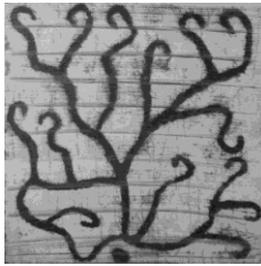


THE FAILED ASSASSIN

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NoPapyrus Press

First published in 2013 by
NoPapyrus Press
Spring Cottage, Church Street, Stradbroke, IP21 5HT

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ISBN 978-1-291-61403-9

For all the nameless

Chapter 1

There is a rigour in all things, a duty to recount all our seconds of life, and to make the past biddable, even if it is imperfect, even when it brings the future closer, and with it fears of pain and madness.

The room is silent except for a tiny echo, a smattering of the past, a conceit of time. The house catches its breath after a sleepless night chased me across the wooden floors with voices of blind despair and terror, such are memories. There are thousands of whispers in my head, still; clambering from the crimson of dawn, here near the top of the mountain. They reach out of this locked room, out through the open window above the abyss, and down into the cold valley, where night remains, thick with shade, while up here, the first rays of day burn into my hands on the heavy oak desk.

There has to be something of you somewhere, doesn't there? Only one of those voices is yours, one single note, a hint of melody, a manacle of recollection, to tie me down, to calm me, to remind me of you. I can't hear it, though, in this prison, this hell, this contrary sanctuary.

Down there, the lights are still on, shimmering, wavering, flickering. The orange street lamps, the yellow-lit rooms of the early risers, the noiseless rushing cars. They are all too far away for me to touch. A gentle breeze stirs, glides in through the window, brushes across my face and away again. I close my eyes and imagine it's you.

My hands ache. This search for the past exhausts me. I look for you everywhere – in the rivers of illusion, in the oceans of my imagination, and in the vacuum of

loss. Nothing. Here, this morning, as every morning, I fumble to find the beginning.

Chapter 2

The rush of trains. The noise and tumult of the station. Milan. It was glorious. Mid-summer and the threat of thunder. Huge beasts driven by electricity. Low platforms, and the high climb into heaving, sweating carriages. A different world to the England I'd left behind, that claustrophobic, damp place, where no-one would speak another language, where anywhere across the water was where foreigners lived, where Hitler was still alive, and where a war had been won half a century ago. I was tired of it, the land of my birth, was intent on finding something different, a new stage where I was an unknown, where nothing was the same as at home.

And so I climbed into the train, hand over foot, clinging on to the hot rail, feet clanking on the metal steps, pushed my way to where I knew my reserved place should be, threw my rucksack up into the overhead netting, and collapsed on to my seat by the compartment door. I didn't look round, closed my eyes instead, and listened to the chaos of language around me, the shouting and babbling of voices I could barely understand, mothers and sons and daughters, farewells and messages and good riddances rippling along the train, and in and out of the windows into the heat.

The train pulled away from the station, and the sun exploded into my eyes. The Italian voices hadn't stopped, excitable, excited, voluptuous, around us, you and I; for fate, in the shape of some small boy in the ticket office, had put us into the same compartment, not that we knew each other, not then. I turned my face towards the rushing window, gazed past the women in the seats between us, and noticed you, your face out into the wind,

your cheeks sharp edges in the yellow light, Italian eyes on us. How much did you understand of the clamouring around us? I don't know. You ignored it, shook your head, cropped black hair above green eyes, skin pale as death. And as the pictures outside picked up speed, I kept looking at you, measured you up, as the voracious always deny they do.

How had I missed you getting on the train? I suppose you were just another stunning woman in a country full of attractive people with poise and grace and style. After a week in Europe already, I probably took beauty for granted. And yet, as I tried you with my stare, and you didn't avoid the breath of my eyes, as I explored your face and your body, I began to take note, started to feel you, a spell, an unknown surge of power, sense and sensuality. Even then, that soon, you were too strong, too strong for me to resist, too strong for me to challenge.

Your eyes. Embers of some unknown fire burning into my skin. I saw the fresh sex around them, the tiredness, the elation, the lost innocence, sensed what you must have held in your hand, your mouth, your body, in the hours before you clambered aboard the train. I could almost smell it, touch it, and craved it. I wondered who you were, what you were. But I couldn't speak, not across those other four people in the same space as us, not across the chattering, those rapid words I could only just decipher.

And then you got up, the train at full speed, rattling along the uneven rails; you got up, pushed your way past those bony knees, those dark dresses and black scarves, away from the window, towards the door into the corridor, not smiling, no emotion at all, and, as you passed me, stretched out your skinny white arm and hand, and grabbed at me and dragged me out of the glass cage. I didn't resist. Maybe I should have.

‘Come,’ you said. That’s all, and my hand still clinging to yours, and my hand so sweaty and hot, and yours cooler than shade. ‘Come,’ you said again. ‘I need you.’

You pushed a path for us through the crowds standing in the passageway, pulled me closer to you, to your sweat-drenched back, your shirt stuck to you as if you’d just emerged from the water. You didn’t even turn to look at me, and your hand was too tight around mine for me to escape.

The first toilet we came to was locked, so you raced through to the next carriage, tried the door there with your sharp shoulder and your elbow. It opened. We fell into the cubicle together, and you slammed the door behind us, locked it. The frosted glass took the edge off the sun, transformed Italy into an icy desert.

‘Who *are* you?’ I said, catching my breath.

‘Nobody.’ You leaned against the door, your long, thin, black skirt clinging to your legs, your feet in leather sandals, your arms behind you.

‘Where are you from?’ I couldn’t work out your accentless English.

‘Nowhere.’

‘These toilets are clean.’

‘You deflect.’

‘What do you expect?’

‘Don’t you like women?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘Then why ask me so many questions?’

‘What?’

‘Come to me,’ you said, moved across to the basin.

‘This is crazy.’

‘I know you want to. I saw you looking.’

‘Looking isn’t the same as touching.’

You shrugged. 'How often do you say other people's words and stop yourself from having what you want?' You crossed and uncrossed your legs, started pulling your skirt up to your waist.

I looked away, although I didn't want to. I felt your heat across the space between us.

'Look at me,' you whispered. 'Watch.'

And I did.

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'Aah.' A sigh from you, and a turning away, a pushing me away, pushing me out, making me a stranger again.

'What if ... ?' I said, falling onto the desiccated sheets.

'I can't have children,' you said, motionless again.

'How do you ...'

'I know. That's all.' Your lips a straight, thin line in your gaunt face. 'That's all.' And then you turned away.

Chapter 3

The lack of movement woke me. Gone, all gone. Sweltering in the empty bed, and you not there. I sat up with a start, my clothes, dry and stale by now, my dick still out of my trousers, made myself decent, pulled the curtain back a little. The sun still blasted down, this time onto a semi-industrial landscape, littered with railway tracks and slender, glittering metal posts.

'You're awake then,' you said as you pulled the compartment door open and clicked it shut.

'I thought you'd gone.'

'Did you check your wallet and passport were still there?' You were mocking me.

I rubbed my face with my hands, still not really awake.

'What do you take me for?' you said. 'Some thieving whore?' You pointed at something behind me. 'If you'd have looked, you'd have seen my bags were still here. I just went to wash my face.'

'Sorry.'

You shrugged. 'It doesn't matter. I'm used to it.'

I stared, ignored your insinuation, or at least what my brain insinuated. 'Why have we stopped?'

'Italian trains. We're waiting to get into the station.'

'Oh.'

'Why the sudden desperation to get away?' you said.

'I'm not desperate.'

'Oh, but you are.' You moved closer to me, leaned towards me, whispered in my ear. 'You don't

understand why you did what you did. You wish you hadn't done it, don't you? You hate being out of control.'

I couldn't move, paralysed by your hot breath.

'Don't worry,' you said. 'Nothing bad's going to happen. You can walk away.' And then you bit my earlobe.

The train jerked into motion. Even you weren't expecting it, and we fell back onto our makeshift bed, your teeth still on me, in me, and then your hands scrabbling to reach under my shirt, pulling at me, scratching me, searching for the raw flesh under my skin, tearing ragged tracks into it, making my nipples hard again, pulling control away from me again.

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'Stop!' You were screaming, your face red and flushed, your hands rigid on your knees, your knees tight together, and your eyes raw and watering. You looked at me. You didn't smile. The city behind you was blurred and full of unknown colours. You caught your breath. 'You know I'm here to kill someone, don't you?' was all you said.

Chapter 4

The cab stopped just as those words came out of your mouth. There was no time to say anything to you, not now, as you bent forward to give the driver some money, your gorgeous arse in my face, grabbed your bag and dragged it out of the car, and I jumped out onto the dusty pavement beside you. You rushed through a few yards of sunshine into the shadow of the buildings, pushed open the door, and slipped from the heat of the afternoon into the cool, air-conditioned foyer.

‘Are you a vampire?’ I said, and the playfulness of my question made me cringe before it was out in the air.

‘Of course I am,’ you said, shaking your head.

We were at Reception now. You handed over a wad of cash but not your passport. No papers to sign. They handed you a key, only one.

‘I thought you said two rooms,’ I said.

‘Change of plan after your successful missions,’ you said.

We ran up the stairs, side by side, until you stopped, two floors up, in a gloomy corridor, outside a dingy door. The sound echoed, of you putting the key in the lock. You looked around before you pushed the door open, threw your bag in, across the floor, before you went in after it. You pushed the door closed quietly once we were in the room.

‘It’s clean,’ I said. ‘That’s good.’

‘It always is.’

‘You’ve been here before?’

‘Now and then.’

‘Always to kill people?’ I said, held my breath, reached for the nearest piece of furniture to hold on to.

‘Ignore what I said before,’ you said. ‘It was a moment of weakness. You were too strong. You made me cry instead of just making me come.’

‘I’m sorry I talked about children. It all just came out.’

You sat down on the bed, looked tired all of a sudden, too tired, not the woman who’d asked me to fuck her, a stranger on a train, a stranger with no past, no name, just a different face. ‘It doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t have asked you, shouldn’t have let the guard down.’

‘Is it true, then? About you killing someone?’

‘Of course not,’ you said, and lay back on the bed, your muscles flexing under the black material. ‘It was just my little death, that’s all. Nothing more.’

‘Do you expect me to believe that?’

‘Of course,’ you said. ‘You’d believe anything I say, wouldn’t you? Now you’re so in love with me.’

‘Love? Is that what you call it?’

‘Every word is a lie, and every lie is a word,’ you said. ‘Just shut up, and come and lie next to me while I think of another challenge for you. You try so hard to win them all, don’t you?’

Why I stayed then, I don’t know, after being patronised by you. Perhaps it was because I could think of nothing but your white body under those thin clothes, maybe it was because I wanted to touch you again, feel every sinew under my fingers, because I wanted to taste your breath and tongue in my mouth again, because I had never felt so, so in tune with another body before, because you made me feel insignificant, without worry or thought or striving, because, with you, I could just let it happen, just be, just let your hunger take me over, without me having to think of anything new, without me

having to think of anything at all, just a primeval longing, an age-old desire I'd never felt before. So I lay down beside you, put my hand on your belly and fell asleep.

It was still light when you woke me, and the heat in the room was overwhelming, even with the windows open, even though the sun wasn't shining in, even with the room facing north.

'Come on,' you said, and I expected you to challenge me with some new way of fulfilling you, sat up and started pulling my shirt off over my head.

'Steady,' you said, and pushed me back down. 'You don't do that unless I tell you to. Why do you men always take it for granted that all we want is sex?'

'That's all you've wanted so far.'

'On my terms,' you said. 'Not on yours. And right now that's not what I want.'

'What do you want?' I looked up at you kneeling on the bed, your clothes even darker with the sweat that must have been running down you for the last hour or so.

'I'm hungry – for food.'

'Did you sleep?'

'No. I just lay there and watched you.'

'You didn't make me take my hand off you.'

'A little peace now and again is ok,' you said. Your smile looked sad, although I'm sure you didn't intend it to be.

'Do you know anywhere to eat?'

'Yes. Just a run-of-the-mill pizza place. I don't have very high standards.'

'Is that why you chose me?'

'You ask too many questions.'

'At least answer some of them,' I said.

'If it's that important to you, I'll answer that one over a glass of wine and some food. Come on.'

You opened the door, looked out carefully, either way, before emerging into the corridor. For some dreadful moment I'd thought of trying to hold your hand, but gave up that idea when I noticed how tense your body was, how much like one single, tight muscle it was. It was as if you were expecting someone to intercept us at any moment, like you had something to hide. Perhaps you were married, and I was just a silly little game you played every year to get away from your husband and assert your independence. I thought better of asking you, though. Even then, you scared me more than a little.

We were in a backwater of Rome, obviously. The narrow roads allowed no sun to hit the tarmac. You headed off, certain in your knowledge of where to go, and I struggled, as before, to match your pace without becoming short of breath. The shade was warm, no breeze to take the edge off the heat of the early evening.

'You've never been here before, have you?' you said, slowing down a little.

I shook my head.

'You've been missing out. Have you been anywhere in Europe?'

'Just Germany. You're asking too many questions now.'

You shrugged. 'Just passing the time until we get there.'

'Why won't you tell me your name?'

'That's a question I'm never going to answer. And you know that.'

I did know it, but I wouldn't stop asking you; I'd never stop asking you, even if it was me you'd end up killing. I needed to understand who I was with. When I looked at you I suppose I understood why – what unattached man would turn down being asked for a shag by a woman as beautiful, as fit, as lithe as you? What

number lover was I? Maybe there really was a husband. I looked again at your rapidly-moving hands and saw no rings, no jewellery of any kind.

We carried on in silence. How many times I thought about turning back, turning away on that walk, I don't know. I think the practicalities of extricating myself from the situation at this point were too complicated, too intimidating, too scary. You had the only key to the room, you were the one familiar with the hotel and the city, and I was just a little cog on whatever wheel was turning at that precise moment. It would have seemed cowardly and weasly to tell you I'd had enough, that I wanted out, that maybe it was fine for us to have fucked four or five times in a day, but that now, thank you very much, I wanted to find my monastery and retire to it for the rest of the two months I had away from England. No, that was all too complicated to contemplate. And, after all, this might be my only summer of freedom. God knows what would be waiting for me when I got home – more bad news about jobs, or some desk-bound, boring job where all the men and women looked the same and acted the same, and talked only of mundanities and football and the misdirected madneses of youth. You ignored me.

When we got there, I saw what you'd meant. This wasn't a place that would attract any tourists, never mind any wealthy Romans. It was in yet another back street, hidden away from the bustle of Rome proper, somewhere locals, loyal locals, would come and eat at lunch and at dinner, where they'd linger to chat to their friends, where the owner would come out of the kitchen, sleeves rolled up, sweat dripping from his brow and no white cap to catch it, and sit down at the same table as his customers and share a glass or three of grappa before going back to his overheated kitchen and cooking more

food in a way that would frighten the Health & Safety pedants back home.

You pushed open the door. ‘Come on,’ you said. ‘Let’s sit down and gorge ourselves.’

‘You and gorge yourself?’ I said. ‘You look like you don’t eat anything.’

‘It’s all about posture. Nothing more than that.’

‘I’ve seen you naked,’ I said. ‘I know.’

‘Posture’s easy when you’re lying on your back.’

And you laughed a smutty laugh, sitting opposite me, out of range, in control, totally in control, and at ease, and so desirable, because you’d made yourself untouchable again.

A young girl came up to us, a couple of sheets of paper in her hand, which she carelessly let flutter down onto the table.

‘He’ll decide,’ you said to her in Italian. ‘And he’ll order.’

‘And pay?’ the girl said.

‘Of course,’ you said.

I raised an eyebrow, and attempted to guess, first what you’d want to eat, and then what you’d want to drink. You leaned back in your chair, arms folded over your chest, tipping the chair backwards and forwards with the strength of one foot, precariously balanced, or so I thought.

You both giggled when I stumbled over my Italian words, never really having spoken it in the wild, having practiced it only on just pubescent Italian girls at the English language schools dotted around my university town. I started again and managed it without making a mistake at the second attempt. Antipasti to start with, olives and ham and bread, then Quattro Stagioni pizza for you, and a Capricciosa pizza for me. And a one-

litre bottle of house red. And a jug of water and two big glasses. You didn't complain, so I must have got it right.

You leaned across the table, your elbows almost in my half. 'Why did you choose that, then?' you whispered.

'Starters are obvious; they'll just get the juices flowing.'

You raised an eyebrow, said nothing.

'And they can last for ages. There's no rush, is there?'

You shook your head.

'And I really like olives and Italian ham.'

You shrugged. 'Weren't you going to say anything? You put your hands flat on the table.'

'Pizza because you said you wanted to gorge, and nothing's more filling than pizza. Four Seasons for you, because you never really know what you're getting with that pizza, and because I don't know who the hell you are, but reckon you're very complicated, just like the pizza.'

A smile crept into the faint lines around your mouth. Maybe you were older than me.

'And my pizza's very boring, just like me; ham, mushrooms, olives, and that's it.'

'Very good,' you said, at last, still with that understated smile on your face, propped your chin on your hands and stared at me. 'Maybe I'll have to make the next challenge a three-course one.'

'Whatever that means.'

'I've not thought about the specifics yet,' you said. 'And I'm not going to. Let's eat.' You leaned back again, and the young girl was at our table with the olives, the ham, the bread, the wine. 'Let's enjoy this while we can,' you said, your fingers already slimy with the oil from

the olives, and your lips glistening red as you spoke with your mouth full.

Watching you that evening was an exercise in self control. You knew exactly what you were doing, the way you took the black olives between your finger tips, then put them gently on your lips, and sucked them into your mouth, chewing and sucking until only the stone was left. And the stone, you didn't spit it out venomously onto the plate they'd given us, but you let it fall, softly, slowly, out of your mouth, sliding out across your lips, into your cupped hand, which then hovered, lingered over the plate until the stone finally fell, in slow motion, onto the oily china, with hardly a sound.

You picked up one slice of ham after another, ripped it apart with your fingers, clawed at it with your teeth and tongue, and devoured it like you'd never eaten before. You even shook your head, like a lioness tearing at her still-alive prey, until it was all gone, all in between your teeth, and then in your gullet. Your eyes were alight with greed, and I had to stop myself fulfilling that greed, stop myself from getting up, knocking over my chair, racing to your side of the table, and offering myself to you. It was fascinating, horrible, and addictive all at once.

'Don't stare,' you said, wiping your oily face with the cotton cloth you'd spread over your knees. 'It's rude.'

'So's what you do to food.'

'Hunger is just another instinct, exactly like sex, or sleeping, or breathing.'

'But did you enjoy it? You hardly had time to.'

'Oh yes,' you said, smacked your lips, and emptied your glass. 'Like you said, that was only for starters.'

'And you said you liked to make them last.'

'Not when I'm this hungry.' You bared your teeth. 'You've hardly eaten anything.'

'I was watching you.'

'So staring's bad for your nutrition as well,' you said. 'You should listen to me.'

'I have been.'

'Stop thinking. Just do.'

The pizzas arrived. You ate yours much more leisurely now, cutting one dainty mouthful after the other from the enormous circle you'd been presented with, only looked at me when you sipped at your wine. The pace of the evening had dropped, and my hardened desire of you over the antipasti softened into a wine-fuelled glow of almost contentment.

By now, the place was full, bursting with chatter and laughter and gesticulation. Not a free table, not a free chair. You'd obviously known exactly when to get here to avoid the neighbourhood rush, to avoid the ignominy of turning up and having to wait for a table.

'It's like this every time I'm here,' you said, as if you were reading my mind. 'And they stay here till God knows what time. It's brilliant.'

'Is that why you keep coming back?'

'That and other things.'

'Like killing people.'

'I told you I didn't mean what I said.'

'But if you did mean it that means you're going to have to kill me, too.'

You shrugged. 'Or keep you close to me all the time. It doesn't matter. Stop talking about it.'

'You told me you'd answer my other question over a glass of wine,' I said.

'What question was that?'

Had you really forgotten, or were you just playing with me? 'You know exactly what I asked you. Why me, why, out of all those people on the train? Do you always fuck total strangers?'

‘That’s two questions,’ you said, your face motionless, your eyes looking down at your empty plate. ‘Which one do you want me to answer?’

‘That’s a difficult choice,’ I said.

‘Not really. You’re a man, so the question you’d most like answered is the one about yourself. You don’t particularly care about how many people I’ve fucked, or where or when. If I’ve ever fucked anyone else, that is.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘I’ll play along with you.’ You were right, of course, although I had to wonder what you’d have answered to the second question, an answer that was as intriguing as painful, somehow.

You filled up our glasses with the last of the wine, gestured at the counter for another one, looked at me, closed your eyes for a long moment and opened them again. ‘You looked like you were gagging for it,’ you said. ‘And you looked so young and vulnerable, easy to control, easy to drag into a quick screw. And you’re thin without being too thin, enough meat on you not to be some muscle-bound idiot with a small prick, and not strong enough to do me any damage.’ You drank some more wine. ‘Happy?’

‘I thought size didn’t matter.’

‘Oh, please, don’t start that. That’s even more pedantic and self-analytical and possibly vain than I would have expected.’

‘But it sort of answers my second question.’

‘It doesn’t actually,’ you said, the glass in front of your mouth. ‘Think about it. The world doesn’t operate in absolutes. The only reason there’s war is because people like to think it does.’

‘And are you still in control?’

‘You tell me.’ That smile again. ‘You’ve been wanting to have me all evening already, but you haven’t dared.’

‘That’s because I’m a gentleman.’

‘The only one you’re kidding is yourself. Now be a gentleman and pay.’

‘What about that other wine?’

‘We’ll come back and have it tomorrow, when we’ve been sightseeing. Now come back to the hotel and let me ...’