



NICOLA ROCCA

# TWO DROPS OF WATER

THRILLER

*"Sometimes, people are best  
being kept in the dark"*

EMMEERRE

Nicola Rocca

**Two Drops Of Water**

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

**Rocca N.**

Two Drops Of Water / N. Rocca — «Tektime S.r.l.s.»,

ISBN 978-8-87-304272-3

Chantal has had a disastrous year. She's lost her job and her mother, seen her father descend into alcoholism and been cheated on by the love of her life. Down on her luck, opportunity knocks when she starts chatting online to Alfredo, who offers her a job at his B&B in Tuscany. Chantal falls for Alfredo and thinks she has found happiness again, but when she hears there is a maniac on the loose who preys on the girls who work at the B&B, she is thrust into a living nightmare. Hundreds of miles from home and gripped with fear, Chantal must decide who to trust amid a tangled web of rumours, lies and a terrible, horrifying secret... Chantal, or SadChantal as she's known in online chat rooms, is thirty-three. She's going through the darkest time of her life; absolutely nothing is going her way. She's out of work and living on benefits because her Economics degree is totally worthless, her father is in rehab after the death of her mother and the love of her life, Giulio, has left her for a younger woman. She's down on her luck but made of tough stuff. She can hardly make plans on €400 a month, but when she begins chatting online to Alfredo (AlfreDario74), her luck appears to change. He's looking for a factotum for the new season at his B&B in Tuscany. Chantal decides to turn her back on her old life and accepts the job. She nearly dies en route and encounters a witch-like old woman when she arrives. On eventually locating the B&B, she discovers it is totally isolated, gloomy and run-down. She wants to turn straight back around and head home, but she can't face another seven hours in the car. She resolves to go home the next day but changes her mind after meeting Alfredo. He's well-educated, polite, kind and immediately puts her at ease. What's more, he's very, very cute. As Chantal and Alfredo get to work on the B&B, they become close and begin a relationship that gradually moves beyond sex. Chantal has rediscovered herself and her joie de vivre. One day, however, her world is rocked when people in the village tell her that the B&B is cursed. A girl like her is hired every year, and every year the girl disappears. Someone is kidnapping, raping and killing these girls, and some people think it's Alfredo. Life at the B&B is no longer the same.

Chantal lives in fear and keeps a close eye on Alfredo. Are the rumours true? Could the man she has fallen in love with really be a killer? Is he what he seems, or is there a monster behind the mask? Chantal decides she won't leave until she has all the answers, but it won't be easy: one false step could be her last. *Two Drops of Water* is a psychological thriller that plays with emotions, feelings and states of mind. Who can you trust? Who is good and who is evil? Sometimes it's impossible to tell because the two are separated by the finest of fine lines. So fine as to be imperceptible. Sometimes, evil is within us. Other times, it's in those to whom we are closest.

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TWO DROPS OF WATER  
ENNEERRE

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Cover art © Alberto Motta

Cover design © Nicola Rocca and Alberto Motta

Translated by Andrew Fanko

Publisher: Tektime - [www.traduzionelibri.it](http://www.traduzionelibri.it)

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2016

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For Sandra and Davide,  
who achieved their  
greatest dream.

For all those who,

like me,

exist in limbo,

straddling the finest

of fine lines that separates

two different worlds.

N.R.

"You will learn, to your cost,

that on life's great journey

you will encounter many masks, but few faces."

(Luigi Pirandello – One, No One and One Hundred Thousand)

TWO DROPS OF WATER

## PROLOGUE

The room is in semi-darkness,  
the pitch black alleviated only by the dirty yellow light of a street lamp filtering through the window.

Aldo Martelli stares up at the ceiling.

It's an ordeal he has endured for years now - in and out of hospital. No particular illness, but he's ninety years old, and there's no cure for old age; it comes for us all, followed sooner or later by its trusty friend, Death.

His throat seems to be closing up, every breath a laborious wheeze.

All he needs to do is reach out and press his emergency button. A nurse would come running and fit his oxygen mask.

Aldo knows there is little point; it would just delay his last breath for a few more hours. He may as well let himself drift off into that deepest of sleeps that he knows so well. A sleep that has been his livelihood for seventy years.

*Martelli Funeral Directors.* Two shop windows and a preparation room.

Thinking about it still brings a smile to his face.

So much time has passed. It seems like only yesterday, but now his entire life has flown by.

The weight pressing down on his lungs increases. Aldo may never have experienced his own death, but it is all too familiar to him. He can sense it.

Now that his time has come, he's not afraid. Life has been kind; he can have no complaints. He has never lacked for money or affection.

His thoughts turn to Mina, whom he married before either of them had even turned twenty. Gradually, images of their children come into his mind. Then the grandchildren.

Their faces seem so real he can't help but smile. Such a beautiful family.

As his vision begins to blur from a lack of oxygen, another memory pops into his head. He thinks of the little white coffin and the secret he has kept for over thirty years.

It was so long ago now, but he can remember it as if it were yesterday.

He still can't explain why he did it. Could have been greed; could have been a million and one other things.

He deceived an entire town.

He opens his mouth wide in an attempt to steal one final breath, and his eyes relax and fall open.

Just a split second more of suffering, and the secret would go with him to his grave.

## FEBRUARY 2016

A mia volta mi fido del mondo  
non ti dico le botte che prendo  
Non c'è modo di starsene fuori  
da ciò che lo rende tremendo e stupendo...

(*La linea sottile* [The Fine Line] - Luciano Ligabue)

CHAPTER 1

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.02

So you're not married and you don't have a boyfriend?

03/02/2016

SadChantal 20.02

Nope. Neither of the above.

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.03

How come? Must be your choice, right? There can't be a lack of interest. I've seen your photo...you're a stunning girl.

03/02/2016

SadChantal 20.04

Girl? I'm not sure I still qualify as a girl at 33 :-)

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.04

You may be 33 but you look about 25. And you're still a girl at 25, trust me!

03/02/2016

SadChantal 20.05

If you say so...

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.05

So you still haven't answered my question. How come a GIRL as hot as you isn't married or in a relationship?

03/02/2016

SadChantal 20.06

Erm...next question please!

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.06

Ooops...have I touched a nerve?

03/02/2016

SadChantal 20.06

I'll say... And what about you? Married?

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.07

That's touched a nerve right here too... :-)

03/02/2016

SadChantal 20.07

Wow. Love is definitely NOT in the air around here!

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.07

You're not wrong, SadChantal. Is that why you're sad? Did your last relationship go tits up?

03/02/2016

SadChantal 20.08

Maybe...But love's not the only reason. What about you anyway? What's the deal with your name?

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.09

Just paying a little tribute to my 2 favourite directors: Alfred Hitchcock and Dario Argento.

OK, so apart from love, what's making you sad, gorgeous?

03/02/2016

SadChantal 20.09

I'm just going through a rough time...I'd rather not talk about it.

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.10

Understood. We'll talk about something else shall we?

03/02/2016

SadChantal 20.10

:-)

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.10

Hmmm...we need something a bit more fun and light-hearted...

03/02/2016

SadChantal 20.11

Anything would be more fun and light-hearted than the last year of my life.

Go on, fire away...

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.12

It might not be the most fun and light-hearted topic for most people,

but it is for me: What do you do? For work, I mean.

Chantal sat motionless in front of her PC. It was unbelievable how this guy had managed to hit her where it hurt. He'd started with family, then moved on to love, and finally, in an attempt to talk about something more "fun and light-hearted", he'd delivered the *coup de grace*.

Work had been a sore point for a while now.

She began to tap away at the keyboard, and her words appeared on the screen.

"Fuck off," she muttered, burying her head in her hands.

She deleted what she had just typed, reducing the message window to nothing but a flashing cursor.

The thirty-three-going-on-twenty-five-year-old girl got up from her swivel chair and headed into the kitchen.

"Where the fuck are they?" she asked herself, scanning the table she hadn't cleared from earlier.

Nothing. They weren't there.

She cast her eyes over to the shelf by the sink.

They weren't there either.

She puffed out her cheeks in frustration and headed for the living room hoping for better luck. She raised a finger to her mouth and began to bite nervously on her nail. Her eyes were darting around the room: the glass coffee table, the shelving unit on the wall, the old writing desk...

"There you are!"

She walked over to the antique piece of furniture and grabbed the packet of Philip Morris. She took a cigarette from the pack and lit it, hoping that the nicotine would somehow inspire her to create a cover story that could mask what she had really, shamefully, done for a living.

By the time she had returned to the bedroom, the cigarette was already half smoked, and a couple of pieces of ash fell to the tiled floor.

“Dammit!” she admonished her own carelessness.

She was about to go back in the kitchen to fetch an ashtray, and a damp sponge to clean up the fallen ash, when her PC emitted a familiar *ping*.

She peered at the screen. There were four new messages.

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.16

Hello?

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.17

Don't tell me I've touched another nerve with work!

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.20

You still there?

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.23

What's going on?

Don't tell me I've touched another nerve with work!

Well, kind of.

You still there?

If truth be told, she didn't know if she was still there or not. It was probably about a year ago that she started not really being there. And it had got worse ever since as she was beset by one problem after another, slamming into her like a high-speed train.

What's going on?

She had no clue what was going on, only that she'd lost her mind in some corner of this godforsaken earth. No, there was definitely no happy ending to the last year of her life.

She took another drag and realised the cigarette had burned down to the filter.

“Fuck's sake!”

She flicked the butt out of the window and turned back to the screen. He could wait, for now.

She moved the cursor up and to the right, and clicked on the X. The chat window disappeared to be replaced by a giant winking emoji.

Her computer had been her virtual world for days, but she switched it off and returned to the real world.

## CHAPTER 2

Until this time last year, her life had been completely different.

Mamma and Papà had raised her lovingly. When she left high school, she had wanted to start working so she could contribute to the household income, but her parents had insisted she apply to university.

“Choose whatever course you like,” her father had said, more serious than she had ever seen him. “We'll find a way of paying your boarding costs.”

She chose Economics, and she already knew enough about that particular subject to know that she didn't want to be a burden on her parents for years to come. She'd found herself a part-time job at Lilly's Snack Bar so she could at least contribute to some of her uni-related expenses: train fares, books, lunches away from home.

She worked at the bar, just a couple of miles from the family home, for the first two years of her course, doing the 5.30pm-10pm shift three nights a week. The money she earned eased the pressure on her folks, at least until the country was rocked by the financial crisis. On one horrible autumn day, Chantal had received a phone call from Signor Ferruccio, who told her (sensitively at least) that he could no longer afford to keep her on. The bar just wasn't generating enough business.

And so Chantal found herself out of a job, and her parents were forced to tighten the purse strings so they could cover all her uni expenses. Then, one day, she responded to an advert:

WANTED: NIGHT CLUB DANCER

The night club turned out to be more of a strip club, requiring topless dancers to strut their stuff in front of sleazy, drooling old men stroking themselves through the inside of their trouser pockets.

But the pay was good and she needed the money, so she had agreed to get up on stage and take her kit off, surrounded by a pack of horny wolves.

When Chantal awoke from her daydream, she found herself standing in the middle of the kitchen. She took a deep breath and pulled yet another cigarette from the rapidly emptying packet.

She had tried to quit so many times but succumbed whenever life got tough.

It was more than just life getting tough though; it was a deep, dark depression that had pervaded every fibre of her being.

She took three long drags on her cigarette, glanced over at the dirty dishes piled up in the sink and shook the tablecloth over the balcony. The sparrows would be grateful for the breadcrumbs.

Taking another couple of drags, she headed back indoors and stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray. She wandered into the bathroom and took all her clothes off, glancing at herself in the mirror but not stopping to admire what she saw. That same body, lusted after by dozens of randy old gits at the club, had been traded in for a younger model by the man she'd thought was the love of her life.

Pushing those painful memories to the back of her mind, she reached inside the shower and turned it on. She put her hands under the jet until it reached the right temperature, stepped into the shower and waited for the water to succeed where yet another cigarette had failed, by calming her thoughts.

CHAPTER 3

He opens his eyes.

He feels drowsy, or perhaps it's the after-effects of the stuff he is forced to take.

Must be some sort of tranquiliser. But he says nothing. He doesn't moan. All that matters is that he gets what he wants. And so far, he always has.

He looks over to the opposite corner of the room.

Still there.

He smiles and begins to drool at the prospect of his favourite meal, which has been there for some time now.

He yawns.

Why me and not someone else?

He asks himself the same question nearly every day.

Why me and not him?

He doesn't actually need an answer, as long as *he* gives him what he wants...something to play with. Something that sates him and yet leaves him feeling empty.

He belches - damn acid reflux -

gets up from the dirty, unmade bed and thirstily gulps down some water from a plastic bottle in an attempt to get rid of the taste of whatever the hell *he'd* forced him to swallow.

He sniffs, slips a hand inside his pants and lightly touches his cock and balls.

He pauses for a few moments as he looks at himself in the mirror and tells himself he's not an ugly man. Sure, he could improve things if he took a little more pride in his appearance,

but he's OK like this. *A glance over at his favourite meal in the corner.* All that matters is that he always gets what he wants.

And he has.

But he doesn't fancy it right now.

Perhaps his appetite will return after a cold shower.

He scratches at his beard. He hasn't shaved for...goodness knows how many days.

He turns on the cold tap, cups his hands under the stream and splashes the water over his face, which is either just tired or numb from those fucking tranquilisers.

He turns the tap off and watches as the drops of water fall from his face. He takes off his dirty t-shirt, uses it to dry himself off and tosses it casually onto the bed.

Before getting in the tiny shower, he again casts his eyes over to the shape in the corner and realises he is changing his mind.

His hunger is returning.

He wants to gorge himself like an animal that has just emerged from hibernation. The thought prompts a twinge inside his pants.

*'Behave!'* he tells himself.

His breathing starts to become heavy and laboured. Beads of sweat begin to form on his brow. He's getting aroused; it always happens like this.

Another glance at the shape in the corner. Another little fiddle downstairs. His mouth begins to water.

*'Later! She's not going anywhere,'* he tells himself. *'She's all yours...'*

"All mine!"

He smiles because he knows it's the truth.

He takes a deep breath, lets his pants fall to the floor and uses his tongue to suck the air through his teeth. He loves the feeling it gives him, the sensation on his teeth and gums.

He enters the shower, lifts up the mixer tap and turns it all the way to the right. He wants it ice cold, like always.

As the water beats down relentlessly on his muscular back, he begins to anticipate what will happen when he has finished washing himself.

The saliva begins to taste sweet in his mouth and the urge in his groin becomes uncontrollable.

Thankfully, it's nearly time to get out of the shower...

#### CHAPTER 4

'Is it really me that should be ashamed?'

Chantal poured herself a glass of sparkling mineral water and sipped it slowly but determinedly, fuelling herself with some non-alcoholic Dutch courage.

'It's them who should be ashamed, paying me a pittance for two years and...'

There was a thud as she angrily thumped her fist on the table.

'...and then letting me go. Morons!'

Chantal became enraged every time she thought back to when she was fired, or, more accurately, they refused to renew her contract. What pissed her off the most was the shame she felt at being unemployed and living off benefits of four hundred euros a month.

Four hundred euros...

She'd dedicated her life to her studies for four hundred shitty euros a month. Oh, and an Economics degree. Which she could use for...making a paper aeroplane or maybe wiping her arse. Oh yes. That was Italy in 2016. On the one hand, there were people with a career spanning more than forty years who weren't about to retire anytime soon; and on the other, there were millions of young people who would give their eye teeth for a job - any bloody job.

Unfortunately for Chantal, she was one of those young people.

She took out a fag, went into her bedroom and switched on the computer. Her long, drawn-out drags meant she was down to the butt in no time.

Chantal opened the chat site and tried to think how she could possibly explain her plight to AlfreDario77.

There was an unread message.

03/02/2016

AlfreDario77 20.32

Fine...you could have just said if you didn't want to chat anymore. If your manners ever come back, you know where I am.

“Fair enough,” she said to the screen. “I'd have been pissed off if someone had done that to me.”

She took another puff and drummed her fingers on the desk, trying desperately to think of how she could respond.

04/02/2016

SadChantal 10.15

Hi...

I'm so sorry about last night. It's not that I didn't want to keep talking to you. Something came up.

That was fine to start with, while she waited for some inspiration on how she could deal with the whole work thing. Also, she wanted to be sure he was online, which would be confirmed by the little green circle next to his name.

She casually rolled the wheel of her mouse to scroll up the screen in search of yesterday's messages.

It might not be the most fun and light-hearted topic for most people, but it is for me. What do you do? For work, I mean.

And then...

Don't tell me I've touched another nerve with work!

She decided to try and respond to that final comment, which was probably the easiest to cope with. She wrote her message but waited a couple of minutes before sending it, hoping he would come online.

Nothing.

She opted to finish the fag with a triple drag that brought tears to her eyes, before stubbing it out firmly in the ash tray, steeling herself and decisively hitting the return key to send her message.

04/02/2016

SadChantal 10.18

You're right. You did touch a nerve as far as my work is concerned... :-)

She focused on what to type next, her fingers once more drumming against the desk. The sentences were beginning to form in her mind. She was almost there when she was distracted by a familiar *ping*.

04/02/2016

AlfreDario77 10.19

Hey...welcome back! You took your time...

04/02/2016

SadChantal 10.20

Sorry again about last night...

04/02/2016

AlfreDario77 10.20

No problem!

Chantal thought about what to say next, but he beat her to it.

04/02/2016

AlfreDario77 10.20

So I did touch a nerve with work? I'm sorry. I'm all ears if you want to offload...

She knew it was time to come clean. If there was anyone who should be ashamed of themselves it was those tossers at Robobi's, who had refused to renew her contract after turning her brain to mush for two years with bills, receipts, tax returns, payslips and whatever else.

Bastards!

Her jaw tightened every time she thought about it.

04/02/2016

SadChantal 10.22

I've been out of work for 5 months...

Only eight words, but that was all that needed saying for now.

04/02/2016

AlfreDario77 10.22

Sorry to hear that...

04/02/2016

SadChantal 10.23

Tell me about it...:-(

04/02/2016

AlfreDario77 10.23

Do you know what? I might be able to help you out...

04/02/2016

SadChantal 10.23

Really?

04/02/2016

AlfreDario77 10.25

I run a B&B in Grosseto, Tuscany. It's mine, I own it. Last year, the girl that was helping me out decided to move on. So I'm looking for a willing replacement.

04/02/2016

AlfreDario77 10.26

What do you think? Would you be interested? Do you know anything about the hospitality sector?

Chantal stared at the monitor for ages. She couldn't believe it. She'd sent off dozens of copies of her CV without managing to get an interview. In fact, no one had even bothered to reply. And here she was, chatting with some guy she'd only met two days ago, and he was offering her a job.

Hardly local though, was it? Tuscany, for goodness' sake.

04/02/2016

AlfreDario77 10.29

Done another disappearing act, have you? If you're not interested, there's no need to turn off your PC! You can just tell me :-)

Chantal chastised herself for taking so long to reply. She took a deep breath.

04/02/2016

SadChantal 10.30

Sounds incredible! A B&B! I did some bar work for a few years...is that any good?

04/02/2016

AlfreDario77 10.31

Perfect. It's not quite the same thing but at least you wouldn't be starting from scratch.

04/02/2016

SadChantal 10.32

If your B&B was in somewhere in the Brescia area, I could come for a trial. But Tuscany...blimey! That's a hell of a long way...

04/02/2016

AlfreDario77 10.33

I know it's quite far. But it's not as if you'd have to go back to Brescia every night. You'd have board and lodging on top of your salary. A bedroom and bathroom all to yourself.

04/02/2016

SadChantal 10.35

I'd have to drop everything...leave my hometown...

Chantal realised what she'd written was total bollocks. It may have been a throwaway comment, but more likely she was lying to herself about the tragedy of the previous twelve months. Drop everything? She didn't have anything to drop.

She wondered if he'd figured as much. Right from the off, she'd spilled her guts and basically let him know that she was on her own.

04/02/2016

AlfreDario77 10.38

It might do you good. Draw a line in the sand, turn over a new leaf...

Look, I don't want to pressure you. I know it's a tough decision. You'll need time.

04/02/2016

SadChantal 10.39

You're right...it's not an easy decision. Give me a couple of days, OK?

04/02/2016

AlfreDario77 10.40

Take all the time you need.

Chantal reflected on what had just happened. It was a great opportunity, but she'd need to be brave. Drop everything (even if it *was* nothing) and go to Tuscany.

She had been on several trips with Giulio, all fairly far away. She'd been to some beautiful places, some on the other side of the world. But Tuscany, which was just down the road in comparison, was somewhere she'd never been.

04/02/2016

SadChantal 10.42

I'll just say thanks for the offer at the moment. I'll have a think about it and let you know as soon as possible. Is that OK?

04/02/2016

AlfreDario77 10.44

Like I said, there's no rush. Take as long as you need, within reason! The season gets under way in about a month's time. People start to arrive at the beginning of spring.

Chantal closed the chat window and decided to treat herself to some peace and quiet and a smoke before heading to the shopping precinct to buy some lunch. Trouble was, there was no peace and quiet to be had: a voice inside her head kept asking the same questions over and over.

Do I? Don't I? Do I? Don't I? Do I? Don't I? Do I? Don't I? Do I? Don't I?

She may have told this guy she needed a few days to think it over, but Chantal knew deep down that she'd already made up her mind.

CHAPTER 5

The key turned twice in the lock and the door opened.

She entered her flat, food shopping in one hand and purse in the other. She raised one foot behind her and kicked the door shut, before dumping her shopping bag in the kitchen and heading towards the bathroom. But as she walked through the living room, something caught her eye.

She froze and stared at the photo.

Her mouth turned down at the corners and she began to weep.

She made no effort to wipe away her tears as she drew nearer the photo frame. Her stomach tightened.

She took another two steps closer to the photo of the woman, who appeared to be smiling right at her, and swallowed tearfully. She raised her hand to her mouth and bit down on her knuckles.

"Mam..." she sobbed. "*Mamma.*"

She sniffed and turned once more to face the woman in the photo, as if she could hear her.

"I miss you so much, you know?"

She gave in to the anguish and broke down in floods of tears, leaving herself drained but somehow liberated.

As the torment began to subside, her lips forced themselves into a wry smile as she remembered how much joy her mother had brought her.

Chantal was in Year 6. Until that year she had always been shy around boys, but in Year 6 everything changed.

There was a knock on the door during Maths. It was the caretaker, and with her was the most handsome boy Chantal had ever seen. He had fair hair and blue eyes. Just looking at his smile made her feel good.

"This is Davide," the caretaker announced.

The teacher nodded at the caretaker and took up the story. "Davide has come from Veneto. He'll be joining our class from today."

From that moment on, Chantal learned nothing more about decimals, fractions, multiplication or division. From the minute he entered the classroom, she didn't take her eyes off that boy for a second.

Within weeks, it was as if they'd known each other all their lives, grown up together and played the same games in the same playground.

One breaktime, he asked her to follow him. So she did. He led her almost to the bottom of the park, where there stood two enormous trees. He told her to close her eyes and count to ten before opening them again.

"Why?" she asked, bursting with intrigue.

"I have a surprise for you," Davide announced, flashing her that smile of his.

"You're not going to play a trick on me, are you?"

"No! Trust me. Just close your eyes."

Chantal closed her eyes and began to count.

One, two, three...

Just as she reached nine, her voice was smothered as something pressed against her lips. She was startled and wanted to open her eyes, but she realised what was happening and kept them closed.

Not only that, she reciprocated.

It was her first kiss. Their magical moment was rudely interrupted by the sound of the school bell. As she opened her eyes, he said: "I like you."

They returned to class in silence, totally wrapped up in each other, and as the lesson unfolded Chantal was certain that she knew less than she had when she'd first laid eyes on Davide.

At the end of school, she got on the bus and went home. She couldn't eat a thing: her stomach was so full of butterflies flitting about that there was no room for anything else.

Her mother asked her what the matter was, and suddenly she had a crazy thought. Her expression turned sullen and her mother urged her to get whatever was bothering her off her chest.

Chantal was afraid her mother would shout at her, but eventually she decided to speak.

She said she was worried she was pregnant.

"Pregnant?" her mother repeated, with eyes as wide as saucers. "And what makes you think you might be pregnant?"

Chantal hesitated.

"You know the friend I've been telling you about over the last few days? The new kid?"

"Yeeeesss."

She looked down at the floor to avoid her mother's gaze.

"He kissed me today. On the lips."

Her mother waited a few seconds and, once she was sure her little girl had nothing more to add, asked:

"And then what?"

"Nothing. That was it. We kissed on the lips for five minutes. Non-stop. And with our eyes closed!"

Her mother smiled affectionately at her, but it was a smile that also betrayed a ruefulness that her little girl would soon become a young woman. She took her daughter's face in her hands and explained to her, calmly and in very simple terms, what needed to happen for a woman to get pregnant.

"Pregnant because of a kiss?" she finished, "oh Chanty!"

"But Mamma, I thought th..."

Her mother smiled at her warmly. "You're so naive, Chanty. Just like your mother. "You and me, we're like two drops of water."

As Chantal opened her eyes, she raised a finger to her lips and smiled. She wiped her cheeks dry and looked once more at the smiling face of her mother, who had been right yet again.

## CHAPTER 6

He looked in the mirror.

His eyes were so lifeless that the blue of his irises appeared as black as the pupil inside them.

He opened his mouth slightly and stared at the prominent cavity on one of his incisors. Goodness knows how many years the tooth had been blighted by that hideous brown mark.

He couldn't care less. He was on a mission.

If he didn't smile, no one would see it - simple as that. He had begun to use his dental defect as a way of passing the time and relieving tension. The thrill - or perhaps it was pain - he experienced when he flicked at the cavity with his tongue was arousing. Sometimes, it even gave him a hard-on.

He stared at his swollen red ear lobe, and then shifted his gaze to the other one, which was as white as the rest of him.

He had no idea why he only ever scratched and butchered his right lobe.

Initially, it was an unconscious response to the pain emanating from his tooth. The tic had stayed with him ever since. It wasn't an attractive habit, he knew that much, so he tried to make sure he only ever did it when he was alone.

It gave him such a thrill...not as much as rubbing his tongue against the cavity, mind.

He scratched his right lobe and slowly slid his tongue over the decayed incisor. He weighed up which gave him more pleasure and decided that it was indeed the tongue on the cavity, by some distance. No contest.

He looked once more at his reflection. His hair was totally dishevelled. He dipped his fingers into a tub of gel and retrieved a small amount, which he carefully applied to the tips of his short hair.

Now he was ready.

Although he kept staring at himself in the mirror, his mind was elsewhere. On his mission. His obsession. He removed his phone from his pocket and re-read the message.

It was time. To hell with the arguments. It was all water under the bridge. Some things were more important.

He slid the phone back into his pocket and walked out of the room.

He needed to get a move on.

## CHAPTER 7

She was still wondering whether to accept his job offer. If she said yes, she'd have to leave her hometown behind for...months? Years?

Move to the back and beyond somewhere in Tuscany.

If she said no, she'd be throwing away a golden opportunity. Paid employment at a time when jobs were at a premium.

A wave of disgust washed over her as she thought back to her work at the strip club.

She hadn't enjoyed getting naked in front of all those lust-fuelled men; she'd just needed the money. She'd put up with it for around three years and probably would have kept doing so had it not happened.

One evening, while she was changing before heading home, Signor Tironi came into the changing room and asked for five minutes of her time so the two of them could talk business.

Business, *that's what he said.*

She agreed and he embarked on a seemingly never-ending monologue before eventually getting to the point.

The business.

He told her she was one of the best dancers and strippers he'd ever worked with. And also the most beautiful. She was loved by all the customers, but one was particularly keen. A wealthy businessman in his fifties. Tironi told her the man was willing to pay anything to spend a night with her.

Chantal raised an eyebrow and looked at him disdainfully.

"So, what do you think?" he asked casually. "What are you looking at me like that for?"

She answered quickly and firmly.

"I'm a dancer, not a whore."

He smiled.

"If you were some kind of nun, you wouldn't be flashing your tits about in my club. Think about it, Chantal. This guy is our best customer. He's got more money than the lot of us put together," he said, drawing a circle in the air with a nicotine-stained finger.

"I strip because I need the money," she replied coldly. "I'm not proud of what I do, but getting your kit off in front of men is one thing, and going to bed with them is something else entirely."

Tironi drew closer and stroked her hair, his stubby fingers brushing against her face.

"Perhaps...but you may not even have to sleep with him." He smiled at her again. "He might be happy with...you know...flirt with him a little, get him hard, suck him off. Close your eyes for three minutes, swallow like a good girl and walk off with five hundred big ones."

She tied up her shoes and stood up. Walked over to the little table and picked up her soft drink.

"So, let's see if I've understood." She stroked her boss's cheek. "I flirt with him a little." She brushed up against him. "I get him hard." She bit her lip. "And I suck him off." She slid her index finger inside her mouth and bit down. Hard.

Tironi smirked.

Chantal continued.

"Then I close my eyes," she whispered, gently pushing down her boss's eyelids. "Three minutes and..."

She threw her drink in Tironi's face.

"Fuck off, you prick!" she snarled.

"What the fuck do you think you're playing at, you stupid girl? You do realise that I could..."

She never heard the end of that sentence. She had already stormed out of the changing room and slammed the door behind her.

She hadn't worked for the strip club since and never would again. She'd been out of work for nearly two years before Robobi's forced her into a two-year contract earning a few hundred euros a month. And then chose not to renew it.

"Bastards," she said, piercing a cube of mozzarella with her fork.

She convinced herself that the offer from the guy in the chat room – *What was he called again? Oh yeah, Alfredo* – really was a golden ticket. Salary, board and lodging. It was the answer to all her prayers.

If she accepted the job, she'd have to go and see her father before she left. He might have been off his rocker these days, but she would still have to say goodbye.

#### CHAPTER 8

On reaching the roundabout at the intersection of Via Paglia and Via Carducci, she'd considered doing an about turn and heading back home. But a little voice inside her head had told her she couldn't leave town without saying goodbye. So she'd gone round the roundabout three times before taking the exit towards the clinic.

Giancarlo Moretti was in bed, the covers pulled up to his chest. Beads of sweat glistened on his furrowed brow. His eyes were closed, shutting out the world that had robbed him of his wife a year earlier.

He was asleep. Perfect. She no longer needed an excuse not to talk to him.

Chantal breathed a sigh of relief, but immediately felt like a coward: she had neither the courage nor the desire to enter the room and talk to the man who had always been a perfect parent.

*Nearly always*, she corrected herself.

Chantal watched her father and reflected on the unfortunate circumstances that had brought him there.

Giancarlo Moretti had led a troubled life but had always got by, even when his problems had seemed insurmountable. But the premature loss of his wife had floored him for good. He'd let himself go one day at a time, alcohol the only point to his existence. The drinking had started the week after the funeral. Before being admitted to the rehab clinic, he would get up in the middle of the night and guzzle whatever he could lay his hands on. Whatever could make him forget the sad reality of life.

Chantal knew what he was doing, but he'd always denied it. That was, until he came home in the early hours one morning and collapsed on the living room floor. The colossal crash had woken Chantal with a start. She'd feared they were being burgled, and her instinct was to lock herself in her room. But then she'd recognised the sobbing and phlegmy coughs of her father. She'd turned on the light and headed towards the noise. And there he was. She'd walked over to him, helped him to his feet, looked him straight in the eye and seen a pitifully drunk old man.

Having struggled to get him to bed, Chantal didn't sleep a wink that night - unlike her father, who was out for the count and snoring within minutes.

The binges became increasingly heavy and frequent, and he started to get nasty with her.

Then he hit rock bottom. He came home one night and Chantal went in to find him sprawled on the sofa, a knocked-over bottle of whisky by his side and vomit down his greasy shirt. His head was back and he was foaming at the mouth.

Chantal was petrified. Her hands shaking, she'd fumbled around in her handbag for her phone and rung the emergency services. They'd managed to save him, but the doctor told her he would be better off in a rehab clinic. He'd advised her to take her father to the nearest SerT, a public drug treatment centre. After all, they couldn't afford private care. So that's what she had done, hoping that he would respond well to treatment and make a full recovery.

But months later, Giancarlo Moretti was still in the clinic. The detox process had resulted in a string of psychiatric problems that had put even more strain on the father-daughter relationship.

Chantal came back to the present, pulled a tissue from her bag and dabbed at her eyes. She glanced over at her father and couldn't help but cry. She raised a hand to her mouth and blew him a kiss.

"Good luck, *Papà*. I just came to say bye," she whispered.

But she feared it was more than just goodbye:

"Farewell, Dad."

She took a couple of steps away, then turned around and looked back through the glass wall of her father's room:

"I love you. I've always loved you."

CHAPTER 9

Chantal's computer flickered into life.

This was it. Decision time. The job she'd been offered would give her a fresh start. Hopefully, it would be a change for the better.

*Could hardly be any worse than the previous year*, she told herself.

She manoeuvred her mouse over the mouse mat, clicked on the smiley face and watched as the chat window opened and displayed her most recent messages.

She had no problem finding the right words this time. They came pouring out effortlessly, and she was so sure of herself that she hit 'send' without even bothering to re-read what she'd typed.

06/02/2016

SadChantal 17.43

Hi Alfredo. I've thought about your offer and have decided to accept it. Just let me know when I can start! Have a nice evening.

No sooner had she sent the message, she couldn't wait for her new adventure to begin. She got up and located her cigarettes. If her mother had been there, she'd no doubt have chastised her for restricting herself to tinned tuna and cheap pasta so she could afford to buy fags. On four hundred euros a month, she couldn't have her cake and eat it.

She felt a bit stupid, but she couldn't suppress her desire to smoke.

She lit up and inhaled greedily. As she blew out a cloud of smoke, she chewed nervously at a hangnail on her thumb.

She took another drag and looked around the room, searching for something else to make her forget her current plight.

She looked right, then left, but nothing she saw managed to distract her.

Until she glanced over at the shelf next to the stereo. A photo showed her striking a pose in her swimming costume as she lay on a brilliant-white beach. She could remember the exact moment the snap had been taken.

The exact moment *he* had taken it.

It was only just over a year ago, but it seemed like a lifetime.

That was the last time she had gone to the beach and smelt the sea air.

She'd forgotten the smell itself,

but she knew it was the most wonderful thing she'd ever smelt.

She smiled as she thought of spending the rest of her life by the seaside. That would be her ideal scenario. By the sea, she felt only joy; no anger or bitterness. By the sea, she felt only calm; no sudden bouts of anxiety.

Whatever the problem, the sea could resolve it. At least that's what she'd thought until that last holiday, the one immortalised in the photo she was now staring at.

They'd decided to go to Mauritius.

As they'd flicked through the holiday brochures, they'd fallen in love with the views, which were seemingly from another world. They'd hoped that the trip would repair the cracks that had started to appear in their relationship after months of fighting. An eight-year relationship.

Eight years of being Chantal and Giulio.

They were so happy in Mauritius: swimming in the sea; walks on the beach; candlelit dinners; sex morning, noon and night. So much sex.

Before jetting off, they'd decided they would make a baby right there in that paradise on earth. They'd certainly tried hard enough, but Chantal had her period when they got back to Italy. They kept

trying, but there was no sign of her falling pregnant so they went to see Dr Cresti, a gynaecologist, who referred them for tests.

They waited for ten long days for the results.

There was no problem with Giulio's sperm, but Chantal's ovaries were considerably swelled by cysts, which were preventing fertilisation.

She went under the knife, and the operation was a success, but she still couldn't get pregnant. They subjected her to more tests, which revealed she would not be able to have children. Chantal had cried for a whole week, and just as the tears had finally begun to dry, she'd caught Giulio in bed with another woman.

"It would never have lasted anyway," he'd told her in an attempt to justify his infidelity. "I'd never have stayed with a woman who couldn't give me a child."

His words had cut like a knife. And her scars would never heal.

On the very same day, she'd packed a case and headed back to her childhood home. Not that it felt like her childhood home anymore. First her mamma had died of stomach cancer, and then her grief-stricken papà, Giancarlo, had been forced into rehab after descending into a spiral of drinking.

Chantal snapped out of her daydream and opened her eyes.

The Mauritius photo was still there in front of her.

She stared at the horizon, the fine line between the sky and sea. Between two things that were similar but entirely different.

Sky and sea: identical yet opposite.

Just like the two monosyllabic words that had been going round her head ever since Alfredo had offered her the B&B job.

Yes, no. Yes, no. Yes, no. Yes, no...

Chantal told herself that sooner or later she had to get back on her feet. She'd had a torrid year, but life had to go on.

She took a deep breath and sat back down in front of the PC.

Her heart jumped into her throat. The smiley face. A message.

## THE DEPARTURE

La canzone rimasta nel vento  
le sorprese che fa il firmamento  
ed i primi che mangiano tutto  
e gli ultimi pagano tutto quel conto...  
(*La linea sottile*, or *The Fine Line* - Luciano Ligabue)

### CHAPTER 10

Chantal loaded her case into the car and closed the boot before going back inside to pick out a few last things. She grabbed her pack of Philip Morris from the shelf, chose her best handbag, transferred everything across from the bag she had used on the previous day and zipped it shut. She grabbed her scarf from the bedroom and wrapped it several times around her neck before walking over to the door and lingering as she stood on the threshold. The borderline. A fine line that separated the light tiles of her flat from the dark marble slabs of the landing.

A thought crossed her mind and made her smile.

Light, dark. Sea, sky. Yes, no...

...In or out?

She took a deep breath and stepped over the line into a brand new chapter of her life.

*A shot at redemption*, she told herself.

Chantal closed the door, inserted the key and turned it all the way round in the lock. She shoved the bunch of keys in her bag as she went down the stairs, and got in her car.

As she started the engine, her thoughts turned to the moment when Alfredo had replied to her message. He'd been brief, writing only that he was happy she'd accepted the job and that he'd have her come down to Grosseto immediately in an ideal world. She took him at his word, replying:

"I can leave tomorrow".

He replied with three smiley faces and just two words: *Can't wait!*

Chantal sighed and pressed the button on the remote control. The gate opened, revealing yet another borderline, this time separating the apartment block from the rest of the world.

As she crossed it, she thought to herself that life threw up more thresholds than anybody could ever imagine, each one putting us at a crossroads, presenting us with a choice, a decision to make.

On the radio, the newsreader's voice gave way to a familiar tune.

Chantal smiled

and turned up the volume a few notches. *With or Without You* by U2.

As she belted out the chorus, Chantal felt the weight lift off her chest only for it to return even heavier as her head filled with memories of a relationship that was no more.

With or

without you.

Without the man she had loved more than life itself. Without Giulio.

It would never have lasted anyway. I'd never have stayed with a woman who couldn't give me a child.

"BASTARD!!" she yelled, drowning out Bono and banging her fist on the steering wheel.

It was all her fault. She was barren, so she couldn't possibly have hoped to find a man who would stay with her forever.

She wouldn't be falling in love again in a hurry, that was for sure. From now on, she would chew men up and spit them out, just like she herself had been.

It would never have lasted anyway...

With the town she grew up in fading into the distance, Chantal drove at a steady pace and turned onto Via Meucci, her mind racing. She took a left onto Via Italia and stopped at a red light.

She glanced at the trees on either side of the road, their tapered trunks holding firm against the icy gusts of wind. Chantal's teeth chattered and she shivered as she rubbed her hands together.

Someone behind tooted impatiently, making her jump. She raised a hand to say sorry and drove off quickly by way of further apology.

She decided to concentrate on the road ahead, but no sooner had she regained her focus, she was distracted by a noise. Her mobile was ringing.

She looked all around but there were no police, so she picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

No answer.

She looked down at the screen: *Missed call*.

She put her phone back in her bag.

After taking another left, she reached a roundabout and took the exit that led to the motorway toll booth. She took her ticket and the bar in front of her raised.

As she emerged from the toll booth, she noticed it had started to rain. She pressed a button to close the driver-side window and instantly felt more secure, as if she were inside a glass bell jar protecting her from the outside world.

Temporarily reassured, she moved into the inside lane and began to fiddle with her phone, keeping her other hand on the wheel. When she accessed the list of missed calls, she saw Alfredo's name against the one she had missed just a few minutes earlier.

What did he want? Did he no longer want her to come and work for him?

She decided to call him back.

A hoarse voice answered after just one ring.

"Hello?"

"Oh, ermm, is that Alfredo?"

"Yeah, hi Chantal. What can I do for you?"

"I'm just returning your call. I didn't pick up in time, sorry."

"Oh, right, of course. I just wanted to check you'd left and ask what time you might be getting here."

"Well, I looked online yesterday and it said it would take around five hours. So, I reckon I'll be with you at about seven. I'll turn the sat nav on when I stop for a coffee in the next hour or so, see what my ETA is. I'll let you know, yeah?"

"OK, I just wanted an idea because then I can rustle you up something for dinner. What do you say?"

"That's really kind, but..."

"But what?"

"I wouldn't want to put you out. Perhaps it's best if I grab something while I'm o..."

"It's no bother, really," he insisted. Suddenly, his tone became rather abrupt. "Anyway, I'll leave it there. See you later."

Chantal didn't even have time to say goodbye before he'd hung up.

*Why?*

In fact, why her in the first place? Why had he chosen a girl who lived three hundred miles away over someone local?

She couldn't remember if she'd already asked him, but she would sure as hell find out when she got there. She'd ask Alfredo why he hadn't hired a girl from around these parts to...

Her stomach lurched as her thoughts were interrupted suddenly by a loud boom that sounded as though someone had fired a cannon. The car jerked violently and began to swerve all over the

road. Chantal lost control and slammed on the brakes in desperation. The tyres of her Citroën C2 screeched plaintively as the vehicle travelled another few yards and spun round twice before slamming sideways into the barrier that ran alongside the hard shoulder. Sparks flew up as metal ground on metal, the noise piercing Chantal's ears.

She closed her eyes, fearing the worst.

#### CHAPTER 11

The axe swished through the air.

A bead of sweat formed on Alfredo's temple, before trickling down his cheek and becoming an irritating itch. He gripped the handle more tightly and brought the axe down once more, the blade slicing through the icy winter air before thwacking into the wood, sending an echo all across the valley. The huge log split, but more work was required to separate the two halves completely.

*Frrrrsscch...*

The noise of the blade rushing through the air was interrupted by a rustling sound. Alfredo paused with the axe in mid-air and felt his shoulder muscles tighten. He turned towards where the rustling had come from.

There was nothing there.

He took one hand off the axe and used the back of it to wipe the sweat from his face. With both hands now back on the handle, he swung the tool back and brought it crashing down once more into the log, which finally split clean in two.

"That ought to do it," he said, as he threw the two pieces of wood into a basket that was already full to the brim.

Added to the wood he had chopped in the previous days, today's haul would be enough to keep the fireplace going all winter. The huge pile in the woodshed was the result of a lot of hard graft.

Feeling pleased with himself, Alfredo buried the axe in the huge tree stump he used for cutting the logs and bent down to pick up the basket.

*Frrrrsscch...*

There it was again. Hearing it once, he could have been mistaken, but not this time. He was certain he'd heard something move, right where he was looking.

There two trees stood next to each other. Olive trees. Identical. Like two drops of water. When his father had planted them, they had obviously been much smaller than they were now, but they had looked alike even then. And the similarity had only deepened with the passing of the years as the trees grew. One day, after his parents had died, Alfredo had decided to change the B&B's name and logo. Gone was the face of a wild boar, to be replaced by two identical olive trees. White and green. White at the base of the logo and green for the trees themselves. From that day onwards, *The Wild Beast* was known as the *Twin Olive Trees B&B*.

Someone was hiding between the two trees. God only knows how long they'd been spying on him as he chopped the wood.

Alfredo took a deep breath.

'Better to be safe than sorry,' he told himself.

He stooped down a fraction to grab the handle of the axe, slung the tool over his shoulder and glanced over to where the rustling had come from.

He thought he saw an outline behind the mighty trunk of one of the olive trees. He could feel his heart pounding and could even sense the blood coursing through his veins. Alfredo resolved to be brave and took a step towards the olive trees. He felt the ice-cold air on the back of his neck, the sharp contrast between the freezing temperature and his sweat-drenched skin prompting him to shudder.

Another step towards the trees... As he got within a few yards, there it was again:

*Frrrrsscch...*

A definite rustle. No doubt about it.

Someone was there.

Another two paces towards the trees...

He gripped the axe with his other hand and defensively brought the weapon in front of him. Just like he'd done with the bottle that time...

He'd been slumped in his armchair in the living room watching Hitchcock's Psycho, one of his favourite films. Every time he watched it was like the first time. His eyes were glued to the screen and he had an ice-cold beer in his hand. Empty bottles were lined up on the table.

It was the first weekend of the off-season at the B&B, and like every year he was celebrating the start of his holiday alone, relaxing in his armchair, consuming a load of beer and junk food, and getting lost in Hitchcock or Dario Argento films.

Very few clients darkened his door from the end of November until the beginning of spring. There was the odd foreigner on a business trip who might stay for one or two nights, and a few couples arrived in December looking for a quiet break with good food. But other than that, not a soul for months on end.

He'd nearly finished his beer, but he was so engrossed in the film that he didn't want to get up and grab another one from the fridge.

Suddenly, something distracted him. It sounded like a window slamming, but he was sure he'd closed them all properly. Next, the sound of glass shattering.

He leapt out of his armchair and gripped the beer bottle tightly around the neck, brandishing it like a weapon. Anthony Perkins and Vera Miles continued their dialogue, but now his attention was elsewhere. Someone was messing about with some kind of metallic implement outside the house.

He made his way to where the living room met the large entrance hall and flicked the light switch.

Voices.

Footsteps moving away into the distance.

He approached the window and tentatively pulled the curtain. A gust of wind blew in through the hole in the centre of the pane. Alfredo looked down at the floor and saw shards of glass scattered everywhere. It took him a few seconds to realise what had happened. He thrust the window open wide and looked out, his fist clenched tightly around the neck of the bottle. What looked like two human figures were walking off into the distance, leaving him stood there, powerless, a cry caught in his throat.

Alfredo felt just like he had that evening. He cursed those sons of bitches who would occasionally come round. They would play all sorts of pranks on him because someone, God only knows who, had been spreading vicious rumours about the B&B.

He took another step towards the twin olive trees, the axe still tightly in his grasp.

He reached one of the trees and turned to lean his back against its considerable trunk. He was panting heavily now.

*Frrrrsscch...*

There it was again.

He spun around the trunk and raised the axe above his head, ready to bring it crashing down onto....oh.

Alfredo looked down and saw a pair of defiant eyes. They were black as tar and staring right at him.

The stone marten eventually broke away from the staring contest, spun around and scuttled off a few yards.

Alfredo looked up to the sky and burst out laughing. Then he turned back towards the animal, which had itself turned back and was staring right at him again. He lifted a foot and stamped hard on the ground.

The marten jumped and disappeared into the long grass.

CHAPTER 12

She'd cheated death.

It had been a real stroke of luck - a miracle, in fact. She was still sat securely in the driver's seat of her C2; her mother must have had a word with Almighty God, that was the only explanation.

Dead because of a blown-out tyre...

She felt sick at the thought of it. The car had slammed into the crash barrier and she had come away without a scratch. Just a bruised wrist and an almighty scare.

Someone was banging furiously on the window. Chantal turned to look and unlocked the door from the inside so the concerned-looking man could open it.

"Are you OK?"

"Yeah, thanks...just a bit shaken up, that's all."

Two other cars had stopped, their occupants keen to check on her well-being, but Chantal just wanted them to leave her alone.

In the end, she felt bad for thinking that because they removed her lacerated tyre and replaced it with the spare, allowing her to resume her journey.

She was running two hours late now and would have to let Alfredo know. She would call him, but only once she'd listened to the old Guns N' Roses song that had started to play over the speakers...she adored this track.

... and it's hard to hold a candle

In the cold November rain...

OK, so it wasn't November, but it was certainly raining. Better to let the candle go out and then light a new one once the rain stops or you've found some shelter.

Sometimes I need some time... on my own

Sometimes I need some time... all alone

Everybody needs some time... on their own

Don't you know you need some time... all alone...

She definitely needed some time all alone.

The brake lights of the car in front came on, warning her to slow down.

She was stationary in seconds. A traffic jam.

What the hell...?

Luckily, there was a sign informing her that there was an Autogrill a few hundred yards up the road.

Stopping at the services would be infinitely preferable to sitting in the jam like a lemon.

"Twin Olive Trees B&B, Alfredo speaking. How can I help you?"

"Hi Alfredo, it's Chantal."

"Chantal?" He sounded confused, as if it were a name he'd never heard before. "Why are you calli..."

She butted in because she knew what he was about to ask.

"I tried you on your mobile a couple of times but you didn't pick up, so I thought I'd ring you on this number."

Silence for a few seconds, then the hesitant voice of Alfredo.

"Oh, right, the mobile...I must have left it charging somewhere. What's going on? Is there some kind of problem?"

Chantal sighed.

"Actually, there is. It's more than just traffic; I think there must be an accident or roadworks. I haven't moved for about 20 minutes. Well, I *have* moved, but only a hundred yards or so."

She paused, wondering whether to tell him about the puncture, but decided against it for now. She didn't want him to worry.

"It's no problem if you get here a little later than advertised," he reassured her.

"I've even thought about staying over somewhere and setting off again tomorrow morning. I mean, I could be stuck in this for hours. Luckily, there's some services a few hundred yards ahead. I'll stop there and..."

"Staying over somewhere?" he repeated incredulously. "You've got to be kidding, right? You're *my* guest tonight. Why on earth would you pay for a room somewhere else?"

"I might not be with you till gone midnight. I don't want you having to stay up late."

"Right, good one..."

"What do you mean?"

There was a pause, and when Alfredo replied, his tone was severe.

"I'm an insomniac. I lie wide awake every single night. Trust me, waiting up for you will not be a problem."

Feeling embarrassed at having touched a nerve, Chantal cleared her throat and sought to end the conversation.

"Great, so I'll see you later then?" Okay?"

"Fine," he replied. "OK, bye."

### CHAPTER 13

The clock on the C2's dashboard told Chantal it was just after ten o'clock. She was nearly there. Another 1.5 miles according to the sat nav.

The countryside all around was enveloped in a late-winter mist. The whole setting gave Chantal the creeps. She felt as though she was in one of those horror films where a Z-list actor plays the guy who gets captured and eaten by zombies. However fleeting, the thought frightened her and sent a shiver down her spine. She flicked the car's central heating up a notch, sending a blast of hot air into the passenger compartment.

A decrepit road sign told her that some place or other (she couldn't make it out) was 9 miles away. A bit further on, a wooden sign bearing a date from a couple of years earlier declared: "Simone and Clarissa had sex here for the first time". Slightly lower down, on the same sign, was a drawing of a cock and a pair of tits underneath some writing: WE DON'T GIVE A SHIT!

Just as she was wondering what kind of place she'd come to, Chantal noticed that the sat nav was now saying she had 2.4 miles to go.

How was that possible?

She was getting further away from her destination.

Perhaps she should turn ar...

Suddenly, there was the most horrendous noise.

Chantal instinctively slammed on the brakes.

At first, she thought maybe she'd strayed too close to the edge of the road, but it couldn't have been that because the car was fractionally over the centre line.

There it was again, that fine line...

She pulled over to the side of the road. There was no crash barrier, but there was a very steep drop as the road fell away. People round here had to be mad driving on these roads all the time.

She turned off the engine, opened the door and got out of the car. There was an icy chill in the air. Chantal looked around but there was no sign of what might have caused the noise.

She knelt down to look under the car and thought she could see something towards the rear end. She stood up, walked towards the boot and knelt down again to take a closer look. Gross! A black bin bag had got caught between the silencer and some other component that she didn't know the name of. She tried to kick the bag and gagged at the stench coming from it.

No joy, so she fetched the warning triangle from the boot and used it to unhook the bag.

Job done.

Chantal got back to her feet. Through the mist, she could just make out a shape moving close by. The triangle slipped out of her hands when she realised it was a person.

"Car trouble, young lady?"

It was an old woman whose cutting voice reminded Chantal of the witch who gives the poisoned apple to Snow White.

She took a step back, startled. The woman must have been in her eighties. She had straggly white hair and a bony face, studying Chantal with a curious and unnerving pair of eyes. One of them had no pupil, leading Chantal to suppose it was made of glass, while the other was practically transparent.

"Won't it start?" the old lady asked, pointing at the car.

"Ye...yes" Chantal struggled to get her words out. She cleared her throat. "Yes, it's fine. There's nothing wrong with the car. I just ran over..."

She paused and pointed at the bin bag.

"...that *thing*. It gave me a fright, but it's fine now."

"Ah, OK. In that case, I'll be on my way," the old woman replied.

Chantal stayed motionless for a few seconds, wondering what the hell an old woman was doing out in the cold on a deserted road at this time of night. Was she the local nutter?

"Excuse me?" Chantal called out.

Enshrouded in mist, the figure of the old lady stopped and turned around, revealing her terrifying face once more.

"Can I ask you something?"

The old woman smiled thinly and inclined her head.

"I'm looking for a bed and bre..." Chantal stopped herself, unsure whether the old woman would be familiar with the English term. "I don't suppose you know of a guesthouse in these parts? It must be around here somewhere, but my car's navigation system doesn't recog..."

The old woman's smile vanished and her expression turned to one of sheer terror.

"Do you know it?" Chantal asked, persisting in spite of the additional anxiety brought on by the woman's reaction.

The old woman raised a bony arm and pointed to a dirt track Chantal hadn't noticed, before scuttling away down the road as fast as her age would allow.

Still a little spooked by the encounter, Chantal got back in the car, reversed as far as the dirt track and turned onto it. Five hairpins and a seemingly endless straight climb later, she arrived at the top of a hill. The enormous valley to her right nestled into the dark night. It must be one hell of a view in the daytime, Chantal thought to herself. By night, however, it was most disconcerting. Were someone to attack her, no one would hear her scream.

According to the sat nav, she was just 850 yards from her destination. She continued along the dirt track, which was now widening gradually. Her already scant visibility was impaired even more by the dust she disturbed as she drove along. She could just make out a light in the distance, however, and as she progressed another couple of hundred yards, the dark outline of an imposing building began to emerge. A yellow light shone through one of the windows.

The ground crunched under the weight of her car as she drove on towards the house.

Eventually, she feathered the brakes and the C2 squeaked to a halt in what seemed to be an unguarded parking lot. A crooked sign told her she had arrived at the TWIN OLIVE TREES B&B. She wondered if there really were twin olive trees hidden among all the other trees in this vast expanse of green. She looked up at the house again. Her first instinct was to turn around and head right back to where she'd come from. She didn't like this place one little bit; it gave her the creeps. It was a huge, bleak house out in the middle of nowhere. If something happened to her out here, she'd be dead before the ambulance could arrive.

She felt sick at the thought of it. Chantal figured she was too tired to begin her return journey that night, but she'd head back to Gussago in the morning. Her hometown was nothing to write home about, but at least it didn't have B&Bs that put the fear of God into you.

She closed her eyes and tried to calm down, raising both hands and drawing circles with her fingertips to massage her temples. It worked, her mind gradually emptied of each and every thought. Except one. She felt like she could sense...

Her eyes bolted open just as the thought entered her head.

...someone.

She screamed with such ferocity it burned the back of her throat. Her mouth remained locked open, now emitting nothing more than a frightened moan.

The figure outside the car approached the door and opened it.

Chantal threw herself across to the passenger seat and tried to open the other door. She was panic stricken, unable to think clearly.

"It's alright," said a man's voice. "It's me, Alfredo."

Relief flooded over Chantal, but she still didn't manage to speak. The man bent down and his curly-haired face appeared inside the passenger compartment.

"You must be Chantal. Are you feeling alright?"

Chantal realised she'd made an absolute twat of herself, and she just wanted the ground to open up. She took the hand extended to her, shifted back across to the driver's seat and clambered out of the car. She felt light-headed and, as she leant on Alfredo for support, she appreciated the white musk fragrance emanating from his skin.

"I'm sorry," she stammered.

"I gave you a fright," he replied, running his fingers through her hair. "It's me who should be apologising." He coughed and smiled. "I didn't think I was *that* ugly!" he said, attempting to lighten the mood.

Chantal suddenly realised she was still in the man's arms.

"You're not," she said, looking away and detaching herself from him.

An awkward silence ensued,

and Alfredo took it upon himself to break it.

"You must be exhausted, Chantal. Perhaps you should get some sleep."

She nodded.

Alfredo helped her with her bags and they walked towards the entrance to the B&B. As they reached the enormous green door, Chantal's gaze was drawn to the sign.

TWIN OLIVE TREES B&B

She stared at the logo, with its two identical trees that seemed to merge into one.

"Do you like it?"

"Sorry?" she replied, distracted.

"I asked whether you liked it," Alfredo said, nodding at the sign on the wall. "I drew it myself."

Chantal thought of the memory the logo had provoked. She forced a smile to hide the sadness she was feeling inside.

"Yes, it's lovely. You've got the talent to match your imagination."

"Thanks." Alfredo gestured towards the door. "Please, go in. You'll freeze to death out here."

She smiled and entered the B&B, which had a welcoming, homely feel. Above five feet of wood panelling, the walls were plastered white. As she looked around, Chantal felt a sense of warmth, hospitality and security. To her right, there were glowing embers in the fireplace, above which was mounted the stuffed head of a wild boar. Hunting scenes were depicted in paintings hung either side of the dead animal. The other wall was more like an ordnance depot. There were shotguns, old pistols and a huge crossbow, all hanging down from varnished wooden hooks. To her left was what she assumed was the reception desk. Chantal wondered if most of her working time here would be spent in front of the old computer.

"So? What do you think? You like it here?" asked Alfredo.

Chantal hesitated. She was still thinking about the twin olive trees.

"Very much," she replied, almost on autopilot. "It's nice. Really has a unique style," she added, snapping out of whatever daydream she was in.

"Good! I'm pleased you like it. There's no point working here if you don't like the place."

Chantal nodded and smiled weakly. Having initially struggled to string two words together, she soon found herself talking ten to the dozen, filling Alfredo in on everything that had happened: the *puncture*, the traffic jam, her encounter with the old lady, her anxiety upon seeing the size of the B&B and the fright that Alfredo had given her.

Well, *almost* everything. She neglected to mention that the tyre blowout - it hadn't just been a puncture - had nearly killed her. She didn't know why she kept that a secret, only that it just didn't feel right telling him. Almost as if she didn't want to worry him.

Which was weird - she barely knew him!

As she spoke, her worries and fears seemed to disappear one by one.

"So, you could say it was a pretty hectic journey," she concluded.

"Sounds like it," Alfredo replied, gesturing to one side with his head. "Come on. I'll show you your room and you can get your head down." He set off down a corridor and, after a few yards, turned back towards her. "Tomorrow's another day."

Chantal forced another smile.

Once he had shown her into the room, Alfredo had the decency to beat a hasty retreat. Chantal was incredibly grateful.

She got undressed, put on the pyjamas she had left on top of the other clothes in the case and went to the bathroom to take off her make-up and go to the loo. As she took care of her ablutions, she was too tired and weak to take in her surroundings.

As she wrapped herself in the freezing bed covers, her thoughts returned to the B&B's logo. Those two identical olive trees merging into one reminded her of the similarity between her and her mother.

She imagined her mamma Teresa's face in front of her,  
then pictured her own alongside.

She focused hard on them until they merged.

Eventually, from somewhere in the dark recesses of either the room or her mind, her mother's voice came through crystal clear.

You and me, we're like two drops of water.

She didn't even have time to smile. Her thoughts faded away as tiredness took hold and carried her off into sleep.

#### CHAPTER 14

There'd been no one else in this huge house when she'd got up. She'd been worried at first, but the sight of a fully stocked breakfast table had filled her heart, and stomach, with joy.

She'd sat down, had a few sips of pear juice and proceeded to smother half a dozen homemade jams over warm pieces of bread. She'd felt right at home. It was warm and cosy. The old gadgets hung on the walls and resting on the solid wooden shelves made the dining room feel peaceful and safe. Homely, even.

Chantal had got full only after her fourth piece of bread.

She'd slipped on a jacket and gone outside into the vast parking area, seeing for the first time how daylight treated what had seemed ten hours ago to be a house of horrors and a bleak view down into the valley.

Standing there now, with a smile on her face, she wondered how she could ever have been scared by such a marvellous place.

Looking beyond the car park, she saw a vast expanse of green surrounded by trees. The big, white building itself was brought to life somewhat by the green door and shutters. As she glanced

upwards, she noticed a large number of plants on the huge balcony, protected from the cold by plastic sheeting.

Chantal closed her eyes and inhaled the pure, country air that surrounded this little bit of paradise. When she reopened them, she was staring at a blue sky with a few wavy clouds. She took a deep breath, as if the oxygen could somehow cleanse her lungs of years of tar and nicotine. She felt like she was sucking on a eucalyptus drop. A gentle infusion of energy.

Fantastic!

Turns out she'd have come to work in Tuscany a lot sooner if she'd known it would be all clean air, breathtaking scenery and homemade jam.

No way was she going back home now.

She wandered over to her car. There was huge scratch all the way down one side, reminding her of the previous day's misadventures. She'd had a lucky escape, she knew that.

She shrugged her shoulders to ward off a shiver and was distracted by the sound of a car approaching.

Coming up the hill she herself had driven up the previous night was a white Opel Kadett which, at first glance, had to be at least twenty-five years old. Chantal squinted to see who was at the wheel, but the sun, albeit fairly weak, was reflecting off the windscreen. Just a few seconds later, it became clear that the person driving was Alfredo.

As the car trundled past, he greeted Chantal by way of a raised arm. She flashed him a smile in return and watched as the Opel pulled in alongside her Citroën.

Alfredo got out and paused to look at the damaged side of the C2. His face clouded over.

"How on earth did you do that, *signorina*?" he enquired, using for the first time the more formal *lei* to address her rather than *tu*.

Chantal was floored by the change. Were they in work mode now? Did she need to observe some employer-employee formalities? She decided to follow suit.

"It's a long sto...let's just say I ran into a little difficulty Mist.."

"Alfredo's fine, honestly."

"As you wish, Alfredo," she replied, using *lei*.

"Why are you suddenly using *lei*?" he asked.

Chantal was speechless. Just seconds earlier, he'd used *lei* to address her! Was he pulling her leg? She decided to ask, albeit indirectly.

"But you just called me *lei*."

"I did?"

"Yes, when you got out of the car," Chantal continued, motioning to the old banger.

"Impossible," Alfredo replied, staring at the floor. "Ermm, OK. Perhaps I misheard." He took a few steps towards her and looked directly into her eyes. "It's best if we carry on using *tu*. What do you say?"

Chantal was lost in his stare, unable to decide if she was in heaven or hell.

She snapped out of it and found the strength for a smile and a response.

"Fine by me."

"Great," he replied, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Have you already had breakfast? I left you someth..."

"It was the best breakfast I've ever had," Chantal replied, feeling a touch embarrassed by the overfamiliarity of Alfredo's hand.

"Really?" exclaimed Alfredo, as he tightened his grip.

Again, the sensation in the pit of her stomach left Chantal wondering if she were in heaven or hell.

"The jam was absolutely..."

"Delicious?" he ventured.

"That wouldn't do it justice."

"I see. So what word would do it justice then?" he asked, finally relaxing his grip on the girl's shoulder.

"I think 'exquisite' sums it up very nicely," she replied, relieved to be free from his grasp. "And there's plenty more compliments where that came from."

"Chantal, you're too kind."

"But it's true."

"If you insist. All that matters is that you liked it. I'm pleased. The jam's homemade, by me."

He paused and smiled, looking straight into Chantal eyes. She lowered her gaze and felt her face redden.

"If we have a bit of spare time, I can show you how I do it."

Chantal looked up at him, and he saw she looked puzzled.

"The jam, I mean," he clarified. "I'll teach you every trick in the book, and you'll be making exquisite jams in no time!"

"Oh, I'd love that!" she replied, holding his gaze for a split second.

"It's a date!" He turned around and gestured towards the Kadett. "Could you give me a hand with the shopping?"

Chantal watched as he opened the boot, which contained several large bags. She realised at that very moment that she'd been hired. No need for an interview. Unless the few words they'd just exchanged counted and were enough to convince him she was the right person for the job.

"Sure, I'm intrigued to see what you've bought."

#### CHAPTER 15

Perhaps Chantal's luck had changed. Perhaps God had finally realised that even she needed some respite from all the crap.

She finally felt like she was living again, rather than just surviving.

Another line crossed.

Unbeknown to Chantal, Alfredo poked his head into the pantry.

"Hey! I see you've already put everything away."

His voice jarred her out of her thoughts.

"Nearly everything," she confessed after a moment's hesitation, pointing to a shopping bag still on the floor.

Around an hour earlier, Alfredo had given her a brief overview of how things worked at the B&B before showing her the pantry and issuing a few vague instructions. She'd done her best and tried to remember what he'd suggested. She smiled. It looked as though she'd succeeded.

"You're very quick and very thorough..." Alfredo stroked his chin, debating whether to say what was on the tip of his tongue.

Chantal looked up at him, inviting him to go on.

He smiled thinly and continued.

"If I'd have known, I'd have hired you years ago."

She tried to suppress the smile that was forming at the edges of her mouth. She wasn't used to compliments. None of her previous bosses had given her any, not even Signor Ferruccio from Lilly's Snack Bar, and he'd been the nicest of them all.

She looked down, shifting her gaze away from Alfredo. Unable to suppress the smile any longer, she turned towards the open cupboard door and pretended to check what she'd already put away.

"That's very kind of you," she said, doing her utmost to keep her excitement in check, "but isn't it a bit early to be showering me with praise? I've only done one job for you!"

Alfredo coughed twice to clear his throat.

"Look, Chantal..."

He coughed again to buy himself the time he needed to rearrange what he wanted to say.

"I've been doing this for quite a few years now. Running a B&B..."

He paused for a moment to watch the graceful movements of Chantal's shapely body.

His voice came out hoarse, but to Chantal it was like birdsong.

"...and I've seen a lot of girls over that time, believe me. Loads of them accept that they have to do the work, but not many really want to be doing it. And even fewer actually manage to do it well..."

He took a couple of steps towards her.

"You do it very well, Chantal. I don't need months of observing you to know that. I suspected as much in the chat room, and now I know for sure."

This time, Chantal had no choice but to turn and meet the gaze of her new employer. She didn't feel it was necessary to hide her smile any longer.

"I'm pleased you think so highly of me."

His response was immediate.

"I'm pleased to have found a girl like you."

She smiled again.

"Have there really been that many girls who have worked here?"

Alfredo looked up at the ceiling and his head began to nod as if he were counting every single girl as their image passed in front of his eyes.

Then, suddenly, he looked directly at her again.

Heaven or hell?

"There's been so many I've lost count."

Chantal decided he was being genuine. She felt like the time had come to ask him the question she had wanted to put to him as soon as he'd offered her the job. But not just yet.

"So, what became of them? Did you fire them all?" she added jokingly, accompanying her question with yet another smile.

Alfredo seemed a bit put out.

Chantal sensed he'd had problems with some of the girls. Too many sick days, trouble with the unions, hands in the till. That kind of thing.

"To tell you the truth," Alfredo ventured, "it was them who chose to leave." He licked his lips. "Well, most of them anyway. I'm not a horrible boss, if that's what you're thinking."

"It's not," she said instinctively.

He moved closer to her and carried on.

"In all these years, I've only ever fired one girl." He stopped, losing himself for an instant. "Yes, only one."

"And why was that? If you don't mind me asking."

Alfredo's expression softened.

"It's funny looking back on it now. But it sure as hell wasn't at the time. She lost me four guests in one fell swoop..." he shook his head as though he were still in denial. "...and didn't even stop to think about the bad impression it would leave on the other people staying here."

He took a second to gather his thoughts, and Chantal gestured at him to carry on.

"Lavinia. That was her name." Alfredo appeared to be trying to dredge up memories from however many years ago this all took place. "She was very hard-working, in the sense that she would do whatever I asked. She did a good job and she did it quickly too. What more could I have asked for?"

Chantal realised it was a rhetorical question.

"She didn't smoke or drink - a really good girl, basically. Apart from her one vice..." Alfredo stared angrily into Chantal's vulnerable, pale-blue eyes.

It was just hell in his look now, no doubt about it.

"...married men."

Alfredo began to spit out his words.

"That girl loved nothing more than fucking other women's husbands. She really screwed me over." He seemed to snap out of his fury, the calmness returning to his words. "You certainly couldn't accuse her of not being conscientious. I mean, she certainly took care of business on her day off."

"Business?" Chantal asked, not really wanting to know the sordid details.

Alfredo looked a little embarrassed. He rubbed his forehead nervously before continuing.

"That's right, business. The business of anything and everything that a woman and two men can possibly get up to in a bedroom. Unfortunately for her, the wife of one of the guys sprained her ankle while the wives were out hill-walking, forcing them to come back early. Anyway, I'll give you the condensed version. At that time, as well as the tourists, I had two couples staying here. They were friends, around forty years old. Lavinia thought it would be a great idea to get the two guys into bed. You can imagine what happened the wives caught them at it. All hell broke loose. Obviously, the couples didn't hang around, but they'd created such a scene that the tourists also decided to leave. I mean, what was I supposed to do?"

He shrugged and held out his arms, reliving the sense of helplessness he'd felt on that day in the distant past.

"I gave her a second chance, but when she pulled the same stunt again I had no choice but to fire her. She's the only girl I've ever sacked...so far."

Chantal felt panicked as she could feel his eyes boring into her. She needed to say something to release the pressure.

"And the others? What happened to them?"

She felt stupid, realising she'd already asked that question.

"I told you, didn't I?" Alfredo continued to stare at her, but Chantal could have sworn his mind was elsewhere. "They left."

She decided now was the time.

"Alfredo, can I ask you something?"

He seemed to snap out of his trance.

"Sure."

She took a deep breath. Now or never.

"There must be loads of girls around here. Why did you hire someone who lives three hundred miles away?"

Alfredo looked surprised.

"You see, Chantal, our lives are governed by fate. It was fate that I met you in the chat room, and fate that you didn't have a job."

Chantal nodded tentatively.

"The girls round here don't exactly have a strong work ethic, and anyway..."

Alfredo decided he needed to let Chantal know about all the rumours, otherwise some busybody would only try and scare her with some ridiculous story the first time she went into town.

"And anyway what?" Chantal encouraged him to continue.

Alfredo sighed loudly.

"Chantal, you need to know that people round here don't like me or my business. They spread a whole load of lies about me."

"What kind of lies?" she blurted out in panic.

"That I'm some kind of monster." He stared right at her, aware that she was unable to find any words. "Look at me. Do I seem like a monster to you?"

Chantal shook her head and thought back to the old lady she'd encountered at the roadside. She was about to mention her to Alfredo - perhaps she already had? - but something inside was warning her against it. She decided to let him carry on.

"See? I don't seem like a monster because I'm not one." Alfredo again spread his arms out wide in a gesture that suggested he was reluctantly resigned to the situation. "Do I really seem like the kind of man who would kidnap, torture and kill a girl like you?"

Chantal felt her stomach tighten. For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, she wondered whatever had possessed her to leave her quiet little home for this godforsaken B&B in the arse end of nowhere.

She froze as Alfredo drew closer. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked straight into her big, blue eyes.

"I don't seem like that kind of man because I'm not one. They're making it up. There are no monsters here."

Alfredo shook his head disconsolately and Chantal could see he was fighting back tears.

His voice began to crack.

"Why do they keep making up all those stories about me and the house? Over the last few years, they've turned me into an outcast, like I'm some kind of leper."

Once again, the old lady's face popped into Chantal's head. But she pushed the image to the back of her mind and calmed herself, managing to restore her heart rate to something approaching normal. The tightness in her stomach began to fade and she felt sympathy for the broken man in front of her as he looked for a shoulder to cry on.

"You don't have to..." she started to say, but he quickly backed away and interrupted.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. You shouldn't have to see me like this."

Alfredo hurriedly dried his eyes, turned around and walked out the door.

## CHAPTER 16

It was an illness. Eugenio Boroni was sure of it.

Not scratching his ear or running his tongue over the cavity; the other *thing*. The other *thing* was an illness.

He'd heard people talking about it and had looked it up on various websites. They all said it was a kind of psychiatric illness. One that pushes against the sides of your brain whenever it feels like it. The victim is powerless to resist, forced to do whatever the *thing* says.

When Eugenio felt it pushing, he would fidget, get nervous, shake like a leaf. He started to scratch his ear lobe frenetically. Such was the force he was using, his ear began to bleed. The scabs left behind only made him want to scratch even more. His mother had figured as much and told him off. The family doctor had prescribed an anti-inflammatory and told his mother to stick plasters on his ears. After Eugenio had left the room, the doctor had spoken to his mother one-to-one. He'd told her the boy was nervous, perhaps even a little anxious and scared. Given his age, these problems were fairly normal but shouldn't be ignored. They should get better with the passing of time, but if they don't, it would be wise to consult a psychologist. The doctor had said the ear scratching was a nervous tic caused by the typical worries of a particularly fragile and sensitive pre-teenage boy.

Eugenio knew now that the doctor couldn't have been more wrong. He wasn't anxious or scared. That tic was just a consequence of this stupid illness.

It was something he'd always had, and the *thing* had pushed him to the margins of society.

At first, people listen to you, maybe even smile. But then they realise something's not quite right with you. Their mood changes.

The thing...

He always tried to fight it, but he wasn't strong enough. It had got the better of him every single time.

At first, when he still hadn't given it a name, the desire seemed to be coming from a remote part of his body, somewhere inside. This desire would become an irrepressible urge that he had to act on. He had to do whatever the illness told him to do. Even if it was wrong; even if it was evil.

*Especially* if it was evil.

He hadn't felt that irrepressible urge for a while now. The illness had simply become an integral part of who he was and what he did. He just did things. He no longer knew right from wrong. Real from fake. He'd lost trust in himself and there was every chance that others would soon lose their faith in him. There were certain things, certain words, that people just wouldn't forgive.

And once you've lost that trust, it's hard to get it back,  
if not impossible.

#### CHAPTER 17

The bedroom was bathed in a pleasant half-light.

Chantal was flat on her back under the soft, warm covers, her eyes open wide as she focused on what little she could see. It was late and she'd worked hard, but she didn't feel tired. Her mind was spinning with everything that had happened. It had been a busy day.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes as she exhaled. She imagined what Lavinia might have looked like. Tall, for a woman. Provocative red lips. Stylish, attractive glasses. Lavinia was smiling, her teeth perfectly white and straight. She was comfortable discussing any topic: politics, current affairs, food and drink, you name it. Honest, hardworking... the perfect employee.

As Chantal opened her eyes, scenes from the life of the Lavinia she had just created in her mind began to play out on the ceiling.

Lavinia was sat on the edge of an unmade bed, flanked by two men about fifteen years her senior. Her glasses made her sensual, sexy even. She licked all the way around her lips with her long tongue. She teased the mouth of the man on her right with one hand, the balls of the man on the left with the other. Then she grabbed one of the men's hands and placed it on her breasts, and slid the other man's hands slowly up her naked thighs until they disappeared under her skirt.

Chantal glanced out of the window. She'd deliberately left the shutters open because she hated laying in complete darkness. Through the window, she could see that the sky was virtually pitch black and the leaves of a big tree were being blown by the cold wind of this never-ending winter.

When she looked back up at the ceiling, Lavinia was wearing nothing but a pair of patent stilettos. She was on all fours on the mattress, sucking one of the guys' cocks. The other was pulling her by the hair as he fucked her from behind. Her back was a dead straight line between the curves of her shoulders and arse. Her moans of pleasure filled the room, providing a contrast with the panting and grunting of the two men.

A really good girl, apart from her one vice...

Married men.

Chantal forced herself to fast forward through the sex scenes and resume the images just as the wives entered the room. First, the shock. Then, the transformation into savage beasts as they hurled themselves angrily at the slut and their cheating husbands.

The scene made Chantal remember when *she* was betrayed by Giulio.

As she tried to push that memory to one side,

the images on the ceiling faded away. Chantal wondered what became of the two couples. Whether the wives had left their respective husbands as well as the B&B, or whether they'd forgiven them. It was pointless wondering, really. Sometimes, you had to experience situations for yourself to know how you'd react. It was all too easy looking in from the outside and judging people for the choices they made. 'I'd do this or I'd do that'. No, that's not how it worked. Life wasn't like that. You shouldn't criticise other people's decisions. How often did life just creep up on you? Throw a spanner in the works? Deal you the cruellest twist of fate? Put you at a crossroads? You have to decide which way to turn, and you know there's no going back.

That's how it had been for her. When Chantal had walked in on Giulio screwing that girl, whatever her fucking name was, she'd realised that no matter how much she loved him, she would never be able to forgive him.

As she came back into the here and now, she realised her quiet sobbing was the only sound in the room. Tears streamed down her face.

She took a deep breath and told herself everything would be OK.

She was at the B&B now, a long way from home. A long way from people and places that didn't deserve her. She was ready to start over.

Chantal wondered if the other girls who had worked here had also taken the job to get a fresh start. Or perhaps it was just to tide them over financially until they found a permanent job with a proper company in the city. She would have liked to speak to one of those girls just so she could ask them about the role of...

What was it she was actually here to do?

...factotum.

Who knows why they all left? She thought back to how sad and embarrassed Alfredo had looked when he spoke about his former employees.

Why was he like that?

At one point, Chantal had even thought he was about to be sick. But he didn't seem the shy type. He'd reeled off Lavinia's sexual exploits as nonchalantly as if he were reading out a shopping list.

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