

A Study in Revenge: Chapter One

The opening chapter. Six weeks into her stay at a rented villa in Piedmont, Sally Clarke prepares to set in motion a plan years in the making.

Dawn in Piedmont. The sky a washed-out rose colour. Mist hanging low over the Langhe Valley in ragged wisps like something that had caught on the estate's tall cedar trees. Standing at the full-length bay windows with a cup of strong, black coffee, Sally Clarke admired the autumn landscape and her own elevated view of it. It had crossed her mind to make an offer on the villa – one that would prove difficult to turn down – but she had finally fought off the temptation. Before she rewarded herself, and retreated into solitude, there was dangerous work to do.

Having rented Casa Vitelli for the last six weeks, she'd mostly kept to one wing of the large property. And apart from a weekly shopping trip in the rental car, she'd ventured no further than its vast acreage. It was, Sally realised, an almost ghostly existence. And, as with a ghost, she'd found herself wandering the centuries-old hallways at strange times of the night, tangled up in the past, unable to shake off the curse of it. But there was to be no wailing, moaning, or dragging of heavy chains behind her. What Sally Clarke had committed herself to was a surgical haunting. A calm, collected act of vengeance that was about to strike.

Turning away from the windows, she approached a low table and set her cup down on it. Then she lifted the lid on her laptop and brought up iPlayer to continue streaming yesterday's lunchtime concert from Wigmore Hall. Biber's Mystery Sonatas, now culminating in the last of the series. As with the earlier pieces, this one expressed a strangely meticulous passion. The tone of the violin conveying an emotion that was both feverish and yet exact. The music also recalled Sally's regular attendance at the same venue during her happiest days in London. At a time when the city had looked like repaying her love for it with the life of which she'd long dreamt.

Next to the laptop stood a tarnished candlestick and a box of matches. After lighting three white candles from a single flame, Sally picked the ornament up by its base and carried it across the floor, scattering the gloom ahead of her. She held it before that large, ominous installation of documents tacked to the far wall: names, faces, data points, body scans, bank accounts; aspects of finance, health, career, social existence. Taken together, the documents represented the dark cloud hanging over one man's life without his knowledge. A devastating paper trail that described his next few months in terrible detail. The painful descent that awaited him as he completed his fall from grace.

Sally took another step closer to stand inches from the wall's surface with the air of an expert studying brushstrokes. But artistry was not the issue, only whether or not the design was fit for use. It was a last chance to consider the plan's outward appearance before packing up and leaving later in the day. They would all need to come down, these telling documents, and become fuel for the great stone fireplace in the neighbouring room. Not that she needed a memory aid, having sunk thousands of hours into the plan's creation. The entire project had been committed to mind, to the point where she could summon any part of it at will.

After examining the wall, Sally put the candlestick on the floor, returned to the bay windows, and opened them as wide as they would go, letting in the morning air. And with it, a severe chill. Then, stripping bare, she stepped outside onto the damp grass, advancing into the cold as if she'd seen off its

challenge once and for all. The balls of her feet soaked in an instant by the dew. Her ears registering the half-hearted bark of a neighbour's wolfhound, off in the distance. Sally's eyes trained on the swimming pool a short way down and to her right.

As her wet feet struck the stone flagging, she broke into a run, geared up for the dive, and gave herself over to it. Making a blade of her body, she pierced the placid, unbroken surface. Narrowing its point of entry, the better to slip clean below. Then, as always, the abrupt shock to the system, her vital signs alarmed by the sharp descent. The splash sounding in her ears, somewhere above, like a great delayed explosion. In answer, she kicked out at these freezing sensations, her body fighting clear of them with deft, practised movements. Underneath the water, methodical as a wave, Sally Clarke propelled herself forwards. It was symbolic, even now, the swimmer's skilful assurance. A far cry from the moment when she'd surrendered to the river, asking that it swallow her life up.