

Montegiallo

The town was as still as old bones. Brian lowered his window and a lemon-scented warmth filled the vehicle. The tyres of the taxi echoed strangely off the stone walls and squeaked like birds on tight stone-paved corners. They hit some cobbles, which widened from a hemmed-in alley into a wedge-shaped, open market space with closed and dark roller-shuttered shops along one side. The taxi stopped behind a silver Mercedes saloon parked haphazardly across the only shopfront that was shutterless. The lights through the windows of the real estate office – whose window said: Agenzia Immobiliare Ideale – made the rest of the square look even darker. As Brian was settling the taxi fare, a man came out. He was barrel-chested, around sixty years of age, and wore a grey suit jacket, jeans and an open collar that was filled with a cravat.

‘*Signor* Chapman? I am Franco Messina.’ Franco shook Brian’s hand with both of his large paws. As Brian looked around, Franco put his head into the cab and said a few words to the driver.

The glass office door opened again and a serious-looking woman holding two bundles of keys came out and locked the door using one set. Daughter, not wife maybe, thought Brian. But he remembered a former Italian prime minister who was always surrounded by bikini-clad nineteen-year-olds, so possibly things worked differently in Italy. She was slightly younger than Brian’s thirty-nine in any case, or was his age but had looked after herself better. She was elegantly dressed in a

brown silk blouse, with a matching skirt and boots.

For some reason the word for skirt, *gonna*, came to his mind. And the word for woman, *donna*. *Good old Mrs Calalesina! A donna in a gonna*, he thought, and laughed quietly. The woman stared at him and it was immediately clear he should stop doing that.

‘Mr Chapman,’ she said, giving him a brief, businesslike smile. ‘I am Viviana Messina. Welcome to Montegiallo.’

‘*Grazie*,’ he said too loudly, and after the bubbling smoothness of the pair’s Italian honed vowels, his Australian accent bounced off the walls like a dying raven.

Viviana opened the back door of the Mercedes and handed him a stack of packages.

‘Ahh, my sheets and towels.’

‘OK, we go.’

‘We walk?’

‘We walk. Very near.’ Franco led the way.

The pair had a brief conversation which Brian couldn’t follow. He wasn’t sure if his poor Italian was to blame or if they were speaking in an impenetrable Sicilian dialect.

Boxed street lamps fixed on the walls were just one of the things that gave the town a medieval feel. Burning torches wouldn’t have seemed out of place. They followed a curving street. They were all curving streets. Their shadows bent and flickered across the stone curves, arches and steps. The few lights showing were gold. Everywhere was the yellow scent of citrus. In less than a minute, Brian was completely disorientated. Each dark curve was the same as the last, rising with each step. In five minutes they reached a small *piazza*, which could have been the one photographed from his balcony. The same old-style lamps, but now on ornate metal poles, shed uneasy light on benches and the darkened stone buildings. Tree roots were pushing up the stone blocks, buckling across the ground. They looked like creatures from the underworld elbowing their way to the surface. Brian realised

that this description, although accurate as far as it went, would have received some red pen from him on a Year Eleven's essay.

Nice writing, Hannah, but overdone descriptions can distract from narrative. Consider revising. BC.

That might be all very well on the page, but in person, it was impossible to shake off the ominous theatricality of the location. Montegiallo *was* overwritten.

They came to a chipped enamel sign. 'Piazza Spirito Santo'. Below that, some metal lettering bolted straight to the wall. 'Bar Limone'.

'Ahh, Bar Limone?' queried Brian, peering at the building.

'It is a, ahh,' Franco turned back to Viviana, '*incantevole?*'

'Delightful. Charming,' she said brusquely. The place looked anything but delightful and charming.

As they crossed the square, Brian looked up and around to find his balcony, but the contrast between this shadow world and the vivid blue of the daylight photographs was too difficult to piece together. Two out of three buildings in the *piazza* were in darkness and it was only the lightness of the stone that gave the park lanterns anything to reflect off. The air was like lukewarm water. Only patches of stars showed the gaps between black branches.

On the opposite corner to the bar, they stopped. Franco used his phone torch to illuminate the front door. A new lock looked incongruous next to the huge lion's head doorknocker. The lock was the only thing on the building – in fact in the whole town – that didn't look five hundred years old. Brian stepped back, and Franco obliged by shining the light across the rest of the exterior. The shadows of the iron railings moved across the upper level like the scales of a snake. The photographs had not conveyed the proportions. His house looked double the size of the neighbouring building, as far as he could see in the darkness.

‘Tch,’ clicked Viviana, annoyed, and Franco moved the spot of light back to the lock while the correct key was finally found.

Brian would have been disappointed if the door had *not* creaked spookily as it opened. Viviana pushed it wide and strode straight in. Franco gestured for him to follow her, and he stepped into his new home.