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Opening Extract from...

I Kill

Written by Giorgio Faletti

Published by Corsair

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I Kill

Giorgio Faletti



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Death walks along a street,
Wreathed in faded orange blossoms
Singing and singing
A song
To a white guitar
Singing and singing and singing.

Frederico García Lorca

FIRST CARNIVAL

The man is one and no one.

For years, he has worn his face as a mask, a mere shadow of himself. He is so wiped out by tiredness that he has almost lost his sanity.

There is music, bodies moving. People smiling and talking. The man stands amongst them, leaning against a column as he watches curiously. He thinks that every last one of these people is useless.

He is surrounded by endless faces, people who do not question; people who passively accept their lives and never admit to the boredom and pain of the journey.

At the far side of the room, a man and a woman are sitting next to each other at a table overlooking the garden.

In the soft light she appears as delicate and tender as melancholy. She has black hair and green eyes, so luminous and large that even from where he stands the man can see into them. Her companion is conscious of nothing but her beauty. He whispers into her ear to make himself heard over the blaring music.

They are holding hands and she is laughing, throwing back her head or hiding her face against his shoulder.

Just a moment ago, she turned and looked around, perhaps aware of the fixed stare coming from the man across the room. Their eyes met for an instant, but hers passed indifferently over his face. And then those incredible eyes came to rest once more on the man next to her. He returns her gaze.

They are young, beautiful and happy.

The man leans against the column, thinking that soon they will be dead.

ONE

Jean-Loup Verdier pressed the button on the remote, but only started his car when the garage door was halfway up, so as not to breathe too much exhaust. His headlights cut slowly beneath the door and out into the black night. He slipped the automatic transmission into DRIVE and slowly rolled his Mercedes SLK outside. He pressed the CLOSE button and sat taking in the view from his house as he waited for the door to shut behind him.

Monte Carlo looked like a bed of concrete by the sea, the city enveloped in the soft evening haze. Not far below him, in French territory, the lights of the country-club tennis courts, where some international star was probably practising, gleamed next to the skyscraper of the Parc Saint-Roman. Lower down, below the old city fortress towards Cap d'Ail, he could make out the neighbourhood of Fontvieille that had been reclaimed from the water, yard by yard, stone by stone.

He lit a cigarette and switched on the car radio, already tuned to Radio Monte Carlo, as he opened the remote-controlled gate and ascended the ramp to street level. He turned left and slowly drove towards the city, enjoying the warm air of late May.

'Pride' by U2 was on the radio, and Jean-Loup smiled with recognition at the band's unmistakable guitar riffs.

Stefania Vassallo, the show's deejay, was crazy about U2's lead guitarist, The Edge, and she never let a show go by without playing one of the band's songs. Her colleagues at the station made fun of her because of the dreamy expression she wore for months after she got an interview with her idols.

As he drove along the winding road that led from Beausoleil to the city centre, Jean-Loup tapped his foot in time with the music. Marking the upbeat with his right hand on the steering wheel, he followed along as Bono's rusty, melancholy voice sang of a man who came 'in the name of love'.

Summer was in the air, and that unique smell one finds only in cities by the sea. An odour of brackish water, pine trees and rosemary. The scent of broken promises and lost bets.

All of it – the sea, the trees, the flowers – would still be there long after he and all the others like him had hurried by.

He drove his convertible with the top down, the warm wind in his hair. Promise filled his heart. He'd placed his bets in life.

Things could be worse.

It wasn't late, but the road was empty. He flicked his cigarette into the rushing air, watching the bright curve it made in his rearview mirror. As it hit the asphalt it scattered in a blaze of tiny sparks, the last puff of smoke disappearing in the darkness. Jean-Loup reached the bottom of the hill and hesitated, then, deciding to take the city-centre route to the harbour he turned down Boulevard d'Italie.

Tourists were beginning to crowd into the Principality. The Formula 1 Grand Prix, which had just ended, meant the beginning of summer in Monaco. From now on, the city would be bustling with actors and spectators day and night. There would be chauffeured limousines with privileged and bored people inside. There would be small cars with sweaty passengers adoring the sights, like those who stand in front of shop windows wondering when they'd find the time to come back and buy that jacket, others where they'd find the money. Things were black and white – two extremes with shades of grey in between.

Jean-Loup thought that the priorities of life, in the end, were simple and repetitive, and in places like Monte Carlo they could be counted on one hand. Money came first. Some have it and the rest want it. Simple. A cliché becomes a cliché because it has some truth. Money might not buy happiness, but that didn't seem to bother anyone.

The mobile in his shirt pocket chirped. He pulled it out and answered

without looking at the caller's name: he knew who it was. The voice of Laurent Bedon, the director and writer of *Voices*, the programme that Jean-Loup hosted on Radio Monte Carlo every night, crackled in his ear in a haze of static.

'Any chance the star will grace us with his presence tonight?'

'Hey, Laurent. I'm on my way.'

'Good. You know Robert's pacemaker acts up when the deejay isn't here an hour before airtime. His balls are already smoking.'

'Really? Aren't his cigarettes enough?'

'Guess not.'

Meanwhile, Boulevard d'Italie had turned into Boulevard des Moulins. The brightly lit shops on both sides of the street were a sea of promises, like the beguiling eyes of high-class tarts. All you needed to make your dreams come true was a little cash.

Their conversation was interrupted by more static. He moved the phone to his other ear and the buzzing stopped. As if on cue, Laurent changed his tone.

'Okay, seriously, hurry up. I have a couple of—'

'Hold on a sec. Police,' interrupted Jean-Loup.

He lowered his hand and tried to look innocent. Pulling up to the junction, he stopped in the left lane and waited for green. A uniformed policeman was standing at the corner to ensure that drivers didn't jump the lights. Jean-Loup hoped he'd hidden the phone in time. Monte Carlo was strict about using mobiles while driving. At that moment he had no desire to waste time arguing with a stubborn Principality cop.

When the lights changed, Jean-Loup turned left, passing under the nose of the suspicious officer. Jean-Loup saw him turn and stare at the SLK as it disappeared down the hill in front of the hotel Metropole. As soon as he was out of sight, Jean-Loup raised his hand and put the phone back to his ear.

'Out of danger. Sorry, Laurent. You were saying?'

'I was saying that I have a couple of promising ideas I wanted to discuss with you before we go on air. Step on it.'

'How promising? Like a thirty-two or a twenty-seven?'

‘Fuck off, cheapskate,’ retorted Laurent, only half-joking.

‘Like the man said, I don’t need advice. I need addresses.’

‘Stop talking shit and hurry up.’

‘Got it. I’m heading into the tunnel now,’ Jean-Loup lied.

They were cut off. Jean-Loup smiled. That was how Laurent always defined his new ideas: promising. Jean-Loup had to admit that they almost always were. But unfortunately for Laurent, that was how he also defined the numbers he *hoped* would turn up on the roulette wheel, and that almost never happened.

He turned left on to Avenue des Spelugues and glanced at the reflection of the lights in the square, the Hôtel de Paris and the Café de Paris like sentinels on either side of the casino. The barricades and bleachers set up for the Grand Prix had been taken down in record time. Nothing was allowed to obstruct the sacred cult of gambling, money and superficiality in Monte Carlo for too long.

The square receded behind him, and he drove at a gentle pace down the hill on which Ferraris, Williamses and McLarens had raced at unbelievable speed just days before. After the curve of the Virage du Portier, the sea breeze caressed his face. He drove through the tunnel and out into the harbour, where 100 million euros’ worth of boats were illuminated. Above, to the left, the castle, swathed in a soft glow, seemed to guarantee that the Prince and his family would sleep undisturbed.

Though he was used to the view, Jean-Loup couldn’t help admiring it. He could understand the effect it had on tourists from Osaka, Austin or Johannesburg: it took their breath away and left them with an amateur photographer’s case of tennis elbow.

By then, he was practically there. He drove past the harbour, the Piscine and then the Rascasse, turned left and drove down the ramp to the underground car park, three levels deep, directly under the plaza in front of the radio station.

He parked in the first empty spot and went up the stairs and outside. Music reached him through the open doors of Stars’N’Bars, a mandatory stop for habitués of Monaco’s nightlife. A bar where you could grab a

beer or some Tex-Mex while waiting for the night to go by, before heading off to the discos and nightclubs along the coast.

The huge building in which Radio Monte Carlo was located, right in front of the quay, housed a random assortment of establishments: restaurants, yacht showrooms and art galleries, as well as the studios of Télé Monte Carlo. Jean-Loup rang the video intercom and stood directly in front of the camera so that it shot a close-up of his right eyeball.

The brusque voice of Raquel, the receptionist and secretary, emerged. 'Who is it?'

'Good evening. This is Mr Eye for an Eye. Open up, will you? I'm wearing contacts, so the retina print won't work.'

He stepped back so that the girl could see him. There was a soft laugh from the intercom. 'Come on up, Mr Eye for an Eye,' she said, warmly.

'Thanks. I was coming to sell you a set of encyclopedias, but I think I need some eye drops now.'

There was a loud click as the door unlocked. When the lift door slid aside on the fourth floor, he found himself nose to nose with the chubby face of Pierrot, standing with a pile of CDs in his hands.

Pierrot was the station mascot. He was twenty-two but had the mind of a child. He was shorter than average, with a round face and hair that stood straight up, which made him always look to Jean-Loup like a smiling pineapple. Pierrot was a very pure soul. He had the gift, which only simple people have, of making everyone like him at first glance. He himself liked only those he thought deserved it, and his instinct was rarely wrong.

Pierrot adored music. He became confused when confronted with the most basic reasoning, but he would be suddenly analytical and linear when it came to his favourite subject. He had a computer-like memory for the vast radio archives and for music in general. All you had to do was mention a title or the tune of a song and he would dash off, soon to return with the record or CD. He was an absolute obsessive – people at the radio station called him 'Rain Boy'.

'Hi, Jean-Loup.'

'Pierrot, what are you still doing here at this hour?'

‘Mother’s working late tonight. The big guys are giving a dinner. She’s coming to pick me up *when it’s a little more later.*’

Jean-Loup smiled to himself. Pierrot had his own special way of expressing himself, a different language that was often the butt of jokes. His mother, the woman who was coming to get him *when it’s a little more later*, worked as a cleaner for an Italian family in Monte Carlo.

Jean-Loup had met Pierrot and his mum a couple of years earlier, when they had been standing in front of the radio station. He’d paid almost no attention to this strange couple until the woman had come up to him and spoke timidly, with the air of someone always apologizing to the world for her presence. She had clearly been waiting for him.

‘Excuse me. Are you Jean-Loup Verdier? I’m sorry to bother you, but could I have your autograph for my son? Pierrot always listens to the radio and you’re his favourite.’

Jean-Loup had looked at her modest clothing and her hair that had gone prematurely grey. She was probably younger than she looked.

He had smiled. ‘Of course, madame. That’s the least I can do for such a faithful listener.’

As he took the paper and pen, Pierrot had come up to them. ‘You’re just the same.’

Jean-Loup had shrugged. ‘Just the same as what?’

‘The same as in the radio.’

Jean-Loup had turned to the woman, puzzled. She had lowered her gaze and voice. ‘My son, you know, is . . .’

She had stopped, as if she couldn’t think of the right word. Jean-Loup had looked at Pierrot carefully and felt a stab of pity for the boy and his mother.

The same as in the radio.

Jean-Loup had realized that what Pierrot meant to say, in his own way, was that he was just as he’d imagined him. Pierrot had smiled, and at that moment Jean-Loup was smitten with the immediate, instinctive liking that the boy always inspired.

‘All right, young man. Now that I know you listen to me, the least I can do is sign an autograph. Hold this for me a minute?’

He had handed the boy the pile of papers and postcards under his arm so that his hands were free to write. As Jean-Loup signed the autograph, Pierrot had glanced at the paper on top of the pile. He had raised his head with a satisfied air. ‘Three Dog Night,’ he said, calmly.

‘What?’

‘Three Dog Night. The answer to the first question is Three Dog Night. And the second is Allan Allsworth and Ollie Alsall,’ continued Pierrot with his own very unique English pronunciation of Allan Holdsworth and Ollie Halsall.

Jean-Loup had remembered that the paper on top of the pile contained a list of questions for a pop quiz scheduled for that afternoon’s show. He’d written it a couple of hours before. The first question was ‘What group from the seventies sang the song “Celebrate”?’ And the second was ‘Who were the guitarists in the group Tempest?’

Pierrot’s answers were spot on. Jean-Loup had stared at the mother in astonishment. She could only shrug her shoulders as if apologizing for him. ‘Pierrot loves music. If I listened to him, I’d be buying records instead of food. He’s . . . well . . . he is what he is. But with music, he remembers almost everything he reads and hears on the radio.’

‘Try answering the other questions too, Pierrot,’ Jean-Loup had said, pointing to the paper the boy was still holding.

One by one, without any hesitation, Pierrot had gone through the fifteen questions, answering each one correctly as soon as he read it. And they weren’t easy by any means. Jean-Loup was astonished.

‘Madame, this is much more than simply remembering things. He’s an encyclopedia.’

Jean-Loup had taken back the pile of papers and answered the boy’s smile with a smile. He had gestured towards the Radio Monte Carlo building.

‘Pierrot, would you like to take a tour of the station and see where we broadcast?’

He had shown the boy around the studio and offered him a Coke. Pierrot had looked at everything with fascination, and mother and son’s

eyes shone with equal brightness as she observed his joy. But when they stepped into the basement archives with its sea of CDs and LPs, Pierrot looked as if he'd gone to heaven.

When the employees of the station heard the boy's life story (the father had bolted as soon as he learned of his son's disability, leaving the boy and his mother alone and penniless), and especially when they realized his musical knowledge, Pierrot was invited to join the Radio Monte Carlo staff. His mother was astonished. Pierrot now had somewhere safe to go while she was out at work and he even received a small salary. But most of all, he was *happy*.

Promises and bets, thought Jean-Loup. Occasionally one was kept and sometimes you won. There were better things in the world, but this, at least, was something.

Pierrot stepped into the lift holding the CDs and pressed the button. 'I'm going into the *room* to put these back. Then I'll come back, so can I see your programme.'

The *room* was his own personal description of the archive and *seeing your programme* was not just one of his linguistic inventions. He meant he could stand behind the glass and watch Jean-Loup, his best friend, his idol, with adoring eyes, instead of sitting at home and listening on the radio as before.

'Okay. I'll save you a front-row seat.'

The door closed on Pierrot's bright smile.

Jean-Loup crossed the landing and punched in the code to open the door. The long desk that was Raquel's domain was right at the entrance. A petite brunette with a thin but pleasant face, and who always seemed in command of the situation. Raquel pointed her finger in his direction. 'You're taking your chances,' she said. One of these days, I'm not going to let you in.'

Jean-Loup walked over and moved her finger as if it were a loaded gun. 'Didn't anyone teach you not to point your finger at people? What if it was loaded and went off? Anyway, what are you still doing here? Even Pierrot's still here. Is there a party I don't know about?'

'No parties, just overtime. And it's all your fault. You're stealing all the

ratings and we have to scramble to catch up.’ She motioned with her head to the room behind her.

‘Go and see the boss. There’s news.’

‘Good? Bad? So-so? Is he finally going to ask me to marry him?’

‘He wants to tell you himself. He’s in the president’s office,’ Raquel answered, vague but smiling.

Jean-Loup padded across the soft blue carpet patterned with small cream-coloured crowns. Stopping in front of the last door on the right, he knocked and entered without being invited. The boss was sitting at his desk and – as Jean-Loup might have guessed – was on the phone. The office was clouded with cigarette smoke. Radio Monte Carlo’s manager was the only person Jean-Loup knew who smoked those toxic Russian cigarettes, the ones with the long cardboard filters that had to be folded in a solemn ritual before they could be used.

Robert Bikjalo nodded at him to sit down.

Jean-Loup took a seat in one of the black leather armchairs in front of the desk. As Bikjalo finished his conversation and closed the case of his Motorola phone, Jean-Loup fanned his hand in the smoky air. ‘Are you trying to make this a place for people nostalgic for fog? London or die? No, London *and* die? Does the big boss know you pollute his office when he’s not here? If I wanted, I could blackmail you for the rest of your life.’

Radio Monte Carlo, the Italian-language station of the Principality, had been taken over by a company that ran a clutch of private stations. Its headquarters were in Milan. Robert Bikjalo was the man in charge of running things in Monaco; the president only appeared for important meetings.

‘You’re a bastard, Jean-Loup. A dirty, gutless bastard.’

‘How can you smoke that stuff? You’re approaching the border between smoke and nerve gas. Or maybe you crossed it years ago and I’m talking to your ghost.’

‘I’m not even going to bother answering,’ said Bikjalo, expressionless and as unaffected by Jean-Loup’s sense of humour as by the smoke from the cigarettes. ‘I haven’t been here waiting for you to park your precious ass so I can listen to you make snide remarks about my smoking.’

This exchange was a routine they'd shared for years, but Jean-Loup knew they were still far from calling each other friends. The sarcasm disguised the fact that it was nearly impossible to get to the bottom of things with Robert Bikjalo. Okay, he was intelligent, perhaps, but he was definitely a shrewd cookie. An intelligent man sometimes gives the world more than he gets back in return; a cunning one tries to take as much as he can while giving back as little as possible. Jean-Loup was well aware of the rules of the game, in the world in general and in his milieu in particular: he was the deejay of *Voices*, a hit radio show. People like Bikjalo showed interest in you only in proportion to your ratings.

'I just want to tell you what I think of you and your show before I throw you out on the street for good.' Bikjalo leaned back in his chair and finally extinguished the cigarette in an overflowing ashtray. Silence fell between them. Then, like someone with a good hand who says, 'I'll see you!' Bikjalo continued. 'I got a phone call today about *Voices*. It was someone very close to the palace. Don't ask me who, because I can't tell you . . .'

The manager's tone of voice suddenly changed. A forty-carat grin flashed across his face as he laid down a royal flush. 'The Prince in person has expressed his pleasure at the show's success!'

Jean-Loup stood up from his chair with an equally wide smile, high-fived the hand held out to him, and sat back down. Bikjalo was still flying on the wings of his triumph.

'Monte Carlo has always had an image of being a place for the rich, a haven to escape taxes from just about everywhere else. Recently, with all the shit happening in America, and the economic crisis practically worldwide, we seem a bit dull.'

He said 'we' with an air of sympathy, but he was someone who didn't seem very involved in the problems of others. He pulled out another cigarette, bent the filter and lit it.

'A few years ago, there were 2,000 people in the casino at this time of night. These days, some evenings there's a really scary morning-after feeling. The jump start you gave to *Voices*, using it to confront social issues, has brought something fresh and new to the city. A lot of people

now think of Radio Monte Carlo as a place where they can solve problems, where they can call for help. It's been great for the station, too, I don't deny it. There's a whole group of new sponsors just waiting in line, and that's a measure of the programme's success.'

Jean-Loup raised his eyebrows and smiled. Robert was a manager, and for him success ultimately meant a sigh of relief and a sense of satisfaction when he wrote the annual report. The heroic era of Radio Monte Carlo, the days of Jocelyn and Awanagana and Herbert Pagani, in other words, was over. This was the era of economics.

'I must admit we've been good. You mostly. Apart from the programme's winning formula and the new direction it's taken, it's a success because you're good at deejaying in French and Italian. I just did my job.'

Bikjalo waved his hand in a vague gesture of modesty that didn't suit him at all. He was referring to his very astute managerial instincts. The show's strengths and the bilingual talents of its host convinced him to try a move that he had devised with the sense of a born diplomat. Encouraged by the ratings and the enthusiasm, he'd created a sort of joint venture with Europe 21, a French station with an editorial line very similar to that of Radio Monte Carlo. It broadcast from Paris. The result was that now *Voices* could be heard in most of Italy and France.

Robert Bikjalo put his feet up on the desk and blew cigarette smoke towards the ceiling. Jean-Loup thought it a very official and symbolic pose. The president, if he'd been there to see, probably wouldn't have agreed. With a triumphant voice, Bikjalo continued.

'The Music Awards are at the end of June, beginning of July. I've heard rumours that they want you to emcee. And then there's the Film and Television Festival. You're going full speed, Jean-Loup. Others like you have had trouble moving up to television. You've got looks, and if you play your cards right, I'm afraid you'll be the cause of a brutal tug-of-war between TV and radio.'

'I'm afraid,' said Jean-Loup, standing and looking at his watch, 'that Laurent is having a tug of war with his liver. We still haven't talked and we need a schedule for tonight's show.'

‘Tell that has-been writer-director that he’ll be thrown out in the street, just like you.’

Jean-Loup headed towards the door. As he was leaving, Bikjalo stopped him. ‘Jean-Loup?’

He turned. Bikjalo was sitting in his chair, rocking back and forth with the expression of the cat that finally ate the canary. ‘What?’

‘Needless to say, if all that TV business works out, I’m your manager . . .’

Jean-Loup decided that his price would be very high.

‘I’ve suffered through a percentage of your cigarette smoke. You’ll have to suffer just as much for a percentage of my money.’

As he closed the door, Robert Bikjalo was gazing up at the ceiling with a dreamy stare. Jean-Loup knew that the director was already counting the money he had yet to earn.

TWO

Jean-Loup was looking out at the city through the large control-room window, observing the play of lights reflected on the still water of the harbour. High above, cloaked in darkness, the mast stood on the peak of Mount Agel, visible only by its series of red lights. It was this mast that enabled the radio signal to reach all of Italy.

‘Break over,’ came Laurent’s voice over the intercom. ‘Back to work.’

Without bothering to answer, the deejay moved away from the window and went back to his place. He put on his headphones and sat down at the microphone. In the control room, Laurent flashed an open hand to show five seconds to the end of the commercial break.

Laurent played the brief *Voices* theme that meant the broadcast was starting again. Before the break, the programme had been fairly laid-back, light-hearted even, without the tone of despair they sometimes had to deal with.

‘Back to Jean-Loup Verdier, with *Voices* from Radio Monte Carlo. We hope nobody needs our help on this lovely May evening – only our music. Oh, I’ve just been told there’s a phone call.’

The red light on the wall lit up and Laurent was pointing at him with his right hand to show there was a call waiting. Jean-Loup leaned his elbows on the table and turned to the mike in front of him.

‘Hello?’

There was some static and then silence. Jean-Loup looked up and raised his eyebrows at Laurent. The director shrugged to show that the problem wasn’t at their end.

‘Yes, hello?’

Finally, an answer came through and was transmitted live on air to every listener. It had a presence in the minds and lives of all who heard it. From that moment on, and for a long time to come, the darkness would be a little darker.

‘Hello, Jean-Loup.’

There was something unnatural in the sound of the voice. It was muffled and strangely flat, devoid of expression. The words had a muted echo like the sound of a plane taking off far away. Again, Jean-Loup glanced up questioningly at Laurent, who pointed, drawing circles in the air to mean that the distortion was on the caller’s line.

‘Hi. Who is this?’

There was a moment of hesitation. Then came the muffled answer with its unnatural echo.

‘It doesn’t matter. I’m someone and no one.’

‘It’s – it’s not a great line. Where are you calling from?’

Silence. The vapour trail of a plane wafting midair in some unknown place.

The speaker continued. *‘That doesn’t matter, either. The only thing that counts is that the time has come to speak out, even if afterwards neither of us will be the same.’*

‘How so?’

‘Soon I’ll be a hunted man and you’ll be one of the bloodhounds sniffing in the dark. And that’s a shame, because right now, at this very moment, you and I are no different. We’re the same.’

‘How are we the same?’

‘We’re both faceless, and people listen to us with their eyes closed, imagining. There are millions of people out there who want only to get themselves a face they can show with pride, to create one that’s different from all the others. That’s all they worry about. Now is the time to find out what’s behind the face.’

‘I don’t understand.’

Silence again, long enough to make Jean-Loup think they had been cut

off. Then the voice came back and some listeners thought they could hear a hint of a smile.

'You'll understand, in time.'

'I'm not sure what you mean.'

There was a slight pause, as if the man on the other end of the line was weighing his words.

'Don't worry. Sometimes it's hard for me, too.'

'Then why did you call? Why are you talking to me?'

'Because I'm alone.'

Jean-Loup bent his head and gripped the table with his hand.

'You're talking like someone who's in prison.'

'We're all in prison. I built mine myself, but that doesn't make it any easier to get out.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. It doesn't sound like you like people very much.'

'Do you?'

'Not always. Sometimes I try to understand them and when I can't, I try at least not to judge them.'

'We're the same that way too. The only difference is that when you're finished talking to them, you're able to feel tired. You can go home and turn off your mind and its troubles. I can't. I can't sleep at night, because my troubles never rest.'

'So what do you do at night to stop it?'

Jean-Loup was egging him on slightly. The answer was slow to come, as though it were wrapped in layers of paper being opened one by one.

'I kill . . .'

'What does that—'

Jean-Loup's voice was interrupted by music coming from the speakers. It was a light plaintive song with a pretty melody, but after those two words it spread through the air like a threat. It lasted about ten seconds and then, as suddenly as it had come, it was gone.

In the heavy silence that followed, the click of the call being cut off was heard by one and all. Jean-Loup looked around at his colleagues. The

air-conditioning was on high, but suddenly everyone could feel the scorching flames of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Someone managed to drag the rest of the programme out to its closing song. No more phone calls came in. That is to say, the switchboard was flooded after the strange call, but no more callers were allowed on air.

Jean-Loup took off his headphones and laid them on the table next to the mike. He realized that his hair was soaked with sweat, in spite of the air-conditioning.

Neither of us will ever be the same.

He played only music for the remainder of the show. He tried to demonstrate what he considered a strange similarity between Tom Waits and the Italian musician Paolo Conte, who were very different as singers, but both major songwriters. He translated the words of two of their songs and pointed out how important they were. Luckily, he had several such expedients in case of emergency, and this moment definitely qualified. There were some reserve phone numbers to use when the show just wouldn't come together. They'd call some singers or writers they knew, begging them to join in. Then they'd use up fifteen minutes on some poetry and the humour of Francis Cabrel.

'Jean-Loup?' The door to the control room opened and Laurent's head poked in. 'You okay?'

Jean-Loup glanced over without looking at him. 'Yeah, fine.'

They left the studio together, exchanging puzzled, somewhat evasive glances with Barbara and Jacques, the sound technicians. Barbara was wearing a blue shirt and Jean-Loup noticed that there were large patches of sweat under her arms.

'There were dozens of calls. Two people asked if it was a mystery story and a bunch of people were furious at what they saw as a cheap way to try and increase the ratings. The boss called, too, and swooped down like a hawk. He fell for it and asked if we had gone nuts. Apparently, one of the sponsors had called him immediately, and I don't think it was to offer a pat on the back.'

Jean-Loup was imagining the president's room, more smoke-filled than earlier, if that were possible.

‘Why didn’t the switchboard filter that call?’

‘I don’t know what the hell happened. Raquel says the call didn’t go through her. Somehow – she has no idea how – it went right into the studio line. There must have been a short or something. As far as I’m concerned, that new electronic switchboard has a mind of its own. We’ll all be fighting with machines one day, like in *Terminator*. You’ll see.’

They left the studio and walked side by side to Bikjalo’s office without daring to look at one another. Those two words had left a small, hollow space between them. *I kill* . . . The awful sound of that voice was still hovering in the air.

‘And that music at the end? It sounded familiar.’

‘I thought so, too. It was a soundtrack, I think. *A Man and a Woman*, an old Lelouch film. From 1966 or something like that.’

‘And what does it mean?’

‘You’re asking me?’

Jean-Loup was astonished. He was facing something entirely new, something he had never experienced before on the radio. On an emotional level more than anything else. ‘What do you think?’

‘It doesn’t mean anything.’ Laurent pronounced these words with a careless wave of his hand, but he sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than anyone else.

‘Really?’

‘Sure. Aside from the switchboard problem, I think it was just some jerk’s really bad idea of a joke.’

They stopped in front of Bikjalo’s door and Jean-Loup turned the knob. They finally looked each other in the eye.

‘It’s just a weird story to tell at the gym and laugh about,’ said Laurent, thinking out loud. But he didn’t look at all convinced.

Jean-Loup pushed open the door. As he walked into the manager’s office, he wondered whether that phone call was a promise or a bet.