

NOW A MAJOR TV SERIES

AN
**INSPECTOR
ZEN**
MYSTERY

VENDETTA

MICHAEL DIBDIN

BBC

A BBC TV programme



MICHAEL DIBDIN

Vendetta

ff
faber and faber

To Moselle

Contents

Title Page
Dedication

ROME

Wednesday, 01.50–02.45

Nearly over now. Everything's going, the doubts, the fears,

Wednesday, 07.20–12.30

Blood everywhere, my blood. I'm collapsing like a sack of

Wednesday, 20.25–22.05

The nights brought relief. At night I moved freely, I felt

Thursday, 07.55–13.20

I never used to dream. Like saying, I never used to go mad.

Thursday, 13.40–16.55

I was always biddable, a born follower. Like those ducklings

Thursday, 17.20–19.10

What is the worst, the most obscene and loathsome thing

Friday, 11.15–14.20

I didn't mean to do it. I was just paying a visit, like before.

SARDINIA

Saturday, 05.05–12.50

I thought their deaths would change everything, but nothing

Saturday, 20.10–22.25

I knew him at once. They think they're so clever, the others,

Sunday, 07.00–11.20

When I saw him leaving I thought everything was lost.

Sunday, 11.20–13.25

How wrong I was! And how right! Yes, a death was needed,

ROME

Friday, 11.20–20.45

The Zen Series from Michael Dibdin

About the Author

By the Same Author

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ROME

Wednesday, 01.50–02.45

Aurelio Zen lounged on the sofa like a listless god, bringing the dead back to life. With a flick of his finger he made them rise again. One by one the shapeless, blood-drenched bundles stirred, shook themselves, crawled about a bit, then floated upwards until they were on their feet again. The extremely literal resurrection had taken them by surprise, to judge by their expressions, or perhaps it was the sight of each others' bodies that was so shocking, the hideous injuries and disfigurements, the pools and spatters of blood everywhere. But as Zen continued to apply his miraculous intervention, all this was set to rights too: the gaping rents in flesh and fabric healed themselves, the blood mopped itself up, and in no time at all the scene looked almost like the ordinary dinner party it had been until the impossible occurred. None of the four seemed to notice the one remarkable feature of this spurious afterlife, namely that everything happened backwards.

'He did it.'

Zen's mother was standing in the doorway, her night-dress clutched around her skimpy form.

'What's wrong, mamma?'

She pointed at the television, which now showed a beach of brilliant white sand framed by smoothly curved rocks. A man was swimming backwards through the wavelets. He casually dived up out of the water, landed neatly on one of the rocks and strolled backwards to the shaded lounging chairs where the others sat sucking smoke out of the air and blowing it into cigarettes.

'The one in the swimming costume. He did it. He was in love with his wife so he killed her. He was in another one too, last week, on Channel Five. They thought he was a spy but it was his twin brother. He was both of them. They do it with mirrors.'

Mother and son gazed at each other across the room lit by the electronically preserved sunlight of summer now more than three months in the past. It was almost two o'clock in the morning, and even the streets of Rome were hushed.

Zen pressed the pause button of the remote control unit, stilling the video.

'Why are you up, mamma?' he asked, trying to keep his irritation out of his voice. This was breaking the rules. Once she had retired to her room, his mother never reappeared. It was respect for these unwritten laws that made their life together just about tolerable from his point of view.

'I thought I heard something.'

Their eyes still held. The woman who had given Zen life might have been the child he had never had, awakened by a nightmare and seeking comfort. He got up and walked over to her.

'I'm sorry, mamma. I turned the sound right down ...'

'I don't mean the TV.'

He interrogated those bleary, evasive eyes more closely.

'What, then?'

She shrugged pettishly.

'A sort of scraping.'

'Scraping? What do you mean?'

‘Like old Umberto’s boat.’

Zen was often brought up short by his mother’s references to a past which for her was infinite more real than the present would ever be. He had quite forgotten Umberto, the portly, dignified proprietor of a general grocery near the San Geremia bridge. He used the boat to transport fruit and vegetables from the Rialto market, as well as boxes, cases, bottles and jars to and from the cellars of his house, which the ten-year-old Zen had visualized as an Aladdin’s cave crammed with exotic delights. When not in use, the boat was moored to a post in the little canal opposite the Zens’ house. The post had a tin collar to protect the wood, and a few moments after each *vaporetto* passed down the Cannaregio the wash would reach Umberto’s boat and set it rubbing its gunwale against the collar producing a series of metallic rasps.

‘It was probably me moving around in here that you heard,’ Zen told her. ‘Now go back to bed before you catch cold.’

‘It didn’t come from in here. It came from the other side. Across the canal. Just like that damned boat.’

Zen took her by the arm, which felt alarmingly fragile. Widowed by the war, his mother had confronted the world alone on his behalf, wresting concessions from tradesmen and bureaucrats, labouring at menial jobs to eke out her pension, cooking, cleaning, sewing, mending and making do tirelessly and ingeniously hollowing out and shoring up a space for her son to grow up in. Small wonder, he thought, that the effort had reduced her to this pittance of a person, scared of noises and the dark, with no interest in anything but the television serials she watched, whose plots and characters were gradually becoming confused in her mind. Such motherhood as she had known was like those industrial jobs that leave workers crippled and broken, the only difference being that there was no one mothers could sue for damages.

Zen led her back into the musty bedroom she occupied at the back of the apartment, filled with the furniture she had brought with her from their home in Venice. The pieces were all elaborately carved from some wood as hard, dark and heavy as iron. They covered every inch of wall space, blocking up the fire escape as well as most of the window, which anyway she always kept tightly shuttered.

‘Are you going to stay up and watch the rest of that film?’ she asked as he tucked her in.

‘Yes, mamma, don’t worry, I’ll be just in there. If you hear anything, it’s only me.’

‘It didn’t come from in there! Anyway, I told you who did it. The skinny one in the swimming costume.’

‘I know, mamma,’ he murmured wearily. ‘That’s what everyone thinks.’

He wandered back to the living room just as two o’clock began to strike from the churches in the Vatican. Zen stood surveying the familiar faces locked up on the flickering screen. They were familiar not just to him, but to everyone who had watched television or looked at the papers that autumn. For months the news had been dominated by the dramatic events and still more sensational implications of the ‘Burolo affair’.

In a way it was quite understandable that Zen’s mother had confused the characters involved with the cast of a film she had seen. Indeed, it was a film that Zen was watching, but a film of a special kind, not intended for commercial release and only available to him, as an officer of the Criminal Police section of the Ministry of the Interior, in connection with the report he had been asked to prepare summarizing the case to date. He wasn’t really supposed to take it home, but the Ministry didn’t run to video machines for its employees, even those of Vice-Questorial rank. So what was he supposed to do – Zen had demanded, in his ignorance of the nature of video tape – hold it up to the window, frame by frame?

He sat down on the sofa again, groped for the remote control unit and pressed the play button releasing the blurred figures to laugh, chat and generally ham it up for the camera. They knew it was there, of course. Oscar Burolo made no secret of his mania for recording the highpoints of his life. On the contrary, every visitor to the entrepreneur's Sardinian hideaway had been impressed by the underground vault containing hundreds of video tapes, as well as computer discs all carefully shelved and indexed. Like all good libraries, Oscar's collection was constantly expanding. Indeed, shortly before his death a complete new section of shelving had been installed to accommodate the late additions.

'But do you actually ever watch any of them?' the guest might ask.

'I don't need to watch them,' Oscar would reply, smiling in a peculiar way. 'It's enough to know that they're there.'

If the six people relaxing at the water's edge were in any way uneasy about the prospect of having their antics preserved for posterity, they certainly didn't show it. An invitation to the Villa Burolo was so sought-after that no one was going to quibble about the conditions. Quite apart from the experience itself it was something to brag about at dinner parties for months to come. 'You mean to say you've actually *been* there?' people would ask, their envy showing like an ill-adjusted slip. 'Tell me, is it true that he has lions and tigers freely roaming the grounds and that the only way in is by helicopter? Secure in the knowledge that no one was likely to contradict him, Oscar Burolo's ex-guest could freely choose whether to distort the facts.... ('and I solemnly assure you, I who have been there and seen it with my own eyes, that Burolo has a staff of over thirty servants – or rather *slaves!* – whom he bought, cash down, from the president of a certain African country ...') or, in more sophisticated company, to suggest that the truth was actually stranger than the various lurid and vulgar fictions which had been circulating.

On the face of it, this degree of interest was itself almost the oddest feature of the business. Nothing could be more banal than for a rich Italian to buy himself a villa in Sardinia. By 'Sardinia', of course, one meant the Costa Smeralda on the northern coast of the island, which the Aga Khan had bought for a pittance from the local peasant farmers and turned into a holiday paradise for the super-wealthy, a mini-state which sprang into being every summer for two months. Its citizens hailed from all parts of the world and from all walks of life: film stars, industrialists, sheikhs, politicians, criminals, pop singers, bankers. Their cosmopolitan enclave was protected by an extremely efficient private police force, but its internal regime was admirably democratic and egalitarian. Religious or political or racial discrimination were unknown. The only requirement was money, and lots of it.

As founder and owner of a construction company whose rapid success was almost uncanny, there was no question that Oscar Burolo satisfied that requirement. But instead of meekly buying his way into the Costa like everyone else, he did something unheard-of, something so bizarre and outlandish that some people claimed afterwards that they had always thought it was ill-omened from the start. For *his* Sardinian retreat, Oscar chose an abandoned farmhouse half-way down the island's almost uninhabited eastern coast, and not even on the sea, for God's sake, but several kilometres inland!

Italians have no great respect for eccentricity, and this kind of idiosyncrasy might very easily have aroused nothing but ridicule and contempt. It was a measure of the panache with which Oscar carried off his whims that exactly the opposite was the case. The full resources of Burolo Construction were brought to bear on the humble farmhouse, which was swiftly altered out of all recognition. One by one, the arguments against Oscar's choice were made to look small-minded and unconvincing.

The security aspect, so important in an area notorious for kidnappings, was taken care of by hiring the top firm in the country to make the villa intruder-proof, no expense spared. Used to having to c

corners to make security cost-effective, the consultant was delighted for once to have an opportunity to design a system without compromises. 'If anyone ever manages to break into this place, I'll believe in ghosts,' he assured his client when the work was completed. Having purchased peace of mind with hard cash, Oscar then added a characteristic touch by buying a pair of rather moth-eaten lions from a bankrupt safari park outside Cagliari and turning them loose in the grounds, calculating that the resulting publicity would do as much as any amount of high technology to deter intruders.

But even Oscar couldn't change the fact that the villa was situated almost 200 kilometres from the nearest airport and the glamorous nightspots of the Costa Smeralda, 200 kilometres of tortuous and poorly maintained road where no electronic fences could protect him from kidnappers. Wasn't that a drawback? Well it might be, Oscar retorted, for someone who still thought of personal transport in terms of cars. But Olbia and the Costa were only half that distance as the crow flies, and when the crow in question was capable of 220 kph ... To clinch the argument, Oscar would bundle his guests into the 'crow' – an Agusta helicopter – and pilot them personally to Palau or Porto Cervo for aperitifs.

As for swimming, since Oscar would not go to the coast like everyone else, the coast was made to come to him. A wide irregular hollow the size of a small lake was scooped out of the parched red soil behind the farm. This was lined with concrete, filled with water and decorated with a sandy beach and wave-smoothed rocks dynamited and bulldozed out of the foreshore, barnacles and all. And the barnacles thrived, because one of the biggest surprises awaiting Burolo's guests as they padded off for their first dip was that the water was *salt*. 'Fresh from the Mediterranean,' Oscar would explain proudly, 'pumped up here through 5,437 metres of sixty-centimetre duct, filtered for impurities, agitated by six asynchronous wave simulators and continuously monitored to maintain a constant level of salinity.' Oscar liked using words like 'asynchronous' and 'salinity' and quoting squads of figures; it clinched the effect which the villa was already beginning to have on his listener. But he knew when to stop, and at this point would usually slap his guest on the back – or, if it was a woman, place his hand familiarly at the base of her spine, just above the buttocks – and say, 'So what's missing, except for a lot of fish and crabs and lobsters? Mind you, we have those too, but they know their place here on a plate!'

Zen paused the video again as footsteps sounded in the street outside. A car door slammed shut. But instead of the expected sound of the car starting up and driving away, the footsteps returned the way they had come, ceasing somewhere close by.

He walked over to the window and opened the shutters. The wooden jalousies beyond the glass were closed, but segments of the scene outside were visible by looking down through the angled slats. Both sides of the street were packed with cars, parked on the road, on either side of the trees lining the pavement and all over the pavement. Some distance from the house a red saloon was parked beyond all these, alone by itself, facing towards the house. It appeared to be empty.

The scene was abruptly plunged into darkness as the street lamp attached to the wall just below went out. Something had gone wrong with its automatic switch, so that the lamp was continually fooled into thinking that its own light was that of the dawn and therefore turned itself off. Then, after some time, it would start to glow faintly again, gradually growing brighter and brighter until the whole cycle repeated itself.

Zen closed the shutters and walked back to the sofa. Catching sight of his reflection in the large mirror above the fireplace, he paused, as though the person he saw there might hold the key to what was puzzling him. The prominent bones and slight tautness of the skin especially around the eyes gave his face a slightly exotic air, probably due to Slav or even Semitic blood somewhere in the

family's Venetian past. It was a face that gave nothing away, yet seemed always to tremble on the brink of some expression that never quite appeared. His face had made Zen's reputation as an interrogator, for it was a perfect screen on to which others could project their own suspicions, fears and apprehensions. Where other policemen confronted criminals, using the carrot or the stick according to the situation, Zen's subjects found themselves shut up with a man who barely seemed to exist, yet who mirrored back to them the innermost secrets of their hearts. They read their every fleeting emotion accurately imaged on those scrupulously blank features, and knew that they were lost.

Like all the other furniture in the apartment, the mirror was old without being valuable, and the silvering was wearing off in places. One particularly large worn patch covered much of Zen's chest, reminding him of the last terrible scenes of the video he was watching, of Oscar Burolo reeling away from the shotgun blasts which had come from nowhere, passing through the elaborate electronic defences of his property as though they did not exist.

With a shiver, Zen deliberately stepped to one side, moving the stain of darkness away. There was something about the Burolo case which was different from any other he had ever been involved in. He had known cases which obsessed him professionally, taking over his life until he was unable to sleep properly or to think about anything else, but this was even more disturbing. It was as though the aura of mystery and horror surrounding the killings had extended itself even to him, as though he too was somehow in danger from the faceless power which had ravaged the Villa Burolo. This was absurd, of course. The case was closed, an arrest had been made, and Zen's involvement with it was temporary, second-hand and superficial. But despite that the sensation of menace remained, and the sound of footsteps was enough to make him rush to the window, a car parked half-way down the street seemed to pose some threat.

The fact was that it was time to go to bed, long past it in fact. He walked back to the sofa and picked up his crumpled pack of Nazionali cigarettes, considered briefly whether to have one more before turning in, decided against it, then lit up anyway. He yawned and glanced at his watch. A quarter past two. No wonder he was feeling so strange. Seen through the mists of sleeplessness everything had the insubstantial, fluid quality of a dream. He picked up the remote control, pressed the play button and tried to concentrate on the screen again.

You had to hand it to Oscar! No doubt the camera angle had been carefully chosen, but it was really very difficult to believe that this beach, these rocks, those plashing wavelets were not part of a natural coastline, but a swimming pool five kilometres inland. As for the members of the group sitting around the table in the shadow of a huge green and blue parasol, toying with iced drinks, packs of cards and magazines full of games and puzzles, they were fairly typical of anyone who might have been found at the villa on any given day during July and August that summer. Besides Oscar and his wife there were only four guests: Burolo assiduously preserved the mystique of the villa by restricting the number of visitors, thus increasing their sense of being privileged intimates. His excuse was that the household was not able to cope with huge parties. Despite the tall tales of resident slave communities, Oscar's staff was in fact limited to an elderly caretaker and wife, together with a young man who had come with the lions and also helped to look after the garden. Oscar made much of being a self-made man with no wish for ostentatious display. 'I am what I am,' he declared, 'a simple builder and nothing more.' The truth was that he had realized that it was easier to dominate and manipulate small groups than large ones. The video made this very clear. In every scene, inside or out, it was the host himself who was invariably the focus of attention. Lounging on his personalized beach in silver shorts and a clashing pink and blue silk shirt, his head exaggerated in size as though by a caricaturist's pen, Oscar

looked like the love child of the Michelin man and an overweight gorilla. One of his unsuccessful rivals had remarked that anyone who still doubted the theory of evolution obviously hadn't met Oscar Burolo. But it was a waste of time trying to be witty at Oscar's expense. He promptly took up the story, telling it himself with great relish, and concluding, 'Which is why I've survived and Roberto gone to the wall, like the dinosaur he is!' Oscar the ebullient, the irrepressible Oscar! Nothing could touch him, or so it seemed.

Such was the spell cast by Burolo that it was only by an effort of attention that one became aware of the others present. The slightly saturnine man with thinning grey hair and a wedge-shaped face sitting to Oscar's left was a Sicilian architect named Vianello who had collaborated with Burolo on the plans for a new electricity generating station at Rieti. Unfortunately their tender had been rejected on technical grounds – a previously unheard-of eventuality – and the contract had gone to another firm. Dottor Vianello was wearing an immaculate pale cream cotton suit and a slight strained smile, possibly due to the fact that he was having to listen to Oscar's wife's account of an abortive shopping trip to Olbia. Rita Burolo had once been an exceptionally attractive woman, and the sense of power which this had given her had remained, even now that her charms were visibly wilting. Her inane comments had commanded total attention for so long that Rita had at last come to believe that she had more to offer the world than her legs and breasts, which was a consolation now that the latter were no longer quite first-division material. Opposite her sat the Sicilian architect's wife, a diminutive pixie of a woman with frightened eyes and a faint moustache. Maria Pia Vianello gazed at the spectacle of her hostess in full career with a kind of awestruck amazement, like a schoolgirl with a crush on her teacher. Clearly, *she* would never dream of trying to dominate a gathering in this way.

Despite these superficial dissimilarities, however, the Vianellos and the Burolos basically had much in common. No longer young, but rich enough to keep age at bay for a few years yet, the men ponderous with professional gravitas, like those toy figurines which cannot be knocked over because they are loaded with lead, the women exuding the sullen peevishness of those who have been pampered with every luxury except freedom and responsibility. The remaining couple were different.

Zen reversed the tape again briefly, hauling the swimmer up out of the water once more, and then froze the picture, studying the man who had dominated the news for the previous three months. Renato Favelloni's sharp, ferrety features and weak chest and limbs, coupled with greasy hair and an over-ready smile, gave him the air of a small-town playboy, by turns truculent and toadying, convinced of being God's gift to the world in general and women in particular, but quite prepared to lower himself to any dirty work in the interests of getting ahead. At first Zen had found it almost incomprehensible that such a man could have been the linchpin of the deals that were rumoured to have taken place between Oscar Burolo and the senior political figure who was referred to in the press as '*l'onorevole*' – the formula reputedly used by Burolo in his secret memoranda of their relationship. Only gradually had he come to understand that it was precisely Favelloni's blatant sleaziness which made him acceptable as a go-between. There are degrees even in the most cynical corruption and manipulation. By embodying the most despicable possible grade, Renato Favelloni made his clients feel relatively decent by comparison.

His wife, like Renato himself, was a good ten years younger than the other four people present, and exactly the kind of stunning bimbo that Rita Burolo must have been at the same age. This cannot have recommended Nadia Favelloni to Oscar's wife any more than the younger woman's habit of wandering around the place half-naked. Having reached the age at which women begin to employ clothing for purposes of concealment rather than display, Signora Burolo discreetly retained a flowing wrap of some material that was a good deal less transparent than it first appeared.

A sense of revulsion suddenly overcame Zen at the thought of what was shortly to happen to the pampered, veiled flesh. Vanity, lust, jealousy, boredom, bitchiness, beauty, wit – what did any of it matter? As the doomed faces glanced flirtatiously at the camera, wondering how they were coming across, Zen felt like screaming at them, ‘Go away! Get out of that house now!’

The Favellonis had done precisely that, of course, which was one reason why everyone in Italy from the magistrate investigating the case to the know-all in your local bar agreed with Zen’s mother that Renato Favelloni was ‘the one who did it’. With the seedy fixer and his disturbingly bare-breasted wife out of the way, the two maturer couples had settled down to a quiet dinner in the villa’s dining room, with its rough tiled floor and huge trestle table which had originally graced the refectory of a Franciscan monastery. The meal had been eaten and coffee and liqueurs served when Oscar once again switched on the camera to record the after-dinner talk, dominated as always by his booming, emphatic voice, punctuated by blows of his hairy fist on the table top.

Apart from a distant metallic crash whose source and relevance were in dispute, the first sign of what was about to happen appeared in Signora Vianello’s nervous eyes. The architect’s wife was sitting next to their host, who was in the middle of a bawdy tale concerning a well-known TV presenter and a stripper turned member of parliament who had appeared on his talk show, and which they had reputedly got up to during the commercial break. Maria Pia Vianello had been listening with a vague, blurry smile, as though she wasn’t quite sure whether it was proper for her to appear to understand. Then her eyes were attracted by something on the other side of the room, something which made such considerations irrelevant. The vague smile abruptly vanished, leaving her features completely blank.

No one else had noticed anything. The only sound in the room was Oscar’s voice. Whatever Signora Vianello had seen was on the move, and her eyes tracked it across the room until Oscar saw her too. He broke off in mid-sentence, threw his napkin on the table and stood up.

‘What do you want?’

There was no answer, no sound whatever. Oscar’s wife and Dottor Vianello, who were sitting with their backs to the camera, looked round. Rita Burolo emitted a scream of terror. Vianello’s expression did not change, except to harden slightly.

‘What do you want?’ Burolo repeated, his brows knitted in puzzlement and annoyance. Abruptly he pushed his chair aside and strode towards the intruder, staring masterfully downwards as though to cow an unruly child. You could say what you liked, thought Zen, but the man had guts. Or was he just foolhardy, trying to show off to his guests, to preserve an image of bravado to the last? At all events, it was only in the final moment that any fear entered Oscar’s eyes, as he flung up his hands in an instinctive attempt to protect his face.

A brutal eruption of noise swamped the soundtrack. Literally disintegrated by the blast, Oscar’s hands disappeared, while bright red blotches appeared all over his face and neck like an instantaneous infection. He reeled away, holding up the stumps of his wrists. Somehow he managed to recover his balance and turn back, only to receive the second discharge, which carried away half his chest and flung him against the corner of the dining table, where he collapsed in a bloody heap at his wife’s feet.

Rita Burolo scrambled desperately away from the corpse as Vianello dived under the table, a pistol appearing in his hand. The ratchet sound of a shotgun being reloaded by pump action mingled with two sharp light cracks from the architect’s pistol. Then the soundtrack was bludgeoned twice more in quick succession. The first barrel scoured the space below the table, gouging splinters out of the wood, shattering plates and glasses, wounding Signora Vianello terribly in the legs and reducing her husband to a nightmare figure crawling about on the floor like a tormented animal. The second caught Rita

Burolo trying desperately to climb out of the window that lay open on to the terrace. As she went further away than the others, the wounds she sustained were more dispersed, covering her in a spray fine and evenly distributed as drizzle on a windscreen. With a despairing cry she fell through the window to the paving stones of the terrace, where she slowly bled to death.

Despite her lacerated legs, Maria Pia Vianello somehow struggled to her feet. For all her diminutive stature, she too gave the impression of looking down at the intruder.

‘Just a moment, please,’ she muttered over the dry, clinical sound of the gun being reloaded. ‘I’m afraid I’m not quite ready yet. I’m sorry.’

The shot took her at close range, flaying her so fearfully that loops of intestine protruded through the wall of her abdomen in places. Then the second barrel spun her round. She clutched the wall briefly, then collapsed into a dishevelled heap, leaving a complex pattern of dark streaks on the whitewashed plaster.

It had taken less than twenty seconds to turn the room into an abattoir. Fifteen seconds later, the caretaker would appear, having run from the two-room service flat where he and his wife had been watching a variety show on television. Until then, apart from wine dripping from a broken bottle at the edge of the table and a swishing caused by the convulsive twitches of the dying Vianello’s arm, there was no sound whatsoever. ‘If anyone ever manages to break into this place, I’ll believe in ghosts,’ the security analyst had assured Oscar Burolo. Nevertheless, someone or something *had* got in, butchered the inhabitants and then vanished without trace, all in less than a minute and in perfect silence. Even in broad daylight and the company of others it was difficult to ignore this almost supernatural dimension of the killings. In the eerie doldrums of the night, all alone, it seemed impossible to believe that there could be a rational explanation for them.

The silence of the running tape was broken by a distant scraping sound. Zen felt his skin crawl and the hairs on his head stir. He reached for the remote control unit and stilled the video. The noise continued, a low persistent scraping. ‘Like old Umberto’s boat,’ his mother had said.

Zen walked quietly across to the inner hallway of the apartment, opened the door to his mother’s bedroom and looked inside.

‘Can you hear it?’ a voice murmured in the darkness.

‘Yes, mamma.’

‘Oh good. I thought it might be me, imagining it. I’m not quite right in the head sometimes, you know.’

He gazed towards the invisible bed. It was the first time that she had ever made such an admission. They were both silent for some time, but the noise did not recur.

‘Where is it coming from?’ he asked.

‘The wardrobe.’

‘Which wardrobe?’

There were three of them in the room, filled with clothes that no one would ever wear again, carefully preserved from moths by liberal doses of naphthalene, which gave the room its basic funereal odour.

‘The big one,’ his mother replied.

The biggest wardrobe occupied the central third of the wall giving on to the internal courtyard of the building. Its positioning had occasioned Zen some anxiety at the time, since it obstructed access to the fire escape, but the wardrobe was too big to fit anywhere else.

Zen walked over to the bed and straightened the counterpane and sheets. Then he patted the hair which emerged from the covers, all the obsolete paraphernalia of muscles and arteries disturbing

revealed by the parchment-like skin.

‘It was just a rat, mamma.’

The best way of dispelling her formless, childish fears was by giving her a specific unpleasantness to focus on.

‘But it sounded like metal.’

‘The skirting’s lined with zinc,’ he improvised. ‘To stop them gnawing through. I’ll speak to Giuseppe in the morning and we’ll get the exterminators in. You try and get some sleep now.’

Back in the living room, he turned off the television and rewound the video tape, trying to dispel his vague sense of unease by thinking about the report which he had to write the next day. It was the lateness of the hour that made everything seem strange and threatening now, the time when, according to what his uncle had once told him – a house belongs not to the people who happen to live there now, but to all those who have preceded them over the centuries. Tomorrow morning everything would have snapped back into proportion and the uncanny aspects of the Burolo case would seem mere freakish curiosities. The only real question was whether to mention them at all. It wasn’t that he wanted or needed to conceal anything. For that matter he wouldn’t have known where to begin, since he had no idea who the report was destined for. The problem was that there were certain aspects of the Burolo case which were very difficult to mention without laying yourself open to the charge of being a credulous nincompoop. For example, the statement made by the seven-year-old daughter of Oscar Burolo’s lawyer, who had visited the villa in late July. As a special treat she had been allowed to stay up for dinner with the adults, and in the excitement of the moment had sneaked some of her father’s coffee, with the result that she couldn’t sleep. It was a luminous summer night, and eventually the child left her room and set out to explore the house. According to her statement, in one of the rooms in the older part of the villa she saw a figure moving about. ‘At first I was pleased,’ she said. ‘I thought it was a child, and I was lonely for someone to play with. But then I remembered that there were no children at the villa. I got scared and ran back to my room.’

Including things like that could easily make him the laughing-stock of the department, while if he left them out he laid himself open to the charge of suppressing evidence. Fortunately, it was no part of Zen’s brief to draw conclusions or offer opinions. All that was needed was a concise report describing the various lines of investigation which had been conducted by the police and the Carabinieri and outlining the evidence against the various suspects. A clerical chore, in short, to which he was bringing nothing but an ability to read between the lines of official documents, picking out the grain of what was not being said from the overwhelming chaff of what was. Watching the video had been the last stage in this procedure. There was nothing left to do except sit down and write the thing, and this he would do the next morning, while it was all fresh in his mind. By the afternoon, the Burolo affair would have no more significance for him than for any other member of the public.

Once again, footsteps sounded in the street below. A few minutes later the silence was abruptly shattered as a car started up and accelerated away with a squeal of tyres. By the time Zen reached the window it had already passed far beyond the area of street visible through the closed jalousies. The sound of its engine gradually faded away, echoing and reverberating ever more distantly through the intersecting channels of streets. The street light was in its waxing phase, and as the light gradually intensified Zen saw that the red car which had been parked further along the street was no longer there. He closed the shutters, wondering why its presence or absence should be of any concern to him. Finding no answer, he decided it was time to go to bed.

Nearly over now. Everything's going, the doubts, the fears, the cares, the confusion, even the pain. A draining away of its own accord. There's nothing I need do, nothing more to be done.

When I saw him standing there, the gun in his hand, it was like seeing myself in a mirror. He had taken my part, emerging from nowhere, implacable, confident, unsurprised. He sounded impatient, taunting me with a strange name, threatening me. 'There's no point in trying to hide,' he said. 'Let's get it over with.' As usual, I did what I was told.

He cried out, in rage and disbelief. Whatever he had been expecting, it wasn't that. Then something overwhelmed me, knocking me over, opening me up. I couldn't have resisted even if I'd wanted to. It wasn't like the first time, the man under the table wounding me with his pistol. All he gave me was pain. This was different. I knew at once that I was carrying a death.

It won't be long now. Already I feel light and insubstantial, as though I were dissolving. The darkness is on the move, billowing out to enshroud me, winding me in its endless folds. Everything is in flux. Solid rock gives way at my touch, the ground flows beneath me as though the river had returned to its courses, unexplored caverns burst open like fireworks as I advance. I am lost, I who know this place better than I know my own body!

Wednesday, 07.20–12.30

As Zen closed the front door behind him its hinges emitted their characteristic squeal, which was promptly echoed from the floor above. One of the tenants there kept a caged bird which was apparently under the illusion that Zen's front door was a fellow inmate and responded to its mournful cry with encouraging chirps.

Zen clattered down the stairs two at a time, ignoring the ancient lift in its wrought-iron cage. Thank God for work, he thought, which gave him an unquestionable excuse to escape from his dark, cluttered apartment and the elderly woman who had taken it over to such an extent that he felt like a child again, with no rights or independent existence. What would happen when he no longer had this ready-made way of filling his days? The government had recently been making noises about the need to reduce the size of the bloated public sector. Early retirement for senior staff was one obvious option. Fortunately it was unlikely that anything more than talk would come of it. A government consisting of a coalition of five parties, each with an axe to grind and clients to keep happy, found it almost impossible to pass legislation that was likely to prove mildly unpopular with anyone, never mind tackle the bureaucratic hydra which kept almost a third of the working population in guaranteed employment. Nevertheless, he would have to retire one day. The thought of it continued to haunt him like the prospect of some chronic illness. How would he get through the day? What would he do? His life had turned into a dead end.

Giuseppe, the janitor, was keeping a watchful eye on the comings and goings from the window of his mezzanine flat. Zen didn't stop to mention the scraping noises he had seemed to hear the night before. In broad daylight the whole thing seemed as unreal as a dream.

The streets were steeped in mild November sunlight and ringing with sounds. Gangs of noisy schoolchildren passed by, flaunting the personalities that would be buried alive for the next five hours. The metallic roars of shutters announced that the shops in the area were opening for business. A staccato hammering and the swishing of a paint sprayer issued from the open windows of the basement workshops where craftsmen performed mysterious operations on lengths of moulded wood. But the traffic dominated: the uniform hum of new cars, the idiosyncratic racket of the old, the throaty gurgle of diesels, the angry buzzing of scooters and three-wheeled vans, the buses' hollow roar, the chainsaw of an unsilenced trail bike, the squeal of brakes, the strident discord of horns in conflict.

At the corner of the block the newsagent was adding the final touches to the display of newspapers and magazines which were draped around his stall in a complex overlapping pattern. As usual, Zen stopped to buy a paper, but he did not even glance at the headlines. He felt good, serene and carefree, released from whatever black magic had gripped his soul the night before. There would be time enough later to read about disasters and scandals which had nothing whatever to do with him.

Across the street from the newsstand at the corner of the next block was the café which Zen frequented, largely because it had resisted the spreading blight of skimmed milk, which reduced the rich foam of a proper *cappuccino* to an insipid froth. The barman, who sported a luxuriant moustache to compensate for his glossily bald skull, greeted Zen with respectful warmth and turned away

unbidden to prepare his coffee.

‘Barbarians!’ exclaimed a thickset man in a tweed suit, looking up from the newspaper spread out before him on the bar. ‘Maniacs! What’s the sense of it all? What can they hope to achieve?’

Zen helped himself to a flaky brioche before broaching the chocolate-speckled foam on the *cappuccino* which Ernesto placed before him. It was only after they had been meeting in the bar each morning for several years that Zen had finally discovered, thanks to an inflamed molar requiring urgent attention, that the indignant newspaper-reader was the dentist whose name appeared on one of the two brass plates which Giuseppe burnished religiously every morning. He congratulated himself on having resisted the temptation to look at the paper. No doubt there had been some dramatic news revelation about the Burolo affair. Hardly a day went by without one. But while for the dentist such things were a form of entertainment, a pretext for a display of moral temperament, for Zen it was work, and he didn’t start work for another half hour. Idly, he wondered what the other men in the bar would say if they knew that he was carrying a video tape showing the Burolo killings in every last horrific detail.

At the thought, he put down his coffee cup and patted his coat pocket, reassuring himself that the video cassette was still there. That was one mistake he certainly couldn’t allow himself. There had already been one leak, when stills from the tape Burolo had made showing love scenes between his wife and the young lion-keeper had been published in a trashy scandal magazine. Such a magazine, even one of the less scrupulous private TV stations, would be willing to pay a small fortune for a video of the killings themselves. The missing tape would immediately be traced to Zen, who had signed it out from Archives. Everyone would assume that Zen himself had sold the tape, and the denials of the magazine or TV station – if they bothered to deny it – would be discounted as part of the deal. Vincenzo Fabri had been waiting for months for just such an opportunity to present itself. He wouldn’t let it go to waste!

Zen now knew that he had badly bungled his unexpected promotion from his previous menial duties to the ranks of the Ministry’s prestigious Criminalpol division. This had been due to a widespread but mistaken idea of the work which this group did. The press, intoxicated by the allure of élite units, portrayed it as a team of high-powered ‘supercops’ who sped about the peninsula cracking the cases which proved too difficult for the local officials. Zen, as he had ruefully reflected many times since, should have known better. He of all people should have realized that police work never took account of individual abilities. It was a question of carrying out certain procedures, that was all. Occasionally these procedures resulted in crimes being solved, but that was incidental to their real purpose, which was to maintain or adjust the balance of power within the organization itself. The result was a continual shuffling and fidgeting, a ceaseless and frenetic activity which it was easy to mistake for purposeful action.

Nevertheless, it was a mistake which Zen should never have made, and which had cost him dearly. When dispatched to Bari or Bergamo or wherever it might be, he had thrown himself wholeheartedly into the cases he had been assigned, asking probing questions, dishing out criticism, reorganizing the investigation and generally stirring things up as much as possible. This was the quickest way to get results, he fondly imagined, not having realized that the results desired by the Ministry flowed automatically from his having been sent. He didn’t have to lift a finger, in fact it was important that he didn’t. Far from being the ‘007 from the Ministry’ which the press liked to portray, Criminalpol personnel were comparable to inspectors of schools or airports. Their visits provided a chance for the Ministry to get a reasonably reliable picture of what was happening, a reminder to the local authorities that all power ultimately lay with Rome, and a signal to concerned pressure groups that something was

being done. No one wanted Zen to solve the case he had been sent to look into. Not the local police, who would then be asked why they had failed to achieve similar results unaided, nor the Ministry, whom any solution would merely pose a fresh set of problems. All he needed to do in order to keep everyone happy was just go through the motions.

Unfortunately, by the time he finally realized this, Zen had already alienated most of his new colleagues. Admittedly he had started with a serious handicap, owing to the manner of his appointment, which had been engineered by one of the suspects in the Miletto kidnapping case he had investigated in Perugia. Zen's subsequent promotion had naturally been regarded by many people as a form of pay-off, which was bound to cause resentment. But this might eventually have been forgiven if it hadn't been for the newcomer's tactless display of energy, together with the bad luck of his having made an enemy of one of the most articulate and popular men on the staff. Vincenzo Fabri had tried unsuccessfully on a number of occasions to use political influence to have himself promoted, and he couldn't forgive Zen for succeeding where he had failed. Fabri provided a focus for the feelings of antipathy which Zen had aroused, and which he kept alive with a succession of witty, malicious anecdotes that only came to Zen's ears when the damage had been done. And because Fabri's grudge was completely irrational, Zen knew that it was all the more likely to last.

He crumpled his paper napkin into a ball, tossed it into the rubbish bin and went to pay the cashier sitting at a desk in the angle between the two doors of the café. The newspaper the dentist had been reading lay open on the bar, and Zen couldn't ignore the thunderous headline: 'THE RED BRIGADES RETURN'. Scanning the article beneath, he learned that a judge had been gunned down at his home in Milan the night before.

So that was what the dentist's rhetorical questions had referred to. What indeed was the sense of all this? There had been a time when such mindless acts of terrorism, however shocking, had at least seemed epic gestures of undeniable significance. But that time had long passed, and re-runs were now only as morally disgusting as the originals, but also dated and second-hand.

As he walked to the bus stop, Zen read in his own paper about the shooting. The murdered judge, one Bertolini, had been gunned down when returning home from work. His chauffeur, who had also been killed, had fired at the attackers and was thought to have wounded one of them. Bertolini was not a particularly important figure, nor did he appear to have had any connection with the trials of Red Brigades' activists. The impression was that he had been chosen because he represented a soft target, itself a humiliating comment on the decline in the power of the terrorists from the days when they had seemed able to strike at will.

Zen's eyes drifted off to the smaller headlines further down the page. 'BURNED ALIVE FOR ADULTERY', read one. The story described how a husband in Genova had caught his wife with another man, poured petrol over them both and set them alight. He abruptly folded the paper up and tucked it under his arm. Not that he had anything to worry about on that score, of course. He should be so lucky.

As a bus approached the stop, the various figures who had been loitering in the vicinity marched out into the street to try their chances at the lottery of guessing where the rear doors would be when the bus stopped. Zen did reasonably well this morning, with the result that he was ruthlessly jostled from every side as the less fortunate tried to improve on their luck. Someone at his back used his elbow so enterprisingly that Zen turned round to protest, almost losing his place as a result. But in the end justice prevailed, and Zen managed to squeeze aboard just as the doors closed.

The events reported in the newspaper had already had their effect at the Viminale. The approaches leading up to the Ministry building were guarded by armoured personnel carriers with machine-gun turrets on the roof. The barriers were lowered and all vehicles were being carefully searched.

Pedestrian access, up a flight of steps from the piazza, was through a screen of heavy metal railing whose gate was normally left open, but today each person was stopped in the cage and had to present his or her identification, watched carefully by two guards wearing bulletproof vests and carrying submachine guns.

Having penetrated these security checks, Zen walked up to the third floor, where Criminals occupied a suite of rooms at the front of the building. The contrast with the windowless cell to which Zen had previously been confined could hardly have been more striking. Tasteful renovations supplemented by a scattering of potted plants and antique engravings, had created a pleasant working ambience without the oppressive scale traditionally associated with government premises.

‘Quite like the old days!’ was Giorgio De Angelis’s comment as Zen passed by. ‘The lads upstairs are loving it, of course. A few more like this and they’ll be able to claw back all the special powers they’ve been stripped of since things quietened down.’

De Angelis was a big, burly man with a hairline which had receded dramatically to reveal a large shiny forehead of the type popularly associated with noble and unworldly intellects. What spoiled this impression was his bulbous nose, with nostrils of almost negroid proportions from which hairs sprouted like plants that have found themselves a niche in crumbling masonry. He was from the town of Crotone, east of the Sila mountains in central Calabria. One of the odd facts still lodged in Zen’s brain from school was that Crotone had been the home of Pythagoras. This perhaps explained why De Angelis reminded him of a cross between a Greek philosopher and a Barbary pirate, thus neatly summing up Zen’s uncertainty about his character and motives.

‘Frankly, I shouldn’t be a bit surprised if they set up the whole thing,’ the Calabrian went on breezily. ‘Apparently the Red Brigades have denied responsibility. Anyway, this Bertolini had nothing to do with terrorism. Why pick on him?’

Zen took off his overcoat and went to hang it up. He would have liked to be able to like De Angelis, the only one of his new colleagues who had made any effort to be friendly. But this very fact, coupled with the politically provocative comments which De Angelis was given to making, aroused suspicion in Zen’s mind that the Calabrian had been deliberately assigned to sound him out and to trap him into damaging confidences. Even given the mutual hostility between the criminal investigation personnel and their political colleagues ‘upstairs’, De Angelis’s last remark had been totally out of line.

‘Have you seen the papers?’ De Angelis demanded. ‘“The terrorists return”. “Fear stalks the corridors of power”. Load of crap if you ask me. The fucking Red Brigades don’t go round spraying people with shotgun pellets. Nothing but the best hardware for our yuppie terrorists. M42s, Armalite Kalashnikovs, state-of-the-art stuff. Shotguns are either old-style crime or DIY.’

He looked at Zen, who was patting his overcoat with a frown.

‘You lost something?’

Zen looked round distractedly.

‘What? Yes, I suppose so. But in that case it can hardly have been the Politicals either.’

‘How do you mean?’

Zen’s hands searched each of the pockets of the overcoat at some length, returning empty.

‘Well, they’d have used the right gun, presumably.’

De Angelis looked puzzled. Then he understood, and whistled meaningfully.

‘Oh, you mean ... Listen Aurelio, I’d keep my voice down if you’re going to say things like that.’

Too late, Zen realized that he had walked into a trap.

‘I didn’t mean that they’d killed him,’ De Angelis explained, ‘only that they’d orchestrated the

media response to his death. I mean, you surely don't believe ...'

'No, of course not.'

He turned away with a sickly smile. He had just given himself away in the worst possible fashion voicing what everyone no doubt suspected but no Ministry employee who wanted to succeed could afford to say out loud. But that didn't matter, not now. All that mattered was that the video cassette of the Burolo killings was missing from his pocket.

Zen walked through the gap in the hessian-clad screens which divided off the space allotted to each official, slumped down behind his desk and lit a cigarette. He recalled with horrible clarity what had happened as he boarded the bus. It was a classic pickpocket's technique, using heavy blows in a 'safe' area like the back and shoulders to cover the light disturbance as a wallet or pocket-book was removed. The thief must have spotted the bulge in Zen's coat pocket and thought it looked promising.

Looking on the bright side, there was a good chance – well, a chance, anyway – that when the thief saw that he'd made a mistake he would simply throw the tape away. Even if he was curious enough to watch it, the first scenes were not particularly interesting. Unless you happened to recognize Burolo and the others, it looked much like any other home video, a souvenir of someone's summer holiday. Everything depended on whether the thief realized that his 'mistake' had netted him something worth more than all the wallets he could steal in a lifetime. He might, or he might not. The only sure thing was that Zen could do absolutely nothing to influence the outcome one way or the other.

He had expected writing the report to be a chore, but after what had just happened it was a positive relief to pull the typewriter over, insert a sheet of paper and immerse himself in work. The first section, summarizing the scene-of-crime findings, went very fast. Owing to the evidence of the video recording and the caretaker's prompt arrival, there was no dispute about the method or timing of the killings. The murder weapon had not been recovered, but was assumed to have been the Remington shotgun that was missing from the collection Oscar kept in a rack next door to the dining room. The spent cartridges found at the scene were of the same make, type and batch as those stored in the drawers beneath this rack. Unidentified fingerprints had been found on the rack and elsewhere in the house. The nature of the victims' wounds indicated that the shots had been angled upwards, suggesting that the weapon had apparently been fired from the hip. At that range it was unnecessary to take precise aim, as the video all too vividly demonstrated.

The two pistol bullets fired by Vianello had been recovered, and one of them revealed traces of blood of a group matching stains found at a point consistent with the assassin's estimated position. A series of stains of the same blood group – which was also that of Oscar Burolo, Maria Pia Vianello and Renato Favelloni – were found leading to the vault beneath the house where Oscar's collection of video tapes and computer discs was housed. When the villa was searched, this room was found to be in a state of complete disorder: the new section of shelving Oscar had recently installed had been thrown over, and video cassettes and floppy discs lay scattered everywhere. The fingerprints found on the gun-rack were also present in profusion here.

Zen stopped typing to stub out his cigarette. From behind the hessian screen he could hear many voices raised in dispute about the merits and demerits of the new Fiat hatchback. He recognized the voices of Vincenzo Fabri and another official, Bernardo Travaglini. Then a flicker of movement nearby caught his eye and he looked round to find Tania Biacis standing by his desk.

'Sorry?' he muttered.

'I didn't say anything.'

'Oh.'

He gazed at her helplessly, paralysed by his desire to reach out and touch her. These exchanges, fu

of *non sequiturs* and dead ends, were typical of their conversation. Presumably Tania just assumed that Zen was a bit scatterbrained and thought no more about it. He hoped so, anyway.

‘This is for you.’

She handed him an envelope from the batch of internal mail she was delivering.

‘So what was it last night?’ Zen asked. ‘The opera, the new Fellini?’

‘The Opera’s on strike,’ she said after a momentary hesitation. ‘As for Federico, we gave up on him after that last one. Granted the man used to be a genius, but enough’s enough. No, we went out to eat at this little place out in the country near Tivoli. Have you been there? It’s all the rage at the moment. Enrico Montesano was there, with the most peculiar woman I’ve ever seen in my life, if she was a woman. But you’d better hurry, if you want to go. The food’s going downhill already. In another week it’ll be ruined.’

Zen sat looking at her, hardly heeding what she said. Tall, large-boned and small-breasted, with brows that arched high above her deep brown eyes, prominent cheekbones, a strong neck and a light shadow down on her protruding upper lip, which was usually curved as if in suppressed amusement, Tania Biacis resembled a Byzantine Madonna come down from her mosaic in some chilly apse, a Madonna not of sorrow but of joy, of secret glee, who knew that the universe was actually the most tremendous joke and could hardly believe that everyone else was taking it seriously. Like himself, Tania was a northerner, from a village in the Friuli region east of Udine. This had created an immediate bond between them, and as the days went by Zen had learned of her interest in films, music, sailing, skiing, cookery, travel and foreign languages. He also discovered that she was fourteen years younger than him, and married.

‘I don’t care what your dealer told you,’ Vincenzo Fabri proclaimed loudly. ‘Until a gearbox has done 100,000 kilometres – under on-road conditions, not on some test track in Turin – not even Agnelli himself knows how it’s going to hold up.’

‘What do I care?’ retorted Travaglini. ‘With the discount I’m getting I can drive it until the warranty runs out and still break even on the trade-in. That’s a year’s free motoring.’

‘Would you do me a favour?’ Tania whispered hurriedly.

‘Of course.’

‘You don’t know what it is yet.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

Zen saw nothing wild or extravagant in this claim, which represented the simple truth. But as she turned away with a disconcerted look he realized that it had sounded all wrong, either too gushing or too casual.

‘Forget it,’ she told him, disappearing through a gap in the screens like an actor leaving the stage.

Zen sat there taking in her absence with a sharp pain he’d forgotten about, the kind that comes with love you don’t ask for or even necessarily want, but which finds you out. It was normal to suffer like this in one’s youth, of course, but what had he done to deserve such a fate at his age?

He tore open the memorandum she had brought him.

From: Dogliotti, Assistant Registrar, Archives.

To: Zeno, Vice-Questore, Polizia Criminale.

Subject: 46429 BUR 433/K/95 (Video cassette, one). You are requested to return the above item at your earliest convenience since it is.

In the blank space, someone had scrawled an illegible phrase.

Zen stuffed the memorandum into his pocket with a weary sigh. He had been so concerned about the large-scale repercussions if the tape fell into the wrong hands that he had completely forgotten the immediate problems involved. The Ministry's copy of the Burolo video was of course just that, a copy, the original being retained by the magistrates in Nuoro. Technically speaking its loss was more than an inconvenience, but that didn't mean that Zen could just drop down to Archives and tell them what had happened. In theory, official files could only be taken out of the Ministry with a written exeat permit signed by the relevant departmental head. In practice no one took the slightest notice of this, but the moment anything went wrong the letter of the law would be strictly applied.

Once again, Zen turned to the task in hand as an escape from these problems. The next section of the report was considerably less straightforward than the one he had just written. While the facts of the Burolo case were simple enough, the interpretations which could be placed on them were political dynamite. Zen's completed report would be stored in the Ministry's central database, accessible by anyone with the appropriate terminal and codeword, his views and conclusions electronically enshrined for ever. At least he didn't have to deal with the dreaded glowing screens himself! The use of computers was spreading inexorably through the various law enforcement agencies, although the dream of a unified electronic data pool had faded with the discovery that the systems chosen by the Carabinieri and the police were incompatible, both with each other and with the quite different systems used by the judiciary. It was a sign of their élite status that those Criminalpol officials who wished to do so had been allowed to retain their battered manual Olivettis with the curvy fifties' styling that was now fashionable once more.

Zen lit another of the coarse-flavoured domestic cigarettes, looked up at the rectangular tiles of the suspended ceiling for inspiration, then began to pound the keys again.

'Because of the exceptional difficulty of unauthorized access to the villa, the number of suspects was extremely limited. Nevertheless, five possibilities have at various times been considered worthy of investigation. The first, chronologically, concerns Alfonso and Giuseppina Bini. Bini acted as caretaker and general handyman at the villa, while his wife cooked and cleaned. Both had worked for Burolo for over ten years. At the time of the murders, the couple claim to have been watching television in their quarters in the north wing of the property. This is separated from the dining room by the width of the whole building, including the massive exterior walls of the original farm house. As Giuseppina Bini is slightly deaf, the volume of the television was turned quite high. Subsequent tests confirmed the couple's story that the gunshots were at first almost inaudible. It was only when they were repeated that Alfonso went to investigate.

'The evidence against the Binis never amounted to more than the fact of their presence at the villa at the relevant time, but since the only other people present were all dead, and it was apparently impossible for any intruder to have entered the property, it is understandable that the couple came under suspicion. However, the case against them, which already lacked any viable motive, was further weakened by the discovery of the video tape recording Alfonso Bini's evidently genuine shock on discovering the bodies, and by the fact that a meticulous search failed to uncover any trace of the murder weapon at the villa, where the couple had remained throughout.'

Zen paused to give his numbed fingers a chance to recover. Next on his list was the vendetta theory which involved filling in the background about the attempted kidnapping of Oscar Burolo. This had surprised no one, except for the fact that the intended victim had got away with nothing but a scratch on his shoulder. God damn it, people had murmured in tones of exasperated admiration, how does he do it? Kidnapping was notoriously a way of life in Sardinia, and what had Burolo done but choose a property on the very edge of the Barbagia massif itself, the heartland of the kidnapping gangs and the

location of the underground lairs where they hid their victims? He was asking for it!

~~And he duly got it. Fortunately for Oscar, the Lincoln Continental he had been driving at the time~~ was a rather special model, built for the African president who figured in the fictitious 'slave' story. Oscar did a lot of work in Africa, which he liked to describe as 'a land of opportunity', rolling his eyes comically to suggest what kind of opportunities he had in mind. The president in question was unfortunately toppled from power just after taking delivery of the vehicle and just before Oscar could collect on the contract the president had signed for the construction of a new airport in the country's second-largest city, a job which had promised to be even more lucrative than most of those which Oscar was involved in.

Where other companies might reckon on a profit margin of 20 or 30 per cent, regarding anything above that as an extraordinary windfall, the projects which Burolo Construction undertook seemed able to generate profits that were often in excess of the total original budget. Oscar had earned the sobriquet 'King Midas' for his ability to turn the hardest rock, the most arid soil and the foulest marshland into pure gold. In the case of the African airport, his bill had already soared to a sum amounting to almost 4 per cent of the country's gross national product, but on this occasion Oscar was constrained to realism. Even if the new regime had been disposed to honour the commitments of the former president, it would have had considerable difficulty in doing so, since the latter had prudently diverted another considerable slice of the country's GNP to the Swiss bank account that was now financing his premature retirement. All this was very regrettable, but Oscar was a realist. He knew that while governments come and go, business goes on for ever. So rather than stymie his chances of profitable intervention in the country's future by pointless litigation, he reluctantly agreed to accept a settlement which barely covered his expenses. To sweeten the pill, he asked for and was given the Lincoln Continental as well.

At the time Oscar had seen the car as just another of the fancy gadgets with which he loved to surround himself, but it undoubtedly saved his life when the kidnappers tried to take him. He was driving back from the local village church when it happened. Much to most people's surprise, Oscar never missed Sunday Mass. Experience had taught him the importance of keeping on the right side of those in power, and compared with the kind of kickbacks, favours and general dancing of attendance which some of his patrons expected, God seemed positively modest in His demands. It was true that you could never be absolutely certain that He was there, and if so whether He was prepared to come up with the goods, but much the same could be said about most of the people in Rome too. As long as a priest that was needed to stay in with Him was taking communion every Sunday, Oscar thought it was well worth the effort. Unfortunately the local village church lacked a suitable landing place for the Augustus, so he had to drive.

As he rounded one of the many sharp bends that Sunday, Oscar found the road blocked by what appeared to be a minor accident. A car was lying on its side in the ditch, while the lorry which had apparently forced it off the road was slewed around broadside on to the approaching limousine. Three men were kneeling beside a fourth who was lying face-down in the road.

As Oscar got out to help, the men turned towards him.

'Instantly, I *knew!*' he told countless listeners later. 'Don't ask me how. I just knew!'

He leapt back into the car as the 'accident victim' rolled to one side, revealing the rifles and shotguns on which he'd been lying. Several shots were fired, one of which wounded Oscar slightly on the shoulder. He didn't even notice. He threw the Lincoln into reverse and accelerated back up the road.

The kidnappers gave chase on foot, firing as they ran. But the African president, even more of

realist than Burolo himself, had specified armour-plating and bullet-proof windows, and the kidnappers' shots rattled harmlessly away. When he reached the corner, Oscar reversed on to the shoulder to turn the car round. As he did so, the youngest of the four men sprinted forward, leaped on to the bonnet, pressed the muzzle of his rifle against the windscreen and fired. In the event, the shot barely chipped the toughened glass, but for a second Oscar had stared death in the face. His reaction was to slam on the brakes, sending the man reeling into the road, and then accelerate right over him.

By the time the police arrived at the scene there was nothing to see except a few tyre marks and a little blood mixed in with the loose gravel in the centre of the road. A few days later the funeral of the young shepherd named Antonio Melega took place in a mountain village some forty kilometres to the north-west. According to his grim-faced, taciturn relatives, he had been struck by a hit-and-run driver while walking home from his pastures.

The abortive kidnap made Oscar Burolo an instant hero among the island's villa-owning fraternity, and eminently kidnappable every one. One enterprising shopkeeper did a brisk trade in T-shirts reading 'Italians 1, Sardinians 0' until the local mayor protested. But although Burolo was quite happy to be lionized, in private he was a frightened man, haunted by the memory of that dull bump beneath the car and the man's muffled cry as the tons of armour-plating crushed the life out of him. He knew that by killing one of the kidnappers he had opened an account that would only be closed with his own death. Burolo had been born in the north, but his father had been from a little village in the province of Matera, and he had told his son about blood feuds and the terrible obligation of vendetta which could be placed on a man against his will, destroying him and everyone close to him because of something he had nothing to do with and of which he perhaps even disapproved. Young Oscar had been deeply impressed by these stories. To his childish ear they had the ring of absolute truth, matching as they did the violent and arbitrary rituals of the world he shared with other boys his age. Just as he had known the kidnappers the moment their eyes met, so now he knew they would not rest until they had avenged the death of their colleague.

Faced with this knowledge, a lesser man might have called it quits, sold off the villa – if he could find a purchaser! – and taken his holidays elsewhere in future. But Oscar's realism had its limits, and it ended where his vanity began. Had it been a business deal, with no one but himself and the other party any the wiser, he might have cut and run. But he had invested all his self-esteem in the villa, to say nothing of several billion lira, and it would take more than some bunch of small-time sheep rustlers, as he jeeringly referred to them, to see him off.

Nevertheless, someone *had* seen him off, and the friends and relatives of the late Antonio Melega naturally came under suspicion. Apart from the sheer ferocity of the killings, some of the physical evidence seemed to support this hypothesis. Sardinians, particularly those from the poorer mountain areas, are the shortest of all Mediterranean peoples. The fingerprints found on the ejected shotgun cartridges were exceptionally small – 'like a child's', the Carabinieri's expert had remarked, a unfortunate phrase which had provoked much mirth in the rival force. But an adult gunman of small stature was another matter, and would also explain the low angle of fire which had previously been attributed to the gun being held at hip level. Moreover, sheep rustlers would necessarily be skilled in moving and acting soundlessly, hence the eerie silence which had so impressed everyone who had seen the video tape.

'Unfortunately,' Zen typed, 'there was an insurmountable problem about this attractive hypothesis, namely the question of access. The defences of the Villa Burolo had been specifically designed to prevent an incursion of precisely this kind. It is true that the control room itself was not manned at the time of the murders, but the system was designed to set off alarms all over the villa in the event of an

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