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Force Protection

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Prologue

The old bull elephant stamped.

The matriarch let the stripped acacia branch drop at her feet and turned her head a little. The bull stamped again, snorted. She took a step toward him and then looked down at her calf, unsure. He stamped again.

All through their band, heads came up.

The old bull's ears shot forward, full display, and he stamped, louder, and trumpeted. There was a noise now, a noise they all knew, and the alien metal smell. *Too close*, the old bull was saying. She turned away, her calf at her side, and began to move along the nearly dry watercourse, away from the noise. She was the matriarch, and the others followed her lead. She moved quickly, easily, fitting her bulk between trees or just knocking older wood down. She wanted to get into deeper cover first, while the bull did his job.

Braaat. A noise like a tree being torn out of the ground right beside her. She whirled and her calf was gone. She started to go back. She could smell her own fear and that of her sisters all around her. Her calf was kneeling at the base of a tree, slumping down slowly, and she knew he was done. She keened a little, and *Braaat* sounded again. Something punched her in the head and stung her ear and she bellowed her pain. One of her sisters stumbled, fell, didn't rise. The ripping noises were all around her, everywhere, and she

watched another, younger bull go down heavily, his feet thrashing and tearing at the dry earth even as he gave his death cry. All their shrieks tore the air, audible for miles, the message clear to other elephants. *Panic and death.*

Angry and afraid, she whirled her bulk back and forth, looking for her assailants, looking for the predator killing her family. She hated with a wild hate, and called, standing over her dead calf, until the *braaat* finished her, too.

He was a big, confident white man with a sneering smile. His black soldiers feared him. He walked through the carnage, his 'boys' already cutting the ivory and in two cases taking the hides. Younger men were cutting the tails for bracelets. He shook his head at the two dead calves.

'That's a waste of ammunition,' he said to a young black man, his own South African accent plain. 'No reason to shoot 'em. Nothing on 'em worth taking back.' He made 'back' sound like 'beck.' The boy nodded, his eyes still wide from shooting the elephants. The South African thought that killing elephants was an excellent way to train his men. He walked back to the big truck that they had come in to lay their ambush hours before, took a long drink of water to wash the red dust from his throat, and reached for the cell phone on the seat.

Sixty miles down the coast of Kenya, in the small city of Malindi, a man also reached for his cell phone. He was dark with sun but not African – Mediterranean, rather, perhaps Maltese or even Spanish. His English was accented but clear, slightly Americanized. He was

a small man, not quite middle-aged, muscular. He was sitting in the well of a thirty-foot power boat in the Malindi marina, sipping Byrrh and looking at a handsome black woman in a thong.

'Uh,' he said into the phone.

'This is Cousin Eddie.'

He knew the voice and the South African accent. A prick, but a necessary prick, was his view. 'Uh,' he said again. The topless woman was lying on the deck of the next boat over. Her nipples pointed skyward like little antiaircraft guns, he thought. He'd had experience of antiaircraft guns.

'We got eleven nice pianos.' 'Pianos' were elephants (because piano keys used to be made from elephant ivory).

'Send them down. Everything okay? The kids, they're okay?' The 'kids' were fifty adult mercenaries, mostly Rwandan Hutus.

'Kids are fine. They're playing every day.'

'Ready for the celebration?'

'Can't wait! Everything going nicely.'

'I sent you three new kids with toy boats.'

'Yeah, got here last night. Very eager.'

The man in Malindi thought that for what he was paying, they should have been very eager indeed, but he didn't say anything about that. Instead, he said that the kids should be kept busy with their toy boats, and he didn't want anything to go wrong at the celebration, was that perfectly clear? The South African at the other end said that was perfectly clear, in the voice that men use to show that they don't take shit from anybody, to which the man in Malindi responded by grunting and shutting down his cell phone and watching the topless woman grease herself with lotion. Then

he turned the phone back on and put in a call that went by way of a pass-through in Indonesia to a number in Sicily.

Carmine Santangelo-Fugosi was the son of a small-time smuggler who had been born in a mountain village and who now lived in an eighteenth-century palace that had been built by the family that had once ruled this part of Sicily. The head of the family had been called 'Count;' that had lasted almost until Carmine's father had been a young man. Now Carmine lived there, and people showed him even more reverence than they had shown the counts, and they called him *Don*.

He was tall for a Sicilian, slightly stooped, fifty, a solidly built man with thick features and a head of graying hair that he left long because he was trying to hide pattern baldness. He wore a collarless white shirt and pleated trousers and felt slippers, and from time to time he spat on the floor of his own terrace, big gobs, to show he was a peasant and came from peasants.

'This is very nice,' a small Lebanese man said in French from the shade of an umbrella, ignoring the spit. The umbrella was fixed in a cast-iron table with a glass top and rather too much filigree work in the legs – more of Carmine's peasant taste – and matched by the chairs around it. The Lebanese wore sunglasses and a weary-looking cotton suit the color of muddy water. With him at the table was an almost pretty man who translated the French into Italian for Carmine Santangelo-Fugosi.

Carmine looked around at his terrace, his eighteenth-century palazzo, his flowers and his French doors and

his tiled floors. Of course it was *nice*. Carmine was a fucking billionaire – what did he expect? 'I don't want any shit from Hizbollah,' Carmine said.

The Lebanese made a gesture that indicated that shit was something that Hizbollah would never in a million years give him. He said in French that none of this would ever get back to Hizbollah and that if it ever did, he, the Lebanese, swore on his mother's grave – he was a Christian – that he would kill himself.

Carmine looked at him as the translation came and said, 'Tell him that if Hizbollah finds out, he'll wish he'd killed himself today.'

Then Carmine's cell phone went off and he turned away, the phone at his ear, and walked to the edge of his terrace, where a balustrade separated him from the twenty-meter drop to the town below. Down there were a street, a café, roofs, and then the port and the Mediterranean, sparkling away to Africa.

'And?' he said into the phone when the man in Malindi had finished his report. Carmine kept his voice low and his back turned to the table, which, because the terrace was so big, was too far away for anybody to have heard him, anyway. Plus the Lebanese wasn't supposed to understand Italian, but Carmine never trusted things like that. People lied about themselves all the time. He leaned on the balustrade and carried on his side of the conversation in grunts and monosyllables, turning slowly to look around the terrace. Two other men were there, one at each doorway, arms folded, impassive, both the children of his father's relatives. Both armed.

'So,' he said. He covered the phone with his other hand so he could look at the Lebanese while he talked. The Lebanese was getting a lot of money to do the job,

but could he do it? Carmine wondered if he should get rid of the man and start over. No, there wasn't time. 'I don't care about that,' he said into the phone when the other man started to give him details. 'All I want is your assurance that everything will be ready for the celebration. Your *absolute* assurance.' When he heard the reply, he grunted and switched off, but the grunt was a positive one. He trusted the man in Malindi.

He spat. He couldn't spit like that without a certain run-up, a certain amount of sound not unlike retching. He went back to the table and waved a hand at one of the other men, who came over and poured him more coffee and then backed away.

Carmine took a biscotto in his right hand and, holding it between his thumb and third finger, used it to lecture the Lebanese. 'I want the only face on this to be Muslim, you follow me?' Carmine came from a village where they had still now and then been visited by puppeteers who did plays from the romances about Saracens and Christian knights; his sense of Islam was based in that half-sophisticated, half-ignorant past. 'That's what the world is to see. That's what Jean-Marc is for.' He gestured with the cookie at the handsome translator, who was actually a freelance television journalist and who smiled at them as if he was on camera. 'You deliver Mombasa,' Carmine said to the Lebanese. He dipped the biscotto, sucked the now-soaked end. 'No mistakes. You don't get a second chance. Eh?'

'Of course, of course –' The Lebanese was afraid of him and showed it – never a bad idea with Carmine, who liked fear in the people around him. The Lebanese tapped the glass top of the table. 'I have everything arranged –' He stopped. The translator was shaking his head at him.

Carmine hawked and spat and waved his left hand. 'Don't tell me details. Tell Carlo or somebody. Get out.' He looked toward a door. 'Carlo!'

The Lebanese was hustled out, his right hand halfway up to give a parting handshake, his mouth still open. He would be back in his Christian village in Lebanon by midnight. It might seem he would have nothing to fear there from somebody living in Sicily. But he knew better.

Carmine sat at the table with the translator, wiping his mouth with a cloth napkin. 'What do you think?' he said.

'I think I don't understand what is going on, *Don*,' he murmured.

'You don't need to understand!' Carmine's head was down like a bull's. 'You do what I pay you to do – you talk nice, look pretty on the camera, you keep saying what I tell you. You don't hear nothing, you don't know nothing, you weren't here today, and you didn't meet this no-balls Lebanese! Yes?'

'Yes, yes – of course – *Don*.'

Carmine sat back. He fingered a cigarette out of a pack on the table without looking. 'You want to keep a secret, you chop it into pieces and you give each guy a piece. They look at it, they say, "I don't know what I got here." That's how it stays a secret.'

He lit the cigarette and turned and looked across the terrace at the sea, his legs spread, his forearms on his knees and his hands joined, smoke blowing from the side of his mouth. The sea was empty but he seemed to see something there, because he said, 'The US Navy, that's what I worry about. Fucking US Navy.'