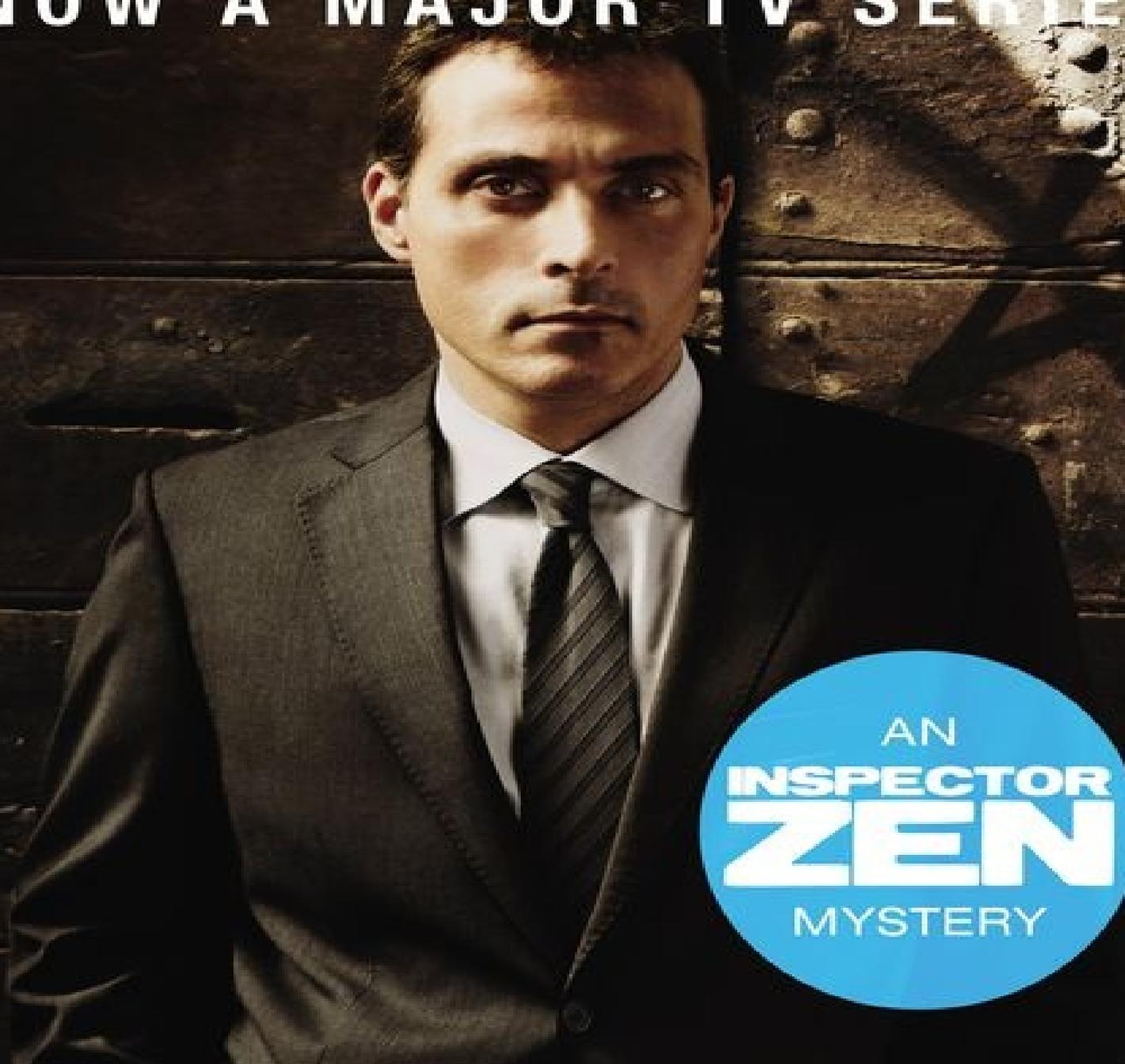


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‘Hello?’

‘*Hello? Who is it?*’

‘Who’s calling?’

‘*I want to speak to Senator Rossi.*’

‘Speaking.’

‘*Ah, it’s you, Senator? Forgive me! These phones make everyone sound like anyone, or rather no one. This is Antonio Crepi.*’

‘Commendatore! What a pleasure! Are you here in Rome?’

‘*In Rome? God forbid! No no. I’m in Perugia. At home, at the villa. You remember it?*’

‘But of course, of course. Of course.’

‘*When my eldest boy married.*’

‘Exactly. Precisely. An unforgettable occasion. A wonderful couple. How are they both?’

‘*I don’t see that much of them. Corrado’s moved to Milan and Annalisa’s seeing some footballer or so they tell me. Our paths don’t cross very often.*’

‘Ah, what a shame.’

‘*These things happen nowadays! I don’t really give a damn any more. At our age it’s absurd to go on pretending. Let them do what they like. Just as long as I’ve got my vines and my olives, and one or two friends I can still talk to. People I understand and who understand me. You know what I’m talking about?*’

‘Of course, of course! Friendship is the most important thing in life, I always say. No question about that.’

‘*I’m glad to hear you say so. Because the fact is I’m phoning to ask for your help on behalf of my friend. A mutual friend. I’m talking about Ruggiero Miletta.*’

‘Ah. A tragic business.’

‘*Do you know how long it has been now?*’

‘Shocking.’

‘*Nearly four and a half months. A hundred and thirty-seven days and nights of agony for the Miletta family and for all their friends. To say nothing of Ruggiero himself.*’

‘Horrible.’

‘*A man as old as you or I, Senator, chained up in some shack in the mountains, in this bitter weather, at the mercy of a gang of callous bandits!*’

‘Dreadful. Scandalous. If only one could do something to help ...’

‘*But you can help! You must help!*’

‘In any way I can, Commendatore! I am only too ready, believe me. But we must be realistic. Kidnapping is the scourge of society today, a plague and a peril in the face of which we are all equally vulnerable, equally powerless, equally ...’

‘*Rubbish! Excuse me, but when something happens to one of you politicians the whole country is put into a state of siege! Nothing is too much trouble then, no expense is spared. But when it’s an ordinary, decent, law-abiding citizen like our friend Ruggiero no one even takes any notice. Business as usual! “It’s his own fault. Why didn’t he take more precautions?”*’

‘Commendatore, do not let us fall into the trap of deluding ourselves that any responsible person

might presume to deny the gravity of ...'

'Keep that stuff for the press, Senator. This is Antonio Crepi you're talking to! Don't you try and tell me we are still equal. If you were kidnapped, God forbid, you would get the crack units, the top men. Well, that's what I want for Ruggiero.'

'Of course, of course! Naturally!'

'I'm not blaming the people here in Perugia. But let's face it, if they were the best they wouldn't be here, would they? They would be in Rome, looking after you politicians.'

'One should perhaps avoid exaggerating the effectiveness of the measures to which you refer, Commendatore.'

'Listen, if you get a pain in the chest you go to a specialist, right?'

'Our specialists couldn't save Aldo Moro.'

'Spare me the talk, Senator! God knows we've had enough talk. Now, I want action, and that's what I'm phoning. I want a top man sent up here to shake up the whole operation. A new face, a fresh approach. You can arrange that in a second, with your contacts.'

'Well ...'

'Or is it too much to ask?'

'It's not ...'

'Don't you think Ruggiero deserves the best?'

'Naturally.'

'Senator, I wouldn't have bothered to call you if I thought you were one of those people with short memories. There are enough of them about, God knows! But no, I thought, Rossi's not like that. He hasn't forgotten what the Miletto family has meant to him. Senator, I beg you, think of them now! Think of what they are going through. Think what it will mean to them to know that thanks to you one of the top policemen in Italy has been sent to Perugia to inspire the hunt for their beloved father! And then think that you can arrange all that with a single phone call, as easily as ordering a taxi.'

'You overestimate my power.'

'I hope not. I sincerely hope not. Because I have always thought of you as a friend and ally, and it would sadden me to feel that I could no longer count on your support. And you on mine, Senator, and on that of the Miletto family and their many friends.'

'For heaven's sake, Commendatore! What are you talking about? Do not please permit ourselves to be misled into imagining that ...'

'Perfect! There is no more to say, then. When can I expect to hear?'

'Well, in a situation of this type one would perhaps be wise to avoid imposing rigid deadlines. Nevertheless, broadly speaking, I would by no means rule out the possibility of being in a position ...'

'I'd like to know by this afternoon.'

'Oh, you would, would you?'

'Or perhaps you have more important business to attend to?'

'Look here, Crepi, it's no good your expecting miracles, you know! Excuse me saying so.'

'I'm not asking for miracles, Senator. I'm asking for justice. Or does that take a miracle in this country?'

*

'Lapucci.'

'Did I wake you, Giorgio?'

'Who's this?'

'Gianpiero Rossi.'

'Ah, good morning, Senator! No, I was working in the other office. No one ever believes it, course, but we do work here at Central Office.'

'Listen Giorgio, I have a little problem I think you may be able to help me with.'

'Consider it done.'

'You know about the Miletto kidnapping?'

'The tyre king from Modena?'

'Modena! What do you mean, Modena? Would I give a damn if he was from Modena? Miletto Miletto! Radios, televisions!'

'Ah, of course. Excuse me. From Perugia.'

'From Perugia, exactly. And that's my problem. Because some people there, friends of the family, feel that not enough is being done. You know how it is, everyone wants special attention. And these are people who are difficult to refuse. Do you follow?'

'Perfectly.'

'Like they say, the poor pray for miracles, the rich think they have a right to them. Now, I'm not trying to justify what cannot and should not be justified. I neither condone nor condemn. But the fact remains that I'm in a difficult situation. You see what I mean?'

'Of course. But what exactly do they want, these people? If you don't mind my asking.'

'They want a name.'

'A name? Whose name?'

'That is entirely up to you. It must be someone presentable, naturally. Don't make me look like a fool. If he's well known so much the better.'

'And what is this person to do?'

'Why, go and sort things out.'

'Go to Perugia?'

'To Perugia, of course!'

'A police official?'

'Exactly. Can you help me?'

'Well, I must say that this is a particularly difficult moment, Senator. Since the Cabinet reshuffle the party's relations with the Ministry have been ...'

'When you've been around as long as I have, Giorgio, you'll know that it's always a particularly difficult moment. That's why I rang you instead of some other people whose names came to mind. Now can you help me?'

'Well, despite the changes I've just referred to, we do have various contacts, of course. There's one in particular I'm thinking of who may well be able ...'

'I'm not interested in the details, Giorgio. I just want to know if you can help me. Or should I ring someone else? Perhaps you could recommend someone?'

'You must be joking, Senator. Anything that can be done, I'll do for you. By this time tomorrow you'll ...'

'By this time tomorrow I'll be in Turin. Make it this afternoon. I'll be here till seven.'

'Very well.'

'Excellent. I knew I did right to call you. I've got a nose for these things. Giorgio's a man who can make things happen, I thought. A million thanks. I'll be expecting your call.'

‘Yes?’

‘Enrico?’

‘Who’s that?’

‘Giorgio Lapucci.’

‘Christ, I thought it was his royal highness. Excuse me while I change my trousers.’

‘Why the panic?’

‘He’s at a conference in Strasbourg, and every so often he phones me and demands a complete update on the situation here. All part of this new managerial style you’ve been reading about. Keep us on our toes, he says. Anyway, what can I do for you?’

‘I suppose this line is safe?’

‘Giorgio, this is the Ministry of the Interior you’re talking to. Any phone tapping that goes on around here, we do it.’

‘Of course.’

‘So what’s up?’

‘Well, it’s the old story, I’m afraid. Someone’s leaning on someone who’s leaning on me.’

‘And you want to lean on me.’

‘Isn’t that what friends are for? But it shouldn’t be too difficult. It’s a question of getting a senior police official transferred temporarily to Perugia to take over a kidnapping case.’

‘That’s all?’

That’s all.’

‘No problem. I can lose it in the routine postings and bang it through at departmental level. No one ever looks at that stuff. The only headache could be finding someone. When are we talking?’

‘Now.’

‘Shit. Look, I’ll have to think a bit. Let me get back to you.’

‘Today, though.’

‘I’ll do my best.’

‘I appreciate it, Enrico. Give my best to Nicola.’

‘And mine to Emanuela. Listen, why don’t we all get together some time?’

‘Yes, we should. We really should.’

‘Personnel.’

‘Mancini. I need someone we can send up to Perugia on a kidnapping. Who do you suggest?’

‘No one.’

‘What do you mean, no one?’

‘I mean there isn’t anyone available.’

‘What about Fabri?’

‘In Genoa on that bank job.’

‘De Angelis?’

‘Sardinia. Where there were three kidnappings last week alone, in case you haven’t seen the papers. This weekend we’ve got the visit of the President of France plus an English football team, God help us. Are you getting the picture? If not, I can go on.’

‘Calm down, Ciliani. I know things are difficult. But there’s always somebody. Look harder.’

‘There’s no one except Romizi, and he’s going on leave.’

‘Well, tell him he’ll have to put it off.’

‘Excuse me, dottore, but you tell him! He’s booked a flight to America.’

‘What’s he doing going to America?’

‘How should I know? Got relatives there or something.’

‘Well, what about people outside Criminalpol?’

‘You said this was operational.’

‘We could always stretch a point. Isn’t there anyone who’s had some experience? Couldn’t stand the sight of blood and requested a desk job, that sort of thing. Use your head, Ciliani! I mean we’re talking about a gesture here, not a new chief for the fucking Squadra Mobile.’

‘Doesn’t help.’

‘What about what’s-his-name, the one we’ve got doing Housekeeping?’

‘Zuccaroni?’

‘No, the other one.’

‘Zen?’

‘That’s it.’

‘But surely he’s ...’

‘What?’

‘Well, I thought there was, you know, some problem about using him.’

‘Really? I haven’t heard anything.’

‘I don’t mean anything official.’

‘Well, as long as it’s not official I can’t see that there’s any problem. A kidnapping, too! Wasn’t he something of a specialist? Couldn’t be better.’

‘If you say so, dottore.’

‘It’s perfect. Ideal from every point of view. The only thing that would ruin it is delay. And that’s why I’m going to leave it in your lap, Ciliani. I want Zen and the relevant paperwork in my office within the hour. Got that?’

*

‘Uh.’

‘Caccamo?’

‘Uh.’

‘Ciliani. You seen Zen?’

‘You tried his office?’

‘No, I’m too stupid to think of that. Of course I’ve tried his fucking office.’

‘Hang on, isn’t he away somewhere? Treviso?’

‘Trieste. He was due back this morning.’

‘Did I ever tell you about this girl from Trieste I met the time I was doing beach duty down Ostia? She was sunbathing totally nude behind a dune, and when I ...’

‘Fuck off, Caccamo. Christ, this is all I need. Where has that son of a bitch Zen got to?’

‘No! I don’t believe it! It isn’t possible!’

‘It isn’t possible, but it happens. In short, it’s a miracle!’

‘Just a few hundred metres away from the station and they stop! This is going too far!’

‘Not quite far enough, I’d say!’

‘For the love of God, let us out of this damned train!’

“‘And yet it does *not* move”, as Galileo might have said. Ah well, let’s be patient.’

‘Patient! Patient! Excuse me, but in my humble opinion what this country needs is a few people who will no longer be patient! People who refuse to suffer patiently the bungling and incompetence with which we are surrounded! There! That’s what I think!’

‘It’s better to travel hopefully than to arrive, they say. It should be the motto of the State Railways.’

‘You choose to joke about it, signore, but in my humble opinion this is no joking matter. On the contrary, it is an issue of the very highest importance, symptomatic of all the gravest ills of our poor country. What does one expect of a train? That it goes reasonably fast and arrives within five or ten minutes of the time stated in the timetable. Is that too much? Does that require divine intervention to bring about? Not in any other country in the world! Nor used it to here,’

‘You can always move to Switzerland, if that’s how you feel.’

‘But now what happens? The railway service, like everything else, is a disaster. And what is the government’s response? To give their friends in the construction business billions and billions of lire to build a new railway line between Rome and Florence! And the result? The trains are slower than they were before the war! It’s incredible! A national disgrace!’

The young man sitting near the door, Roman to his elegant fingertips, smiled sarcastically.

‘Ah yes, of course, everything was better before the war,’ he murmured. ‘We know all about that.’

‘Excuse me, but you know nothing about it,’ replied the vigorous, thick-set man with the shock of silver hair and the Veronese accent. ‘Unless I am very much mistaken you weren’t even born then!’

He turned to the third occupant of the compartment, sitting by the window, a distinguished-looking man of about fifty with a pale face whose most striking feature was a nose as sharply triangular as the jib of a sailing boat. There was a faintly exotic air about him, as though he were Greek or even Levantine. His expression was cynical, suave and aloof, and a distant smile flickered on his lips. But it was his eyes that compelled attention. They were grey with glints of blue, and a slightly sinister stillness which made the Veronese shiver. A cold fish, this one, he thought.

‘What about you, signore?’ he demanded. ‘Don’t you agree that it’s a disgrace, a national disgrace?’

‘The train was delayed at Mestre,’ the stranger observed with a grave, deliberate courtesy that somehow seemed mocking. ‘That has naturally upset the schedules. There were bound to be further delays.’

‘I know the train was delayed at Mestre!’ retorted the Veronese. ‘You don’t need to remind me that the train was delayed at Mestre. And why, may I ask, was the train delayed at Mestre? Because of an unofficial stoppage by the local section of one of the railway unions. Unofficial! As if we didn’t have

enough official strikes, we are also at the mercy of any local gang of workers with a grievance, who can throw the whole transport system of the nation into total chaos without, needless to say, the slightest fear of any reprisals whatsoever.'

The young Roman slapped the leg of his trousers with a rolled copy of a glossy news magazine.

'Certainly it's a nuisance,' he remarked. 'But don't let's exaggerate the inconvenience. Besides there are worse things than chaos.'

'And what might they be?'

'Too much order.'

The Veronese made a contemptuously dismissive gesture.

'Too much order? Don't make me laugh! In this country too much order wouldn't even be enough. It's always the same. The trains are late? Build a new railway! The South is poor? Open a new factory! The young are illiterate delinquents? Hire more teachers! There are too many civil servants? Retire them earlier on big pensions! The crime rate is soaring? Pass new laws! But for the love of God don't expect us to make the railways or the factories we have run efficiently, or make the teachers or bureaucrats do an honest day's work, or make people respect the existing laws. Oh no! Because that would smack of dictatorship, and of tyranny, and we can't have that.'

'That's not the point!' The young Roman had finally given up his pose of ironic detachment. 'What you want, signore, this famous "order" of yours, is something un-Italian, un-Mediterranean. It's an idea of the North, and that's where it should stay. It's got no place here. Very well, so we have a few problems. There are problems everywhere in the world! Just look in the newspaper, watch the television. Do you think that this is the only country where life isn't perfect?'

'It's got nothing to do with perfection! And as for this beautiful Mediterranean myth of yours, signore, permit me to say that ...'

The man at the window looked away at the blank wall of the Campo Verano cemetery on the other side of the tracks. Neither this further delay nor the argument to which it had given rise seemed able to touch the mood of serenity which had been with him since he awoke that morning. Perhaps it had been the dislocation of routine that had done it, the shock of finding himself not back in Rome but inexplicably stalled at Mestre, five hundred and sixty kilometres further north. For a moment it had seemed as though reality itself had broken down like a film projector and soon everyone would be demanding their money back. After a blind tussle with his clothes in the cramped darkness of the sleeping compartment he had stepped out into the misty early-morning air, laden with the salty stench of the lagoon and the acrid odours of petroleum and chemicals from the heavy industry he could hear murmuring all around, and wandered along the platform to the bar, where he pushed his way into a group of railwaymen, ordered an espresso laced with grappa and discovered that no trains would move out of Mestre until further notice due to a dispute regarding manning levels.

I could go, he had thought. I could have gone, he thought now, simply by boarding one of the orange buses which passed the station with illuminated signs bearing that magic combination of letters: VENEZIA. But he hadn't, and he'd been right. His mysterious mood of elation had been one that floated on, gliding lightly as a shallow-bottomed skiff across the inlets and channels of the lagoon whose melancholy topography he had explored as a boy. At his age such gifts came rarely and should be handled with care, not asked to bear up under the tortuous coils of his relationship with his native city. His reward had been that the mood proved unexpectedly durable. Neither the delay at Mestre nor the subsequent hold-ups at Bologna and Florence had been able to touch it, and despite the weather, grey and unseasonably cold for late March, even the return to the capital hadn't depressed him as much as usual. He would never learn to like Rome, never be at ease with the weight of centuries of power and

corruption there in the dead centre of Italy, the symbol and source of its stagnation. How could he ever feel at home in the heaviest of all cities when he had been born and formed in its living antithesis, a city so light it seems to float? Nevertheless, if he were forced to take sides between the old Veronese and the young Roman there could be only one choice. He had no wish to live in some miserable Northern land where everything ran like clockwork. As if that was what life was about! No, it was about those two lads out there in the corridor, for instance, typical Roman working-class toughs in jeans and leather jackets staring into the first-class compartments as they strolled along the corridor with an easy natural insolence which no degree of poverty could touch, as if they owned the place! The country might have its problems, but as long as it could go on producing that burning energy, that irresistible drive and flair ...

In a second, the door was closed again and the taller one inside, a plastic sports bag in one hand, and an automatic pistol in the other. A brief smile flashed across his face.

‘Don’t worry, I’m not a terrorist!’

The bag landed on the floor at their feet.

‘All the goodies in there! Wallets, watches, rings, lighters, locketts, trinkets, bangles, ear-rings, silver knickers, you name it. Foreign currency in major denominations only, all major credit cards accepted. Move it, move it!’

The snout of the automatic jabbed out towards each of the three passengers in turn.

‘You piece of shit.’

It was hardly audible, a shiver of pent-up loathing finding its release. The pistol swung towards the silver-haired man.

‘You said *what*, grandpa?’

The grey-eyed man by the window cleared his throat conspicuously.

‘Don’t shoot me, please,’ he said. ‘I’m just getting my wallet out.’

The pistol swung away from the Veronese. The other man’s hand emerged holding a large brown leather wallet from which he extracted a plastic card.

‘What’s that?’ the youth snapped.

‘It’s no use to you.’

‘Let me see! And you two *move* it, for fuck’s sake, or do you want to get kneecapped?’

Expensive leather and precious metals began to hit the bottom of the plastic bag. The youth glanced at the plastic card and laughed briefly.

‘Commissioner of Police? Eh, sorry, *dottore*, I didn’t know. That’s OK, keep your stuff. Maybe one of these days you can do me a favour.’

‘You’re a police official?’ demanded the Veronese as the carriage jerked violently and the train started to roll forward.

The door opened and the other youth beckoned urgently to his companion.

‘Haven’t you fucking finished yet? Let’s go, for Christ sake!’

‘Well, do something!’ shrieked the silver-haired man as the pair scooped up the bag and vanished. ‘If you’re a policeman, do something! Stop them! Pursue them! Shoot them! Don’t just sit there!’

The train was now moving slowly past the San Lorenzo goods yard. A carriage door slammed nearby. The police official opened the window and looked out. There they were, haring away across the tracks towards the safety of the streets.

The Veronese was beside himself with rage.

‘So you refuse to reply, do you? But that won’t do! I *demand* an answer! You can’t get out of it that easily, you know! God in heaven, do you feel no shame, Commissioner? You calmly allow innocents

citizens to be robbed under your very nose while you hide behind the power of office and do precisely damn all about it! Mother of God! I mean, everybody knows that the police these days are a bad job that makes us the laughing stock of every other country in Europe. That's taken for granted. But dear Christ, I never in my worst moments expected to witness such a blatant example of craven dereliction of duty as I have seen today! Eh? Very well. Excellent. We'll see about this. I'm not just some nobody you can push around, you know. Kindly give me your name and rank.'

The train was rounding the curve by the Porta Maggiore and the terminus was now visible up ahead.

'So, your name?' the silver-haired man insisted.

'Zen.'

'Zen? You're Venetian?'

'What of it?'

'But I am from Verona! And to think you disgrace us like this in front of these Southerners!'

'Who are you calling a Southerner?'

The young Roman was on his feet.

'Ah, ashamed of the name now, are you? A few minutes ago it was your proudest boast!'

'I'm ashamed of nothing, signore! But when a term is used as a deliberate insult by someone whose arrogance is matched only by his stupendous ignorance of the real meaning of Italian culture ...'

'Culture! What do you know about culture? Don't make me laugh by using big words you don't understand.'

As the carriage jarred over several sets of points and began to run in alongside the platform Zen left the compartment and squeezed through the line of people waiting in the corridor.

'In a big hurry, eh?' remarked a sour-looking woman. 'Some people always have to be first, and just too bad for everyone else.'

The platform was packed with passengers who had been waiting for hours. As the train slowed to halt they stormed it like assault troopers, intent on winning a seat for the long haul down to Naples and beyond. Zen struggled through them and out to the station concourse. The phones were all in use. At the nearest a tired-looking, poorly dressed woman was repeating 'I know ... I know ... I know' over and over again in a strident, unmodulated country voice. Zen waved his identity card at her.

'Police. This is an emergency. I need to use this phone.'

He took the receiver from the woman's unresisting hand and dialled 113.

'This is Commissioner Aurelio Zen. No, Zen. Z,E,N. No O. That's right. Attached to the Ministry of the Interior. I'm calling from the Stazione Termini. There's been a train job. They ran off towards Via Prenestina. Get a car off now and then I'll give you the descriptions. Ready? The first was about twenty. Height, one sixtyish. Short dark hair, military cut so possibly doing his service, dark-green leather jacket with twin zippered flaps, faded jeans, dark brown boots. The other slightly taller, long lighter hair, moustache, big nose, brown leather jacket, new jeans, red, white and blue running shoes carrying a green plastic sports bag with white lettering "Banca Popolare di Frosinone". He's got a small automatic, so be careful. Got that? Right, I'll leave a full report with the railway police.'

He hung up. The woman was gazing at him with an air of cautious fascination.

'Was it a local call?' he asked.

Fascination was replaced by fear.

'What?'

'Were you speaking to someone in Rome?'

'No, no! Salerno! I'm from Salerno.'

And she started rooting in her bag for the identity card which was her only poor talisman against the dark powers of the state.

Zen looked through his change until he found another telephone token, which he handed to her.

‘Here. Now you can dial again.’

The woman stared at him suspiciously. He put the token down beside the phone and turned away.

‘It’s my sister,’ she said suddenly, gripping his arm. ‘She works for the Pope. At the Vatican! She’s a cleaner. The pay’s rotten, but it’s still something to work for the Pope, isn’t it? But her husband won’t let me in the house because of what my brother found out about him, the dirty bastard. So I phone her whenever I come up to see my grandson. She hasn’t got a phone, you see, so I phone from the station. They’re stingy bastards, those priests. Still, it’s better than packing anchovies, at least your fingers don’t stink. But listen, can that criminal do that? Forbid me to see my own sister? Isn’t there a law against that?’

Mumbling something about emergencies, Zen pulled away from the woman’s grasp and crossed the concourse towards the distant neon sign reading POLIZIA FERROVIARIA.

‘Welcome home,’ he muttered under his breath. His earlier mood already seemed as remote and irrelevant as a childhood memory.

*

The heavy front door closed behind him with a definitive bang, shutting him in, shutting out the world. As he moved the switch the single bulb which lit the entrance hall ended its long, wan existence in a extravagant flash, leaving him in the dark, just back from school. Once he had kissed his mother he would run out to play football in the square outside. Astonishingly, he even seemed to hear the distant sound of lapping water. Then it faded and a didactic voice began pontificating about the ecology of the Po Delta. Those liquid ripples overlaying the constant rumble of traffic came not, of course, from the backwater canals of his childhood, but from the television.

He moved blindly along the passage, past pictures and furniture which had been part of his life for so long that he was no longer aware of their existence. As he approached the glass-panelled door the noise of the television grew louder. Once inside the living room it was deafening. In the dim mix of video glare and twilight seeping through the shutters he made out the frail figure of his mother staring with childlike intensity at the flickering screen.

‘Aurelio! You’re back!’

‘Yes, mamma.’

He bent over her and they kissed.

‘How was Fiume? Did you enjoy yourself?’

‘Yes, mamma.’

He no longer bothered to correct her, even when her mistakes sent him astray not just in space but in time, to a city that had ceased to exist a third of a century earlier.

‘And what about you, mamma? How have you been?’

‘Fine, fine. You needn’t worry, Maria Grazia is a treasure. All I’ve missed is seeing you. But I told you when you joined! You don’t know what it’s like in the services, I said. They send you here and then they send you there, and just when you’re getting used to that they send you somewhere else until you don’t know which end to sit down on any more. And to think you could have had a nice job on the railways like your father, a nice supervising job, just as secure as the police and none of this roaming around. And we would never have had to move down here to the *South*!’

She broke off as Maria Grazia bustled in from the kitchen. But they had been speaking dialect, and the housekeeper had not understood.

‘Welcome home, dottore!’ she cried. ‘They’ve been trying to get hold of you all day. I told them you hadn’t got back yet, but ...’

At that moment the phone started to ring in the inner hallway. It’ll be that old fascist on the train, Zen thought. That type always has friends. But ‘all day’? Maria Grazia must have exaggerated.

‘Zen?’

‘Speaking.’

‘*This is Enrico Mancini.*’

Christ almighty! The Veronese had gone straight to the top. Zen gripped the receiver angrily.

‘Listen, the little bastard had a gun and he was standing too far away for me to jump him. So what was I supposed to do, I’d like to know? Get myself shot so that the Commendatore could keep his lousy watch?’

There was a crackly pause.

‘*What are you talking about?*’

‘I’m talking about the train!’

‘*I don’t know anything about any train. I’m calling to discuss your transfer to Perugia.*’

‘What? Foggia?’

The line was very poor, with heavy static and occasional cut-outs. For the hundredth time Zen wondered if it was still being tapped, and for the hundredth time he told himself that it wouldn’t make any sense, not now. He wasn’t important any more. Paranoia of that type was simply conceit turned inside out.

‘*Perugia! Perugia in Umbria! You leave tomorrow.*’

What on earth was going on? Why should someone like Enrico Mancini concern himself with Zen’s humdrum activities?

‘For Perugia? But my next trip was supposed to be to Lecce, and that’s not till ...’

‘*Forget about that for now. You’re being reassigned to investigative duties, Zen. Have you heard about the Miletto case? I’ll get hold of all the documentation I can and send it round in the morning with the car. But basically it sounds quite straightforward. Anyway, as from tomorrow you’re in charge.*’

‘In charge of what?’

‘*Of the Miletto investigation! Are you deaf?*’

‘In Perugia?’

‘*That’s right. You’re on temporary secondment.*’

‘Are you sure about this?’

‘*I beg your pardon?*’

Mancini’s voice was icy.

‘I mean, I understood that, you know ...’

‘Well?’

‘Well, I thought I’d been permanently suspended from investigative duty.’

‘*First I’ve heard of it. In any case, such decisions are always open to review in the light of the prevailing circumstances. The Questore of Perugia has requested assistance and we have no one else available, it’s as simple as that.*’

‘So it’s official.’

‘*Of course it’s official! Don’t you worry about that, Zen. Just concentrate on the job in hand. It*

important that we see results quickly, understand? We're counting on you.'

Long after Mancini had hung up Zen stood there beside the phone, his head pressed against the wall. At length he lifted the receiver again and dialled. The number rang for a long time, but just as he was about to hang up she answered.

'Yes?'

'It's me.'

'Aurelio! I wasn't expecting to hear from you till this evening. How did it go in wherever you were this time?'

'Why did you take so long to answer?'

She was used to his moods by now.

'I've got my lover here. No, actually I was in the bath. I wasn't going to bother, but then I thought it might be you.'

He grunted, and there was a brief silence.

'Look, something's come up. I have to leave again tomorrow and I don't know when I'll be back. Can we meet?'

'I'd love to. Shall we go out?'

'All right. Ottavio's?'

'Fine.'

He hung up and looked round the hallway, confronting the furniture which having dominated his infancy had now returned to haunt his adult life. Everything in his apartment had been moved there from the family house in Venice when his mother had finally agreed, six years earlier, to leave. For many years she had resisted, long after it had become obvious that she could no longer manage on her own.

'Rome? Never!' she cried. 'I would be like a fish out of water.'

And her gasps and shudders had made the tired phrase vivid and painful. But in the end she had been forced to give in. Her only son could not come to her. Since the Moro affair his career was nailed down, stuffed and varnished, with years of dreary routine to go before they would let him retire. And there was simply no one else, except for a few distant relatives living in what was now Yugoslavia. So she had moved, avoiding the fate she had feared by the simple expedient of bringing all her belongings with her and transforming Zen's apartment into an aquarium from which she never emerged.

But if she was thus protected from suffocation, the effect on Zen was exactly the reverse. He had never particularly liked the apartment, in a drab, pompous street just north of the Vatican, but in Rome you had to take what you could get. The nearest he had come to a personal feeling for the place had been an appreciation of its anonymity: it had been like living in a hotel. But his mother's arrival had changed all that, swamping the sparse furnishings provided by the landlord with possessions laden with dull memories and obscure significance. At times Zen felt that he was choking, and then his thoughts would turn to the house in Venice, ideally empty now, the rooms full of nothing but pearls, light, intimations of water, the cries of children and gulls. He had promised himself that one day he would retire there, and in the meantime he was often so intensely there in spirit that he wouldn't have been in the least surprised to learn that the place was believed to be haunted.

From the kitchen came a clatter of pans supplemented by Maria Grazia's voice alternately berating the ancient stove, encouraging a blunt knife, singing snatches of the spring's big hit and calling on the Madonna to witness the misery to which her life was reduced by the quality of the vegetables on offer at the local greengrocer's. He would have to eat something here before sneaking out to meet Ellen. His mother's birthday was in a week, he realized. He would almost certainly still be away. At all events

he would have to tell her about the change of plans, which meant hearing once again how he should have got a nice job on the railways like his father. Did she really not realize that she told him that every single time he returned? Or was she, on the contrary, having a good laugh at his expense? That was the trouble with old people, you could never be sure. That was the trouble with living with someone you loved more than anyone else in the world, but had nothing in common with now but blood and bones.

‘But I don’t understand. Surely you’re not a real policeman? I mean, you work for the Ministry, don’t you? As a bureaucrat. That’s what you told me, anyway.’

Ellen’s implication was clear: she would never have had anything to do with him if she had thought he was a ‘real’ policeman.

‘And it’s the truth. Ever since I’ve known you that’s what I’ve been doing. Going the rounds of provincial headquarters checking how many paperclips are being used, that sort of thing. Inspection duty, popularly known as Housekeeping, and just about as glamorous. The nearest I’ve got to real police work was smashing the great stolen toilet-roll racket at the Questura in Campobasso.’

She didn’t smile.

‘And before that?’

‘Well, before it was different.’

‘You were a real cop? A police officer?’

‘Yes.’

There was so much shock in her look that he could not tell what else it might contain.

‘Where was this?’ she asked eventually.

‘Oh, various places. Here, for example.’

‘You worked in the Questura, here in Rome?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Christ! Which department?’

She was looking hard at him.

‘Not the Political Branch, if that’s what you’re worried about.’

It was, of course. Ellen’s circle of expatriate acquaintances already regarded it as rather bizarre that she had got involved with an official from the Ministry of the Interior, just as Zen’s few friends were clearly at a loss to know what to make of his liaison with this American divorcee, a classic *straniera* with her bright little apartment in Trastevere filled with artistic bric-à-brac and books in four languages and her Fiat 500 illegally parked in the street outside. The only answer in either case had been that whatever it was, it worked for both of them. It had seemed to be the only answer necessary. But now, without the slightest warning, Ellen found herself facing the possibility that her official had once been an active member of La Politica: one of those who beat up demonstrating students and striking workers and pushed suspects out of windows, while protecting the neo-fascists responsible for the indiscriminate bombings of public squares and cafeterias and trains.

‘I asked you what you did do,’ she insisted, ‘not what you didn’t.’

Her manner had become that of the tough brutal cop she perhaps assumed him to have been bullying a statement out of a suspect.

‘I was in the section concerned with kidnappings.’

At this, her features relaxed slightly. Kidnappings, eh? Well, that was all right, wasn’t it? A nice uncontroversial area of police work. Which just left the question of why he had abandoned it for the inglorious role of Ministry snooper, spending half his time making exhausting trips to dreary provincial capitals where his presence was openly resented by everyone concerned, and the other half

sitting in his windowless office at the Viminale typing up unreadable and no doubt unread reports. Before Ellen had a chance to ask him about this, Ottavio appeared in person at their table and the subject changed to that of food.

Ottavio outlined in pained tones his opinion that people were not eating enough these days. All they ever thought about was their figures, a selfish, short-sighted view contributing directly to the impoverishment of restaurateurs and the downfall of civilization as we know it. What the Goths, the Huns and the Turks had failed to do was now being achieved by a conspiracy of dietitians who were bringing the country to its knees with all this talk of cholesterols, calories and the evils of salt. Where were we getting to?

Such were his general grievances. His more particular wrath was reserved for Zen, who had told the waiter that he did not want anything to follow the huge bowl of *spaghetti alla carbonara* he had forced himself to eat on top of the vegetable soup Maria Grazia had prepared at home.

‘What are you trying to do?’ Ottavio demanded indignantly. ‘Put me out of business? Listen, the lamb is fabulous today. And when I say fabulous I’m saying less than half the truth. Tender young sucklings, so sweet, so pretty it was a sin to kill them. But since they’re dead already it would be a bigger sin not to eat them.’

Zen allowed himself to be persuaded, largely to get rid of Ottavio, who moved on to spread the good word to other tables.

‘And how have you been?’ Zen asked Ellen, when he had gone.

But she wasn’t having that.

‘Why haven’t you told me this before?’

‘I didn’t think you’d be interested. Besides, it’s all past history now.’

‘When did all this happen, then?’

He sighed, frowned, rubbed his forehead and grimaced.

‘Oh, I suppose it must be about ... yes, about four years ago now. More or less.’

Surely he had overdone the uncertainty grotesquely? But she seemed satisfied.

‘And now they’re suddenly putting you back on that kind of work? This must be quite a surprise.’

‘It certainly is.’

There was no need to conceal that, at any rate!

‘So it was 1979 you quit?’

‘The year before, actually.’

‘And you got yourself transferred to a desk job?’

‘More or less.’

He tensed himself for the follow-up, but it failed to materialize. Fair enough. If Ellen didn’t appreciate how unlikely it was that anyone in that particular section of the Rome police would be allowed to transfer to a desk job in 1978 of all years, he certainly wasn’t going to draw her attention to it.

‘What made you do that?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I suppose I was just fed up with the work.’

The food was brought to their table by Ottavio’s youngest son, a speedy little whippet who, fourteen, had already perfected his professional manner, contriving to suggest that he was engaged on some task of incalculable importance to humanity carried out against overwhelming odds under nearly impossible conditions, and that while a monument in the piazza outside would be a barely adequate expression of the debt society owed him, he didn’t even expect to get a decent tip.

They ate in silence for several minutes.

‘So, what have you been up to?’ Zen insisted. ‘How’s business?’

‘Very quiet. There’s a big sale on Tuesday, though.’

Ellen made a living acting as representative for a New York antique dealer, but it was a case of profiting from a lifelong hobby, and one that she had tried in vain to get him to share. Zen had had his fill of old furniture!

‘How long will it be altogether?’

‘Not long, I hope.’

‘Do you know Perugia?’

Perugia, he thought. Chocolates, Etruscans, that fat painter, radios and gramophones, the University for Foreigners, sportswear. ‘Umbria, the green heart of Italy’, the tourist advertisements said. Why did that make Latium, he had wondered, the bilious liver?

‘I may have been there on a school trip, years ago.’

‘But not for work?’

‘Not a chance! There’re two of us on Housekeeping. Zuccaroni is better regarded than me, so I gets the soft jobs, close to home.’

‘Will it be difficult?’

He pushed his plate away and topped up their glasses with the flat, bland white wine.

‘There’s no way of knowing. A lot depends on the magistrate who’s directing the investigation. Some of them want to take all the decisions themselves. Others just want to take the credit.’

She also finished eating and at last they could smoke. He took out his packet of Nazionali. Ellen usually preferred her own cigarettes.

‘Can I come and visit you?’ she asked with a warm smile.

‘It would be wonderful.’

She nodded.

‘No mother.’

He suddenly saw which way the conversation was heading.

‘Don’t you think it’s ridiculous, at our age?’ Ellen continued. ‘She must know what’s going on.’

‘I expect she does. But as far as she’s concerned I’m still married to Luisella and that’s that. If I spend the night with you it’s adultery. Since I’m a man that doesn’t matter, but one doesn’t mention it.’

‘It matters to me.’ Her tone had hardened. ‘I don’t like your mother thinking of me as your mistress.’

‘Don’t you? I quite enjoy it. It makes me feel young and irresponsible.’

The remark was deliberately provocative, but he had long ago decided that he was not going to be talked into matrimony a second time.

‘Really?’ she retorted. ‘Well, it makes me feel old and insecure. And angry! Why should I have my life dominated by your mother? Why should you, for that matter? What’s the matter with Italian men letting their mammas terrorize them their whole life long? Why do you give them such power?’

‘Perhaps we’ve found over the centuries that they’re the only people who can be trusted with it.’

‘Oh, I see. You can’t trust me? Thanks very much!’

‘I can’t trust anyone in quite that way.’

It seemed perfectly obvious to him. Why was she getting so angry?

‘Not because my mother’s a saint,’ he explained. ‘It’s just that mothers are like that. They can’t help it, it’s biological.’

‘Oh, that’s wonderful! Now you’ve insulted both of us.’

‘On the contrary, I’ve complimented both of you. My mother for being what she is, and you for being everything else. And above all for being so understanding in what is a very difficult situation for both of us, but one that won’t last for ever.’

She looked away, disarmed by this allusion, and Zen seized the opportunity to signal Ottavio for the bill.

The air outside was deliciously cool and fresh after the small, stuffy restaurant. They walked in silence towards the roar of traffic on Viale Trastevere. In Piazza Sonnino an office building was being refitted after a fire, and the hoarding put up by the builders had attracted the warpaint of rival political clans. The Red Brigade’s five-pointed star was the most conspicuous, but there were also contributions from Armed Struggle (‘There’s no escape – we shall strike everywhere!’), the Anarchists (‘If voting changed anything they’d make it illegal’), and the neo-fascist New Order (‘Honour to our fallen companions – they live on in our hearts!’).

To Zen, the clash of slogans seemed eerily appropriate. Because if the events of 1978 had had a secret centre, and part of their horror was that he would never be sure, then in a sense it had been here at the terminus of the 97c bus and the San Gallicano hospital opposite. If there had been an unspeakable secret, then one of the two men who had guessed it had died there. And since that moment, day and night, whatever else he might be doing or thinking, Zen had remained uneasily aware that he was the other.

‘The entire resources of the Questura of Perugia are at your disposal. Eager to obey, my men await only your commanding word to spring into action. Your reputation of course precedes you, and the prospect of serving under your leadership has been an inspiration to us all. Who has not heard of your brilliant successes in the Fortuzzi and Castellano affairs, to name but two? And who can doubt that you will achieve a no less resounding triumph here on Umbrian soil, earning the heartfelt thanks of a city by succeeding where others, less fortunate or deserving, have failed? The city of Perugia has a long and historic relationship with the capital, of which your posting here is a concrete symbol. My men, by will, I am sure, wish to join with me in bidding you welcome.’

There was a feeble flutter of applause from the group of senior officials assembled in the Questore’s spacious top-floor office, all discreetly modern furniture, rows of law books, and potted plants. Aurelio Zen stood in their midst like a Siamese cat dropped into a cage full of stray dogs: tense and defiant, his eyes refusing to meet those fixed on him with expressions of more or less successful concealed mockery. They knew what he was going through, poor bastard! And they knew that there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

Salvatore Iovino, their chief, a corpulent, vivacious fifty-year-old from Catania, had given a masterly performance. Fulsome and vapid, laden with insincere warmth and hidden barbs, his speech had nevertheless left no legitimate grounds for complaint. He had spoken of Zen’s ‘reputation’ without actually mentioning that his abrupt departure from the Rome Questura in 1978 had been the subject of the wildest rumours and speculations throughout the force. The two cases he had mentioned dated from the mid-seventies, underlining Zen’s lack of recent operational experience. He had referred to the transfer as a ‘posting’, thus emphasizing that it had been imposed on him by the Ministry, and had called it a symbol of the historic relationship between Rome and Perugia, a relationship consisting of two thousand years of bitterly resented domination.

‘Thank you,’ Zen murmured, lowering his head in a proud and melancholy gesture of acknowledgement.

‘And finally,’ the Questore continued, ‘let me introduce Vice-Questore Fabrizio Priorelli.’

Iovino’s bland tone did nothing to prepare Zen for the glare of pure hostility with which he found himself transfixed by Priorelli. The Questore’s next words followed an exquisitely judged pause during which the silence in the room assumed a palpable quality.

‘Until today he was handling the Miletto case for us.’

Iovino laughed weightlessly.

‘To be perfectly frank, that’s one of the many problems your unexpected arrival has caused us. It’s a matter of protocol, you see. Since Fabrizio outranks you I can’t very well make him your second-in-command. Nevertheless, should you wish to consult him he has assured me that despite his numerous other duties he is in principle at your disposition at all times.’

Once again Zen murmured his thanks.

‘Right, lads, lunch!’ the Questore called briskly. ‘I expect you’re about ready for it, eh?’

As the officers filed out Iovino picked up the phone and yelled, ‘Chiodini? Get up here!’ Then he turned pointedly away and stood gazing out of the window until there was a knock at the door and

burly man with a bored brutal face appeared, at which point the Questore suddenly appeared to notice Zen's existence again.

'I'll leave you in Chiodini's safe hands, dottore. Remember, whatever you need, just say the word.'
'Thank you.'

As they walked downstairs Zen studied his escort: hair closely cropped on a head that looked muscle-bound, ears cauliflowered, no neck to speak of, shoulders and biceps that formed one inflexible block, the 'safe' hands swinging massively back and forth. Chiodini would be the one they sent for when old-fashioned interrogation methods were required.

At the third-floor landing the man jerked his thumb to the right.

'Along there, three five one,' he called without turning or breaking his stride.

Zen just managed to stop himself intoning another 'Thank you.'

Yes, it had all been consummately handled, no question about that. Iovino's speech had been a brilliant set piece, systematically exploiting all the weaknesses of Zen's position. Words are not everything, however, and the Questore had by no means neglected other possibilities of making his point, such as the contrast between the bombastic formality with which he had rolled out the red carpet and beaten the big drum and the perfunctory way he had then dismissed Zen into the 'safe hands' of the local third-degree specialist. The message was clear. Zen would be offered the moon and the stars, but if he wanted a coffee he'd have to go and fetch it himself.

He opened the door of the office and looked around warily. Everything seemed normal. On one wall hung the mandatory photograph of the President of the Republic, facing it on another the inevitable large calendar and a small crucifix. There was a grey metal filing cabinet in the corner, the top two drawers empty and the bottom one stuffed with plastic bags. In the centre of the office, dominating the room, stood a desk of some sickly looking yellow wood which had seemingly been grown in imitation of one of the nastier synthetic materials. Like every other piece of furniture in the room this carried a tag inscribed 'Ministry of the Interior' and a stamped serial number. Screwed to the back of the door was a list itemizing every piece of furniture in the room, down to the metal rubbish bin, together with its serial number. It was not that the Ministry did not trust their employees. They were just tidy-minded and couldn't sleep at night unless they were sure that everything was in its place.

Zen walked over to the window and looked out. Down below was a small car park for police vehicles. Facing him was a windowless stone wall with a heavy gate guarded by two men, one in green uniform with a cap, the other in battledress and a flak jacket. Both carried submachine guns, as did another guard patrolling the roof of the building. So that was it: they had given him an office with no view but the prison. He smiled sourly, acknowledging the hit. Sicilians were notoriously good at that kind of thing.

And the phone? He would never forget those first months at the Ministry, sitting in a windowless office in the basement, his only link to the outside world a telephone which was not connected. The repair men were always just about to come, but somehow they never did, and for over three months that telephone had squatted on his desk like a toad, symbol of a curse that would never be lifted. And when it finally was repaired Zen knew that this was not a token of victory but of total defeat. They could let him have a phone now. It didn't matter, because it never rang. Everyone knew about his 'reputation'. He had broken the rules of the tribe and been tabooed.

Here in Perugia his phone worked all right, but the same logic applied. Who was he going to call? What was he going to do? Should he fight back? Call Iovino's bluff and start throwing his weight around? The Ministry had sent him and they were bound to back him up, if only as a matter of form. With a bit of effort and energy he could soon bring the Questore and his men to heel. The problem was

that he lacked the energy and was not going to make the effort. At heart he just didn't care enough about these provincial officials and their petty pride. He didn't even care about the case itself. Ninety kidnappings out of ten were never solved anyway, and there was no reason to think that this one would be any different. In the end the family would pay up or the gang would back down. As a spectacle it was as uninspiring as an arm-wrestling contest between two strangers.

Outside the Questura he found the driver who had brought him there from Rome, a young Neapolitan named Luigi Palottino, still standing attentively beside the dark blue Alfetta. The sight of him just increased Zen's humiliation by reminding him of the scene at his apartment that morning when he'd returned, having spent the night with Ellen, to find Maria Grazia and his mother trying to organize his packing while the driver stood looking on with a bemused expression and everyone had to shout to be heard above the cheery chatter of the television, which had apparently turned itself on as if he was not to be left out of things.

'What are you doing here?' Zen snapped at him.

'Waiting for you, sir.'

'For me? I'm not in the mood for company, frankly.'

'I mean waiting for your orders, sir.'

'My orders? All right, you might as well take me to my hotel. Then you can go.'

The Neapolitan frowned.

'Sir?'

'You can go back to Rome.'

'No, sir.'

Zen looked at him with menacing attention.

'What do you mean, "no"?''

'My orders are to remain here in Perugia with you, sir. They've allocated me a bed in the barracks.'

They want to keep tabs on me, thought Zen. They don't trust me, of course. *Of course!* And who could say what other orders Luigi Palottino might have been given?

*

Half an hour later Zen was sitting in a café enjoying a late lunch, when he heard his name spoken by a complete stranger. The café was an old-world establishment quite unlike the usual chrome-and-glass filling stations for caffeine junkies, a long, narrow burrow of a place with a bar on one side and a few seats and small tables on the other. The walls were lined with tall wooden cabinets filled with German chocolates and English jam and shelves bending dangerously under the weight of undrinkably ancient bottles of wine. There were newspapers dangling from canes and waiters in scarlet jackets who seemed to have all the time in the world, and faded pastoral frescos presided amiably from the vaulted ceiling. Zen took the only free table, which was between the coat-stand and the telephone, so that he was continually being disturbed by people wanting to get at one or the other. But he paid no particular attention to the other clients until he heard his own name being laboriously spelt out.

'Z,E,N. Yes, that's right.'

The man was in his early sixties, short but powerfully built with an almost aggressively vigorous appearance that suggested a peasant background not many generations earlier. But this was no peasant. His clothes and grooming suggested wealth, and his manner was that of a man used to getting his own way.

'So I've been told. Perhaps he hasn't arrived yet? Ah, I see. Listen, Gianni, do me a favour, will

you? When he comes back, tell him ... No, nothing. Forget it. On second thoughts I'll call him myself later. Thanks.'

The receiver was replaced, and the man glanced down.

'Sorry for disturbing you, eh?'

He walked slowly away, greeting various acquaintances as he went.

The elderly cashier seemed to have no idea how much anything cost, and by the time the waitress who had served Zen had told her and she had manipulated the Chinese box of little drawers to extract the right change, the man had disappeared. But as soon as Zen got outside he almost bumped into him standing just to the left of the doorway chatting to a younger bearded man. Zen walked past them and stopped some distance away in front of a glass case displaying the front page of the local edition of the *Nazione* newspaper with the headlines circled in red ink.

'TRAGEDY ON THE PERUGIA–TERNI: ATROCIOUS DEATH OF YOUNG COUPLE UNDER TRUCK.' He could see the two men quite clearly, reflected on the glass surface in front of him, the younger protesting in a querulous whine, 'I still don't see why I should be expected to deal with it.' 'BUSES IN PERUGIA: EVERYTHING TO CHANGE – NEW ROUTES, NEW TIMETABLES.' 'It's agreed, then?' exclaimed the older man. 'But not Daniele, eh? God knows what he's capable of.' 'FOOTBALL: PERUGIA TO BUY ANOTHER FOREIGNER?' Zen scanned the newspaper for some reference to his arrival. Rivalries within the Questura usually ensured that an event which was bound to be damaging to someone's reputation would be reported in the local press. But of course there had been no time for that as yet.

When he next looked up he found that the two men had now separated and the older one was walking towards him.

'Excuse me!'

The man turned, suspicious and impatient.

'Yes?'

'I couldn't help overhearing your telephone call just now. I believe you wish to speak to me. I am Aurelio Zen.'

The man's impatience turned first to perplexity and then embarrassment.

'Ah, dottore, it was you, sitting there at the table? And there I was, talking about you like that. Whatever must you have thought?'

His voice drifted away. He seemed to be rapidly searching his memory, trying to recall what exactly he had said. Then with an apologetic gesture he went on, 'I am getting old, dottore! Old and indiscreet. Well, what's done is done. Forgive me, I haven't even introduced myself. Antonio Crepi. How do you do. Welcome to Perugia! Will you allow me to offer you a coffee?'

They returned to the café, where Crepi hailed the barman familiarly.

'Marco, this is Commissioner Zen, a friend of mine. Any time he comes in I want you to give him good service, you understand? No, nothing for me. You know, dottore, they say we must be careful not to drink too much coffee. I'm down to six cups a day, which is my limit. It's like a bridge, you know. You can reduce the number of supports up to a certain point, depending on the type of construction and the nature of the soil and so on. After that the bridge collapses. For me the lower limit is six coffees. Fewer than that and I can't function. Anyway, how do you like Perugia? Beautiful, eh?'

'Well, I've only just ...'

'It's a city on a human scale, not too big, not too small. Whenever I go to Rome, which nowadays almost never, I feel like I am choking. It's like putting on a collar that's too tight, you know what I mean? Here one can breathe, at least. A friend of mine once told me, "Frankly, Antonio, the moment

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