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Kill the Father

Written by Sandrone Dazieri

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KILL THE FATHER

SANDRONE DAZIERI



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For Olga, who held out

- 1 -

BEFORE

The world is a curving wall of gray cement. The world has muffled sounds and echoes. The world is a circle two times the length of his outstretched arms. The first thing the boy learned in that circular world were his new names. He has two. Son is the name he prefers. He has a right to it when he does the right things, when he obeys, when his thoughts are clear and quick. Otherwise, his name is Beast. When he's called Beast, the boy is punished. When he's called Beast, the boy goes cold and hungry. When he's called Beast, the circular world stinks.

If Son doesn't want to become Beast, he has to remember the right place for the things he's been given and take good care of them. The bucket for his excrement and urine must always be hanging from the beam, ready to be emptied. The pitcher for the water must always stand at the center of the table. The bed must always be clean and tidy, with the covers nicely tucked in. The tray for his meals must always sit next to the hatch.

The hatch is the center of the circular world. The boy fears it and venerates it as a capricious deity. The hatch can open suddenly or remain shut for days at a time. The hatch can give him food, clean clothing, books, and pencils, or it can dispense punishment.

Mistakes are always punished. For minor errors, the punishment is hunger. For bigger mistakes, there's atrocious heat or cold. One time he was so hot that he simply stopped sweating. He fell to the cement, convinced he was about to die. He was pardoned with a stream of cold water. He was Son once again. Now he could drink again and clean the bucket, abuzz with flies. Punishment is hard in the circular world. Implacable and precise.

That's what he always believed until the day he discovered that the circular world is imperfect. The circular world has a crack. The length of his forefinger, the crack appeared in the wall, right where the wooden beam the bucket hangs from fits into the wall. The boy

didn't dare look closely at the crack for weeks. He knew it was there, it impinged on the boundaries of his consciousness, scorching it like flame. The boy knew that looking at the crack was a Forbidden Thing, because in the circular world everything that isn't explicitly allowed is forbidden. But one night the boy gave in to his impulse. He transgressed for the first time in a long time, the unchanging time of his circular world. He did it cautiously, slowly, planning out each move in advance. He got out of bed and pretended he'd fallen.

Stupid Beast. Incompetent Beast. He pretended he had to lean against the wall to support himself and for just an instant he brought his left eye into contact with the crack. He didn't see anything, only the darkness, but the enormity of what he'd done made him sweat in fear for hours. For hours he expected punishment and pain. He awaited cold and hunger. But nothing happened. This was an extraordinary surprise. In those hours of waiting, which eventually became a sleepless night and a feverish day, the boy understood that not everything he does can be seen. Not everything he does is weighed and judged. Not everything he does is rewarded or punished. He felt lost and alone, in a way he hadn't experienced since his very first days in the circular world, when the memory of Before was still strong, when the walls didn't exist and he had another name, different from Beast or Son. The boy felt his certainties shatter, and so he dared to take another look. The second time he kept his eye glued to the crack for nearly a whole second. The third time he looked for a full breath. And he saw. He saw the green. He saw the blue. He saw a cloud that looked like a pig. He saw the red roof of a house.

Now the boy is looking again, balanced on tiptoe, his hands spread out against the cold cement to support himself. There's something moving outside, in a light that the boy imagines to be the light of dawn. It's a dark silhouette, and it grows bigger and bigger as it comes closer. Suddenly the boy realizes he's making the most serious mistake, that he's committing the most unforgivable transgression.

The man walking over the meadow is the Father, and he's looking at him. As if he'd read his thoughts, the Father speeds up his pace. He's coming for him.

And he has a knife in his hand.

- || -

THE STONE CIRCLE

The horror began at five in the afternoon on a Saturday in early September, with a man in shorts waving his arms, trying to flag down a car. The man had a T-shirt draped over his head to ward off the hot sun and a pair of ravaged flip-flops on his feet.

Watching him as he pulled the police car over to the side of the county road, the older officer classified the man in shorts as a “nutcase.” After seventeen years on the force and several hundred wins and other delirious citizens calmed into docility with various carrots and sticks, he could spot a nutcase at a glance. And this was one, beyond the shadow of a doubt.

The two officers got out of the car, and the man in shorts crouched down, mumbling something. He was wrecked and dehydrated, and the younger officer gave him a drink of water from the bottle he kept in the car door, ignoring his fellow officer’s look of disgust.

At that point the words of the man in shorts became comprehensible. “I’ve lost my wife,” he said. “And my son.” His name was Stefano Maugeri, and that morning he’d gone with his family for a picnic, a few miles farther up, in the Vivaro mountain meadows. They’d eaten an early lunch and he’d fallen asleep, lulled by the breeze. When he’d woken back up, his wife and son were gone.

For three hours, he’d moved in a circle, searching for them without success, until he found himself walking along the side of the county road, completely lost and on the verge of sunstroke. The older officer, whose confidence in his first impression was beginning to waver, asked why he hadn’t called his wife’s cell phone, and Maugeri replied that in fact he had, but he’d heard only the click of the voice mail, over and over until the battery of his cell phone ran out.

The older officer looked at Maugeri with a little less skepticism. He’d racked up quite a collection of emergency calls concerning wives who’d gone missing, taking the children with them, but none

of those callers had dumped their spouse in the middle of a mountain meadow. Not still alive, anyway.

The officers took Maugeri back to his starting point. There was no one there. The other day-trippers had all gone home, and his gray Fiat Bravo sat alone on the lane, not far from a magenta tablecloth strewn with leftover food and an action figure of Ben 10, a young superhero with the power to transform himself into an array of alien monsters.

At that point, Ben 10 would probably have turned into a giant horsefly and flown over the meadows in search of the missing wife and son, but the two policemen could only radio in to headquarters and turn in the alarm, triggering one of the most spectacular search-and-rescue operations the meadows had witnessed in recent years.

That was when Colomba got involved. It was her first day back at work after a long break, and it would be, beyond the shadow of a doubt, one of her worst.

2

A little older around her eyes than her thirty-two years, Colomba never went unnoticed, with her broad, muscular shoulders and her high, prominent cheekbones. The face of a warrior, a boyfriend had once told her, a woman warrior who rode stallions bareback and cut her enemies' heads off with a scimitar. She had laughed in response, and then she'd leapt astride him and ridden him furiously, leaving him breathless. Now, though, she felt more like a victim than a warrior, sitting on the edge of the bathtub, holding her cell phone, and staring at the display, where the name of Alfredo Rovere kept blinking. He was the chief officer of the Mobile Squad of the Rome police, technically still her boss and her mentor, and he was calling for the fifth time in three minutes: she'd never once answered his calls.

Colomba was still wearing a robe after stepping out of the shower, already horribly late for a dinner party at the house of friends, a dinner party to which she'd finally accepted an invitation. Since being released from the hospital, she'd spent most of her time alone. She rarely ventured out of her apartment; she usually went out in the morning, often at dawn, when she put on her tracksuit and went running along the Tiber River, which flowed past the windows of her apartment, just a short walk from the Vatican.

Jogging along the banks of the Tiber was a challenge to her reflexes, because, potholes aside, she had to avoid the dog shit, as well as the rats skittering suddenly out of the piles of rotting garbage, but none of that bothered Colomba, any more than she minded the exhaust fumes from the cars roaring past overhead. This was Rome, and she liked it precisely because it was dirty and nasty, even if that was something the tourists would never understand. After her run, every other day, she would do her grocery shopping at the corner minimart run by two Sinhalese immigrants, and on Saturdays she'd venture as far as the bookstall on Piazza Cavour; there she'd fill her bag with used books

she would read during the week, an assortment of classics, detective novels, and romances that she almost never finished. She'd get lost in the plots that were too intricate, and she'd get bored with the ones that were too simple. She really couldn't seem to concentrate on anything. Sometimes she had the impression that it was all just sliding over her.

Aside from shopkeepers, Colomba spent days at a time without uttering a word to a living soul. There was her mother, of course, but she could just listen to her without having to open her mouth; then there were her friends and coworkers, who still called every now and then. In the rare moments that she devoted to self-awareness, Colomba knew she was overdoing it. Because this wasn't a matter of being comfortable on her own, something she'd always been able to do very well; she now felt indifferent to the rest of the world. She knew that she could blame it on what had happened to her, that it was the fault of the Disaster, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't pierce the invisible film separating her from the rest of humanity. That was another reason she had made a special effort to accept tonight's invitation, but with such scant enthusiasm that she was still trying to make up her mind what to wear while her friends were already on their third aperitif.

She waited for the incoming call to time out, then went back to brushing her hair. At the hospital they'd cut her hair extremely short, but now it had grown back to something approaching its normal length. Just as Colomba was noticing that some gray had begun to appear, someone rang the buzzer from downstairs. She stood there with her hairbrush in her hand for a few seconds, hoping there'd been some mistake, but then it rang again. She went and looked out the window: there was a squad car parked downstairs in the street. *Fuck*, she thought to herself as she grabbed the phone and called back Rovere.

He picked up on the first ring. "So the squad car arrived," he said by way of greeting.

"Yes, goddamn it," said Colomba.

"I wanted to tell you, but you wouldn't answer your phone."

"I was in the shower. And I'm late for a dinner party. So I'm very sorry, but you'll have to tell your man to go back where he came from."

“And you don’t even want to know why I sent him out?”

“No.”

“Well, I’ll tell you anyway. I need you to come take a hike around the Vivaro mountain meadows.”

“What’s there?”

“I don’t want to spoil the surprise.”

“You’ve already sprung one on me.”

“The next one’s more interesting.”

Colomba blew out her cheeks in impatience. “Sir . . . I’m on leave. Maybe you forgot.”

Rovere’s voice turned serious. “Have I ever asked you for anything during all these months?”

“No, never,” Colomba admitted.

“Have I ever done anything to try to get you back before you were ready or to talk you into staying on the force?”

“No.”

“Then you can’t deny me this favor.”

“Like hell I can’t.”

“I really need you, Colomba.”

From his tone she understood he meant it. She fell silent for a few seconds. She felt she’d been cornered. Then she asked, “Is this absolutely necessary?”

“Of course.”

“And you don’t want to tell me what it’s about.”

“I don’t want to influence you.”

“So thoughtful.”

“Well? Yes or no?”

This is the last time, thought Colomba. “All right. But tell your officer to stop ringing my buzzer.”

Rovere hung up, and Colomba sat for a brief moment staring at the phone. Then she informed her resigned host that she wouldn’t be coming to dinner after all, imposing her will over a series of half-hearted objections, and put on a pair of tattered jeans and an Angry Birds sweatshirt. It was clothing that she would never have worn while on duty, and that’s why she’d picked it.

She grabbed the keys from the dresser by the front door and

instinctively checked to make sure her holster was fastened to her belt. Her fingers brushed only empty air. All at once, she remembered that her pistol had been in the police armory since the day she was admitted to the hospital, but it came as a deeply unpleasant sensation, like stumbling over a step that wasn't there; for a moment she hurtled back to the last time she'd reached for her weapon, and the feeling triggered an attack.

Her lungs immediately clamped tight; the room filled with fast-moving shadows. Shadows that were *screaming* as they slithered along the walls and floors, shadows she couldn't look straight at. They were always just outside her field of vision, visible only out of the corner of her eye. Colomba knew they weren't real, but she could feel them with every fiber of her being all the same. A blind, absolute terror took her breath away and was steadily suffocating her. She reached out sightless for the corner of the dresser and hit it hard, intentionally, with the back of her hand. Pain burst into her fingers and jolted up her arm like an electric shock, but it vanished too soon. She hit the dresser again and again, until the skin of one of her knuckles was torn and bleeding and the shock got her lungs working again, like a defibrillator. She gasped and swallowed an enormous mouthful of air, then started breathing regularly again. The shadows vanished, dissolving into a patina of icy sweat on the back of her neck.

She was alive, she was alive. She went on telling herself that for the next five minutes, kneeling on the floor, until the words seemed to mean something.

3

Seated on the floor, Colomba controlled her breathing for five minutes more. It had been days since her last panic attack, *weeks*. They'd begun right after she was released from the hospital. She'd been warned that they were pretty common after the sort of thing that had happened to her—but she'd expected just a little shakiness and some insomnia. Instead, the first one had been like an earthquake that had shaken her to her foundations, and the second one had been even more powerful. She'd passed out from lack of oxygen, convinced she was dying. The attacks had become frequent, sometimes three or four a day. It took only something as small as a sound or an odor like the smell of smoke to set them off.

The hospital psychologist had given her a number to call if she needed support of any kind. In fact, he'd urged her to call him. But Colomba had never told him or anyone else what was happening. All her life, she'd made her way in a world of men, many of whom would have been happier to see her serving coffee than packing a firearm, and she'd learned to conceal her weaknesses and troubles. And after all, somewhere deep down inside, she thought she deserved it. A punishment for the Disaster.

While she was bandaging her injured knuckle, she thought about calling Rovere back and telling him to go to hell, but she couldn't bring herself to. She'd limit their meeting to a minimum, the shortest time civil decency would allow, then she'd return home and mail in the letter of resignation she kept in a kitchen drawer. Then she'd decide what to do with the rest of her life, hoping she wouldn't wind up like those cops who'd taken retirement but kept hanging around police headquarters to make themselves feel they were still part of the family.

Outside, a cloudburst seemed to shake the world. Colomba threw on a lightweight K-Way windbreaker over her sweatshirt and went downstairs.

A young man was at the wheel of the squad car, and he stepped out into the rain to greet her. “Deputy Captain Caselli? Officer Massimo Alberti.”

“Get back in the car, you’re getting drenched,” she said, climbing into the passenger seat. A number of neighbors sheltering under umbrellas were watching the scene curiously. She’d only moved into that apartment building recently, and not everyone knew what she did for a living. Maybe no one did, actually, given how seldom she talked to anyone.

For Colomba the squad car was like a whiff of home: the reflections of the flashing roof lights on the windshield, the radio and mike on the dashboard, the pictures of wanted men taped to the sun visors were all like so many familiar faces she hadn’t seen in far too long. *Are you really ready to give this up?* she asked herself. No, she wasn’t. But what choice did she have?

Alberti turned on the siren and started down the street.

Colomba snorted. “Turn that off,” she said. “We’re not in any hurry.”

“My orders are to hurry, Deputy Captain,” Alberti replied, but he obeyed.

He was a young man, about twenty-five, fair-skinned, with a light sprinkling of freckles. He emanated a scent of aftershave that she found agreeable, though out of place at that time of day. Maybe he carried a bottle of the stuff around with him and had sprayed some on to make a good impression on her. For that matter, his uniform was a little too clean and tidy. “Are you new?” she asked.

“I graduated from the academy a month ago, Deputy Captain, and I first enlisted as a cop a little over a year ago. I come from Naples.”

“You got started late.”

“If I hadn’t passed the admissions exam last year I’d have been too old. I squeaked through just in time.”

“Well, break a leg,” she muttered.

“Deputy Captain, can I ask you something?”

“Go on.”

“How do you get onto the Mobile Squad?”

Colomba smirked. Nearly everyone on patrol duty wanted to get onto the Mobile Squad. “You need a recommendation. You file a request with your commanding officer, and then you take a justice

police course. But if you do get in, just remember, it's nowhere near as much fun as you think. You have to forget about the clock."

"Can I ask how you got in?"

"After passing the police admission exam in Milan, I served two years at police headquarters; then I was transferred to drug enforcement down in Palermo. When Captain Rovere was sent up to Rome four years ago, I came with him, as his deputy."

"In Homicide."

"Let me give you a piece of advice, don't call it Homicide unless you want everyone to think you're a *penguin*." "Penguins" were newly minted cops. "That's strictly in the movies. It's the third section of the Mobile Squad, okay?"

"Excuse me, Deputy Captain," said Alberti. When he blushed, his freckles became more noticeable.

Colomba was sick of talking about herself. "How come you're out driving around solo?"

"Normally I make my rounds with my older partner, but I volunteered for the search-and-rescue effort, Deputy Captain. My partner and I found Maugeri earlier today, on the county road."

"Just assume I don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

Alberti complied, and Colomba found out about the vanished picnickers and the guy in shorts.

"Actually, I haven't done any searching. I just went to the apartment and then stood guard outside," Alberti summed up.

"The family apartment?"

"That's right. If the wife ran away, she didn't take anything with her."

"What do the neighbors say?"

"Nothing helpful, Deputy Captain, but they did have plenty to say," said Alberti with another smile. The fact that he didn't make an effort to keep an expression of granite solemnity on his face, the way most penguins did, was a point in his favor.

Colomba smiled back in spite of herself and it almost hurt her face, she was so out of practice. "Where are we going?"

"The search coordination center is at the Vivaro riding stables. There's us, the carabinieri, the firemen, and civil protection. And a bunch of civilians who mostly just get in the way. Word's gotten out."

“Word always does,” said Colomba, discontentedly.

“There was a little activity three hours ago. I saw two Land Rover Defenders heading out toward Monte Cavo with several officers and a magistrate. Judge De Angelis. You know him?”

“Yes,” and she didn’t like him. Prosecutor Franco De Angelis was always far too pleased to appear in the press. He had only a couple of years before he’d be eligible to retire, and everyone said that he had his sights set on the Superior Council of the Magistrature. They also said he’d do anything to land a seat on that exalted panel. “How far is Monte Cavo from where they were picnicking?” she asked.

“A mile and a half through the woods, six miles by road. You want to see the report? There’s a printout in the glove compartment.”

Colomba got it out. It featured two photos of the missing persons, taken off Facebook. Lucia Maugeri had dark, wavy hair; thirty-nine but she looked older. The boy was plump, with Coke-bottle glasses. The picture had been taken at his desk at school, and he wasn’t looking into the lens. Six and a half. His name was Luca.

“If they wound up on Monte Cavo, they certainly took a nice long hike, him and his mother. And no one saw them, is that right?”

“That’s what I was told.”

The rain started coming down again, and the traffic ground to a halt. Still, with their flashers on, they cut through the line of cars like Moses through the Red Sea. They reached the turnoff for Velletri in half an hour. Colomba began to see official cars and civil protection vans coming and going; soon there was a solid mass of emergency vehicles as they reached the fences surrounding the riding stables. The stables were a compound of one-story buildings, modest in appearance, built around a harness track.

At walking speed, they drove along the county road cluttered with squad cars, civilian automobiles, carabinieri troop buses, ambulances, and fire trucks. There were also mobile news vans from two television networks, with satellite dish antennas on the roofs, and a field kitchen on wheels that was sending up a dense plume of smoke. *The only things missing are sideshow attractions and a shooting gallery*, thought Colomba.

Alberti pulled up behind a camper. “We’re here, Deputy Captain,” he said. “Captain Rovere is waiting for you at the operations center.”

“Have you already been there?” asked Colomba.

“Yes, Deputy Captain.”

“Then show me the way, and we’ll save time.”

Alberti pulled the hand brake and then escorted her past buildings that seemed to be deserted. Colomba could hear horses whinnying inside and just hoped she wouldn’t run into a runaway horse, panicking in the rainstorm. They were heading for one of the buildings, guarded by two uniformed officers who saluted Alberti brusquely and ignored her entirely, taking her for a civilian.

“You wait here,” she said and, without knocking, pulled open a door on which hung a piece of paper that bore the warning STATE POLICE—WAIT TO BE ANNOUNCED.

She walked into an old records room with metal filing cabinets lining the walls. Half a dozen police officers, uniformed and plainclothes, sat at four large central desks, making phone calls or talking on radios. Colomba spotted Alfredo Rovere, standing over a map spread out on one of the desks. He was a short man, about sixty, with thinning hair carefully combed back. Colomba noticed that his shoes and trousers were spattered with mud up to the knee.

The officer sitting by the door looked up and recognized her. “Deputy Captain Caselli!” he exclaimed, getting to his feet. Colomba couldn’t remember his name, just the handle Argo 03, which he used when it was his shift at the operations switchboard. Everyone in the room stared at her, and for a moment all conversation ceased.

Colomba forced a smile onto her face and gestured with one hand for them all to go back to work. “Please, don’t make a fuss.”

Argo 03 gripped her hand. “How are you, Deputy Captain? You’ve been missed.”

“You haven’t, that’s for sure,” she answered, pretending to kid around. Argo went back to his phone, and soon the sound of multiple conversations resumed. From what they were saying, Colomba understood that checkpoints had been set up all along the county road. Odd. That wasn’t standard practice in disappearance cases.

Rovere came over. He gently squeezed her shoulders and looked her in the eyes. His breath reeked of cigarette smoke.

“You’re looking good, Colomba. For real.”

“Thanks, Captain,” she replied, thinking to herself that he actually looked aged and weary. There were bags under his eyes, and he needed a shave. “What’s going on?”

“Curious?”

“Not in the slightest. But as long as I’m here . . .”

“You’ll see in a minute,” he said, taking her by the arm and steering her toward the door. “Let’s go find a car.”

“Mine’s parked at the front entrance.”

“No, we need a jeep.”

They walked out, and Alberti, who’d been leaning against the wall, snapped to attention.

“Are you still here?” asked Rovere.

“I asked him to wait,” said Colomba. “I’d hoped I’d be heading home soon.”

“Do you know how to drive an off-road vehicle?” Rovere asked Alberti.

“Yes, Captain.”

“Then go to the front gate and requisition one. We’ll wait for you here,” Rovere ordered.

Alberti rushed outside. Rovere lit a cigarette in open defiance of the sign that said NO SMOKING.

“Are we going to Monte Cavo?” asked Colomba.

“I try to keep things from you, and you figure them out anyway,” he replied.

“Did you think I wouldn’t talk to my driver?”

“I’d have preferred it.”

“And what’s up there?”

“You’ll see with your own eyes.”

A Land Rover Defender reversed toward them across the courtyard, narrowly missing a highway patrol motorcycle.

“About time.” Rovere took Colomba by the arm and started to lead her out.

She wriggled free. “Are we in a hurry?”

“Yes, we are. In an hour, or possibly less, we won’t be welcome anymore.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll bet you can figure it out all by yourself.”

Rovere opened the door for her. Colomba didn’t get in. “I’m seriously thinking of just going home, Captain,” she said, “I didn’t like riddles even when I was little.”

“Liar. You’d have picked another line of work.”

“That’s exactly what I’m planning to do.”

He sighed. “Have you really made up your mind?”

“I couldn’t be more determined.”

“We can talk about that later. Come on, get in.”

Colomba slipped into the backseat resignedly.

“Good girl,” said Rovere as he got in front.

With Rovere giving directions, they left the stables and turned onto the Vivaro county road, following it for a little less than three miles; then they took the lake road until they reached the state road toward Rocca di Papa. They drove past the last few homes and a trattoria where a small knot of police officers were drinking coffee and smoking under a pergola. It seemed the civilians had all gone to ground and only uniforms and military vehicles remained. They traveled another three quarters of a mile and turned off onto the road up to Monte Cavo.

When they stopped, there was no one else in sight. Beyond the trees at the end of the trail, Colomba glimpsed the glow of floodlights breaking the darkness.

“From here we’re going to have to continue on foot; the trail is too narrow,” said Rovere. He opened the trunk and pulled out two Maglite flashlights.

“Will I be looking for hidden notes?”

“It would be nice if they left such easy clues, wouldn’t it?” said Rovere, handing her a flashlight.

“Clues to what?”

“Be patient.”

They started up the trail, shielded on both sides by trees whose branches twined together to form a sort of green corridor. The silence was practically absolute, now that the rain had stopped, and the air was redolent with the scent of dampness and rotting leaves that Colomba associated with mushrooms. The smell stirred up memories

from when she was small and used to go mushroom hunting with an uncle who'd been dead for years. She couldn't remember whether they'd ever actually found any.

Rovere lit another cigarette, though his breathing was already labored from the hike. "This is the Via Sacra," he said.

"What's that?" asked Colomba.

"A road that once led to a Roman temple. You see? The original paving stones are still there," said Rovere, playing the beam of his light over the gray, time-worn basalt slabs. "Three hours ago one of the search teams took this trail and followed it out to the overlook."

"What overlook?"

Rovere pointed the flashlight at the line of trees straight ahead of them. "Behind there."

Colomba ducked her head and stepped under a tangle of branches and out onto a broad flagstone terrace bounded by a metal railing. The overlook surveyed a clearing about thirty feet beneath it, at the center of which was a stand of pine trees, holm oaks, and tangled underbrush. Parked between the narrow road and the trees were two Defenders and a police van used to transport technical equipment. The muttering roar of the diesel generator powering the floodlights could be heard, along with the echoing sound of voices.

Rovere puffed up beside her, panting like a pressure cooker. "The team halted here. It was pure luck they spotted them at all."

Colomba darted the flashlight beam over the edge, following Rovere's pointing finger.

There was a bright reflection on a solitary boulder at the edge of the darkness that at first looked to her like a plastic bag caught in a bush. When she trained the beam directly on it, she realized that it was a pair of white-and-blue gym shoes dangling from the branch of a bush, slowly twisting in the air. Even from that distance, she could see they were small, a child's size nine or ten at the most.

"So the boy fell down here?" Colomba asked.

"Look closer."

Colomba did, and then she saw that the shoes weren't simply tangled in the bush, the laces had been knotted together. She turned to look at Rovere. "Someone hung them there."

“That’s right. Which is why the team decided to go down. Go this way,” he said, pointing to the lane. “But be careful, it’s steep. One of the men twisted his ankle.”

Rovere went down ahead of her and Colomba followed, her curiosity piqued in spite of herself. Who’d put those shoes there? And why?

A sudden gust of wind sprinkled her with drops, and Colomba jumped, her lungs contracting. *That’s enough panic for today, okay?* she told herself. *When I get home, I can have a nice fat attack, and maybe another good cry to go with it. Just not now, please.* Who she was talking to, she couldn’t say. All she knew was that the atmosphere of that place was starting to twist her nerves; she wanted to get out of there as quick as she could. They made their way past the line of trees until they emerged onto a steep embankment, dotted with thorn bushes and underbrush, and surrounded by a number of large rocks arranged in a semicircle. Standing around one of the boulders were a dozen people, including Franco De Angelis and Deputy Chief Marco Santini of the Central Investigative Service. Two guys in white jumpsuits were photographing something at the base of the boulder, but Colomba couldn’t see what it was. Their chest patches displayed the emblem of the Violent Crime Analysis Unit, and suddenly Colomba understood everything, even if deep down she’d known it the whole time. She didn’t work on missing persons cases, after all; she worked on murders. She went over. The rock cast a sharp, dark shadow over a shape huddled on the ground. *Please don’t let it be the boy,* Colomba thought. Her silent prayer didn’t go unanswered.

The corpse belonged to the mother.

She’d been decapitated.