

—Milan, Italy.

She lifts her hands to her face, sniffs them, the wet, earth smell of them. The storm has been coming all night. Illegitimate couples case the nooks of the park for a few minutes of bliss, one set of shadows blending into another. There is always a pause in discussion, an averting of the eyes, when they see her. She draws her syringe, fills it, taps her fingernail on the barrel, and something flickers in her eyes. There is a shudder in the ground, like the base of a thunder. After the underground train passes, she lifts her left arm, inspecting the constellation of flushed red streaks against the discolored skin. She locates the protruded vein serpentining through ancient welts and bruises, and inserts the needle. Everything is swept away. The heroin travels across her like a flood, tingling as it bends the corners on her arteries, filling her organs with its icy deliciousness. She feels her jaws go slack and lies down, curled up, her right cheek on the cool earth.

She rises with the moon, vomits the excess of the drug and sits, crouched and shaking. When she turns her head, she sees an enamel leather purse, and next to it, a purple foot sticking out of the ground.

CHAPTER ONE—THE AUTOPSY

Montero sits in the front passenger seat of the garbage truck in the blackish-green dawn of the hinterland Milanese, thoroughly over-caffeinated with a kind of non-feeling, a numbed trance that is like sleep. The red Mercedes is a smudged thumbprint of color against the quilted hills, a spatter of blood approaching. After a few seconds it passes the truck releasing a movement of light against the darkened one-way ballistic glass on the driver's side and stops at a red light fifty meters ahead of them.

The truck's engine comes to life, coughing a cavernous, chocking noise. The driver tilts his head toward Montero. "Keep our distance, major?"

"No need," she says. "We're so conspicuous that we're invisible."

They drive over gravel and oil stains, avoiding rubble from broken traffic, and accost the Mercedes on the left in the four-lane road. Despite the early hour, prostitutes wrapped in colorful polythene stand in all corners of the intersection. Montero turns her gaze to the driver, expecting him to be staring at the display of colorful flesh but his eyes are avoiding the women like the plague. Parallel plates of light slip through the open window on his side, surrounding him like bars of a cage. He is holding the steering wheel like a grievance, staring straight ahead with a marionette's blank stare. His lips make slight movements as though he is reciting a prayer or talking furtively into a cell phone. She turns on audio penetration, capturing the vibrations of his voice against the windows of the truck. It is an indecipherable muttering beneath Mozart's Great Mass in C-minor. His speech rambles and spins. His words are slippery, elusive, tangled strands of overcooked, wet spaghetti he does not seem to be able to control. She thinks she hears the word Feodora, assumes he's communicating with the dead or saying an act of contrition. *An unburdening of guilt*, she thinks, *which will make her job easier.*

His rambling is washed away by white noise as the Mercedes takes off with a lazy roar, its engine emitting a hollow echo, like the sound of water streaming down a brook. The driver of the truck opens the window on his side a few scant centimeters and she smells the ice-cold stillness that precedes snow, the odor of wet fog tinged with the rank smell of soot from the factories, hears a stray dog's husky call and the stifled roar of a storm retreating in the distance—the buried sounds and scents of her youth. They bring back other desolate places like this, a certain hour of the day, the first cigarettes, furtive kisses.

The truck's tires catch gravel at the center of the road with a vicious spewing that jolts her out of her reverie and she directs her attention back at the driver of the Mercedes, observing him with the degree of intensity required. He has stopped mumbling and there is an oddly fierce leer on his face. His skin is pebbly, has a sickly-greenish tint like an avocado gone bad and there are light purple abrasions on his neck as though he has shaved against the grain a little too harshly. His unkempt hair—trashed in what seems an anguish of its own—and subdued eyes have something of the expression of a startled bird. He frowns, apparently mulling over something and his face blushes a deeper shade of olive under the weight of contemplation.

The radio of the Mercedes hiccups an instrumental ensemble, a score for an orchestra: woodwind, brass and strings. He seems to be listening with the inclination of his body, the slant of his head, entirely absorbed in the notes. After a few seconds he starts playing around with the dial of the radio. He settles for bebop, Miles Davis, and leans back, the feral grin sill on his face.

They drive over a bridge that spans a railway line and the streets become narrower, collapsing on themselves.

“Fall back,” she says.

Shadow-lit alleys, like tiny wormholes with a scar of light at the end resolve slowly into shapes and surfaces as they navigate through the diagonal slashes of light and shadow. There are tens of vast grey edifices on each side, ancient stone *palazzi* where *Milano Bene* threw its legendary lavish custom parties, now infested by heroin dealers and Albanian viados. Their

façades are covered with the intricate calligraphy of street graffiti. The multi-paneled, arched windows emit a lacy, smoke-clogged light that shines blaringly onto the travertine.

They exit the impossibly tight maze of the alleyways and dismembered villas with lichen-laden russet roofs replace the ancient palaces. The abandoned houses are set against jagged hills that seem like ruined towers. She lifts her eyes to the sky and flinches in the glare. The dawn has lifted and the sky is a great dome of limpid azure glass, deep and transparent, cloudless, the same sky as the CNN footage of the second plane coming in. The moment she *knew*, the moment realization set in, bred the sense of expectation that is with her after a decade like a piece of shrapnel embedded too deeply in the flesh to be extracted.

Past a scope of barren trees and the military base, a bone-colored, L-shaped slab of concrete unfolds itself from the hills. The building seems prefabricated, two separate structures glued together with aluminum sidings set against a grim landscape of wire fences and parked Land Rover Defenders. There is one point of entry, a ten-foot gate in reinforced tungsten carbide. A beam of light whips across the metal gates as the truck comes to a lurching stop at the gates and a guard starts toward them with a steely swagger, shirt un-tucked, suppressing a yawn.

“Welcome to Spaceship Incompetence,” the driver murmurs, rolling down his window, “the planet of the morons.” He turns a bland gaze to the young carabinieri (he can’t be older than nineteen) who is now standing next to the truck giving them his toughest stare.

“Your colleagues have already—”

“We’re not garbage collectors.” The driver pauses, waiting for this to sink in. “We’re CN terrorists. The truck is packed with C-4. We’re going to blow up the base.”

The guard freezes. Nothing moves but his Adam’s apple—a fishbone stuck in his throat. He is beginning to give off a stale smell: sweat vied with something like boiled cabbages.

The driver holds up his badge. “I believe you were briefed on the surveillance op this morning?”

Nodding, standing at attention, tucking his shirt in with his left hand as he begins to raise his

right arm—all at once.

“If you salute I’ll break your arm.”

“Yes sir.” He signals to someone behind him to open the gates. “Lieutenant, I—“

The lieutenant rolls up his window stifling his words and turns to Montero. “What did I say?”
He brings the engine back to life and they steer through the opening gates.

“CN?”

“The Cartoon Network.”

By the time they reach the entrance to the parking lot the Mercedes has already parked in one of the designated slots for the medical coroner’s office and doctor Zolkov is getting out.

The heat that hung over Northern Italy like a swarm of flies vanished during the course of the last weekend. Now the wind carries the sharp edge of winter, but he wears no overcoat atop of his habitual outfit of tweed trousers and double-breasted blue blazer. Two decades spent with cadavers at below humanly temperatures must have hardened him against the cold.

The truck parks next to the dumpsters against the southeast wall of the parking lot, now ablaze with sunlight.

She activates digital transmission. “The mark is entering the building.”

Captain Santini makes an indecipherable sound—could be acknowledgement, could be frustration.

“Haven’t had your second cappuccino?”

“Haven’t had my *first*.”

“Besides you hate surveillance.”

“Joining me?”

“Getting breakfast first.”

“You heartless bitch.”

“I’ll bring you a caffè latte and a brioche.”

“Have I ever told you that I love you?”

Montero closes the connection, gets out, and half-crouching circles the truck, the stench of garbage pulling at the trapdoor of her throat, making her gag. Leaning against the back of the truck she watches Zolkov's silhouette shuffle toward the base. He is a blurry speck receding toward the building, his footsteps detonating a shiver of tiny echoes. She brings her Steiner binoculars to her eyes to see him better. *Every detail is a clue. Every tiny gesture could be a revelation.*

He straggles forward with lunar caution, leaning a little to the left, trying to conceal the limp in his right leg. He is moving but there is an enervated stillness to him like death: his arms lay idle at his side and his head is statue-still. He glides forward in a series of sliding loops as though he is skating on the surface of a frozen lake, coming to a standstill every few passes. Thirty meters short of the entrance he loses his footing and almost topples over, but manages to right himself, half-turning and she catches the expression of suppressed pain and embarrassment in his face. His trousers are balding at the knees and his front jacket pocket is drooping, seemingly unseamed. He takes a deep breath, composing his features into the remoteness of a still painting and spins around, picking his way to the entrance with his odd broken shuffling. He reminds her of a Kafka character caught in a tragicomic predicament and a shiver of empathy runs up her spine like a bead of mercury. She checks herself. There is no place for empathy, for any trace of compassion, in her line of work.

He pauses at the entrance, his right arm extended toward the handle of the glass door. There is something spectral, almost surreal in everything he does. He cocks his head to the right and peers absently at the floor around his feet, his arm still extended, seemingly frozen. After three or four seconds he starts patting his jacket, turning slightly away from the door, casting a De Chirico diagonal shadow to his right.

She imagines little doors of doubt opening in his mind, some kind of intuition. Perhaps he has detected the surveillance. She knows that if he walks away they will have to arrest him on the spot. He could ask for union representation, after which he will be plunged head first into the

nefarious labyrinth of the Italian legal system. He will be arraigned and locked up in San Vittore. With decent legal presentation (which he can afford) his defense will argue attenuating circumstances, *casus fortuitus*. He'll get a snap on the wrist and they will never get anything out of him.

Her mind puts out feelers for this and that: what they call data points in the trade—*the explosion, the diary, the dead girl, Zolkov*—bulking at the last place, realizing that he is the only viable connection they have. *Without him the entire—*

He turns abruptly like a car spinning with locked wheels and starts back toward his car.

She plucks her transmitter out of her belt. “All units, the mark is—”

Abruptly he stops, patting the left side pocket of his jacket, extracts something the size and shape of a credit card (*his electronic pass, she thinks*) and shakes his head, grinning his feline non-grin, and turns back toward the base, now dragging his leg like a tree stomp. Ten seconds later he is plodding through the front entrance, the glaring, bone-white fog throwing his figure into high relief before it dissolves his contours into a haze as he is lost in the building's deeper reaches.

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The irritated mechanical squawking of a mosquito follows him into the freight elevator and doctor Zolkov thinks of Saint Bartolomeo, flayed alive and exposed to flies. He steps into the arctic ambience of the pathology lab, forcing Miles Davis' sax to play in his head—*anything is better than remembering*. He usually doesn't care for jazz but that piece was interesting. Despite the chaotic composition of burly saxophones and improvised percussions, the notes traveled in parallel motion, a chaotic composition that was oddly harmonious, a little like his life until two nights ago. His memory of what happened Friday night is blurred, like the ragged edges of a nightmare, scenes from a hackneyed horror movie too horrific to be true.

He stops in front of the corpse on the stainless steel autopsy table, thinking he can detect, under the faint, familiar stench of formaldehyde and decaying flesh, the kitchen odor of skin—*her* skin—dirty towels and *bistecca al sangue*, topped with a hint of the cheap perfume she insisted on wearing despite the Channel Number 5 he had bought her.

He removes the white sheet.

Feodora Ledebeva. First time he saw her she reminded him of a tragic heroine in a melancholy story he had been read as a child, some Chechen folk tale. Her curls got into her eyes and she made exaggerated movements to clear her face. *See? Look at me.* She is now a stinking corpse, covered in deep-purple bruises. He puts on his lab coat and washes his hands, eyeing the slash wounds on the left side of her chest. He is careful bending not to put any weight on his right leg. He starts reading the Authorization for Autopsy issued by the Ministry of Interior. After a paragraph words pulse into sense: *Anonymous call to 113...Competent ID...* He picks up the forensics report. *Satanic insignia attached to the body...corpse found in Parco Lambro...* They have not found any direct or biological evidence, and he expected that. Nothing on why the body has been moved to the military base, why the carabinieri are involved. Considering that the recipient of the anonymous call was the polizia, the Murder Squad has jurisdictional sovereignty, not the carabinieri.

The carabinieri are ferociously more efficient than the polizia, but Zolkov doesn't feel threatened. Whatever the experience has left him with, it's not fear—remorse, a kind of emptiness perhaps—but not fear. He cannot be connected to Feodora in anyway. He has never been to her apartment. She was independent—there is no *modeling* agency that may have records of Zolkov. The men took the corpse out under the cover of darkness and the pied-à-terre, where he and Feodora met once a week, was wiped clean. Even if the police were to reconstruct her itinerary—a bus driver who noticed an exceptionally pretty girl, a passerby who followed her a block—and find the pied-à-terre, it cannot be connected to Zolkov. The financial wiz who arranged the rental agreement through an invisible financial institution in the Caymans assured

him that there was no paper trail, nothing that could be traced back to him.

He dabs a touch of menthol cream to the base of his nostrils, pulls on his gloves, and begins to make the standard Y-shape incision, ignoring the outline of the Florentine breasts, right shoulder to chest, left shoulder to chest and then down across her smooth belly, all the way down to the pubis. Her ribs crackle under the scalpel. The crisp sucking sounds echo off the walls. A sign—*some atrocious satanic insignia*, he assumes—is carved across the tattered skin of her heart. He glances the macabre sketch, and cringes. He thinks she was conscious when they did that. He could hear her muffled screams.

He delves into the intestines—shaped like sausage-links—they always remind him of Germany, sausage, potatoes, and beer. He hates Hamburg now. It seemed like a paradise after Grozny but now he can live in no place on earth but Milan. No city can rival its multiplicity, the sensuality you breathe in the air, the assortment of its whores.

Feodora was different. She was like him, a kindred spirit. He knows that there was more to it than the act itself. Of course, it had started like that, but going forward she had glimpsed his soul, heard the music in his heart. Everyone tells you that it never happens. It's an illusion: the contractor who applies the promised third coat of paint, the hostess in first class who is flirting because she finds you attractive, the whore who falls in love.

There is no blood from the incision. The tissue separates revealing a thin layer of yellow fat. Mentally he gauges her body fat: seven-eight percent, perhaps more, but it's all in the right places. Vital statistics: one-hundred-seventy-six centimeters, fifty-two kilos, five hundred. That's how much she charged: five hundred Euros for forty-five minutes.

She said she took a Valium and a glass of red wine to fall asleep. But he has never seen her sleep. She always had to go after the allotted time. *To study*, she said, and he believed her. He knew she wanted to stay awhile, listen to Mozart, sip wine and converse, but she had to study.

Her breasts were soft to the touch on the surface, but hard as billiard balls if you pried a little, 34Bs, can't get any larger than that for the runway. He knew that despite all the setbacks, she

still believed she would make it as a model and her perseverance was one of the qualities he loved in her.

He removes each lung. They're apparently healthy but lungs can be tricky. Positioned on either side of the chest cavity, like wings of an angel, the lungs are indistinct masses, purple and large. The right one is larger than the left one which is often the case with right-handed people. The heart is tucked between and behind the lungs. He places the lungs in a solution of formaldehyde to determine if she were breathing at the time of death. This interests him. He wants to know how much she endured.

He picks her liver and cuts it into slices, trying not to think of his favorite Venetian plate. Past two weeks—ever since they told him what they wanted him to do—he manages only salad and cheese. After three decades, all of a sudden, he can't tolerate the taste of red meat. He slices the J-shaped stomach, looking for telltale signs of bleeding.

His thoughts spin and reel, like millions of atoms in Brownian motion, moving excitedly, going nowhere. He knew she kept a diary. Is his name in it? According to the hanging balance her heart weighs 263 grams. He writes that down; then cuts her heart into slices. The vessel is almost entirely occluded with atherosclerosis—cocaine. He suspected she took something stronger than Valium.

This is what else he remembers.

Her laughter, dignified and quiet, and her footsteps like the passing of a Russian princess on a silk rug. Her face when she took the money was the face of a woman eating alone in a restaurant. He remembered her clumsy grammar when she spoke Italian, and a linguistic tic that repeated itself at equally timed intervals, fault of her native Russian. The way she moved suggested dance lessons in the past—jazz, he thought: Feodora was too tacky for classical or ballet. Her full name was Feodora Romanovna Lebedeva but she went by Miranda.

Feodora had long legs, exceedingly long. When she walked it seemed as if she were about to leave the ground and fly. In death her eyes are pale, lucid, glistening like glass, a doll's eyes. He

notes something about the face, tiny pinkish dots like an outburst of small pox that could hint at suffocation as probable cause of death.

She had cranberry lips. Now they're purple and black. He remembers the glistening lips parting as he touched her. He turns the corpse. In American films, doctors have assistants who do that but this isn't Hollywood. He makes an incision across the back of the head from ear to ear and turns on the power saw. The human brain is pinkish-grey with blood vessels coiling around one another like a million copulating worms. He detects no sign of aneurysm or clotting.

He closes his eyes, conjuring the young-girl scent of her, and leans toward her as if nudging part of him to enter her. "Cunt," He whispers in a hypnotic chant. For the smallest part of a second he expects her to respond. He clenches and unclenches his fingers and slaps her left buttock with the flat of his hand. The corpse is past rigor mortis and the muscles are flaccid now. They tremble like jelly under the force of the slap. His head reels. Thoughts and images are straggled up in his mind like sheep. "You stupid lovely cunt." He can imagine the creamy skin of her ass cheeks beneath the black-purplish hue of death. *Perhaps he can*—he stops himself. In his vision shadows and light mix, driven like the heat waves of a furnace rolling over him. He gasps, sucking bits of air, scorching slivers piercing his lungs.