

EVO

Diane May

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To my husband,

Living with a writer is hard, but living with an aspiring writer is even harder. Through all the storms and heavy winds you've always been my anchor, keeping me safe and never letting me drown. Thank you for believing in me when no one else did, not even me. And for keeping me to my word count! This book was possible because of you.

I love you.

“Look into my eyes,” the voice started speaking again. “You hear my voice and my voice only. You are not in control of your mind anymore. I am. You do whatever I say, when I say it. Everything I say is real for you. Your mind and body accept it without any opposition. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

- The Hypnotist -



CHAPTER 1

TWENTY YEARS EARLIER

The lack of windows and the artificial neon light wiped away all traces of the outside world. John Blake felt his own life was put on hold each time he stepped into the four-by-six-metre room with white-washed walls and grey floor-tiles. When he'd come in, the weather man on his car radio had excitedly prattled on about how splendid the early June day was going to be. Now he had no idea if the sun was still shining in the sky.

He lay on a hard mattress, dressed only in his black boxers. The white cotton sheet underneath his skin felt like rough canvas, washed and bleached one time too many. His torso was covered in electrodes hooked up to a machine, which in turn was connected to a monitor.

Lewis's expressionless eyes were staring intently at the screen.

Another click of the mouse and Lewis stood up. His emaciated body looked as if it had already seen the inside of the grave.

"Are we done here, doctor?" John asked.

"We are, agent Blake."

John sat up in bed, removed the electrodes attached to his chest and jumped to the floor. He grabbed his light-brown chinos from the back of the chair in front of Lewis's desk, pulled them up and buckled his belt.

This was the seventh consecutive year he had come to Camp Peary, Virginia, for the annual round of routine medical tests. And boy, oh boy, how he hated them. They made him waste an entire day and feel like a bug under the microscope.

"How's that wonderful daughter of yours?" Lewis asked suddenly, and for a fraction of a second, John thought he glimpsed something in the dark depths of the doctor's blood-shot eyes. He just couldn't put a

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finger on it.

“She’s getting more beautiful each day,” he replied, and pulled on a white t-shirt which stretched over his bulging muscles. “In a few years’ time I’ll need a hunting rifle to keep all her suitors at bay.”

The doctor smiled weakly as if it was something he wasn’t really used to. “Is Maya’s behaviour at home—” he lapsed into silence, as though searching for the right word, then went on, “is it normal?”

John felt a familiar stirring in his gut. Lewis couldn’t possibly know about...

“Why wouldn’t it be *normal*?” he asked.

“No, no, I’m sorry,” the old man said quickly, raising his palms in a placatory gesture. “Poor choice of words. It’s just that yesterday I had another agent who, just like yourself, is often away from home and has a little child the same age as your Maya. Well,” he shrugged, “his son isn’t really coping all that well with his father’s absence, so I was just—”

The shrill sound of the phone interrupted him.

“Dr. Lewis,” he barked into the receiver. He listened for a few seconds, then narrowed his eyes and exhaled loudly. “Can’t this wait half an hour? I’m in the middle of something.” He clearly didn’t like the answer he got because his lips tightened in a line so fine it almost became invisible. “Fine,” he said and slammed down the receiver.

Then Lewis turned to him. “Finish getting dressed, I’ll be back in five minutes.” He walked out through one of the two doors in the room, the one on which black letters on white plastic spelled out *PRIVATE*.

John nodded absently, but his thoughts kept going back to the doctor’s question. And although cold logic was telling him that Lewis had no way of knowing about Maya’s ability, his instinct warned him differently. Lewis had used the word *normal*. And this bothered him.

With light steps he approached the door marked *PRIVATE*. No sound came from behind it. He slowly opened it. Another office with the same hospital-white walls and dull-grey floor. But no sign of Lewis. He spotted another door to his left which explained the doctor’s absence. He took in the room. An L-shaped desk occupied the right corner, and the wall opposite to it was lined with filing cabinets. Behind the desk, the orange glow of the afternoon sun entered the room through a narrow window.

He was acting on pure instinct now, but the one thing he’d learnt in all his years with the CIA, was to listen when his internal alarm went off. And right now it was blaring.

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He saw nothing of interest on the wooden desktop. Computer, keyboard, printer... the everyday stationery.

He crouched down and inspected the three drawers. He opened the first one. More stationery and a chocolate bar. He closed it and moved on to the second one. Pale green folders with stiff cardboard covers. He picked up the first one and quickly scanned its content. Medical records of a family who, just like him and his wife, had gone through the same medically assisted procreation program that the CIA made available to all its employees. He flipped through the remaining folders, but they more or less told the same story. Blood tests, genetic tests, sperm count, fertility treatments, the whole ordeal. He was beginning to think he wouldn't find anything here.

He opened the third drawer. The same type of folders. He was about to close it and go to the filing cabinets, when he felt the fine hairs at the back of his neck bristle. He stared at the files. They looked so commonplace, their faded-green colour so banal. Too ordinary to hold anything of interest.

He lifted the first one and opened it. On the first page he read two names.

Tai Smith, Anna Smith.

Tai had been one of his friends, a special agent four years his senior. He started leafing through the pages. At first, he thought he was looking at the same type of medical records he had seen in the other folders. But then the story started changing. He turned two more pages and what he read on the third one made his heart rate jump. He flipped another page. And then another. By the time he reached the end, he felt sick to the stomach, and his palms were covered in cold sweat.

What he had just read could by no means be described as medically assisted procreation. But horrendous illegal genetic experiments made on human beings. Worse even. On embryos.

On *their* children.

His hands were shaking when he opened the second folder sitting in the drawer. It also had two names on the cover.

John Blake, Maya Blake.

His heart hammered in his chest and his hands shook. He almost didn't want to read the file, but he had to know. He took a few deep breaths and opened it. He turned page after page, quickly skimming the content, until he reached the last one. Now he understood why his sweet six-year-old daughter had never been sick a day in her life,

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learned foreign languages in a matter of months rather than years, and had the uncanny ability to detect a lie with unflinching accuracy.

He noticed a handwritten footnote on the last page. Scribbled in black ink and looking like the horror-movie type of message a killer would leave, dark red blood on a white wall, the sentence shattered his life to pieces.

Maya Blake and Christian Brent – test results positive.

Terminate her.

He needed to get out of there.

He put the files back in the drawer, pushed it closed and headed back to the windowless room. Just as he was about to close the door, he heard the footsteps. Heavy and loud, hurrying towards the office. He closed the door without making the slightest noise.

He breathed deeply to calm down his heartbeats and force all the muscles in his body to relax. Then he cleared his face of any emotion and sat down on the chair in front of the dark-brown desk. And waited.

The door marked PRIVATE opened and a young man entered. He was slightly out of breath and was wearing a white doctor's coat over dark brown trousers and a light-blue shirt, a little too tight over his bulging midriff which ballooned out over his belt. He looked like he was in his thirties, and his uninteresting face and dull clothes made him a man who was easily overlooked and soon forgotten.

"Who are you?" John asked, pretending he was stifling a yawn. "And where's Doctor Lewis?"

"I'm his assistant. You can call me Doc," the young man answered. He had a pen in his hand, along with a clipboard, and an artificial smile plastered across his face. "Everybody seems to do so anyway. I don't think they'd know who you're talking about if you used my name," he went on, seemingly in a chatty mood.

"Well, *Doc*, can I go or not?"

The man raised his head and stared at him. His eyes shone with interest, and something else. Intelligence. Not the nerdy type, but the dangerous kind, the one you couldn't fool nor enslave. "That's my office, you know," Doc finally said, pointing towards the door marked PRIVATE.

John's face remained blank.

Doc smiled and shrugged. "I have a very sensitive smell. And you've been sweating a lot today, if I am to tell by your body odour."

"I was just looking for Dr. Lewis. Thought he was in there, since

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that's the door he walked out through."

Doc remained silent and just stared at him.

"So, can I go or not?" John asked again.

"Yes, of course," Doc answered, a pensive look on his face. "Free to go, agent Blake. Doctor Lewis asked me to give his regards to you and your lovely wife."

"Thanks, Doc," John replied, as he stood up and headed towards the door.

He went out of the building, walked to his black Lincoln MKC, climbed in and started the engine. He pulled away from the parking lot and drove at a slow cruising speed until he reached the heavily guarded check point. He stopped, rolled down his window and showed his credentials to one of the three armed marines there. The three who were in plain sight. There were more in the two lodges on either side of the road, and more still in the forest outside the base.

He waited patiently for the big iron gate to slide back to one side and then eased the car through the two solid metal posts.

After thirty minutes, far from the spying eyes of the CIA, his carefully maintained self-control started to crack.

He turned right onto a side road and a few seconds later the busy highway disappeared from his rear-view mirror.

He pulled over, stopped the engine and then slowly got out of the car. A large field of bright-red poppies stretched out in front of him. He staggered onto the gravel to the side of the ditch and collapsed on his knees like a deadly wounded soldier in the mud, his entire body shaking. His heart thundered in his ears and his stomach started convulsing. A burning pain seized his throat. He threw up so violently he thought his insides were tearing up. He heard someone howling in pain, the loud agonizing scream of an animal being slaughtered. It was coming from him, from the depths of his being.

When he felt there was nothing left inside of him but burning acid, he stood up, his body still shaking, and took the water bottle that he kept in his car. He rinsed his mouth thoroughly, cleaned his face, and put the bottle back. Then he remained completely still, his gaze fixed somewhere beyond the reddish-green field. How long, he didn't know.

When he got back to his car, he caught a glimpse of his face in the front side window. It was so different that his wife wouldn't recognize

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him. It was the face of a man devoid of any feelings, of any trace of humanity. It was the face of death.

He had made a decision. Maya would live a happy, normal childhood, go to school and break the hearts of all the boys there. She would argue with her mother, sneak out of the house to go to parties, then go to University, meet a nice boy and get married.

Maya's life would not be *terminated*.

He was Special agent John Blake and he was on a mission.

But first, he had to die.



CHAPTER 2

PRESENT DAY

His eyelids stung as if they were held open by sharp needles. He felt tired, but it wasn't just an every-now-and-then feeling. He felt perpetually tired, as though life and blood were slowly oozing out of him. Tired of being around the sick and the grieving, tired of his starched white coat, grey slacks and polished black shoes, tired of feeling lonely and having no-one at home waiting for him.

For a moment, he entertained the idea of crashing out in the on-call room at the hospital, but the bunk bed with its lumpy, cheap mattress held little appeal. The Borgo Trento hospital in Verona, one of the best in Italy, didn't offer much in this regard. Then there was the constant smell of ammonia, laundry soap and bed sweat hovering in the air, impregnating the walls, the furniture, the clothes he was wearing. Sometimes it filled his nostrils and almost suffocated him and its acrid taste remained at the back of his throat for days.

He'd go home instead.

He took off his coat and carefully put it on the coat hanger in the closet by the door. He fished out a small hair comb he religiously kept inside the breast pocket of his shirt, looked in the mirror hung on the inside of the closet door and began tidying his unruly hair. He had always been obsessed with this. If he didn't comb his hair every few hours, it started looking like a half-built bird's nest.

He focused all of his attention on his hair and tried to ignore the sagging pale face in the mirror. He was forty-five, but his hectic life-style and the sterile light in the room added at least another decade to that. With a receding hairline and his black hair developing more than just a few grey friends, his dull-brown eyes slightly too close, and his waist puffing out like rising bread dough – although he tried to hide it under large sweaters and shirts – he knew he wasn't exactly Brad Pitt.

In his opinion, men fell into four categories: the gorgeous scoundrels, who had half of the female population swooning at their feet; the handsome good guys, who also encountered no difficulties in finding a partner; the ugly, but charming, who still had their fair share of success with the opposite sex. And then came the invisible ones. The

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men who were neither good-looking, nor ugly. The ones you saw once and failed to remember the next day. They were the nice guys. And he was one of them.

He sighed and turned away from the mirror. He took the leather jacket from the coat hanger, grabbed his briefcase and stepped out of his office into the brightly lit corridor of the virology wing. It was Sunday evening, a little over eight o'clock, and he had just finished a thirty-six-hour shift.

"Good night, Doctor Pasetto," the nurse at the reception desk said, her red-rimmed eyes peering at him from behind thick glasses. Then she resumed staring at the computer screen in front of her, pounding on the keyboard.

"Good night, Dorina," he answered, always polite, always using first names.

Because he was the nice guy. This was how the few women he had been with - in his pathetic attempts to find *the one* - would describe him.

In his twenties and thirties, he had been too busy studying and making a name for himself to think about starting a family, although his mother had gradually become more vocal in expressing her desire to have grandchildren. But once he had established an excellent reputation for himself, his lonely existence started to weigh him down, and he found himself wishing for someone in his life, a person he could share everything with, who'd be at home when he arrived in the evenings, ask about his day and tell him in great detail about her own.

He stepped outside into the grey twilight gloom and ambled to his car. He thought about the date he had a few evenings ago. An intelligent and beautiful woman with a healthy sense of humour, a woman he certainly wished to see again. But that would never happen.

It's not you, it's me, she had told him, you're such a nice man, Niccolò, you deserve someone with less emotional baggage.

He was tired of hearing what a nice guy he was.

He pointed the key fob at his black Mercedes; the doors unlocked with a low hum, the mirrors reverted to the normal position, and the interior light came on. He climbed behind the wheel.

The thought of sleeping at the hospital popped into his mind again, more persistent this time. But he pushed it aside. His own bed was much more comfortable.

He turned the key in the ignition, and with a soft purr, the car

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started. He drove out of the parking lot and joined the traffic. His apartment was ten minutes away from the hospital.

There were few cars on the streets now, the city's inhabitants relaxing in front of the television, beer in one hand, remote control in the other. He loved the quiet of the dark, the sleepiness of Verona like a cat curled up on the warm mat in front of the fireplace dozing off into oblivion. At least until the next morning when the *Veronese* invaded the streets once again, driving to work, and day-dreaming about the next summer holiday.

He parked the car in his private underground garage, and dragged his feet to the door that connected the garage to his apartment building.

As his right foot hovered over the first step, a strange, unsettling feeling washed over him and made him freeze for a few seconds. He felt the muscles in his stomach tighten and a tremor rippled through his body. This had never happened to him before. He stood there motionless, feeling confused and ridiculous, a grown man behaving like a superstitious old fool.

He finally snapped out of it and went up the stairs, every step feeling heavier somehow.

His apartment was on the first floor, and he stopped in front of the door, patting down his pockets and trying to remember where the hell he had shoved his keys. After two full minutes and a lot of mental swearing, he finally found them in the front compartment of his briefcase.

I definitely need a holiday, he decided as he took them out and unlocked the door.

He went inside, closed the door behind him and turned on the lights. The uneasy feeling returned full force and he felt scared. He almost wanted to run out of his apartment.

Don't be an idiot!

But as an extra-precaution he locked and bolted the door carefully. Then he dragged his feet into the bathroom, but not before he turned off the lights in the corridor. Wasting the planet's already depleted resources wasn't something he took lightly. He was that kind of man.

He stripped down, threw his clothes in the blue hamper behind the door, and got in the shower.

He turned his body away from the faucet and placed his hands on the wall, letting the hot water beat down his back. Doing this usually

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relaxed him, but now it somehow amplified this weird restlessness, this foreboding feeling he couldn't shake off. Annoyed at himself, he quickly washed his body, turned off the faucet and reached for the brown towel on the hook.

A heavy silence filled his apartment. A few drops of water from the shower head splashed onto the ceramic tiles below, the sound deafening to his ears. His heart started beating faster. All of a sudden he wanted to hear human voices, his neighbours yelling at each other, their baby crying, anything but this dead silence and the rhythmic tapping of the water drops.

An icy shiver rippled down his spine and his body started shaking. Unseen walls were sliding down around him, trapping him. Suffocating him.

What the hell is wrong with me? Could this be a panic attack?

He had never had one in his life, but his mother suffered from them periodically. Maybe somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind the prospect of leading a lonely existence scared the hell out of him.

He took a few deep breaths and managed to bring his erratic heartbeat down a notch.

And then he heard a noise. It sounded like footsteps in the bedroom. He stopped breathing and his body went rigid. Cold water trickled from his hair down his face. And pure panic constricted his throat.

I'm naked. In the shower box.

And yet he wasn't sure he wanted to get out. The air around him became menacing, as if something evil was lurking in the shadows of his apartment. He closed his eyes.

This is getting ridiculous! Nobody could have gotten in!

With jerky movements he dried his body, put on a pair of black boxers and an old grey t-shirt, and went to the sink. He opened the medicine cabinet to the right of the mirror and took out the bottle of Xanax he kept there for his mother. He put it on the sink and stared at it. He'd never thought he would actually come to need it himself.

He placed his palms on either side of the sink, holding himself up, his head lowered, his forehead and chin beaded with sweat.

His gaze fell on the pair of scissors he used the previous morning to cut off the plastic wrap holding two bottles of mouthwash he had bought for the price of one. Grey steel and black plastic against the immaculate white ceramic of the sink. Kind of like his own life. No

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colours, no joy in it.

He decided he needed the Xanax. He grabbed the bottle and was about to unscrew the cap.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that.”

He froze. His heart started hammering hard against his rib cage.

A man’s voice. Inside his house.

His breathing turned shallow and quick, and a cold clammy sweat covered his skin.

But I locked the door. I locked the door!

Then he understood. The intruder had already been inside. The bottle of Xanax slid from his hand and clattered to the floor, rolling under the sink.

“Now look what you’ve done!” the intruder said, his jeering voice mean and hollow like a dead man’s laugh.

It came from the darkness of the corridor.

You need to do something! Do something!

He wished he knew what to do. He had never attacked anyone in his life and had no idea how to go about it. What if the burglar was armed? Maybe he should just give him whatever the hell he wanted and be done with it.

He saw the scissors on the sink.

He felt a rush of adrenaline surge through his body as he realised the man couldn’t see the scissors. His whole body tensed, his blood ran faster and his muscles were ready for attack. In one swift movement he grabbed the scissors and lunged at the figure in the dark shadows.

But instead of driving the scissors deep inside a warm body, he stabbed... nothing. He lost his balance and fell on the cold, hard tiles in the small corridor connecting the two bedrooms to the bathroom and living-room.

He didn’t have the scissors anymore. He had dropped them trying to break the fall, and they were now lying somewhere out of his reach.

He heard a laugh behind him, cruel and evil like the depths of Dante’s inferno.

“Get up!”

He did as instructed, slowly. His legs were unsteady as he had injured his right knee when he fell, and he almost felt like checking to make sure the scissors weren’t stuck in his kneecap, so excruciating was the pain.

“Turn on the light.”

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With a trembling hand he flipped the light switch up.

As the warm glow flooded the corridor, he understood he was going to die.

And at the exact same moment he realised how much he wanted to live. How rich and blessed his life really was, how he still had time to meet the right woman, start a family, buy a house in the suburbs and fill it with love and laughter, just like in those sappy movies played year after year on TV at Christmas.

A scornful smile stretched across the features of this soulless shell of a man all dressed in black. "I'm afraid that's just not in the cards for you. You see, you made one fatal mistake six years ago." He paused, his face hard and ruthless, then added in a voice as final as a judge giving the death sentence. "You worked for Doc."

"Who...? I never—"

The words died on his lips. The heavily guarded medical lab, the creepy doctor in charge... it all came back to him.

"Exactly," the killer nodded as if he could actually read his thoughts. "And now it's time to pay the price. But if it's any consolation, you won't be the only one."



CHAPTER 3

Marchiori took his gun, a 9mm Beretta 92FS – perfect for his hands because of its ample grip – from his shoulder holster, put it on the brown wooden desk in front of him, and then sat down. The big swivel chair squeaked under his weight. Not that he was fat. But he was tall and muscular, the body of a man who exercised regularly, just not in the perfect conditions of a gym. He strongly believed that if you wanted a hard body and a tough mind you needed to go hand-to-hand with Mother Nature. He ran and exercised in the forest and up the hills behind his house, and he did it in all weather conditions. Rain, ice, or the fires of hell, it made no difference to him. He rolled out of bed and into his training gear every morning, never past six am, no matter how late he had hit the sack the night before. The only exception to this rule was when he slept in his office. The police headquarters had an underground space where there were two gyms, showers and locker rooms, and he had no choice then but to train there. Because no exercise was just unacceptable. He had made a pact with himself. The day he was out of breath while chasing a perp would be his last day as a police officer. And he sure as hell did everything in his power to keep that day in the very distant future.

He loved his job more than anything in the world, which was why at thirty-seven he'd already been divorced for more than five years. The fighting had started shortly after they got married. *You're never at home when I go to bed*, his wife used to yell at him, *we don't even have breakfast together because you always go to that lousy police bar*. Sleepy hellos and good-byes didn't qualify as communication apparently. And then came the ultimatum. *Me or your job*, she calmly announced one night, *you have one week to decide*. He could have given her the answer straight away. It wasn't that he didn't love her. Because he did. But his job was an integral part of his being, encoded in his DNA and impossible to live without. Of course he never actually told her this, but she was a smart woman, and by the end of that week she had packed her bags and wished him and his job a happy life together.

While sitting in his chair with one hour until midnight, Marchiori realized he had no idea what he was supposed to do the next day. His first day off in years. A whole day off.

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The nice old lady in the Personnel Office had threatened to make him take two weeks off at a time if he didn't reduce the obscene amount of paid holiday he had accumulated over the years. And Colonel Sanese, chief of The Homicide and Burglary Division of the Verona Police Department, had been on her side. Marchiori had muttered something about how bullying employees was illegal, but realised he had no choice in the matter. So unless he wanted to die of boredom two weeks at a time, he had agreed to take one or two days off every now and then.

And the first one was tomorrow.

He switched off his computer and was about to stand up, when he heard a soft knock on the door. He sighed loudly. There was only one person in the entire building who did that. His new partner. A young man who had no business being a police officer. But whether he liked it or not, the guy had been forced down his throat and he had to work with him. Because the young man's father was a well-connected, well-known general in Rome.

The door opened slowly.

"Sir?..."

"Giusto, how many times do I have to tell you not to act like a girl on her first date when you come into my office?"

A red patch stretched up from under the lieutenant's shirt collar and quickly reached his cheeks. He cleared his voice. "Sorry, Sir."

"So, what is it then?"

"We've just received a 112 call reporting a murder."

For a few moments Marchiori was quiet. He couldn't believe his luck. If one could call the killing of another human being luck. But Sanese had made it loud and clear that unless someone got killed, he was to stay at home tomorrow, or do whatever the bloody hell he wanted to, but under no circumstances show his face inside the police headquarters.

And someone had been killed.

He pushed his chair back and stood up. "Let's go then," he said, as he grabbed his crumpled suit jacket off the back of his chair and slipped it on.

The nice old lady in the Personnel Office would not have her wish come true today. And through no fault of his own.

He put his gun back in the shoulder holster and marched out of his office, quickly followed by Giusto.

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Twenty minutes later, Marchiori parked the unmarked black Alfa Romeo between two Carabinieri cruisers next to the kerb on Via Delle Argonne, right outside a posh and elegant building painted in warm shades of café-au-lait. An apartment here must cost more than he could ever afford on a public servant's salary.

A *Croce Rossa* ambulance was parked not far from where they were, its blue lights piercing the moonless night. Two carabinieri and one paramedic stood at the back of the red and white van.

He and Giusto got out of the car and were about to head towards the ambulance, when one of the carabinieri saw them and sauntered in their direction.

"Captain, lieutenant," the man greeted them.

"What do we have here, sergeant?" Marchiori asked him.

"Victim's name is Niccolò Pasetto, and from what the paramedics have been saying, he was one of the finest virologists at Borgo Trento Hospital."

"Who called it in?"

"Anonymous, but the call was made from the victim's mobile phone."

Which meant it may have very well been the killer himself.

"ID every single person entering or leaving the building, ask them to give you their contact details and start knocking on doors and see if anyone's seen or heard anything suspicious this evening."

"Some of the folks living here won't like it. From what I've seen it's full of doctors, lawyers and such. I think I might've recognised a judge's name on the intercom outside."

"I don't care if the Pope himself lives here. This is a police investigation and until further indication we're treating this as reported. Murder."

"Yes, sir."

Marchiori turned on his heels and marched towards the building. A police officer posted in the lobby let him in.

"First floor, door on the left," the man informed him.

"Thanks," he said and climbed the steps two at a time, Giusto in tow.

A young policeman he'd never seen before stood guard outside the door and asked them to ID themselves.

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"I'm Captain Livio Marchiori, the detective in charge of this case and this is my partner Lieutenant Giusto," Marchiori answered and flashed his badge.

"Yes, sir, you can go in. The crime scene guys have just arrived as well."

"Really?" Marchiori arched his eyebrows. "How the hell did they get here so quickly?"

The policeman shrugged and opened the apartment door for them.

"What the fuck!?" Marchiori cursed when a wave of stinking hot air hit him.

"It's the heating, sir," Lieutenant Bernini, one of the CSU techs, said and handed both him and Giusto a pair of blue shoe covers and gloves.

"No kidding! And here I was, thinking it was the AC... Well, turn the damn thing off then!"

He took off his jacket, loosened his tie knot and undid the first two buttons on his shirt. He was already drenched in sweat and hadn't even seen the crime scene yet.

"The body's in what appears to be the victim's office, the second door on your right," Bernini added, his face strained, his jaw set tight.

"That bad, huh?" Marchiori muttered and headed in that direction.

The rancid smell of decaying flesh was getting stronger now. He fished out a handkerchief from the pocket of his trousers and covered his nose, then focused on the room in front of him. A floor-to-ceiling bookcase covered the wall to the left, and right across from it a big cherry wood desk took up almost half the space, standing on a thick green rug covering a portion of the polished wooden floor. A pile of folders, haphazardly stacked, a room thermometer on one corner of the desk and a telephone were the only items on it.

Then his gaze settled on the body in the centre of the room. The victim was dressed in a pair of boxers and looked like he had been dipped in boiling water before sitting in the big black leather armchair where he was now.

But it was the man's face that made Marchiori's mouth go dry. His eyes were wide open and sunk deep into his skull, and looked so terrifyingly empty as if the man's very soul had wrenched itself free from that tortured body without leaving any trace of its presence there. A mask of unseen horrors, his face was red like blood, his mouth twisted in a silent scream.

Marchiori took a few steps closer to the body.

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Who did this to you?

"The medical examiner is here," he heard Bernini's voice in the hallway.

"Send him in."

"Her. Send her in," a feminine voice chimed from behind him.

Marchiori turned around. A woman somewhere in her mid-thirties stood in the doorway and looked at him, her eyes a deep blue, her lips wearing a polite smile.

"You're not Gianluca Farinati," he blurted, and as soon as the words were out he wanted to kick himself.

It was plainly obvious she was a woman and not a sixty-year old balding man.

"Dr. Abbigail Jones," she said and extended her hand, "but you can call me Abby, captain."

He almost felt more shocked by her presence here than by the victim in the armchair. Without a word, he shook her hand, feeling her firm hold and smooth skin.

Aw, crap.

This was one complication he didn't need in his life.

"I'm the new chief medical examiner in Verona," she added, "just transferred from Milan. Dr. Farinati grew tired of always being among the dead and decided to take early retirement and live a little."

"Can't say I blame him," Marchiori said, thinking of the body behind him.

He had a flash about a memo he'd received about a month ago regarding Farinati's retirement and the arrival of a new medical examiner.

He should pay closer attention to his memos.

"You're not Italian, Dr. Jones," Marchiori tried to fill the silence.

He hated small talk. And whenever he had to work with a woman he felt compelled to engage in some sort of conversation. If she'd been a man, after they had finished with the introductions they would have focused on the body.

"And... is that a problem, detective?"

"No, of course not, Dr. Jones, just curiosity."

"First of all, it's Abby. Dr. Jones is my father. And second, yes, my name's not Italian. I'm Italian-American, mother from Sicily, father from Atlanta, USA."

"Interesting... Well, welcome on board, Dr. Jones," he said with an

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emphasis on the words *Dr. Jones*.

Why would anyone request a transfer from Milan to Verona? It was usually the other way around.

A slight frown had appeared on the woman's face and her lips weren't smiling anymore. He chose to ignore that.

"All yours," he added and stepped aside so she could get a full view of the decaying corpse.

For about a minute she just looked at the dead body without saying a word. She didn't appear scared or sick or anything. Her face was a mask of detached professionalism, and her hands didn't hesitate or tremble when she took a camera from her bag and started clicking away.

"Could you tell me the estimated time of death, Dr. Jones?"

The camera stopped clicking and she turned to him. "Either you have problems with your short-term memory detective, or you're trying to annoy me. But let me make one thing clear: I'm not going anywhere. So the way I see it we only have two options here. We could play nice, or..."

"Or...what, doctor?"

"You know," she said and shrugged her shoulders, "medical examiners are so busy sometimes, that the results you need could get delayed, or even lost on their way to you. Shit happens, right?"

She then took a few steps closer to the body as if nothing had happened and she hadn't just threatened him. He couldn't even see a bead of sweat on her face or neck for fuck's sake and it was boiling hot in the room. Not to mention the stink. But she seemed oblivious to all of that.

He looked at her closely. She wore elegant clothes and by the look of them he bet they were from the same rack as Gucci or Dolce & Gabbana. Black slim trousers and pumps, and a double breasted trench coat of the same colour, with a belt that flattered her figure, and a pale pink scarf and lip-gloss to add some light to her look. Professional. That would be the correct word to describe her appearance. But there was more to her than met the eye. The way she had threatened him, without any qualms or hesitation, and the way she was now examining the body... well, he got the message loud and clear: *Don't mess with me*. Or something to that effect.

He cleared his throat. "So... er, Abby, what can you tell me about the time and cause of death?"

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She smiled. "Not so sure about why and when, but I do know who he was having a date with last night."

"You do?"

"A goddam oven, that's who."

He couldn't help it. The corners of his mouth curled upward. If his colleagues had seen this, they would have teased him about it for a month. The grizzly bear smiled, hell must have frozen over. He could practically hear all the jokes.

Abby started clicking her camera again, taking pictures from all possible angles.

"I don't know how you did things in Milan, but here we have full time employees who do this."

"Don't worry, I'm not trying to steal their job. Got enough on my plate as it is," she said, without even pausing to look at him, "and I'm not trying to say they aren't fine professionals either. But I like taking my own photos. It helps me to remember details more easily and concentrate better."

Well, at least it showed she was thorough, if nothing else, Marchiori thought.

"Hm... It's strange," she muttered to herself.

"What is?"

"He seemed to have died of heat stroke." She put the camera back inside her handbag.

"Well, if you don't open a window soon, I might die of a heat stroke, too."

Abby rolled her eyes. "Don't worry, that's not gonna happen. Not in this temperature anyway."

"What do you know?" he muttered. "I bet you sip your afternoon tea with the devil himself. And he's the one doing the sweating."

She whipped her head in his direction. "Pardon?"

"Just asking how could the vic have died of a heat stroke if—"

"Sir," Giusto's voice interrupted him, "you might wanna come and see this." He then seemed to realize Marchiori wasn't alone in the room. "You too, Dr. Jones."

"What is it?"

"We found a pen drive inserted in the victim's laptop and there's a video on it," the lieutenant said without giving further details. He looked at the body and didn't even flinch or try to avert his eyes.

Every now and again the young man managed to surprise Marchiori.

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“What’s the video about?”

“You need to come and see for yourself, sir.”

Abby followed Marchiori and the young lieutenant into the living room where two crime scene techs were busy dusting the furniture for prints.

She felt a little baffled by her reaction to him calling her *Dr. Jones*. It wasn't like her to threaten her colleagues like that, and he most certainly wasn't the first person to insist on using her surname. So why the hell did she all but bite his head off for it?

To her right a young man sat on a black chair staring at the silver MacBook on the black futuristic coffee table in front of him. He kept pushing his glasses further up on his nose as they slipped down every two seconds as if they didn't fit properly. When he saw them entering the room, he told them he had hooked the laptop up to the big screen TV behind it and they would be watching the video there.

“You can sit down on the sofa if you want,” he added and gestured towards the white leather couch opposite the TV.

They all chose to stand.

“Have you already seen it?” Marchiori asked.

“Only the beginning,” the young man said and hit enter on the laptop keyboard.

A man wearing only a pair of boxers and a t-shirt appeared on the screen, his eyes full of fear. The victim.

For the first time that evening Abby felt uneasy. She lived and walked among the dead, she witnessed crimes and mutilation more often than she cared to, but this was different somehow.

A cruel, cavernous voice broke the wary silence in the room. Abby's breath caught in her throat and her hands became cold and clammy. That voice was evil.

“Take off your t-shirt.”

Pasetto's eyes widened and he hesitated for just a second before complying.

“Turn on the heat and set it on maximum.”

With trembling hands, he took a white remote control from one of the bookcase shelves, and a few seconds later they could hear the loud humming of air being blown into the room.

“Now sit down in the armchair.”

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Pasetto sat down and placed his arms on the two armrests in an attempt to show confidence, but the visible trembling of his hands, the spasmodic closing and opening of his fists proved the contrary.

"Look into my eyes," the voice started speaking again. *"You hear my voice and my voice only. You are not in control of your mind anymore. I am. You do whatever I say, when I say it. Everything I say is real for you. Your mind and body accept it without any opposition. Do you understand?"*

"Yes."

"You feel hot. Very very hot. So hot that you start sweating."

And Abby was shocked to see beads of perspiration appearing on the victim's body. Then they spread and multiplied, staining his boxers, until his whole body glistened as though he had just come out of the shower and hadn't used a towel yet.

"You feel hotter and hotter every second. It's scorching your entire body, inside and out, and you can hardly breathe."

Pasetto's skin became scarlet red and his breathing hard. Two minutes later he looked like he was boiling inside his own body. His eyes pleaded for mercy, his face was contorted in pain and terror.

Then the sweat on his body started to diminish.

"He's dehydrated," Abby whispered. "The risk of having a heart attack or a stroke just went through the roof."

"Why?" Giusto asked.

"When the core temperature rises," Abby started explaining, her eyes still glued to the screen, "this triggers two bodily processes that most people find embarrassing. The first one is that your skin's blood vessels dilate and you start looking like a boiled lobster. That blood is being pumped straight from your heated organs, so when it meets the coolness of the outside air – provided that air *is* cooler – the unwanted heat is safely pushed out of your body."

"And the other process is sweating, right?"

"Right."

"But he just stopped sweating buckets because he's dehydrated."

"Severely so. The temperature around him must be too high, which causes the blood to lose water, through evaporation, and thicken."

"And thickened blood means clotting, which in turn causes heart attacks or strokes," Giusto concluded.

Abby nodded. She had never seen anything like this before.

There was one thing that troubled her though. In the video, she

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could see a big room thermometer on the desk near the armchair, and it clearly showed twenty-nine degrees as the temperature in the room. It was too low to trigger such a response in a person's body. Unless Pasetto suffered from certain diseases, but even then...

"It's getting hotter and hotter, like you're surrounded by huge fires. You start burning up inside," the cavernous voice interrupted her line of thought.

Pasetto started yawning convulsively. His face showed so much pain, Abby found it increasingly difficult to keep watching the video.

"Why's he yawning?" Giusto asked.

"His body needs more oxygen so his brain is forcing him to suck in more air."

Then Pasetto's body started convulsing violently. His lips had swollen and looked bright red, his skin a layer of raw meat and blood. His sunken eyes moved erratically in their sockets, and his chest heaved with every breath; he groaned, a sound so terrifying, so agonizing as if it had been wrenched out of his chest with a steel hook.

"Why isn't he fainting?" Marchiori asked.

"He should be," Abby agreed. She had been asking herself the exact same question. And then the answer came, in that same evil voice.

"You will be conscious until the very end. Your brain will be the last thing to shut down."

"This isn't possible," she whispered.

But it was. The man was still conscious even as his skin seemed to be melting, as his whole body was liquefying like butter left in the sun.

"The enzymes and cells in his body can no longer hold themselves together," Abby explained, in an attempt to look at this clinically and professionally, and not let herself be overwhelmed by the horror she was witnessing. "The proteins in his cells are cooking now. Just like egg whites as they boil."

Pasetto started suffocating. His mouth, wide open, was desperately trying to suck in the air which couldn't reach his lungs anymore.

"His muscles are locking up, including the respiratory ones. His brain has no more oxygen supply."

Pasetto's body went limp and for a second everything seemed to freeze in silence.

"Game over," the cavernous voice said, pleasure and satisfaction laced with pure evil.

And the screen went blank again.

EVO

“What the fuck was that?”

The question came from the young IT geek, whose face had lost all colour.

But even though he'd been the only one to voice it, it was clearly visible on the shocked faces of all the people in the room.

And Marchiori was sure he was no exception.

Apart from the grotesqueness of seeing a man killed, there was something else as well. They were all law enforcers, people who had witnessed a lot of bad shit throughout their careers, who knew how a bullet killed, how a knife sliced through skin and organs. But not this. Not what they had just seen here.

“He couldn't have killed Pasetto through hypnosis,” Giusto blurted, looking at him as if he needed reassurance.

Because nothing terrifies the human mind more than the inexplicable, the supernatural.

“Play it again, but this time without sound,” Marchiori instructed the IT geek, who seemed to have sunk into a semi-catatonic state.

A few seconds later, the big screen came to life once more. Marchiori knew he would be watching the video over and over again in the hours to come.

The vic was now sitting down in the armchair and—

“Pause it,” Marchiori yelled. Then turned to Giusto. “There might be a way for us to find out who did this. Look here. What can you see behind the armchair?”

“A... window?”

“And in that window—”

“We can see the killer's reflection!” Giusto said, comprehension dawning on his face. “I'll have our tech guys take a look at it. Hopefully, we'll know something soon.”

Marchiori turned to the screen again.

“Detective,” Abby said, “what killed Pasetto?”

He sighed. Women and talking. He looked at her, but the smart retort died on his lips when he saw her face. All of a sudden she seemed too fragile to be in a world like this. A chivalrous instinct he thought he was born without aroused somewhere deep inside of him and he was shocked to find himself feeling the need to reassure her, to chase away the fear from her eyes.

“Not what, but who, Abby. We're talking about a man here, a sicko

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who somehow found yet another twisted way to kill a human being. When you do the autopsy, you'll probably find traces of substances that can lead to or cause heat stroke. Or maybe Pasetto had been suffering from some weird disease or syndrome. Or fuck knows what else to explain scientifically what we've just seen here. I may not know the hows and whys yet, but one thing I know for sure. It was committed by a man. A living and breathing human being. All that hypnotic mumbo-jumbo is just that. Mumbo-jumbo."

"I take it you don't believe in hypnosis?"

"Not in a million years. Do you?"

But she didn't answer his question. Instead she said, "Send the body to the lab now and I'll expedite the autopsy and the toxicology screen."

Marchiori watched her closely. Her face looked smooth and soft, but the dark circles under her eyes told him she hadn't spent the day relaxing at the health spa anymore than he had.

"It's late now, you should go home and get some sleep. The body will still be there tomorrow, it's not like he's going anywhere."

"The dead are never in a hurry, I know that. But I need to do this. For myself. I need to find a rational explanation."

He nodded. "You'll have the body as soon as possible."

"Thank you, Livio," she said using his first name.

More or less overtly, everyone within earshot was looking at him and Marchiori knew why. He had never been on a first name basis with anyone at work. Born and raised on military bases around the world – his dad had been a career paratrooper – he firmly believed that when people were supposed to follow your orders without questions, it was better not to encourage certain behaviours which led them to see you as a friend rather than their commander.

"Okay," he said. And then watched her leave the room.

Apparently his rules weren't as set in stone as he'd thought them to be.

Cold gusts of wind whipped around her as she left the building, and she pulled up the collar of her trench coat.

You'd think this was goddam February and not the end of March, she thought slightly annoyed. She hated cold weather and dreamed of one day living on a sunny island, house by the sea, and no dead bodies in her life anymore.

EVO

She had parked further down the street, and with every step she took, the cold permeated her clothes, reaching her skin and trying to penetrate deeply inside her body and coil around her bones.

She hastened her pace and soon found herself surrounded by darkness. She looked behind her. The police cruisers and the four *carabinieri* were still there, though they seemed too far somehow.

A creepy silence engulfed her.

She thought she saw movement somewhere ahead of her and her heart skipped a beat.

What if there's somebody out there?

Her heart was beating faster now and her throat constricted. She knew that more often than not killers weren't usually far from the crime scene when it was first discovered.

Don't be silly! He has no reason to kill you.

She picked up the pace and cursed herself for parking so goddam far.

Unless he's a serial killer who has a thing for doctors in white hospital robes.

She stopped dead in her tracks. Her eyes started to frantically scan the area around her. He could be anywhere. Behind every tree, every parked car. Every dark corner could hold a death sentence for her. A slow, agonizing death.

Just get into the fuckin' car, Abby!

She forced her legs to move, to take her further into the shadows. She kept telling herself that it was all in her mind, that nobody was after her.

She finally reached her car and locked herself in. Only then did she start breathing again. Deep breaths. She turned the key in the ignition, the low humming of the engine soothing her nerves, and pulled away from the kerb. She kept breathing in and out, but the icy feeling down her spine remained.

END OF EXCERPT

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