

Chapter / Kapitlu 1

September/Settembru 2014

Morning/L-ghodwa

Angelica Senderos cursed herself as she jogged along the dusty tracks surrounding the fields outside Msierah. She passed the ancient Cart Ruts site and headed towards Tal Balal. She intensified her cursing as she thought of how stupid she had been, just a few hours earlier, when she had taken a pill from her newfound friend, Chloe, in the White Line Club.

Her body clock had stirred her from her bed at 7.30 a.m. as always and set her on her daily routine since arriving in Malta to study English a few weeks earlier. But on this morning, Angelica Senderos was unsure if she was jogging, in a trance, or still asleep.

Come on; get those legs and arms pumping, focus, concentrate. What's that? Fuck, I hope it's not a cat. Ignore it, focus, look straight ahead. No, something's not right, out of place. The crimson trickle, seeping out from the swaying strands of gold on her right-hand side, seemed surreal in some way. She stopped. The buzzing of flies drew her gaze further into the field. She pushed some of the crop to the side. *Run, Ang, run... don't look back... ever.*

Inspector Thea Spiteri, of the Maltese *Pulizija* homicide squad, had seen a number of dead bodies. Children, youths, adults, old people, male, and female; but she had never seen one cut in half. The sight of the young woman's body didn't repulse her; it was more a case of fascination.

The young Swiss girl who had found the body was standing propped up against a *Pulizija* rapid response team car. She had a distant, blank look on her face and an unlit cigarette in her hand even though she didn't smoke. Spiteri felt sorry for her; she had only questioned her briefly, then said that if there was anything else she needed to ask her, she'd get in touch. She put her arm on the girl's shoulder: 'I'll see that you get back to your flat okay.'

The two attending officers from the Rapid Intervention Unit and one District *Pulizija* officer seemed to be as equally dazed as the young girl. One of the Rapid Intervention Officers had told Spiteri that Senderos had frantically flagged them down, almost collapsed in front of their vehicle, in fact. They'd arrived at the scene within minutes of being told what the girl had seen. 'At first, it didn't look as if it could actually be a body. Not a whole one at least. The parts weren't connected. Close to each other, but somehow not. It's the worst ever, Ma'am; on Malta, anyway.'

Spiteri had been confused initially but understood when she went to look for herself. Even in the bright sunlight, the corpse looked to be a wax model, a mannequin. The look was compounded by the fact that the body didn't seem to be lying in a recognizably human position.

The attendant flies and beetles told Spiteri that this was no mannequin, and the clothing ... *expensive, but discreetly so...* indicated human remains even though little else did.

The body itself had been decimated. The woman's face and breasts had been slashed and stabbed multiple times. Her vagina had been obliterated; stabbed and slashed so many times, it was now no more than a mass of masticated pulp lying on the woman's thigh. The two parts of the body were positioned exactly half a metre apart with the arms over the head and the legs in a V shape. Some of her internal organs had clearly been removed, but her liver and spleen were still visible. But perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the display was that the woman's cheeks had been sliced from mouth to ears on both sides; she appeared to be grinning. Spiteri also noted the rope marks on her wrists, feet, and neck. *She wasn't killed here. Christ, the press will have a field day with this.*

Spiteri turned to Detective Sergeant Sarah Said. 'What do you think?'

'Well, overkill like this usually means a relative has done it, but...'

'I know what you mean, but no... this killing is a message: "Look at me with awe, I am spectacular!" Was it raining last night?'

'No, I don't think so.'

Spiteri pointed over to a black coat and black umbrella lying a few metres from the body. 'Try and find out the last time it was raining around here.'

'Okay, but how do you know she was killed around here?'

'I don't, but we have to start somewhere.'

Both officers stared for a few more seconds at the mess that had once been a living person.

'He'll do it again?' whispered Said.

Spiteri took a deep breath: 'Let's go. I don't think we need to wait for confirmation of death, do you?'

The two officers turned and walked back towards Spiteri's car.

A voice from behind the *Pulizija* cordon shouted, 'Inspector, any comment for *The Independent*?'

Spiteri replied over her shoulder, 'Yes, we'll try our best not to be incompetent.' Old wounds never healed.

Afternoon/Waranofsinhar

Thea Spiteri was sitting in her office. She wondered if she had become immune to death over the last year. The site of the mutilated corpse had affected everyone who had seen it; except, seemingly, her. She had just finished a call to *Pulizija* Commissioner Kevin Galea, a man she had always liked and admired and had grown to respect even more over the last troubled year of her life and career. As an inspector, Spiteri was answerable to her Superintendent, who in turn reported to an assistant commissioner. Spiteri followed the chain of command but always made direct contact with Galea. Theirs was a link forged over the years through a mutual sense of trust and respect.

Galea had asked if she was alright about leading the investigation. Spiteri appreciated his concern; after all, it was only a few months since she had cradled the body of her own murdered lover in her arms—her soon-to-be husband, his head almost severed from his body by one of her fellow officers. The killer someone she had considered to be a friend as well as a trusted colleague at one time.

Spiteri forced her thoughts into the present. She looked out into the squad room, her squad now, with two new officers in place, one to replace the colleague who had killed her lover, and one to replace a female officer whose grief over the death of her child had driven both her and her husband into an eternity of madness.

Detective Sergeant Sarah Said was still in place and showing great promise. She had now been joined by newly promoted DS Dario Grimoldi and DC Michael Sammut. Spiteri had already instructed them to try and find out who the dead girl might be, to check missing persons or anything else they could think of. She watched as the officers sat at their desks, sifting through reports, occasionally lifting the phone; she knew it was a thankless and, she suspected, a futile task. Her own phone rang. She instantly recognised the cheery voice of Professor Paul Sammut, Head of Forensics and father of her new DC, Michael Sammut.

‘Thea, I’ve completed the post-mortem, such as it is. Would you like to come over?’ asked the professor.

‘Yes, I’ll be right there.’ Spiteri rose and walked into the squad room. ‘Sarah, PM results.’

The morgue in Mater Dei Hospital is surprisingly large for a small population such as Malta. Sammut often remarked that the size was necessary to accommodate the brain power present;

even after many years, he still laughed at his own wit. On this occasion, however, there was no humour, not even the black humour that often helped people associated with death to cope. Both halves of the mutilated corpse lay on the same table, close together, but the small gap still visible between the two halves still made it difficult for the brain to take in exactly what it was looking at. A label—Body 6 A—was tied around the right wrist of the corpse; a second label—Body 6 B—was fixed to a toe on the bottom half. Spiteri had never seen that before and suddenly felt an overwhelming sadness for the girl.

Professor Sammut cleared his throat and started speaking, but in a voice that Spiteri noticed was quieter than normal. 'It's difficult to determine how long she's been dead. For example, I can't take a rectal temperature, but I'd say two days. The good news, if there is such a thing, is that nearly all of the major wounds were inflicted after death. Again, it's difficult to say, but I would say that the probable cause of death was the blows to the head. The bad news is that she was definitely tortured before being dispatched. I'd say she's about twenty-five years old. I measured from the top of her forehead to the top edge of the bisected torso, then from her heel to the bottom edge, round about the third vertebrae. I'd say she was quite small, around one-point-five metres, about fifty-two kilos.' The doctor stopped for a moment and looked up at Spiteri. 'It's the worst attack on a woman I've ever seen. I've taken prints and DNA samples; they're already away. I knew you wouldn't want to waste time.'

'Thanks, Paul' said Spiteri.

'Any thoughts on who would do this kind of thing, Professor?' asked Said.

Professor Sammut slowly shook his head. 'A maniac?... if she was a prostitute, an angry client?... who can tell? Most murders are committed by family, relatives, friends, as you know, but this...'

Spiteri's thoughts flashed to her former lover, a Scottish detective who had stated often, and loudly, "The victim knows the killer." Spiteri's sadness seemed to engulf her.

'Paul, in case the prints or DNA don't tell us anything, can you stitch up her face? Even at that, we can't put a photo out. Sarah, call for a sketch artist to come down here. Warn them in advance and tell them to do the best likeness they've ever done, but leave out the scars.'

Spiteri glanced back at Body 6 as she left the Lab. *Don't worry. I'll find out who you are; you won't be called that for long.* She would be right about that, but not in the way she imagined.

Night/Serata

No one who had been directly involved in the day's trauma spoke of the event to anyone who had not been. There seemed to be an unspoken understanding that something had happened

that day, on a tiny island in an idyllic setting... and that life would never be the same again. They were right.

Thea Spiteri lay on the top of her bed. She had already drunk one bottle of wine and, although she knew she needed to be up with the sun in the morning, she was halfway through a second. Her thoughts swirled in her mind. Her life seemed to have been split into two parts: pre- and post-2014. Pre- she had been, if not happy, then content. Her career had possibilities. She felt she had a good and loyal squad. She had a life-long friend and confidant in a Dominican priest who lived on the island. She had a lovely home and no financial worries. Life was good, but...

In a couple of months' time, 2014 would be over... and she was now neither happy nor content; merely empty. Her trust in her squad had been badly misplaced, her soul mate had proved to be the Devil... and the man she was to marry around this time was dead. She lay back and thought of her lost love. She smiled at the thought of the ranting he would no doubt have done when he heard that his beloved homeland, Scotland, had just voted "No" to Independence. Her smile evaporated and the tears came... as they did every night.

Professor Paul Sammut, too, lay on the top of his bed. Thankfully, his wife now slept in another bedroom in order to escape his "trapped bull" snoring. It wasn't just the horrific post-mortem he had performed that was concerning him. Something his son, Michael, had said to him a couple of days before was niggling away at the back of his mind. He prayed he was wrong.