

**BAY OF
THIEVES**

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ZAFFRE



First published in the UK in 2024 by
ZAFFRE
An imprint of Zaffre Publishing Group
A Bonnier Books UK company
4th Floor, Victoria House, Bloomsbury Square, London, WC1B 4DA
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-83877-862-0
Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-83877-866-8

Also available as an ebook and an audiobook

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Zaffre is an imprint of Zaffre Publishing Group
A Bonnier Books UK company
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk



Prologue

Roquebrune-Cap-Martin

THE SECURITY GUARD GRASPED THE dog's lead and prepared for another sweep of the property.

It was 5 a.m., the sky a wash of pale blue although the sun had not yet risen above the hills. In another hour his shift would be finished and Milos would head home to his apartment in Ventimiglia, a town just over the Italian border and part of the coastal sprawl that stretched from Marseille to Messina. He took a drag of his cigarette and the smoke stung his throat, a bracing hit against the pure morning air. He whistled softly to the dog, then began his circuit, clockwise this time around the perimeter.

It had been another warm night and there had been some activity on the beach at the eastern end of the property just before 2 a.m. Two drunk tourists had clambered into the sea from the rocks below the old architect's place. They must have scaled the hurricane fence that ran along the railway line. Milos had heard the soft pop of a cork then laughter as he surveyed them from the balustrade, their voices amplified by the water. They spoke in French but Milos's was limited and he had strained to make anything out as he watched the woman strip off. The moonlight glowed on her skin and made a silhouette of her naked body as she lowered herself in off the rocks and then

walked along the pebbles with the man. Milos waited until they were in the water again before letting the dog off the lead.

‘Make sure no one swims on the beach in front of the house,’ Amir had told Milos on his first day at the villa two months ago.

Amir had pointed to the restaurant at the far end of the shingle, beneath the steps that led to the road. Among his other instructions, Amir told Milos that was the place for public bathing.

‘People think they have all kinds of rights over this beach just because they’re locals. But this is my property and I say who swims here.’

Milos knew Amir was wrong and that although it didn’t seem like it, there was no such thing in France as a truly private beach. Milos nodded in agreement though because Amir had the money and he was the boss. Money wrote the rules on the Côte d’Azur and the real locals were those who understood this.

That was back in May and Amir was no longer there. Milos had only worked at the villa for a week before the security company sent him to another estate in Antibes after its owner, a Russian businessman, was sanctioned. Milos had stayed in Antibes guarding the empty estate and this was his first time back to Roquebrune since then. Milos had heard that Amir had been sanctioned too and that the villa had changed hands. He noticed a lot of other things had changed since May, but that was nothing strange. When new owners took over these large properties they usually brought in teams of builders and workmen to fix them up – altering the gardens and the bathrooms, changing the location of the driveways and the helipad. Each owner needed to put his own stamp on a place even though it had never been anything less than perfect.



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Milos had worked along this coast for several years and he knew how it went. After the new owners had finished renovating, there would be a flurry of activity and parties. Limousines backed up night after night, helicopters coming in with glamorous guests. This would continue until one day, without warning, the owners would disappear and the place would be shut down again. Milos used to imagine this happened because the owners had become bored, that they'd found better places to go – their yachts, the Caribbean, the Balearics or Bali.

This year had been more difficult than usual and instead of holding one job the whole season, Milos had to follow the work. Many of the luxury villas on the Côte d'Azur were empty now because travel bans meant their owners couldn't visit France anymore. A lot of properties had been sold in anticipation of this and for fear of the market collapse that might follow. Locals were concerned that the absence of Russians meant the absence of cash, but they needn't have worried: there was always money in the world for the Côte d'Azur. If it wasn't the Russians it would be someone else and in the meantime, Milos's job was to guard the empty villas. To him they were like ghost ships that had washed up on shore, their vacant rooms still glowing with chandeliers and bustling with uniformed staff. In the kitchens the champagne remained chilled. Food was still purchased and chefs retained in case of an owner's surprise return.

Amir's villa, Casa di Stelle, was one of the biggest houses on the Cap-Martin peninsula. There was a new resident now – a woman Milos had not yet seen. She must be somebody important though as there were two other guards that looked after the place besides himself, plus a staff of eight – a cleaner, two maids, a butler, a chef, two bodyguards and a driver. Inside the villa



there was artwork, antiques and jewellery and it all needed to be protected and polished.

Milos descended the narrow staircase at the edge of the garden and opened the gate to the beach. He gazed along the pebbles to where he had watched the couple lay last night. A gentle tide was coming in, soft waves lapping the shoreline, clinking the stones against each other.

Milos picked up a half-empty bottle of champagne. The sun had not yet touched it and it was still cool. Milos chuckled to himself as he remembered the couple's panicked swim to the other end of the beach. The dog was trained to bark from the water's edge, to keep the beach in front of the villa empty, but not to follow people into the sea nor chase them along the beach. Perhaps the couple had walked naked up the steps to the road and flagged a taxi, or sought refuge in the restaurant. He didn't think they would have dared walk all the way back past the villa again to retrieve their clothes from the rocks.

Milos was still smiling when he returned to the property. The sun shimmered now above the hills, flooding the valley with luminous colour, making pink scars of the limestone cliffs in the forest above Roquebrune. He continued his circuit, threading his way towards the villa past the pool. Beneath his boots fine blades of emerald grass had been mown to bowling-green perfection. Up ahead there was a vast gazebo and to the right classical statues and potted palms surrounded a large rectangular *bassin*, which sat drained and awaiting destruction. The new owner wanted a more modern aesthetic and had started work on an infinity pool perched on an outcrop overlooking the beach. A digger had arrived three days ago and had already excavated two wide trenches along the front boundary wall.



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The dog was alert now, pulling at the leash, its nostrils twitching with the morning smells. Milos wound the chain tight around his fist, pulling the animal in close but something had caught its attention beyond the frogs, the cats and the freshly turned earth.

Milos was about to discipline the dog when he saw something near the gazebo that changed the tone of a sprinkler as it rotated past. As he drew closer he faltered. It was the body of a woman, slumped on the grass, ragged and wet. Her chest was unmoving but there were deep wounds that ran from her shoulders across her breasts. Her head was at an unnatural angle, a black rope ostentatiously coiled around her throat. Her face had been slashed too, all red and bloated from the rope and half covered by her wet and matted hair, the gashes peeling open.

Milos ordered the dog back and walked over to where she was, the water from the sprinkler hissing around him, running down his hair and face, drenching him. His first thought was that this was the woman from the beach, but she wasn't naked. The lower part of her body was covered in a fine silk fabric, stained with blood spread thin by the water. A pale arm stretched out on the grass above the woman's head, as if she had been waving for help from something in the sky.

He bent down to check her pulse, averting his eyes from her face. Then he shook his head, stepped back from the arcs of water and crossed himself. Milos stared at the sun and said a prayer for the woman, cursing the thing that had brought her to this place and allowed this to happen.

He lit a cigarette and then spoke quietly into his phone.

