

# ALIAS

A Chance Colter Mystery

Jeffrey Birch

Also by Jeffrey Birch

Fiction

Magnet For Murder

Frozen Solid

The Hunting

Conflagration

Crossings

Kin

Descent To Madness

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Chapter 1  
Chapter 2  
Chapter 3  
Chapter 4  
Chapter 5  
Chapter 6  
Chapter 7  
Chapter 8  
Chapter 9  
Chapter 10  
Chapter 11  
Chapter 12  
Chapter 13  
Chapter 14  
Chapter 15  
Chapter 16  
Chapter 17  
Chapter 18  
Chapter 19  
Chapter 20  
Chapter 21  
Chapter 22  
Chapter 23  
Chapter 24  
Chapter 25  
Chapter 26  
Chapter 27  
Chapter 28  
Chapter 29  
Chapter 30  
Chapter 31  
Chapter 32  
Chapter 33  
Chapter 34  
Chapter 35

*For Gail*

## Acknowledgements

Nothing replaces traveling to a locale described in a novel for an author. I have been fortunate to have visited many of the places I write about. Written research doesn't provide the same sense of place. Smells, sounds, how people communicate, what make them laugh and angry are best discovered by visiting a destination. The patios of a region must to be heard. However, since the advent of the Internet, research for writers has become immensely cheaper, simpler and more immediate. Most sources can be cross-checked to assure accuracy in minutes. But the Internet has its limitations. Viewing original historical documents in archive around the world can't be duplicated. Still, the Internet has been transformative. Finally, and most important, I thank my wife Gail for her support and unerring scrutiny of my writing.

Ex-Minneapolis cop Chance Colter rolled in bed at the sound of his phone. His wife Tika slept on, still recovering from the injuries suffered in the blast that destroyed their business in Savannah, Georgia. The Roman sun sliced through the slatted window shade, knifing a six-inch swath across the bed below their heads. Colter glanced at the clock on his phone and answered.

“Hello.” Usually he answered with “Colter.” But few knew Tika and he were in Italy. Anna Partanza had his number. Maybe something had happened to her or Bernadette but he didn’t want to give anything away to a number he didn’t recognize.

“Colter? Glad you picked up. It’s Chuck Dumont. How’s Rome? Where are you staying?”

“Dumont! Why are you calling me? We finished in Ecuador and didn’t die. And how did you know I’m in Italy.”

Dumont chuckled. “I’m hurt. Thought you might want to hang out.”

“Get a life without me in it. I’m tired of getting scars because of you.”

“You know, Colter, you could hurt a guy’s feelings.”

“Why are you calling?”

“I’m in Rome. Quite a coincidence.”

“Why?”

“Extended vacation. “We need to meet. Now.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because I can’t go over it on the phone.”

“I’m not interested.”

“You will be. Where’s your hotel. That information I didn’t get.”

“Get from who?”

“I’ll tell you when we meet.”

“We’re not meeting, Dumont.”

“Does the name Irina ring a bell.”

Colter hesitated. “*Il Albergo Trieste*, off the *Piazza Navona*. I’m only telling you that so I can tell you no in person.”

“Restaurant?”

“Small one.”

“Good. I haven’t had breakfast. I won’t have much time.”

“I’m not alone in case you didn’t remember. I have a life.”

“Neither am I.”

“Not another agent. You weren’t supposed to be in Ecuador. Italy won’t like it either.”

Dumont laughed. “Well, she is another agent but on medical leave. Like you, we’re on vacation.”

“Not an official visit, then.”

“No. Vacation like I said.”

“Good for you.”

“Tika with you?”

“Of course.”

“How’s she doing?”

“Better every day.” Colter’s voice softened. “How are you? You do what we discussed?”

“I’ll tell you when I see you. I’m not far. Half an hour.”

Colter glanced at Tika who had roused at his voice.

“What’s going on?” She said through a yawn.

“That was Dumont.”

“The FBI agent?”

“Uh-huh.”

“How did he find us?”

“Hopefully not by someone I don’t want to know. I didn’t think the FBI cared. I was wrong.”

“You spent time with Dumont. He came to our business a few times. He was better than his partner. You seemed to like him.” Another yawn.

“Like you said, better than his partner, Pickler.” Colter chuckled. “Who was assigned to Alaska after our last visit.”

“I thought you were going to put him in the hospital that day.”

“Dumont stepped between us.”

“I remember. Is this social with Dumont?”

“It’s never social with the Bureau. Come on. We’re meeting him for breakfast downstairs in thirty minutes.”

“And I’m supposed to get ready in thirty minutes?”

“You look beautiful asleep, awake and everything in between.”

“Why do I have to be there?”

“Because nothing Dumont has to say to me won’t involve you or happen if you say no. This way I don’t have to explain it and answer five hundred questions I probably won’t have answers to.”

Tika smiled. “Good answer. Both of them.”

Dumont beat them to the restaurant by five minutes. He stood as they entered.

“Mrs. Colter. Very nice to see you again. I know you were injured in Savannah...”

“Tika is fine and thanks for asking. I’m okay.” She head-nodded to Colter. “He’s always Colter except to me and his mother.”

“Please call me Chuck. We’re all on vacation.” He glanced at Colter. “Or Dumont if you prefer.”

Colter was thinking as much as he had come to like Special Agent Chuck Dumont, he had no desire for a group vacation. Before he could stake his ground, Tika said, “You vacationing in Rome alone, Chuck?”

“No. I’m here with a female agent who was badly injured in a blast at the Murray farm in Kansas that led your husband and me to South America. I don’t know how much he told you.”

“Some,” Tika said. “And not much as usual.”

“Her name is Janice Rooker and we became...close.” Dumont smiled sheepishly. “I took your advice, Colter.”

“Good. No money worries. You’re still with the Bureau? Haven’t retired?”

“Haven’t decided, actually. That’s part of what this vacation is for and Janice has always wanted to see Pompeii.” Dumont shrugged. “Me too.”

“So, what’s this about? Why did you track us down?”

“Since I haven’t retired, I got a call from my SAIC in Minneapolis. The CIA found us. Through customs surveillance footage I imagine.”

“Now, I’m nervous. The FBI is bad enough but the spooks from Langley are... well, not people I want know. Okay, Dumont, let’s have it. What’s going on?”

“In Savannah, you assured me the assassin who hunted Anna Partanza and you in France was not returning to the U.S. You implied she was dead. That wasn’t true, of course but you returned home and she, you called her Irina, disappeared in Europe as far as anyone knew. She came here to Italy and is here now. She’s been sighted.”

“You’re thinking reunion, Dumont? Forget it. Leave her alone.”

“There’s more or I wouldn’t be here intruding into your vacation and mine. Once she surfaced on her hunt for you, she exposed herself with an identity. We alerted the CIA as a matter of course. Not me, Colter. They have her under surveillance. A CIA watcher is “watching” her now. She’s moving between Rome and Florence. It appears she’s settling down and buying or leasing a villa outside Florence in a town called Livorno, on the coast. The name she used with you was Irina last name Petrova. It was not her real name. She’s here using the name of Larisa Yevtushenko. I’ve seen a few surveillance photos. Blonde, tall, looks Russian. She is Russian by ethnicity, they believe.”

“Why does the CIA care? Why does the FBI care? You had nothing on her as I told you for anything she may have done stateside. All the years she operated as a contract assassin in the U.S., you didn’t know she existed. Why now? Why does the CIA have assets watching her?”

“Because the FSB has taken an intense interest in her. We’re not sure why. We need to know why. The Cold War may have officially ended but Russia under its present leadership has other ideas. They have a watcher on her who she hasn’t picked up we also believe. She may have been a great assassin but she’s no spy. Never went through The Farm, you know, spy school.”

“I know what The Farm is. The Russians? Makes no sense.”

“This part is classified.” Dumont shot a glance at Tika. “I appreciate your wife not joining us this morning. Her birth name is Maria Orlov. Her father was Sergei Orlov, a U.S. diplomat who spent most of his career in Europe that explains Maria’s language skills, etc. etc. She went to school in Switzerland until he was posted back to Washington. He brought her along. The mother died shortly after Maria’s birth. Her father raised her and they were close despite him not being around much working as a diplomat. A succession of nannies dominated her childhood but she received a first rate European education. Switzerland as I said.”

“So what? Good job on background. Like I said, leave her alone. Anna and I owe her our lives. I have no interest in disturbing her privacy. You and the CIA can work things out. Why call me?”

Dumont took a breath. “The next part even you didn’t hear, Colter.”

Colter shook his head. “You’re making me nervous, Dumont and we’re on vacation. The only thing I want to be nervous about is whether Tika likes our room.”

Tika grinned. “This one’s good.”

“Sergei Orlov was possibly turned by the KGB. Or he was working both sides. If the CIA knows with certainty, they aren’t forthcoming.”

“Her father was a Russian spy?”

“They thought so. At least we think they thought so.” Dumont let out a breath. “The FBI knows how to disseminate misinformation when it suits them but Langley wrote the book on it.”

“So, fine, Irina... Larisa, alias Maria’s dad was a spook for both sides. Or he wasn’t. He wasn’t alone back then. Again, so what? That’s what? Twenty years or more ago?”

The CIA believes that Orlov found something out. The Russians were expecting the information to be passed. Orlov died before that could happen.”

“But if he was a double agent, the information had to be misinformation.”

“A logical conclusion but the FSB thinks Orlov told the daughter and they want her to tell them... the CIA believes.”

“The Russians are planning to grab her on Italian soil?”

Dumont nodded. “That’s what I’ve been told. We also believe that they’ll kill her if they can’t make the grab... And probably if they do.”

“What could Orlov have known that could possibly be useful or relevant after so many years?”

“We don’t know.”

“Where do Tika and I fit in?”

The Russians don’t know you. You’re an ex-Minneapolis cop. Not on anyone’s watch list. We know who their agents are, well many of them, and they know ours. That’s the game as the CIA plays it. It has rules but when one side decides to act, the rules are set aside sometimes. She’s not a U.S. senator’s daughter or anybody anyone cares about officially.”

“Again, where do we fit in?”

“Here’s what I’ve been told. They need you to meet and warn her. You know each other. They’re betting she’ll not bolt as soon as you do. She’s still an American citizen. They want to protect her and keep her out of Russian hands.”

“You’re thinking asylum somewhere managed by the CIA?”

Dumont slid two photos from a pocket and laid them on the table one at a time. “The first picture is of the CIA’s man. How he looks now. You need to be able to recognize him and avoid telegraphing him to the Russians.”

“Old guy.”

“Could be. He’s also taller, shorter, younger and older depending. Probably the best watcher in the game on either side I’ve been told.” Dumont shrugged. “Almost as good as a couple of guys and gals in the Mossad. He has a reputation.”

“Who’s feeding you all this Super Spy stuff?”

“My SAIC via Langley.”

“Why are they building this guy up? Who cares?” I know I don’t.”

“I guess Langley wants you, us to realize how seriously they are taking this.”

“To impress me? Not much impresses me anymore except my wife.”

Tika smiled. “You’re just full of good answers this morning.”

Dumont stabbed a finger into the second photo. “This is the Russian watcher.”

“Handsome young man.”

“We’re guessing at some point, he’ll try to become intimate with her. Once she’s involved with him, the grab will be made easier and she’ll be interrogated in Moscow.”

Since the Russians can't admit they have her, ever, she'll disappear inside Russia. A prisoner for life if she's not murdered by the FSB."

"Timeframe?"

"We're thinking two weeks, maybe three. The Russian agent hasn't approached her yet and she may not be a spy by training but she hasn't survived this long by falling for a handsome face. He'll have to be very good and take it slow. And he is very good or he wouldn't be here."

Colter looked skeptical. "My wife and I are on vacation, Dumont. The things I've done in my life after my cop life have been to protect us."

"As you said, you owe her. All they want you to do is make contact and warn her. Help them get her somewhere the Russians can't."

"And they sent you because?"

"I know you and they were pretty certain if the CIA boys approached you, you'd say no."

Colter turned to Tika. "That's *his* good answer."

Dumont shrugged. "Won't take much of your time. Or mine. That's what I've been told."

Colter smirked. "How many times have I heard that?" He sat back and exchanged a look with Tika. "You say no and it's no, babe."

"If you two will excuse me, Chance, I need to lie down for awhile."

"You okay?"

"Just need a short rest. You two have breakfast. I'll get room service later. Do what you need to do. You can't let the Russians murder the woman who saved yours and Anna's life in Paris. If all you need to do is contact her, get it done so we can see Pompeii. I'd like to see that too before Vesuvius buries it all again."

Colter turned to Dumont. "Okay. I'm in as long as it doesn't take too long. I owe Irina."

"Understood. I feel the same way about Janice."

Colter grinned. "You in love, Dumont?"

"I'm involved."

\*

Colter and Dumont left the hotel restaurant thirty minutes later in a taxi. The drive to the rendezvous with the CIA's man took another thirty. The taxi dropped them a quarter mile from the destination and Dumont walked by the alley twice before realizing it was the right location. "I have directions. Haven't been here before. This should be it."

"It's an alley with a door at the end." Colter wasn't amused. "Dumont? This suddenly feels like a past life I want in the past."

Dumont was nervous, gawking up and down the street like an amateur. "I've had a lot of training spotting tails. I'm sure you've had some. Nothing like the CIA guys I suppose but nobody wants to fail on this and I sure as hell don't want to be the cause."

"Did I mention I'm having second thoughts?"

As they stood on the street before heading down the alley, Dumont watched everyone who passed on the street. Colter saw them all without making a show of it.

"You're acting like a rookie Langleys spook, Dumont."

"I was warned to be watchful for a tail. Let's go."

They entered an unmarked door with two garbage cans to either side that hadn't been emptied in a while. Colter smirked but said nothing noticing both cans had splashes of paint – green on one side, red on the other. Green was showing to the alley. The garbage cans had to be the signal to enter. Two red stripes walk by. A red and a green had to be an enter with caution sign, call for help, come on in or some such spy nonsense.

Inside the door that closed behind them, the interior was dim approaching dark. The entry looked like a restaurant not open yet, Dumont thought. Boxes and packages lined the walls, nondescript and indecipherable in the gloom. Colter thought it looked staged.

“You haven't been here before?” Colter asked in a level voice, not a whisper.

“No. Just got directions as I said.”

“From Super Spy?”

“Uh-huh. Speaks with a British accent.”

“He's a Brit working for The Company? On loan from MI6?”

Dumont scratched his stubbled jaw and let out a breath of exasperation. “I don't know. I've told you everything that was fed to me.”

“Fed to you is right.”

A short hall led to a restaurant kitchen that was equally dark. Colter guessed the space had been acquired temporarily and whatever the CIA was using it for would be packed up and gone without a trace in a short time.

Dumont led them through another door that opened onto a brightly lighted room with windows covered with opaque blinds.

“You seem to know where you're going.”

“I had directions explained. Two rights and a left, that sort of thing. Nothing more.”

“By Super Spy?”

“None other.”

In the room, three young men with an equal number of women were staring into computer screens with headsets but none said anything. To one side of the room were banks of electronics. Nothing hums anymore. It was dead silent. The only sound was keyboard keys tapping and they didn't make much noise either. No one looked at them. Colter thought the whole thing looked a little too much like a spy movie set but he knew immediately they were in a CIA listening station. “You hang out here, Dumont? Just walk in?”

“Jesus, Colter, I told you I haven't been here. I was given some directions and background on what would happen. That's it.”

“Like what?”

“We were seen when we entered the alley, coming in the door and more times after that. We didn't spot the two security guys who have shoot-to-kill orders.”

“Super Spy hangs out here?”

“Didn't say. Said there'd be coffee.”

“Espresso?”

“You mean that squirt in a little cup?”

Colter laughed. “That was funny, Dumont.” Colter looked around full circle.

“I don't know where it is.” Dumont said.

“Must be the carafe on that table in the corner with the three cups and matching saucers. Everything but name cards. You were thinking a vending machine and paper cups like your office?”

Colter noticed the kids looking into computer screens had soda cans, bags of chips and candy wrappers strewn on desks. The metabolisms of youth.

They continued to be ignored as they sat at a small table that served as the lunchroom with Colter scraping his chair noisily on the floor. No kid response. Colter thought they either didn't give a damn or the headphones had cranked up volumes of something in who knew what languages.

Dumont poured, sliding one cup to Colter who tasted it and said, “Italians know their coffee if you favor robusta beans. Not bad.”

Dumont blinked. “Robusta beans?”

“Another life. Forget it.”

Seconds later as in ten, the CIA guy from the photo materialized through the door that admitted them. He pulled out a chair and sat taking a few seconds to settle into the plastic seat before making eye contact.

If the guy was in costume, it suited him perfectly Colter thought. He walked with a polished wooden cane, had a mustache worthy of Hercule Poirot, his hat was a classic Panama fedora and he wore a nondescript gray suit that looked too hot for the Roman summer heat.

“You look like the photo,” Colter said.

“Do I? As it should be. It changes, you see.” He spoke with the same accent as Prince Charles.

“Accent too?”

The guy offered a small smile, shook his head declining as Dumont lifted the carafe. “The coffee here is atrocious. Very nice little café around the corner. Only been there once. The coffee was first rate and the gelato was quite nice. I move about, you see. You might stop by after our little talk.”

“Harry?” Dumont asked.

The CIA man nodded. “That is my name.”

“This is Chance Colter. The one you called about.”

“Welcome to the team. I understand you know our girl.”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Yes. I've been briefed on your history together. Quite the adventurous life you have led, Mr. Colter.”

“Sounds like yours isn't tame, either.”

Harry chuckled. “Quite boring, you see. Quite. I simply follow people around without them knowing. If there is adventure, I live vicariously through my targets. Not the least bit thrilling on my end...until something happens.”

“Like the Russians,” Colter said.

“Precisely.”

“Were you watching Irina before they showed up?”

“Irina Petrova, one of her aliases. At a low level simply to keep tabs on our girl among others. No intention to let her know. An expat with an enigmatic history if what we've heard is true. Nothing concrete, you see. You might be able to shed some light on her past.”

“Sorry. Can’t help you.”

“Or won’t. Completely understandable old boy. Completely.”

“Appreciate your understanding. Dumont told me what you want.”

“Of course. We like to know where people are, you see. All was simply routine until...”

“Ivan shows up uninvited.” Colter said.

Harry chuckled again. “Amusing euphemism. Commonly applied. As good a name as any. We don’t actually know his, the agent’s, real name. Changed the game entirely when he dropped into the scene. What had been as boring as a tableau vivant became instantly more animated. Good deal of scrambling in Langley, as you might imagine. They’ve intercepted a good measure of chatter between Moscow and their man since and who has the code name of Yuri. Being handled very high up in the FSB. That’s what pricked Langley’s ears so to speak.” Harry made a sly face. “And my picking up on Yuri watching our girl brought us to now. Fortuitous you and Mr. Dumont were available. The coincidences of place and time.”

Colter shot a glance at Dumont wondering about the coincidences. He didn’t know the FBI agent all that well. Had he and his FBI “girlfriend” another active FBI agent happened to be in Rome at the same time as Tika and he or was there more to it? “Who’s my contact?” Colter said.

Harry’s eyes caught Dumont’s. “Please refer to Mr. Dumont as Calvin Winter, Cal. You’ll keep your name, Mr. Colter. Everyone listens to everyone, you see. He’s your contact. Not here as an FBI agent. Can’t work across the pond except by invitation of the host government.” Harry’s small smile came and went like a wet wind that died. “Quite the coincidence our girl and the four of you being here in Rome just as the Russians made a move on her. Exceptional good fortune, constellations in alignment or providence as you choose.”

From a worn leather briefcase, Harry retrieved and passed a phone and charger to Colter and the same to Dumont offering a neutral expression. “Anything that can be done to confuse the boys in Moscow is desirable, don’t you see. Use these. Encrypted. Satellite phones but as I mentioned one never knows who’s found a way to listen in. We’re the best, you know. But the Russians are not without their skills.” Harry rolled his eyes. “Those kids. The hackers. They’re everyone’s worst enemy. The Russians and Chinese use them but the kids that do it for fun or just to be evil are the worst of the worst. We have our sources and countermeasures, of course. Quite the game we play, Mr. Colter.”

Harry’s description of the concurrence of their presence as providence, felt manipulative like the CIA had somehow engineered the “coincidence” but he had no evidence to challenge the conclusion. *Coincidences are possible but the more there are the more the odds quickly become astronomical.*

“Do the Italians know what’s going on?” Colter asked.

“Some. It’s their country. They know we’re here. We collaborate. The recent behavior of the Russians has made them more amenable to us roaming around. Never know, though. Our ambassador hasn’t been called on the carpet. They wouldn’t take kindly to our girl being abducted from Italy to Russia but we don’t plan on that happening, you see.”

“Will I be in contact with you, Harry?” Colter asked.

“Not in the game plan but I’m around. Should something happen to Mr. Winter on his vacation, I would step in. Up to Langley, of course.” Harry glanced again at Dumont. “Sorry for the intrusion into your vacation with Miss Rooker. Hopefully, this whole matter can be concluded in a few days and our girl will be safely in our hands.” Harry glanced at Colter. “How’s your wife’s health progressing?”

“Better every day. Why?”

“We need you to be a couple on vacation. Two couples actually. Confusion in numbers as it were and four American tourists is good cover.”

“We just coincidentally met here?”

“Happens, old boy. Happened.

“I didn’t agree to Tika being involved.” Colter shot a glance at Dumont.

“No danger and I’m sure you’d rather be vacationing together than you being a recruited CIA agent with a higher profile, don’t you agree? She’s here, Mr. Colter unless you were to send her home. As I said, we’re confident the entire matter can be concluded in a few days. Your wife and you, Mr. Dumont and Miss Rooker can see the sights of Rome. Quite astonishing. Be sure to visit Pompeii after Rome and the museum in Naples where most of the body casts are.”

“I’m not a CIA agent. I’m a private citizen. I’m willing to help this one time because I owe Irina. That’s it.” Having Tika with him was preferable to leaving her at a hotel. He was not sending her home. She wouldn’t go anyway. Colter was thinking that Harry was right about the better cover traveling as two couples. “What can you tell me?”

“Mr. Colter. I do dislike word-mincers. And you are not one. “A straight shooter as they say. Here it is.”

For the next twenty minutes, Harry laid out the situation. At the end of his soliloquy, said as he rose from the table, “We really don’t want our girl taken. Do your best, Mr. Colter. Good day, Cal. My best to your wife and friend.” His eyes traveled from Colter to Dumont. “Try the café next door before you return to your ladies as I suggested. Wait five minutes before leaving if you please.”

Harry or whatever his name was disappeared through an all but invisible door like a magician through a puff of smoke without the smoke.

They waited. Dumont timed it and sauntered to the café, taking a table that faced the street. Always Colter’s preference.

“You okay with this? It wasn’t the vacation I’d planned either. I’m just getting to know Janice. My SAIC put on the pressure. I’m not ready to announce my retirement. You know how it is.”

Colter didn’t reply to that. He’d been away from cop life and pushy superiors too long to remember or care.

“And planned to be alone with her. I get it.” Colter stared into Dumont’s eyes, searching for something. “Don’t bullshit me, Dumont. Is this a set up? Are we really in the same Italian town at the same time by accident?”

“Listen to me, Colter. Maybe they tracked you here. Maybe they tracked Janice and me. I don’t know but I was not sent here. Being here is exactly what Harry said, a coincidence at a providential time. Providential to them anyway.”

“Do you have any idea what the odds are on this?”

“It doesn’t matter. Somebody wins the lottery. It’s what it is. I don’t know what else I can say. I was not directed to be here with Janice. Her brain damage is real; you can

confirm that she's on leave not on assignment with the Omaha office. I'll give you the number."

"Okay, Dumont. You've always been straight with me. I believe you."

The coffee was great. The spook named Harry was correct. Colter watched the door and watched the street when they left to find a taxi. No suspicious characters tickled his antenna. *Maybe it is what it seems.* Colter stared through the window unsure of what he was feeling as they were driven to Tika's and his hotel. Colter exited saying, "Call me with the next step, Cal." He held up the satellite phone shaking off a laugh at the cloak and dagger nonsense as Tika had described it.

The perpetual subterfuge was wearisome. After thirteen years as a contract assassin and too many identities to remember, retirement in Italy should have meant letting it all go. Perhaps it still would. But a problem needed solving first.

Being Larisa Yevtushenko in Italy replaced her being Irina Petrova in the United States. In the hushed voice of one who perpetually hid her identity she murmured, “I look somewhat Slavic. I can’t play Irish.” The Irina Petrova identity had served for two years – about average. Despite many years of practice, aliases were tedious and required a constant presence of mind to prevent slip-ups but in her heart, she was always Maria Orlof.

Maria had no contacts in Europe to forge false documents as she had in America. As an expat American citizen visibly living in Italy, delving into the murky world of buying false documents was risky and a last resort. Larisa she would be for as long as possible. She wondered if she could openly ever reclaim her birth name and identity. Probably not. But if her life had taught her anything, it was that nothing was completely predictable despite meticulous planning and flawless execution. She smiled at the double entendre of the word “execution.”

No one in thirteen years got close. To her knowledge, no photos or film footage existed with police or FBI. She left no trace. No DNA, no fingerprints, no hair or fiber, nothing in thirteen years of killing people for money except bodies. Most of them needed killing, at least in the minds of her clients. In truth, she knew most were criminals targeted by other criminals. She had no remorse.

No one until Colter in Key West, Florida who by complete chance, again she smiled at the double meaning since Colter’s first name was Chance, found her. He’d put a bullet in her shoulder and rescued her target, Anna Partanza, daughter of a Mafia kingpin in Miami, assassinated by his cousin. Colter left her thinking her dead with no heartbeat from a freak condition known as commotio cordis. Miraculously she revived spontaneously and escaped to eventually hunt Colter out of revenge and Partanza as the unfinished contract in France. There, she’d unexpectedly come to like Colter, maybe more than like, after following them for days, saved his and the life of the young Partanza woman, killing the two French thugs sent to kill them by people in the French Catholic Church. Yes, life was unpredictable.

Now, she discovered a handsome young man was following her. He was good, very good. She couldn’t be sure how long he’d been on her trail. Days? Weeks? She’d seen him several times over as many days in the past week. Perhaps he’d become emboldened thinking she would not discover him. Or possibly, he was planning to meet her having stalked long enough to gain the courage. An innocent obsession? She wondered.

Two questions burned in her mind. Who was he and why was he following? Maria had answers to neither. One thing was clear. His following must end. If his intentions were innocent, she needed to rebuff them. The idea of a lovesick pup hanging around was unacceptable. A stalker required a firmer, more permanent solution.

Luring him to his death and making the body disappear wouldn’t be difficult. That was what she had done for a living. Learning who he was and why he followed was the

greater problem. If he worked for any police agency, more might be sent. Killing cops was out of the question. Maria was troubled. The FBI thought her dead. Killed by Colter in France. He promised in gratitude for his and Anna Partanza's lives he would state to U.S. authorities he killed her in Paris, her body washed downstream in the Seine. The pact later became a bond.

American police forces had no idea who she was. Interpol was not interested. She'd broken no laws in Europe. That left...she had no idea who that left.

Maria knew she was attractive to men. Many thought her beautiful. Numerous times, she had used her looks to disarm a target before killing him. Men were such suckers for a pretty face and shapely body. But this one was disarmingly good looking. Women know when they're pretty and men know when they're handsome. Not having that edge was new.

He hadn't approached, identified himself. For now, she'd watch him watching her. Maria was mulling over next steps when the train from Rome to Florence stopped in the *Santa Maria Novella* station at the *Piazza della Stazione* in Florence. At the station, she boarded another train to the port city of Livorno west of Florence on the Ligurian Sea. A short taxi ride delivered to the rented seaside villa. Maria loved the area. The town was large enough to offer amenities and to be inconspicuous walking on the street. The villa was private and luxurious. A winning combination.

The man following her boarded at the last minute in Rome many cars away and made his way to her car. She saw him again board the train to Livorno reading an Italian newspaper and again climbing aboard at the last second. Pretending to read a foreign newspaper was obvious. He didn't look Italian. If the Italian *Polizia*, *Carabinieri* or the AISI, the approximate Italian equivalent of the FBI had targeted her for surveillance, she was discovered and would have to disappear to start again. If he was not Italian and she killed him, the outcome was the same. She would have to disappear and possibly change identities. Maria sighed, "I'm retired. Leave me in peace whoever you are."

A taxi delivered her to the villa from the station in Livorno. During the short ride, she checked for a following taxi or car and saw none. Perhaps he was gone. His reappearance would mean two things – he knew where she lived or she missed the tail.

As Maria wandered through rooms, opening windows and checking for intrusion, she stopped at one on the second floor that overlooked the circle drive from the road. The word for window in Italian was *fenestra* and this was a *fenestra grande* offering a clear view. If her watcher followed by taxi far back, he might be watching from the manicured grounds, hidden from sight. Maria studied the lawn and shrubbery for movement and saw none. Her vision was acute as was her hearing. Peripheral vision picks up color and movement better than the fovea of the eye. Anyone watching would say she appeared to be staring without focus but Maria was intently screening for movement. If he were an infatuated suitor and wishing to meet, a taxi would pull up or he would openly approach on foot. If he were hiding, his purpose was more troubling and sinister.

Being watched, stalked or hunted like game was not flattery. It was a violation but Maria wasn't angry. Anger was an emotion that clouded judgment. The smooth white skin of her brow pinched in thought. "I need to know who he is and why he's watching me only then can I decide his fate."

She stood motionless at the window, hidden behind blinds. Maria had trained herself to be motionless for hours if necessary. With breathing and heartbeat slowed but intently alert, time passed as she waited.

Maria had installed a few simple security devices. Inexpensive cameras watched doors and ground floor windows that she monitored on her phone. Simple “tells” of thread told her if doors had been opened as a back up to the cameras. A skilled adversary could thwart electronic surveillance but not the tells.

Minutes later he appeared, ambling up the drive, hands in pockets, a rucksack over one shoulder. *He thinks I've never seen him. What do you have in there? Where is your luggage or are you pretending to be a local who happened to see me on the train and fell instantly in love? We shall soon see. How Italian you are trying to appear. You don't look Italian.*

The knock on the door followed. Maria slowly made her way to it, taking time. It was a big house. How long he waited was key. The house might be empty. He had bothered to walk up a long driveway to knock but if he were an innocent pursuer wishing to claim uncontrollable ardor would he wait or leave? Throw pebbles at an upstairs window if she failed to open it? Leave a sappy note pinned to it in broken Italian? If he were a potential suitor, he would believe her to be Italian.

Maria opened the door.

He spoke in near native-speaker Italian. Not as good as hers but fluent. He had been well schooled in the language but schooled. He spoke like a Roman not a Tuscan and far from the dialect of one who had been raised in Livorno with its Greek influences.

She stood in the open door – waiting.

*“Signorina? Parla di Italiano o forse inglese?”*

*He's asking if I speak Italian or English. “Italiano. Che cosa volete.”* What do you want? She asked.

The man blinked. Maria thought he seemed surprised she would intimate she was Italian. An error. He knew she wasn't Italian but he couldn't admit to knowing. In that moment, she knew a foreign national was watching her. He was not from the Italian authorities. A key piece of information.

The conversation continued in Italian.

The man worked a practiced, sheepish, embarrassed look on his face. “I saw you on the train from Rome and wanted to meet you.”

“And then caught the train to Livorno in Florence. Why? Have you nothing better to do than follow a woman from town to town?” Maria made a show of crossing her arms indignantly working for the attitude she'd often observed Italian women showed to Italian men and different from those shown to other Italian women. All cultures have movements, gestures and attitudes that are gender-specific. Folded arms, chin thrust forward defiantly were a pose she'd seen Italian women strike when annoyed by a man. *Maybe that will throw him off, confuse him that I am Italian.*

“Because you are beautiful and I...” He looked down and shrugged through a shy smile. “I wanted to introduce myself.”

“Do you live in Livorno?”

“Yes. I was born here.”

*A lie. Your trainers did not train you well enough.* “Do you knock on people's doors like this often?”

He chuckled and shook his head. "No."

"Has this approach been successful?"

"We shall see." He grinned, showing dimples above his strong jaw and bright blue eyes.

*A little too confident.* Maria worked up a light laugh and dropped her arms. She couldn't let him leave. "All right. You've seen me. We have spoken. What do you want of me?"

"Only to cast my eyes on you and know you a little. That is all I seek."

*Trying too hard to appear an Italian man.* "Are you married?"

"No."

Another lie. A slight tan line circled his ring finger. "I am not in the habit of admitting strange men into my home."

"It is midday. I could take you to lunch in the city?"

Maria looked about. "Do you have a car?"

"No. We could call a taxi."

"How did you get here? Where did you just come from?"

Another sheepish grin with downcast eyes. "I took a taxi from the station and let it go."

"Confident?"

"Frugal."

Maria forced an innocent smile. "Since you won't go away you can come in for a few minutes for coffee."

He smiled broadly and Maria offered a small smile of acceptance but with the impression of trepidation. *I must appear cautious, uncertain, perhaps a little fearful but intrigued and flattered enough by his easy manner and disarming good looks to invite him in.* She needed to see what was in his rucksack.

Maria led him to a veranda partially covered by a pergola that overlooked the sea. A soft breeze was blowing. It was a beautiful day. He walked to the rail and peered over. The water was nearly 40 meters below and out about fifteen meters on broken boulders. A fatal fall.

He turned leaning casually against the rail, "I wonder if I might know your name?"

"Larisa." *He might already know. Better not to make up another name.*

"I am Santo."

"Are you saintly, Santo?"

He sighed with too much affectation. "Short of that, I'm afraid." He glanced about. "I wonder if I might use a restroom?"

"Of course. Along the hall on your left. Third door. I'll get the coffee. Opposite direction."

As soon as he was gone, she activated the security cameras on her phone and leapt to his rucksack. Probing quickly, she found two bags of snack foods, a roll of wide tape like duct tape, a black hood, two syringes in a small case, a knife in a sheath and a Russian Makarov pistol with a suppressor attached not easily obtained outside Russia. She removed one syringe and pocketed it. *Russian. What do the Russians want from me?* Her brow pinched as she walked to the kitchen. She watched him roam through rooms where she had camera images on her phone. None were in a lavatory. *Getting the layout*

*in your head or looking for something in particular? And what did you bring? Poison or a sedative."*

Maria needed to move fast but also to think. This was not a mere watcher, keeping tabs on her. This was a full-fledged Russian agent on a covert mission and she was the target. No phone in the rucksack so he had to be carrying one. She hoped the phone would tell her things she needed to know.

Maria did not have a gun. She was retired from contract assassination and an average American expat choosing to settle in Italy. Common enough. Now, with danger imminent, she could use his gun and knife. One other thing was clear. She would not spend another night in the villa. A Russian agent had found her and he wouldn't be alone.

Russians. Why did the Russians send an agent to locate her? What could they possibly want? She'd never been to Russia. Thinking back over her career, she had eliminated more than one. But that had been in the U.S. and none were part of the Russian government to her knowledge. Perhaps one had been an undercover Russian operative and valued. She couldn't know.

Maria had been careful to be invisible in Italy. Clearly, not careful enough. That would have to change the moment she had dealt with him.

With espressi made and placed on a tray with a few local biscotti after checking her phone, he was back on the veranda and not hiding to over power her. She hoped he had not checked his bag. When he turned at her footsteps, he was pointing the pistol at her heart. He had. The rucksack lay in different place.

"When did you notice me?"

Maria shrugged, eyes darting, thinking fast. "A while ago."

"No. Please, when."

"Three days ago. If you were watching longer, you got lazy or you wanted me to notice you. Which was it?"

"Not important. Now, if you would slide the syringe across the table this will go much easier for you."

"What do you want? I have nothing the Russians want."

He smiled. "I believe that you believe you don't know what we want to know. But we have ways to make you remember what you didn't know you had learned."

A chill ran down her spine as she tried to hide the shudder of her body.

"The syringe, please, Larisa."

She set the tray on the table and reached in the pocket, removed the syringe and dropped it, crushing under her heel. "You mean that one?"

He sucked in a breath. "That was stupid. It won't change a thing. You're coming with me."

Maria forced a small smile. "Since you can't learn whatever it is you seem to think I know, you won't shoot me will you Santo or whatever your Russian name is."

He smirked. "Yuri will do." And shifted the gun to one of her thighs. "No. Killing you is not our preference but what you know cannot become known by anyone else. I am sanctioned to kill you if I can't bring you back. It's that simple, Larisa. Now, do you have a car?"

The trains are great in Europe. No need."

Yuri's eyes shifted. Apparently, he had counted on a car. Someone in Moscow had failed in his duty. Yuri shrugged. "Better if you do not lie to me."

“Check for yourself. I have no car.”

“No matter. I have friends to call.”

“Where are we going?”

Santo cocked his head and shrugged. “To a Russian boat in Livorno and to a Russian ship at the port near Rome. Then, a leisurely sail home.”

“Home is Moscow?”

Another shrug.

Maria doubted she would reach Russian soil and if by some chance she weren't killed on the ship, she would never leave there. Her life had come to an abrupt end for information she didn't have.

She had edged forward in inches. They stood two meters apart. Yuri smiled. “Close enough. Any closer, I shoot you.” He dropped the gun to point at her right thigh. Maria snapped her head to the lattice of the pergola above widening her eyes in false alarm. Yuri flitted his eyes skyward. It was an amateurish response. With one quick step forward with her left foot, Maria highly trained in several types of martial arts but rusty delivered a kick to Yuri's gun hand. The hand and gun remained in his grip but a round was fired into the pergola. Before Yuri could react, she sent a second leaping kick into his chest. Yuri fell back across the table, rolled and recovered his feet, a surprised expression mapped on his face. She could see his chest hurt. The fall into the table had been hard. Perhaps a rib had cracked. He sucked in air with a wince.

He wobbled slightly on his feet but retrained the weaving gun at her chest. “That was stupid. It will only go worse for you now.”

Maria lunged at him grasping his gun hand forcing it down and sent a hard punch to his face but Yuri fired a second shot that missed her by inches before his gun hand lowered. He back stepped but too late. Maria was on him.

Blood streamed from a broken nose but Yuri was far from incapacitated. He grabbed her throat, pushing her back as he worked to stand. Maria, still gripping his gun hand, chopped his hand free from her neck, found his fingers and broke two. Yuri screamed in pain that gurgled from the blood in his mouth. He wrenched the gun free held in his right hand, swinging it toward Maria but it was wide of her. Instinctively he protected his left hand with the broken fingers, clutching it to his chest.

Protecting the hand was an opening. She feigned a punch, grabbed the hand again twisting the broken fingers as Yuri tried to re-aim the gun at her. Again, Yuri screamed as she, with quick catlike movements, slid around his body, protectively behind the gun. Yuri raised the gun arm over his head to fire behind but couldn't see her. Another bullet sounded and struck the floor sending chips of ceramic flying. She pulled the gun hand back over his head. Yuri was off balance and tried to lean forward.

With a handful of hair, she yanked him back off his feet onto the hard tile floor. Yuri grunted but still had the gun as she had lost her grip on the wrist with his fall. Maria was behind his head and kicked his gun hand with a precise kick. The pistol skittered across the floor. Yuri brought a leg over his head to kick Maria hard in the solar plexus as she leaned over him from behind. Yuri was not completely incapacitated and then desperate to survive. His mind swirled with astonishment. What had been to his clear advantage inexplicably shifted to a life and death struggle in a blink of time. Adrenalin surged into his blood stream as rage consumed him.

Air was pushed from Maria's lungs with the kick. The room spun but she shook her head, recovering her senses after a painful deep breath. With his body dropped on the hard pavers, he attempted to roll. She caught his left hand, stretched the arm and bent back the wrist and broken fingers. Yuri was on his back and screamed again with pain, writhing with flailing limbs on the floor. He reached out with his right hand but it was a futile and aimless grasp in desperation. Maria was tiring. She needed to end this. Yuri wrenched and rolled on the floor trying to free himself from her grip. He had forty or fifty pounds of muscle and mass more than she.

As his body rolled away one complete revolution onto his back, Maria was on him and with a heel stomped on his chest that took the full force of the blow on the hard, unyielding pavers. A second stomp produced the sickening sound of his sternum and ribs crushing. Air rushed from his lungs and Yuri's eyes rolled back followed by her stomping on his throat crushing the windpipe. His mouth opened but air could not reach his lungs. He writhed violently unable to stand. Maria sensed it was the fatal blow but she dashed for the gun, rolled and prepared to shoot from a crouched position, back against the sidewall of the veranda. Yuri was lurching and twitching in death throes that morphed to the final tremors of life and stilled. His eyes were wide and became sightless. Yuri was no longer among the living. With eyes turned to the puffy clouds that lazied across the blue sky, she knew she was fortunate to have survived Yuri. It could easily have been Yuri watching the passing clouds.

Maria sat on the floor legs splayed in front breathing hard, physically spent, the gun now held loosely in a hand. Her chest hurt and the old shoulder wound from Colter's bullet ached. Killing people had been her career but never in thirteen years had she had hand-to-hand combat with any of them at this level of intensity. Maria picked the time and place, controlled every aspect of a hit and rarely was even seen by her targets. She came. They died. She was paid.

As she considered the situation and what to do with the body, she realized that Yuri was not sufficiently accomplished in martial arts. He knew some moves but she was more highly skilled. Why had he been sent and not one more accomplished and why just one? As Yuri said, others were around but not with him. She drew two conclusions. Yuri was sent as a pretty boy she would fall for making his job easy. A messy grab involving multiple agents from the FSB could get noticed by the *Carabinieri* and the AISI; and the Italians would not take kindly to kidnapping anyone on their soil. The reputation of the Russians had plummeted with the Ukraine mess and other provocative behaviors. NATO, the Americans and all of Europe were intensely aware of everything Russia did. Not the best time for another international incident. Britain had not forgotten the assassination by Russia of Alexander Litvinenko on British soil. The Dutch still fumed about lost citizens in the downed airliner over eastern Ukraine blamed on Russia. An emboldened Russian military caused a marked uptick in NATO activity to counter the increasing threat.

Maria gathered herself and stood shakily, smirking at the body. *Silly boy*. Despite the life and death struggle, it had been a good workout, almost too good. She needed to ratchet up her fitness level. She shook her head. *I should have had you down in half the time. The kick to my chest was a wakeup call.*

Collecting his belongings and finding a phone in a pocket, miraculously undamaged, she needed to learn about Yuri.

Inspecting the phone, she saw the letters were in the Cyrillic script. *That confirms it. You're a Russian, Yuri.* She glanced at the body and realized time was short. Her mind scrolled back to the smattering of Russian she had learned at her father's knee and recalled little.

The phone was turned on. Little doubt that it was encrypted. It also would track him. Turning it off or destroying it would be an immediate alert to his comrades but Yuri would use it sparingly. The West and especially, the Americans, of which she was one, had extraordinary capabilities to monitor and penetrate communication devices. The Taliban in Pakistan ran couriers and fighters many kilometers over mountain passes into Afghanistan to avoid using cell phones. Maria may have been an assassin on her native soil but she was a patriot and loved her country. It just wasn't safe to retire there.

Maria stepped over Yuri's body, righted the table, set the gun on it and replaced the rucksack on its wrought iron surface, dumping the contents and separating them. She removed the second syringe with its clear fluid and studied it realizing its contents were unknowable.

Yuri had a Russian passport and a few documents in Russian in a zipped pocket she couldn't read but a few words of. She was gifted with learning languages. *It wouldn't take me long. No time for that.*

The bag contained nothing more of interest. She picked up the smashed syringe and returned it to the bag along with the other items keeping the gun, knife and second syringe. A glance at Yuri who stared sightlessly at her reminded her to get going. He was on his back. Blood from the broken nose had not leaked onto the floor. The other damage she had done to him hadn't yet leaked blood or body fluids.

Maria stood with hands on hips. *You need to disappear without a trace. Your handlers might wonder but they won't know what happened. Others will be sent but I have a few hours. By then, I'll be gone.*

She had been honest with Yuri that she had no car. The villa had come with a Vespa scooter and she used that to travel into town. Yuri's body couldn't be slung on the back. Her identity as Larisa Yevtushenko was tied to the rental villa. Her gone and a body inside would mobilize the *Polizia* and *Carabinieri*. Descriptions of her would be everywhere. The lease on the villa was prepaid for three months. *This has to be resolved by then. Maybe I can return.* She called the leasing agent since the owner lived in Germany and said she would be away for an indefinite period and suggested the agent check on the property from time to time adding she would leave the scooter at the train station with the key inside a small box with a numbered combination she provided.

Italy had been occupied for thousands of years. Vast tracks of wilderness such as in the U.S. didn't exist. Even if she had a way to transport the body, it would be found. Without documents, identification would be delayed but eventually some distinctive characteristics would show he was Russian. *Maybe Russian dentists fill teeth differently.* Yuri needed to disappear and that meant, disappear.

A roll of plastic sheeting was in the kitchen she remembered. With a double layer spread on the floor, she dragged Yuri's body onto it. Stripped of his clothing she looked for identifying marks and tattoos. No tattoos but a birthmark on one leg. She sliced it off. It was the intense work of an hour to dismember the body. Fingers with fingerprints were removed and set aside. Limbs, torso and bony parts were bagged in plastic trash bags

along with the backpack. In all she had twelve bags. With the head and fingers separated, she walked outside.

A groundskeeper came several mornings each week but left a few tools in a shed. Finding a shovel, she selected an area of property with shrubs. Thirty minutes later, Yuri's head and fingers were buried deep and the ground surface carefully replaced. With rapid decay in the moist soil, features and fingerprints would be the feasts of bacteria and worms. Maria reasoned that since Yuri was a Russian national and not an international criminal, his identity would be unknown beyond his Russian handlers. The head if found by Italian authorities would not be easily identifiable nor any of the separate body parts. Interpol would not have information. Maria doubted the Russians would admit that a covert agent had been inside Italy attempting to abduct an American citizen.

With the burial completed, she burned the clothing, passport and other personal effects in a fireplace in the villa adding a generous sprinkling of one hundred proof American whiskey she preferred on the rare occasion she drank alcohol.

The other bags were more problematic. With dusk approaching, she began making trips into town with two bags on the back of the scooter. Livorno was a busy metropolis. No one noticed. Here and there on quiet streets, she added the bags to garbage cans and dumpsters. She tossed the phone into the back of an open delivery truck. It was not visible among boxes and bags.

Full dark had fallen over Livorno. The city came alive with lights. Returning to the villa, Maria packed a small combination roller bag and backpack. She didn't need to take much. Everything needed was easily repurchased. With meticulous and practiced care, she adopted a disguise. Disguises had been part of her career. She was disguised to some degree with every contract fulfilled during her professional life.

The black wig had long wavy hair. She darkened her skin to match with warm tones over her white skin. Dark lipstick complemented her new coloring. Dark eyebrows and eyeliner transformed her look. The look could be a Mediterranean woman from a number of countries. She definitely looked Italian from perhaps Naples or Sicily and she certainly no longer looked of Russian ethnicity.

A simple black dress with a high neckline and modest hem just below her knees, and comfortable black flats suitable for running, completed the outfit. A wide red belt added a touch of color. Maria wanted to appear feminine but nondescript and not advertise sexuality. In a spacious purse was Yuri's pistol with the suppressor disconnected that reduced its length, the knife and second syringe of whatever Yuri had brought. If it had been poison, no need for a second. It had to be a fast-acting sedative.

With Yuri already a receding memory, Maria hopped on the scooter and made for the train station. It was the worrisome wait of an hour to board the train that would eventually lead to Milan – her next destination and then to Turin. Turin was near a northern mountainous region and a quick escape into Switzerland or France across the borders. Austria lay to the northeast, also a possible destination. Maria spoke fluent German but not nearly at the level of her Italian. Remaining in Italy was her preference. Hopefully Turin was far enough away from Rome and Tuscany. The first task was to discern if Russian agents or anyone suspicious were on the train.

Wandering through the train, she purchased a cup of coffee in the concession car. Moving slowly and casually, she furtively focused on the passengers. Maria was an attractive woman and in her disguise looked like a native beauty. Being eyed by men was

nothing new but the difference between scrutinizing and watching was the most important determination. Averting her eyes, she was careful to avoid encouraging the men who glanced at her while assessing their interest. In her recollection, the behavior of men toward women in the South differed somewhat from the more intellectual and sophisticated north. Milan and to a similar degree, Turin, were infused with the cultural norms of Switzerland, France and Austria. Less ogling but men were men worldwide. Their larger physical countenance could be a threat but their sexual desire was predictable and being predictable made them vulnerable. Maria had no fear of men.

Yuri was removed from her mind without much effort. Concentration was demanded. She'd killed dozens of people in thirteen years she operated in the U.S. One more didn't make much difference. What did consume her thinking was why the Russians were after her. During her career, Maria had developed the ability to concentrate her mind in ways most people couldn't. She turned this skill to mining her memory to the last times with her father as she settled into the seat. Yuri had said that they had ways to make her remember what she didn't believe she knew. Obviously, the Russians believed she knew something and they had lost an agent to learn what it was.

Satisfied that the half empty car contained no threats, she focused. Perhaps a memory would be unlocked. The practiced mental state she reached in seconds was akin to meditation and far from sleep. Any disturbance instantly returned her to the present. Passersby assumed her to be asleep with closed eyes but with her head oddly upright.

Moving back through time to her childhood, a series of mind boxes scrolled by. They were many covering more a decade beginning at age eight to arriving in Washington with her father years later. Time was insufficient to explore them individually but she placed a mental checkmark on the ones for later examination.

With eyes opened, she was back in the present, satisfied progress had been made. *I know where to look and what to look for.*

The journey from *Livorno Centrale* to *Milano Centrale* stations passed through *Firenze, Bologna, Modena, and Parma* consumed three hours twenty minutes. It was a picturesque tour of northern Italy and its main cities. The train arrived within minutes of its scheduled time at 8:35 PM. Darkness had descended on Italy's second largest city. Countless lights danced across the window as the train pulled into the station. Milan's night air, cooler than Livorno, filled her lungs as she stepped onto the platform.

