Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

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

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

Opening Extract from...

Death in August

Written by Marcho Vichi

Originally published in Italian as *Il Commissario Bordelli*

Translated by Stephen Sartarelli

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

All text is copyright © of the author

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

MARCO VICHI

DEATH IN AUGUST

THE FIRST
INSPECTOR BORDELLI
MYSTERY

Originally published in Italian as *Il Commissario Bordelli*
Translated by Stephen Sartarelli

HODDER &
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

1

Copyright © Ugo Guanda Editore, S.p.A., Parma 2002
Translation copyright © Stephen Sartarelli 2011

The right of Marco Vichi to be identified as the Author
of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form
or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher,
nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover
other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition
being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance
to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available
from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 444 71220 9
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 71361 9

Typeset in Plantin Light by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and
recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The
logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the
environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

To Véronique

For crickets, it's enough to have won on earth.

Anonymous, 21st century

Florence, Summer 1963

Inspector Bordelli entered his office at eight o'clock in the morning after an almost sleepless night, spent tossing and turning between sweat-soaked sheets. These were the first days of August, hot and muggy, without a breath of wind. And the nights were even more humid and unhealthy. But at least the city was deserted, the cars few and far between, the silence almost total. The beaches, on the other hand, were noisy and full of peeling bodies. Every umbrella had its transistor radio, every child a little bucket.

Before even sitting down, Bordelli spotted a typewritten sheet of paper on his desk and craned his neck to see what it was about. He noticed that it was typed very neatly, clean and precise, the lines nice and even, with nothing crossed out. He was astonished to see that it was a routine report. There was nobody he knew at police headquarters capable of drafting a report like that. Just as he started reading it, somebody knocked at the door. Mugnai's round head appeared.

'Dr Inzipone wants you, Inspector,' he said.

'Oh, shit . . .' said Bordelli, squirming. Inzipone was Commissioner of Police. He always sent for Bordelli at the worst moments. It was a good thing the commissioner was about to go on holiday too. The inspector stood up from his chair with a wheeze and went and knocked at the commissioner's door. Inzipone greeted him with an odd smile.

'Sit down, Bordelli, I've got something to tell you.' The inspector sat down listlessly and made himself comfortable. The commissioner himself stood up and started walking about, hands clasped behind his back.

'I wanted to have a chat about last Friday's dragnet,' he said.

'I had the report drawn up yesterday.'

'Yes, I know, I've already read it. I just wanted to tell you a couple of things.'

'All right.'

'I'll be clear about this, Bordelli. As I've always said, you are an excellent policeman, but your concept of justice is, well, a bit peculiar.'

'What do you mean?'

Inzipone paused for a moment, to find the right words, and looked out of the window, turning his back to the inspector.

'I mean . . . there are laws, my dear Bordelli, and we are paid by our citizens to make sure they are respected. We can't take matters into our own hands; we can't decide when to enforce the law and when not to.'

'I know,' Bordelli said calmly. He couldn't stand all this beating about the bush, this false way of saying things. Inzipone turned round and looked at him.

'During Friday's dragnet, you let a number of offenders get away,' he said drily.

'Nobody's perfect.'

'No, no, Bordelli, you haven't understood what I said – or rather, you've understood all too well. They didn't escape from you; you deliberately set them free, after you'd arrested them.'

'I must be getting old . . .'

Inzipone sighed and resumed pacing about the room.

'A thief is always a thief, Bordelli. The courts will decide on the punishment. Don't you think Robin Hood is a little out of date?'

Bordelli started feeling a strange tingling in his hands.

'Dr Inzipone, we're here to enforce the law, that much is clear. But so far I've come across no law that ensures everyone's survival.'

'This has nothing to with politics.'

'Politics? A man who needs to eat wipes his arse with politics.'

'Must you always be so vulgar, Bordelli?'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I thought vulgarity was something else.'

'This is a simple matter of either doing or not doing your duty.'

'I have a duty to myself, too.'

'I realise that. But it's not yours to decide whether thieves go free!'

'I didn't let any thieves go free. I simply released a few poor bastards.'

'That is precisely what I'm trying to say. It is not your decision to—'

'Let me tell you something, Dr Inzipone. When I returned from the war, I hoped I had done my small part to liberate Italy from the shit we were in; but now all I see is mountains of shit, everywhere . . .'

'We all know about your great valour during the war, Bordelli.'

'Cut the crap. You know as well as I do that we're worse off now.'

'That's a bit of an exaggeration . . .'

'I hate dragnets, Dr Inzipone, they remind me of the Fascists' round-ups. But if I have to take part in them, I'm certainly not going to put hungry people in jail.'

Inzipone threw up his hands, resigned.

'I've turned a blind eye to you many times, Bordelli. But this is happening a little too often.'

'What am I supposed to say? That I'll be a good boy? Which means, I'll get tough with the poor?'

'You have a way, Bordelli, of always saying the most irritating things.'

'Believe me, I don't mean to. Can I go now? I've got a couple of beggars to hang.'

Inzipone eyed him, clenching his teeth. He knew there was little he could do about Bordelli's methods, because he was, after all, an excellent inspector, he was loved by the entire department, and everybody knew that, in the end, he was right. There *was* too much poverty about.

* * *

Bordelli returned to his office. A few minutes later, Mugnai knocked again.

'Coffee, Inspector?'

'Yes, thanks. Listen, who wrote this?' he asked, waving in the air the stellar report he had found on his desk.

'A new guy, Inspector. Piras is the name.'

'Sardinian?'

'From head to toe.'

'Send him in to me, if you would.'

'Immediately, or with the coffee?'

'With the coffee.'

'All right, Inspector.'

Mugnai disappeared. Before returning to the report, Bordelli got up, opened the windows and half closed the shutters. As he did every summer, he thought it would be nice if all the holidaymakers decided en masse never to return to town. There would be everlasting peace.

He sat back down and picked up the report. He read it all in one go, quickly scanning the lines. It was about a car accident. Normally such matters were assigned to Vaccarezza, but in August the department was half empty. Bordelli took care not to take any time off during this period. He preferred battling the mosquitoes in the deserted city to finding himself alone as a dog on a crowded holiday beach wanting nothing more than to go home, where he might find a little peace. And this was why the report of an ordinary car accident had been put on his desk.

Somebody knocked again, and the door opened. On the threshold stood a lad Bordelli had never seen before, holding an espresso cup and saucer.

'You sent for me, Inspector?' The intonation was typically Sardinian: bouncy, proud, almost aggressive.

'Are you Piras?'

'In person.'

'Come in . . .'

He was young and handsome, with a bony face, two dark,

intense eyes, short but well built. On the whole, a likable sort.

'Mugnai told me to bring you this,' he said, indicating the coffee.

'Thanks,' said Bordelli, still looking at him. Piras set the little cup on the desk and remained standing.

'Where are you from, Piras? I mean, what part of Sardinia?'

'A little town near Oristano.'

'But what's it called? Come on, don't keep standing, have a seat.'

'Thanks, Inspector. I'm from Bonacardo.'

Bordelli leaned forward and looked him straight in the eye.

'Piras, from Bonacardo . . . Don't tell me your father's name is Gavino.'

'That's exactly right, Inspector. His name is Gavino.'

The inspector ran a hand over his face, shaking his head.

'It's not possible,' he said to himself.

'Is anything wrong, Inspector?' asked Piras, concerned. Bordelli didn't reply. He merely stared into space for a moment, looking absent. Then he opened a drawer of his desk and started rummaging through it with both hands, searching for something. At last he found it. A photograph. Setting it down on the desk, he spun it round with two fingers and pushed it towards Piras: three uniformed soldiers, framed from the waist up, leaning their heads together and smiling. Piras opened his eyes wide.

'But that's . . . my father!'

'Yeah, that's him all right,' said Bordelli, mimicking a Sardinian accent.

'So you must be . . . the Bordelli who saved his life!' Piras said excitedly. The inspector felt embarrassed, like a little kid. Piras picked up the photo and continued to look at it, incredulous. A faint smile played on his lips, parting them.

'When I tell my father about this . . .' he said.

'Send him the photo,' said Bordelli.

'Thank you, Inspector. My father will like that very much.'

Piras looked at the snapshot a moment longer, then put it in his pocket. Bordelli sighed.

'So, tell me, how is Gavino?'

'He's fine, Inspector, still strong as an ox.'

'I'm sure he's never told you, because he was always very modest, but he was one of the best. I always brought him along on my patrols. He was quiet and alert, like a cat, and we used to communicate with our eyes. He would sniff out the Germans as if he could actually smell them; he could see the Nazi convoys when the rest of us hadn't heard the slightest sound.'

The inspector also thought about the arm that Gavino had left behind in the nettles thanks to a mine, right at the end of the war. But he didn't know how to bring it up. He would have liked to know whether his old friend had any problems, whether there was any way he could help, but he didn't want to risk offending his son.

'And what is he up to these days?' he asked.

'He works as a caretaker at a school, but whenever he gets the chance, he runs off to his little patch of land so he can play peasant and talk to his animals.'

'What kind of animals has he got?'

'Pigs, sheep, chickens, rabbits, doves . . . There's even a turtle, and he talks to all of them as if they were people.'

Bordelli felt relieved.

'He liked animals back then, too. Has he ever told you he spent the last two years of the war with a mouse in his pocket? He even gave it a name—'

'He called it Gioacchino. He brought it home with him. It died when I was three.'

They talked about the past, the war and Gavino for a good half-hour.

Piras was eighteen years old. Apparently Gavino had wasted no time upon his return, promptly marrying his former girlfriend and getting straight down to the matter at hand. He certainly didn't need both arms to make babies, and after the

first son, they had four more. As the conversation wound down, Bordelli sighed wistfully. He felt very old.

'Has your father got a telephone?' he asked.

'No, Inspector, I get in touch with him through the village priest.'

'Next time you talk to him, give him a hug for me, and tell him I would love to see him again.'

'Thanks, Inspector.'

For Bordelli, seeing Gavino Piras again would be like returning to the front lines. He felt at once very sad and very pleased. A gust of hot air filtered through the half-closed shutters, enveloping his face, and he felt his forehead bead with sweat.

'Now, to us, Piras.' He tapped the report with his forefinger. 'Did you write this?'

'Why, is there something wrong with it?'

The inspector scratched the back of his neck.

'No, on the contrary. It's very well done. I bet when you were a little kid you wanted to become a policeman,' said Bordelli, smiling. Piras remained serious.

'I've always liked discovering the hidden side of things, especially when everything looks completely normal on the surface.'

'I'm the same way, Piras. We're both cursed.' Piras gave a hint of a smile, with only his eyes. The rest of his face remained stony. It was probably a rare thing to see him laugh in earnest.

They remained silent for a few seconds, listening to a distant siren until its wail became confused with the buzzing of a restless fly. The heat was intense, the kind that slows the thought processes. Bordelli felt a bead of sweat drip down his side and bestirred himself.

'What do you want to do in the police force?' he asked the boy.

'Murder,' Piras said firmly.

'I guessed as much.'

'I should leave now, sir. I have to go somewhere in the car.'

'Have a good day.'

Piras thanked him and left the room with a firm step, not a drop of sweat on him. Bordelli's shirt, on the other hand, was wet and sticking to his back, and he envied the Sardinian with all his heart. He remembered the coffee and brought the cup to his lips. It was disgustingly lukewarm, but he drank it anyway.

Rodrigo lived in Viale Gramsci, in the nineteenth-century quarter that had sprouted up along the line of the Renaissance-era walls, after these were demolished. Broad avenues, no commerce. Inspector Bordelli rang the buzzer outside the main entrance and waited. His cousin worked at home in the afternoon and was usually loath to leave his desk. He taught chemistry at the *liceo* and saw the world through formulas. He was constantly assigning written exercises, then spent his afternoons correcting them. That was why he taught: so he could correct. In August, when everybody else was on holiday, Rodrigo was still correcting avalanches of homework that he would thrust into the faces of his pupils on the first day of class in October.

In childhood, he and Rodrigo had silently detested each other. Bordelli was two years older and used to frighten Rodrigo with the faces he made. In adolescence they ended up spending a few summers on the same beach. Their parents would send them out to sea together to fish, but all Bordelli could think about when they were on the water together was drowning his cousin. By age twenty, as fate would have it, they lost sight of each other, but on the first Christmas after the war, they met up again. And they shook hands and decided once and for all that they were different from one another. Neither had married, but for different reasons: the inspector because he was waiting for the right girl, and Rodrigo because he was afraid to spend too much, in every sense. Ever since that Christmas, they would seek each other out some three or four times a year, never for any particular reason, but as if, every so often, they both needed to see, with their own eyes, the abyss of difference between them, either as confirmation or for love of the challenge. And they would part, each pleased not to be like the other. For

Bordelli it was always a relief to realise that the whole world wasn't like Rodrigo, and Rodrigo always openly declared that Bordelli was not at all right in the head. But they didn't hate each other; they couldn't because they were too far apart. Actually, there was a sort of bond between them, though neither of them would ever have admitted it.

Bordelli rang the bell again, and at last Rodrigo came to a window on the fourth floor. Seeing his policeman cousin below, he stopped and looked at him, remaining provocatively immobile. The inspector gestured to him to open the door, but the other just stood there, staring at him. Then he saw Rodrigo disappear, and a moment later he heard the click of the electric lock on the door. Climbing the stone stairs, he detected the smells of old furniture and carpets, typical of that building. On the fourth floor he found the door open, but no one there to welcome him. He entered and noticed with pleasure that it was cool in the apartment. Rodrigo was sitting in the living room with pen in hand, obviously a red pen. He did not greet him or even look up from his papers. Bordelli sat down on the edge of the desk.

'Well? So how's Rodrigo?'

'You're sitting on the homework assignments I need to correct.'

'Oh, sorry. Where should I put them?'

'If I put them there, it means that's where they're supposed to be.' He spoke fast, correcting all the while, eyes fixed on the page. Bordelli stood up and put everything back in place.

'I'm going to make tea. Will you have some?' he asked politely.

'The housekeeper cleaned the kitchen a couple of hours ago,' said Rodrigo, still without looking up.

'So what? Does that mean you'll never cook again?'

'All right, all right, go and make your tea.' It seemed like a major concession.

'Lemon or milk?' asked Bordelli.

'Milk.'

'Sugar?'

'No sugar. There's honey in the cupboard on the right.'

'How many spoonfuls?'

'Two. Teaspoons, that is.'

'I got that.'

'I'd like a little silence.'

'I'll be silent as the grave.'

It was strange to talk to someone who was correcting papers without ever looking you in the eye. Bordelli thought about annoying him further by asking him what kind of cup he wanted, whether he wanted a napkin and what kind, paper or cloth, and other things of that sort, but thought better of it. He went into the kitchen to make the tea, trying to create as little mess as possible. He returned with cups in hand and found his cousin in the same position. Rodrigo seemed to have turned to stone. He was staring at a sheet of paper. He was only happy when he could make sweeping strokes of red ink. Bordelli set Rodrigo's tea down in a random spot on the desk, at the very moment his cousin was finishing a broad red flourish of the pen.

'Another mistake? Are they big mistakes or little mistakes?' he asked. Rodrigo finally raised his head and looked at him.

'Remove that wet cup immediately,' he said icily.

'It's your tea.'

'Get that mess out of here, it's making a ring on my agenda.'

'What's the problem? You're only going to throw it away at the end of the year.'

Rodrigo heaved a sigh of forbearance and decided to intervene personally. Setting down the red pen, he lifted the cup and wiped the cover of his agenda with a paper napkin, which he then rolled up into a ball and tossed into a wastepaper basket under the desk. Bordelli followed his every move with great curiosity. In a way his cousin's precision fascinated him; it looked very much as if it stemmed from some sort of madness. Rodrigo then straightened his back and gave a smile that was supposed to convey calm and serenity.

'Why are you here? Do you have something specific to tell me?' he asked.

'No, why? Does it seem as if I have?'

'I don't care. Why did you come?'

'For a chat.'

'All right, then. Let's chat.' Rodrigo folded his arms to show that he was interrupting his corrections. Bordelli sat down comfortably in a chair, and with his teacup balanced on his thigh, he lit a cigarette.

'So, then, how are things, Rodrigo?' he asked with a hint of a smile. Rodrigo stood up and opened his eyes wide.

'Put out that disgusting cigarette immediately,' he said, trying to contain his rage.

'I don't see an ashtray.'

'Do you know that it takes a week for the smell of smoke to go away?'

'I swear I didn't know,' Bordelli said, inhaling deeply, as if it were his last puff, asking again for an ashtray with his eyes. Rodrigo opened a secretaire and pulled out a small souvenir dish from Pompeii, set this in front of him, and immediately stepped back. Bordelli snuffed out his still-whole cigarette.

'So . . . aside from the cigarette, how are you? Getting along all right?' Bordelli asked. Rodrigo had sat back down at the desk, but seemed a little more inclined to chat, even if he had no choice.

'Yes, all right, not too bad. And yourself?' he said.

'Like shit, Rodrigo, I feel like shit . . . Oh, sorry, I know you don't like profanities.'

'It doesn't matter,' Rodrigo said, understandingly.

'In short, I feel like shit . . . I'm fifty-three years old, and when I come home there's nobody there waiting for me.'

'If you live alone, of course there's nobody waiting for you.'

'That's not what I meant.'

'So why don't you speak more clearly?'

'Jesus . . .'

'What is it now?'

'Nothing, nothing . . . Tell me something, are you still with that woman . . . what was her name?'

'What's she got to do with anything? And I don't like the way you phrased that.'

'Have you ever wondered why you like so much to correct other people's mistakes?'

'You're changing the subject again . . .'

'I was only curious as to why you like so much to correct other people's mistakes.'

'What's wrong with that?'

'Come on, try to be nice. I'm only trying to start a discussion.'

'What kind of discussion?'

'Any kind, provided it lasts more than two sentences.'

'Maybe we have nothing to say to each other.'

'Even two people who have nothing to say to each other can still talk.'

'That's an absurd statement.'

'Listen, why don't you tell me . . . I don't know, tell me what you do on Sundays, for example.'

'I try to rest.'

'You don't correct any papers?'

'And what if I do? I really don't see what you're getting at.'

'Nothing, I'm not trying to get at anything. As I said, I just wanted to have a chat.'

'Well, unfortunately, I have to work.'

'In August?'

'That's right, in August. Why not?'

'I have nothing to say.'

'Strange . . .'

'Tell me something, Rodrigo. Who do you vote for?'

'I vote for whoever I feel like voting for.'

'I don't doubt that. But are you satisified with the way things are going?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean just what I said.'

Rodrigo sighed indulgently and started fiddling with his red pen.

'Italy used to be all wheat and sheep . . . and now prosperity is finally on its way,' he said.

'For whom, exactly?'

'For everyone. We used to be a nation of peasants, and now we all drive cars.' As usual, after a difficult start, Rodrigo was warming up to the idea of talking.

'The power of statistics,' said Bordelli. 'Do you watch a lot of television?'

'Why? Do you want to be left behind?'

'Left behind by what?'

'For now, we're still at the beginning, but before long, you'll be amazed.'

'I'm already amazed.'

'If each does his part, we'll all be fine.'

'I don't know why, but I don't like that statement.'

'Can't you see that you don't understand? You don't understand that everything is governed by the laws of chemistry, even man and society—'

'So it's all very simple, in other words.'

'Look, it's easy to see what you're thinking. You're one of those who think chemistry is only a cold science.'

'Ah, you mean I'm not alone?'

'You don't understand, none of you. One need only find the right formula for each thing. There are certain substances that can change the molecular structure of others. Some compounds are inert until they come into contact with a new agent that makes them explode . . . It's not magic; everything is governed by precise rules.'

'And where does prosperity fit in with all this?'

'Prosperity is the result of new combinations of elements that have always existed. Is that not chemistry? This is an important moment for our country . . . and Italians know this.'

'Italians? What do you mean by "Italians?"'

'I don't understand.'

'Which Italians are you talking about? The lawyer who lives on the floor below, or the day-labourer from Bari?'

'Everything's always a joke to you.'

'Look, I'm not joking. Which Italians do you mean?'

'You tell me something. How did you end up becoming a policeman?'

'Actually, it's a good profession. I've made a lot of friends as a policeman.'

'And a fine lot they are: prostitutes and thieves . . .'

'You should meet them some time, Rodrigo. They could teach you a great deal.'

'You are insane.'

'Right, I'm insane because I refuse to condemn the poor and I despise this dream-besotted country that believes in the Fiat 1100.'

'What are you, a communist?'

Bordelli shook his head.

'For now, it is easier to say what I'm not,' he said. Rodrigo raised the red pen and then dropped it on to the papers.

'As usual, you don't know what you want,' he said smugly.

'That's possible, but I don't like a poor little country that dresses up as if it's rich. It's asking for trouble.'

Rodrigo huffed and made as if to resume correcting papers. Bordelli finished his now cold tea and put an unlit cigarette in his mouth.

'Don't worry, I won't light it,' he said, raising a hand.

'I'm not worried,' Rodrigo muttered. Bordelli stood up, approached the desk slowly, then leaned on it with both hands.

'You know, Rodrigo, I really believe that, somewhere, there is a woman made just for me . . . Isn't that also a question of chemistry?'

'I don't like the way you put it.'

'Why, how did I put it?'

Rodrigo tightened his lips and said nothing. Snatching a paper already marked in red from the stack, he went back to work. Bordelli looked at his watch. He had a great many things to attend to, and here he was wasting his time doing nothing.

'I'll let you work,' he said.

'I've still got seventy more to correct.'

'That's a lot . . .'

'Have you anything else to say to me?'

'Let me think.'

Bordelli pulled out a box of matches and started to shake it as if it were some South American percussion instrument.

'You're making noise,' said Rodrigo, annoyed. Bordelli immediately stopped.

'You know something, Rodrigo? One day I'd like to take you to the forensics department and show you the corpses.'

'I'm not interested.'

'You're wrong not to be. You don't know how many things you could learn.'

'Make sure you shut the door on your way out.'

'Don't worry, I'll seal everything up.'

'Bye.'

'Goodbye, Rodrigo. Give my regards to Auntie.'

The inspector set his cup down on a stack of papers and left Rodrigo to his flourishes of red ink. As soon as he was on the landing, he lit his cigarette.

Three weeks of relative calm passed at police headquarters. But it was even hotter than before. The humid, motionless air ruled every corner of the city. The houses were saturated with the smell of *zampironi* and DDT. In that hazy summer solitude Bordelli often indulged in long monologues in his mind, especially at night in bed, before falling asleep. Or, perhaps more correctly, before sinking into that sort of laborious, memory-laden sleep which got him through the night. It was a kind of semi-consciousness peopled with overlapping images, where distant memories merged with absurd fantasies, and fatuous little dramas played themselves over and over to the point of obsession, tiring him out until they finally woke him up. At which point he would get out of bed, go into the bathroom, drink two or three glasses of water, then lie back down again, not bothering to cover himself with the sheet. Window

still open, a pitcher of water with ice cubes on the nightstand. Sometimes he couldn't go back to sleep at all and would spend hours and hours in a confused state of mind, as if jumping from branch to branch like a restless monkey.

Rosa, for her part, had fled the city. But not before phoning Bordelli to invite him to join her and her girlfriends on their way to Forte dei Marmi. The old retired prostitute had the innocence of a pup.

'Come on, darling, drop everything and come with us. You'll have three women to yourself, all in love with you.'

Bordelli had made up some annoying chores that kept him hopelessly stuck in town. He really didn't feel like playing the stud with three ingenuous whores. Rosa had praised his heroism and asked him to keep an eye on her place.

'You know, with all the burglars about . . .' she had said. She complained that it was no longer the way it used to be, when she, the beautiful Rosa, was well known on the circuit and didn't need to worry. Things were different now; the new generations of burglars didn't look anyone in the eye.

'And don't forget the flowers, dear, don't let them wither like last year.'

'I won't.'

'Thank you, you're such a sweetie. I'll leave the keys with Carlino for you.'

Carlino was the barman at the corner café. He never closed shop.

'Have fun.'

'No need to tell us that, darling!' she said, sending a barrage of kisses through the receiver.

Bordelli sighed in the dark and turned on to his side. He closed his eyes, hoping to go back to sleep. All of a sudden he saw in his mind's eye the tattered bodies of Caimano and Scardigli, after they had stepped on an anti-tank mine a hundred yards away from him. They hadn't even shouted. One of their arms had to be taken down from a tree. Fucking war. In the morning you were sharing dishwater coffee with

a friend, and that evening you were putting his body parts into a coffin.

Bordelli often thought about the war; he still felt it very close by. Sometimes it seemed as if he had stopped shooting at Nazis just yesterday. He could still hear the voices of his dead comrades, their laughter, each as distinct as a signature. He could still hear each one's personal verbal quirks and curses. If he had to name one good thing about the war, it was the way it had forcibly mixed people of every region together. One learned to recognise the different dialects and mentalities, the myths and hopes of every part of Italy.

Bordelli turned on to his other side and thought about the fact that he had nearly stopped smoking. This was a great triumph for him. During the war he had got up to a hundred cigarettes a day, the famously terrible MILIT cigarettes issued by the government. Once the Americans arrived, smoking no longer felt like torture. But Bordelli had kept smoking a hundred a day. Thinking about it now made him feel nauseated. Without turning on the light, he reached out and picked up a cigarette, his fourth. He propped himself up on one elbow and lit it. The ashtray was in the same place it had been for years; it was hard to miss. He smoked, still jumping from one memory to another, following no order whatsoever. Sometimes his head filled with many memories at once and they began to overlap, so that it became impossible to make any sense at all of the jumble. . . .

The telephone on the nightstand rang, and he groped in the dark for the receiver.

'Yes?'

'Is that you, Inspector?'

'I think so. What time is it?'

'Two.'

'Has something happened?'

Mugnai faltered.

'I don't know yet . . . I mean . . . well, a short while ago a woman phoned, saying she was worried . . . says some lady's not answering her phone, and she says that's unusual . . .

Inspector, do you by any chance know what a "lady companion" is?'

'I'm sorry, Mugnai, you'll have to start over again, from the beginning.'

'No, I'm the one who's sorry, Inspector. I probably shouldn't even have bothered you, but I'm here by myself, and you've always said that if I had any doubts about anything . . .'

'There's no problem, Mugnai, I'm listening, but try to make things simpler.'

'I'll try, Inspector, but nothing is clear, not even to me; I wrote everything down, otherwise I'd forget it . . . A little while ago a woman, called Maria, phoned saying she was the lady companion of a certain lady with two surnames . . . What's a lady companion?'

'I'll explain another time.'

'Does it have anything to do with whores?'

'Don't be ridiculous! Go on.'

'Sorry, Inspector. Anyway, this woman, Maria, I mean, says she spends the whole day with the lady, but then at eight o'clock she leaves because the lady wants to be alone at night. Every night, however, round midnight, she phones the lady to see how she's doing, because the lady is old and sort of sick.'

'You should say "elderly", Mugnai; "old" isn't very nice.'

'Whatever you say, Inspector . . . Anyway, so tonight Maria called at round about midnight, but there was no answer. She tried again a little later, but still no answer. She kept calling every fifteen minutes till one o'clock, and then she took a cab to go and check on the lady in person. She says she can see the light on inside, but the lady won't come to the door. So she called us.'

Bordelli had already started getting dressed.

'So why didn't she go inside?'

Mugnai slammed his hand down on the table.

'That's what I said, too, Inspector! Why didn't she go inside? And you know what she said?'

'What?'

'She said nobody else has got the keys to the villa, because the lady doesn't want to give them out.'

The inspector sighed.

'If she was so worried, she should have gone there with the woman's doctor and broken down the door,' he said. Mugnai practically ate the receiver.

'That's what I said, too, Inspector! And you know what she replied?'

'What?'

'She said the lady's doctor is so small that if he tried to break open the door he would break his shoulder.'

'Well, then the fire department.'

'I swear I said that, too. And so she says: "Well, at this point, there's nothing more to be done. The lady's dead."'

'Fine, I think I get the picture.'

'And you know what she said next, Inspector?'

Bordelli buckled his belt, holding the receiver between chin and shoulder.

'Go on, Mugnai, stop playing guessing games.'

'Sorry, Inspector.'

'Well, what did she say next?'

'She said the lady was murdered.'

'And how does she know that?'

'She doesn't know it. She only said she could sense it. Then she started crying.'

'Maybe she reads too many mysteries.'

Mugnai slammed his hand down somewhere else.

'That's what I thought, too, Inspector! So what are we gonna do?'

'Let me put on my shoes, and I'll be on my way.'

'Sorry about this, Inspector, but you always told me that—'

'Forget about it. I couldn't sleep, anyway. Give me the address.'

By half past two Bordelli was driving his VW Beetle up Via della Piazzola, a narrow little street in the hilly, posh end of