immacolata Borelli arrive, and you don't know how she left. Where did she come from? What was her destination? You've given me a little, which is tantalising . . . Thank you.'

Alone again, he felt excited, which was unusual for him, after twenty-five years with the Arma, and seventeen in the ROS. But it was there, unmistakable. He sank down from his chair, was on hands and knees, and his stomach sagged as he burrowed for the file that held her photograph. When he found it and extracted the photograph – taken in Forcella by a long-lens surveillance camera – he stared at it. Could a woman from that family show remorse and be humiliated by the death of a friend? He gazed at the photograph and searched for an answer.

Time ebbed. Eddie was slumped on the bed.

Before getting back to his room, he had sat for three hours in the restaurant on the left side, going up, of Kingsland high street. Opposite him there had been an empty chair and a laid place that went unused.

The heels of his trainers left smears on the coverlet. Her face would have puckered, a frown wrinkling her forehead, if she had been there to see them. She was not. Her picture, straight ahead of him, had pride of place on the wall facing the bed. The landlord's offering, a Victorian artist's effort at cattle grazing beside the Thames, was out of sight behind the wardrobe, Mac's picture in its place. She was in the Mall, in front of the Palace, smiling, her hair thrown back, T-shirt strained, and the sun was on her. It was the best photograph he had of her, so he'd taken the memory stick to the camera shop the Punjabis ran, in Dalston Lane, where they'd blown it up to thirty inches by twenty. The picture was stuck to the wall – if it was taken down the paper would come with it. He thought it was there in perpetuity and had come to believe that he and Mac were in it for the long term.

The Afghan place, which did a wonderful lamb dish, was their favourite, and they could make the food last for ever, as they gazed into each other's eyes and held hands across the table. It was as if they belonged in the place, and the people who ran it – from Jalalabad – welcomed them with an enthusiasm that lifted the soul. All the time he had sat there he had waited for her to

push the door wide and come in, panting, then hang on his neck to whisper apologies and murmur some excuse. She'd have kissed his lips and he'd have kissed hers and . . . He had studied the menu as a break from watching the door – not that he needed to because he knew it by heart. He hadn't ordered food for one, hadn't even ordered a drink. He hadn't believed she wouldn't come.

To the left of the photograph was the door to his room, a flimsy dressing-gown – Mac's – hanging on it. She would have complained loudly, in a jumble of Italian and English, if she had seen the smears on the coverlet, because it was his and her bed when she slipped into his little home. Only one room, only one window overlooking an overgrown back garden, then another row of houses, chimneys and greyness. The rain had fallen more heavily as the evening had gone by and now it was spattering the window panes. They had made love on that bed, sometimes fast, sometimes noisy, sometimes slow and quiet. They had first been on it after their second meeting . . . not long then, maybe twenty minutes, until she'd said she had 'to get back', and had wandered over his threadbare carpet, retrieving the scattered, sodden clothes, and had refused to let him walk her to her front door. It had been the happiest two months in the life of Eddie Deacon . . . He lay on his bed and hated the world.

He'd left the restaurant after three hours because his was the only table with a spare place and two couples were waiting. The owners had seemed to sympathise, but had made clear that his love life was his concern and their priority was to seat one of the waiting couples. He had shambled out, and for a while he hadn't noticed that the rain was persistent, driving. The misery had eaten into him. Nobody who knew him, who saw him with Mac, could believe that Eddie Deacon had landed a girl like her. Dear old Eddie, 'steady Eddie', one of thousands who drifted along and didn't stand out, who was better than bloody ordinary but who didn't bother to be exceptional, had a girl on his arm who was dramatic, impressive, head-turning . . . and a bloody good shag. He had shuffled home and the rain had dribbled

down his face, and he'd been within a hair's breadth of being knocked over crossing a road because hadn't seen the van coming. He hadn't known such love or such unhappiness.

On that bed, her still astride him and him still inside her, his sweat running with hers, her hair in his face, his lips brushing the cherrystone nipples, two evenings ago, they had fixed the rendezvous time and place. Always, in the two months since the park-bench meeting beside the Serpentine, she had been on time for their meetings. There were magazines on the floor, dropped haphazardly or chucked, *Espresso* and *Oggi*, fashion magazines and home-refurbishment magazines, a pile of her textbooks, dictionaries and notepads. He liked it best when she wore the dressing-gown, nothing else, and sat cross-legged on the bed, close to him, and they worked on her English – he liked every damn thing about her. It was the first and only time she had failed to turn up.

He didn't have an address for her, only a sight of a street corner, no mobile number. It hadn't mattered before because she was always where she said she would be . . . He thought a disaster must have struck her, couldn't think of anything else. It hurt Eddie so much that Mac wasn't there . . . and he realised how little he knew of her, how much had been kept from him. Questions deflected. Subjects changed. He could have bloody well wept. She was smiling at him from the photograph, the dressing-gown hanging loose on the hook . . . Damned if he'd lose her.

He stood by the hut. The sun teetered at the top of the treeline, and was in his eyes. It was hard for him to see. Behind the open door of the hut, at his back, he heard crackling radio connections. He had a little Spanish, picked up on three visits here, so if he had strained and concentrated he would have had definitive answers to the two outstanding questions: how many were kicking and how many were not? He stared out over the trees and thought he heard the first sounds of a Huey's engine and the gentle chop of the rotors. When the bird landed and they spilled out he would know for sure how many were kicking and how many were not.

He would know, also, whether the advice he had given to the captain was sound or horseshit. He lit another cigarette – he'd worked through the best part of a carton since the team had been lifted on to the plateau and set down in the clearing close to the hut.

His name was called. 'They are coming, Lukas. Two minutes, and they will be down.'

He raised a hand in acknowledgement and ash fell from his cigarette on to his boot.

In the middle of the plateau, a soldier in combat gear took something from his webbing belt, arced an arm back, then tossed whatever it was. When it landed bright orange smoke burst from it, climbed and was shifted by the light wind, masking the sun. The noise of the helicopter was louder. He heard, behind him, the exodus from the hut and the communications. The captain reached him, took the cigarette from between his fingers, dragged hard on it twice, then replaced it. The captain was Pablo – probably a good man, probably an honest one. He couldn't have said how many of the others, those who had gone into the jungle or manned the communications nets, were good and honest. Too often a call was made, satphone, mobile or landline, or a message sent, and the storm squad found only a 'dry house', which had been used to hold some wretch but from which he had been shifted out. Pablo had gone past him and was yelling orders. Soldiers came off their asses and carried folded stretchers towards the orange smoke. He told himself it meant nothing. It was standard operating procedure.

The Huey came in low, doing a contour run over the canopy.

Pablo stopped, turned, shouted: 'Are you coming forward, Lukas, or staying back?'

He indicated, two hands up, that he was standing his ground. He dropped the cigarette, ground it out under his boot and lit another. He was not in an army so didn't wear a uniform. He had on a heavy wool blue shirt that was buttoned at the cuffs and kept him warm enough against the chill at this time of year and at this height above sea level. His trousers were heavy-duty

corduroy, dun-coloured. His boots were not military but of the brown leather used by hikers, and hitched to one shoulder was a rucksack that held his spare socks, underclothes, washbag and the notepad laptop.

The Huey made the approach. Usual for it to do a circle of a touch-down point, give the flier a chance to check the ground, but it came straight in.

If the bird came straight in, and was dropping the last few feet over the dispersed orange smoke, it didn't mean his advice had been wrong. He gave the advice as best he could and sometimes the corks popped and sometimes the bottles stayed in their boxes. His advice, offered to the captain, given what he knew, given the location where the poor bastards were held and the near impossibility of maintaining secrecy, had been to make the strike. The Huey landed heavily on the skids, bounced and settled.

The light hit the bird's camouflage-painted bodywork and he had a good view inside the door, which was slid back. The hatch machine-gunner jumped down and went up to his thighs in the long grass, which made more room for the soldiers with the stretchers to pass them inside. Three were handed up. If, at that moment, it was a disappointment to him that three were needed, he didn't show it. His feelings of disappointment or elation, his thoughts, were not for sharing. They wouldn't be FARC guys, wounded enemy, on the stretchers: they'd have been tipped out. Two of the stretchers were lifted down, the orderlies holding drips high above them, the bearers hurrying as best they could. A doctor in a pristine uniform was between the stretchers and examining the occupants on the move. The wounded would be stabilised, then casevaced: it was the way things were done.

He saw the third stretcher lifted down, no drip. The body-bag rolled on the canvas as it was lowered.

The doctor came past him. 'They were spotted when they were almost on target, but it gave away the critical last thirty seconds. It's what it depends on – success, failure. I think, Lukas, it's neither . . . I hope to save them.'

He didn't look into the faces of the two men, just glanced and saw the long, wispy beards and hair, the blood of bullet wounds on filthy clothing, and the grimaces because they were in shock and the morphine had not yet taken effect. Three men now emerged from the Huey and they were helped down, then led away bent low from the spinning rotors. They looked weak and near to collapse. He did the equation. Intelligence had reported six hostages – a French tourist who was an irresponsible idiot, a Canadian water-purification-plant engineer whose light aircraft had come down three years earlier, a judge who had been kidnapped eighteen months back, two local politicians who had been snatched four and a half years ago, and a missionary who was said to have Peruvian papers. One dead, two wounded, three unharmed was a good return.

Two soldiers were walking wounded. Five bodies were dumped from the hatch; they'd be FARC guys. A Chinook was coming in now. Would have been called up when the 'Contact' report had come in over the communications. A monster with a double rotor system and a full medical team. It was a good return – he'd seen the missionary walking towards him, and had seen him also, politely, shake off a hand that tried to support him. It was all because of the missionary. It was not for the tourist or the engineer or the judge or the local-government people; they could have been forgotten and left to rot. If it had been Special Forces, Americans, on the ground, the message would have been sent out in clear to the FARC that the missionary tag was bogus. The man passed him and there was a murmur, lips barely moving, which might have been two words: 'Thank you.' Probably was. He didn't acknowledge. The captain, Pablo, was not inside the loop and didn't know that the freeing of an American asset was the sole reason for this mission. Lukas, no one else, would have been permitted by the Agency to give the crucial advice on the rescue of their man. He had the reputation . . . but he shunned pride.

There was a colonel on the Chinook. He slapped him on the arm, and bayed, 'Good work, Lukas. We lost a local politico, but

he was a left sympathiser, and the Frenchman. We've saved the judge, who has good connections with central government, and God's man, the Canadian and a mayor from this region. The injured will live. Fine work.'

A hand was offered but he kept one of his in a pocket and the other cupped a cigarette end. He did not do courtesies. It was not that he intended rudeness, more that the pleasantries seemed unimportant, and he wouldn't have considered such a refusal might offend. Guarding the cigarette was a greater priority.

But, later, at the ramp of the Chinook, he permitted Pablo to hug him briefly.

It would be an hour's flight to the military base attached to Bogotá's civil airport.

He would be in time to catch the Avianca night flight out of the Aeropuerto Internacional El Dorado for the long haul over the wastes of the Atlantic before the European landfall, then the short commuter ride to his home. The families of the survivors would be at the El Dorado, with jerks from the embassy, flashlights, government ministers and a ratpack of hacks. He would be well clear of them.

He would sleep on the long-haul flight. He always slept well coming off an assignment: win, lose or draw, he'd sleep.