

Umbria, Italy.

A cold breeze sweeps down from the summit of Mount Bacugno.

Three shadows pick their way through the forest on the lower slopes. Whenever the moon slips behind the clouds, the silver footpath fades before their eyes, yet still they struggle on like blind men in a bad dream, their movements hampered after a hard night's work.

Somewhere, a lark trills, announcing the dawn.

Then, distant thunder sounds, and the earth begins to shake.

They know the moods of the forest by night, the groaning trees, the rustling leaves, the cries of night-birds. But these are not the sounds of the trees, the wind or the river down in the valley below.

The shadows freeze, draw close, trying to gauge the danger, trying to pinpoint where it is coming from, growing louder each moment like an earthquake rumbling beneath their feet.

Then something rockets out of the undergrowth, grunting and roaring, hurtling straight at them, driving between them.

The one in the middle takes the blow, the others knocked aside like skittles.

It is over in an instant, the danger gone.

The sound of charging hooves soon fades. The rasping of the figure on the ground grows hoarse and frantic as silence reclaims the forest. A lighter flares. The gash is as long as a hand span, the left thigh ripped and torn, blood spurting out of the severed aorta, spraying their hands and faces, painting them black in the darkness.

They step back as a shriek rends the air.

Then their eyes meet.

No word is said. A tool is raised – a long wooden shaft, an adze-like blade with two curved fangs at the back like a carpenter's hammer – and a mighty blow strikes the skull. They

wait for a minute, watching for any sign of life, then they go to work with machetes, hacking off the arms and legs, the torso and head, chopping the sections into smaller pieces. As the first rays of sun crest the peak of Mount Bacugno, they dig holes in the damp, loamy earth of the forest and do what needs to be done.

CHAPTER 1

Calabria, southern Italy.

Simone Candelora lay flat on a ridge, elbows propped on cold stone, taking in the view.

Lago Cecità stretched away from right to left, east to west, a pale moon glinting off the vast expanse of water. He couldn't see the mountains on the far side of the lake. It was pitch black over that way, just one or two lights that might have been stars but were really farmhouses scattered over the mountainside. It was a strange name for a lake. *Lake Blindness*.

Who the hell had thought that one up?

He twisted the ring of the binoculars, focused on the farmhouse below.

Everything looked peaceful down there, but the knot in his stomach told him differently.

The *carabinieri* manning the road-block out near Taverna had looked peaceful, too, telling him the road was closed, and that there had been a "serious accident." Their bullet-proof vests and submachine guns had told him another story. Something was going on, and he had the feeling he wasn't going to like it.

He had volunteered for the job that night, wanting to shine in Don Michele's eyes.

He checked his watch, a cheap-looking Nite Speed chronograph, but accurate. He never wore the Rolex when he was working. Don Michele had warned him in that rough accent of his: "Keep that Rollie out of sight, Simò. The cops are fond of those."

The others had laughed at the joke, the suggestion that all cops were thieves, but Simone had taken the joke seriously. If the law stopped you, Don Michele added, a Rolex was the first thing they'd notice before they started asking serious questions.

"Make out you're a poor bastard, just like them, Simò, or be ready to blast the fuckers."

03.23.

Seven minutes to rendezvous.

The farmhouse was unlit, but that was normal for a safe house when no-one was hiding there. He boosted the magnification, concentrating on the window panes. If there were any coppers in the vicinity, they'd be well-hidden, but they wouldn't be able to cover every angle. He went from window to window, but there were no reflections, nothing suspicious, no-one to be seen...

No-one?

Where were the donkeys?

A ton and a half of stuff coming in, there should have been half a dozen men out there, waiting to offload it into the van. He scanned the field to the left of the farmhouse. It was lying fallow, half a dozen sheep to crop the grass. If the labourers were donkeys, those sheep were lawn-movers. So where was the van? The field was empty, except for the stacks of straw, already drenched with petrol, he imagined.

03.28.

Two minutes to go...

Then he heard it, felt it almost, as if the air was changing in consistency. The distant rumble took on a mechanical thrum as it homed in on the landing place. He glanced back down at the farm and the field. He'd been distracted by the noise in the sky, hadn't seen the fires being lit. There were five of them forming a blazing circle, fifty or sixty metres in diameter.

It would have needed five men to light those fires on cue.

The noise was steady now, a regular thumping. Any kid who'd seen a film could tell you what was making that racket. He could hear it, though he still couldn't see it. The pilot was flying without navigation lights, the cockpit dark as the big bird swooped in on the circle of bonfires down in the plain between the ridge and the lake.

Then the noise changed somehow, syncopated, yet out of sync, as if the engine had whooping cough. He heard it, but he took no notice, too busy watching as the *Agusta*

Koala suddenly appeared in stark silhouette against the flames, rearing back, then settling down on its landing-skis in the centre of the circle. Then, men came running out from behind the farm buildings.

Too many men...

As the rotor-blades slowed down, he heard the other noise more distinctly.

He swung the binoculars upwards, saw it hovering above the black *Koala*. It, too, was painted black, a big bug-like military helicopter with big white letters written on the flank. *CARABINIERI*. The cops in the chopper were blocking any attempt at an emergency take-off, the men on the ground moving in fast. Powerful arc-lights flashed on, and he saw the scene in startling clarity. Armed *carabinieri* closing in, machine-guns aimed at the cockpit, warning the pilot and his mate that it was useless to try and escape.

Don Michele had just lost a helicopter, a ton and a half of coke, a van, some cars, two pilots and half a dozen soldiers.

Jesus! What were you supposed to tell him?

Simone slid back down the slope on the seat of his pants, then ran to the car.

He tried to drive back slowly to Catanzaro, but it was hard to stop his foot from pressing the accelerator down to the floor.
