

PART I

THE CRISIS

Autumn

CHAPTER 1

HANDSOME AND SIMPATICO

CHAPTER 2

DO I SHOOT, OR NOT?

CHAPTER 3

NAZIS, STASI, SOVIETS, SATAN

CHAPTER 4

ISO ZHU-NYAN: WHO ARE YOU?

CHAPTER 5

THE ROTTEN SOUL OF EUROPE



Ukraine

HANDSOME AND SIMPATICO

Pierre Giorgio shivers. In her sleep, Martha has pulled the sheet away. The bedroom is still dark, light just fingering the edges of the window. A neon circle over the pub across the street staggers on and off, like a tired stripper waiting for the last set to end.

Turn off the damned sign, he thinks.

Bright red on green, green on red. BAR ZANZI BAR. A light-house display, alternate bands of color circling the bed. Blood and hope.

Time to get moving, looking for ideas. Big news and heavy situations. It's how he makes a living. No, a life, doing what he was born for. *Not an ego thing,* he tells himself. *It's about living up to expectations.*

No detours. Except Martha.

"Why?" He asks himself the question again.

Martha is his opposite. An academic who spends her days searching for - what?

"Meaning," she says.

"I chase stories."

"*Sturm und Drang,*" she says.

"I want facts. Hard evidence. Action."

They are opposites. Which is why he keeps coming back. Back to her apartment near the Kurfürstendamm, rushing, unarmed, into her causes. Into her bed. She isn't a threat. Martha Husslung, professor at Freie Universität Berlin, isn't out to hurt anyone. Except, maybe, herself.

He knows the type. Martha is an intellectual. She rages against injustice, delicate frame shaking, wide eyes bent on some solution Pierre G knows no one else would take seriously.

“We must act,” Pierre G tells her, pushing back the hair pasted to her temple.

She shakes her head.

Martha is at the university to research Europe’s woes, to study its failures: wars, genocides, rivalries, the weight of history, and now its decline.

“Decay, it’s better to say.” Her mission is to write and explain - not to change. Like a physician, she examines Europe’s comatose body. Vital functions almost flat. Her duty is to establish the causes.

She is certain that Europe’s barbarization is spiritual and intellectual.

He thinks the opposite. *No fall. No collapse. The European crisis is a transformation. For the better.*

She has a reputation to make. A big one. Maybe as important, in its own way, as his.

How can we know, he wonders, and not act?

Not a question an intellectual would ask. She would rather compare today’s European decline with that of the Roman Empire. Inevitable. Lasting another millennium.

Pierre G earns his living at the European News Network, the old-fashioned way, working 24/7, laser-focussed on the news, never too tired, busy, or self-important to do what someone else can’t or won’t.

Handsome and simpatico, an intern at 21, junior reporter at 23. A quarter century later Pierre G is the network’s chief international correspondent. He keeps his hand in, and his boots on the ground. He also regularly anchors the financial programs at ENN Int’l, the largest, most prestigious private TV network on the old continent.

His great reputation? He deserves it.

Not just because he outperforms the competition, but because he out-thinks the rivals thanks to his unbeatable sense of intuition. His missionary zeal doesn’t go unnoticed. One ENN associate, tired of Pierre G’s passionate lectures on Europe, starts calling him ‘the conscience of Europe,’ a facetious tag the network’s marketing department instantly turns into brand-issimo by using it to plug the newscaster’s reports.

“Good evening, Europe...” Pierre G intones to millions of view-

ers, his trademark smile meant to assuage the growing euro-phobia among them, his choice of greetings his way of continuing in the tradition of illustrious broadcasters. Edward R. Murrow. Walter Cronkite. When they opened their mouths, out came the voice of the people. Then the great competitors like BBC and CNN.

Pierre G, the new European – everybody’s friend, open-minded, caring, and eternally optimistic—wants to do more than comment on Europe and its future. He wants to build it.

A tough challenge. The horrors of the last century finished, not forgotten. The financial alarm over, turned into prolonged stagnation. Unemployment sky-high, but boat-loads of migrants still landing daily looking for bread. National rivalries receding, common purpose nowhere in sight. A continent undergoing transformation, its back turned against the U.S. and Russia. Against China, of course, the big commercial threat.

Never mind.

Pierre G tells himself that’s why he’s at ENN. To speak, not just for contemporary Europeans, but for generations lost to indiscriminate slaughter, massive hardships, attacks coming from all sides. To make sense, not out of the past, but of the future.

Two millennia of continuous, brutal, internecine combat. Among nations. Within nations.

“The story of this continent,” Martha says.

He refuses to accept the descent into oblivion.

“Scroll back a single century,” she adds. “Two world wars. 100 million killed, countless wounded and maimed. Entire populations displaced, homeless, penniless, broken.”

“For what?”

Not progress. Not freedom. Bloodlust, greed, and the wish to pound the world into dead, iron submission. Those were the drivers, the virus that lies dormant now, but is never truly gone.

Piedmont, 1944

World War II. Pierre G’s family lives its consuming terrors. Play your cards wrong and you are shot, gassed, tortured or raped any minute, anywhere, by anyone.

His mother's family is French. "Savoyard!" she would shout. From the town of Chambery in the foothills of Mont Blanc, the continent's geographical centre, and its highest point. His father's people hail from Piedmont, in Italy, just across the border from Savoy, where the Alpine sun ripens the vines and provides la famiglia Bosco, premier red wine producers, with a good living.

A cosmopolitan bunch – educated, well-travelled, well-read. Lots of art and literature in the family. Above all, politics. Yes, politics: parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, each with his or her own opinion, world view, political leaning.

But tolerance is not a useful war-time tool. Taking sides is.

For half a decade. Chaos. Violence. Fragmentation. Throughout the continent. Across Italy. Within families.

Left, right, nazis, fascists, monarchists, communists, socialists, Catholics, Jews, dozens of partisan groups - enemies today, enemies forever. From the Alps to Sicily. Locals gunning one another. Fritz, the occupier, killing anything, everything that moves. And then Johnny, from Gary, Indiana, who, when he finally lands in Sicily, just wants to push everybody back where they belong, wherever the hell that is, so that he, who has nothing to do with this stinking European mess, can just go home.

There are plenty of sides in war. None of them produces happy endings. For sure not in the Italian boot, not in the Bosco family. Not during World War II.

His grandparents' home is ransacked several times during mopping-up actions. Belligerents on both sides are convinced that someone suspicious is hiding there: a Jew, a deserter, or perhaps just the parents of young men fighting on the wrong side.

One of his father's young cousins never returns from the Russian front. Years after the war, some returning soldier says the cousin died of starvation in a Soviet camp in 1947, having languished as a prisoner of war long after the conflict had ended. Against all international laws.

On the same spring day in 1944, Pierre G's aunt Maria becomes the proud recipient of a university degree in biology and a Beretta 34, a graduation gift from comrades in Torino. Weeks later, after joining a group of Catholic insurgents, Maria is seized by communist partisans. She is executed not long after the Feast Day of Santa Maria, a stone's throw from same kitchen garden where Pierre G's

mother sends him 30 years later to pull basil and pick tomatoes.

A teenage uncle, Gian Battista, bikes home from school past a few German NCO's, *Unteroffiziere*, drinking beer outside a local bar. Laughing, they lunge at the boy, turn his pockets inside out, craziness closing in when a Sergeant reaches for a P-38 lying on the table next to his drink. The pistol, with its double-action trigger, is loaded, hammer down. They find tobacco rolled in an anti-Nazi handbill. "It is proof, *Das reicht!*" they say as they separate the boy from his bicycle, press him against the rocky wall and discharge a 9 mm slug into his brain.

Pierre G's father, imprisoned first by the Germans at the Ludwigshafen camp and then by the French in Chambery, by the war's end is a thin cinder of a man, who manages, somehow, to float up from a conflagration that still smolders, still threatens to set his son's new Europe on fire.

Kurfürstendamm, before dawn

Enough. The neon sign is off. Pierre G sits up and reaches for his robe.

Martha shifts, still asleep, one small hand sliding toward his side of the bed. The light is stronger now, teasing out the delicate lines of an extraordinary face.

He can't look away.

It occurs to him, cold, tired and out of place most of the time in this bohemian bolt-hole in Berlin, that she has bewitched him. An idea he would never admit to out loud. To anyone.

Martha is lost in a time and place where she does not belong.

Pierre G knows this. When he was 16, his mother took him to the Musée Condé at the Chateau de Chantilly, outside Paris. There he saw for the first time the delicate face that rests on the pillow now, right next to him. Years later, a grown man, he is enchanted by the same beauty, this time at the Galleria Uffizi in Florence - hazel-into-blue eyes, the white, white skin, and the body, grown voluptuous.

Simonetta Vespucci, 15th century muse.

Martha Hasslung, 21st century intellectual.

Pierre G carries both images as cell phone wallpapers.

Simonetta, the most beautiful woman in Florence, Botticelli's Venus, a pale, glistening girl on the half-shell, who, at 22, dies from pulmonary tuberculosis, and whose funeral cortege draws thousands of mourners, including her reputed lover, Giuliano De Medici, broken-hearted, into the streets of Renaissance Italy. The 'Venus Rising from the Sea', Pierre G knows, is Botticelli's masterpiece. The artist, it is rumored, is so besotted with his model that his only wish is to be buried one day beside her. When he dies 34 years later, an old man, it is to Simonetta that they carry him.

Good story, the newsman thinks.

But when Pierre G looks at Martha, resting on the pillow, his mind ricochets back to the profile of Simonetta at the Musée Condé, '*Portrait de femme dit de Simonetta Vespucci*' by Piero di Cosimo. A unique woman, actually 'without equal' according to the Renaissance poet Angelo Poliziano. The frail, left-facing teenage Cleopatra, bare-breasted, asp coiled around the long, alabaster neck, the heavy crown of thick red-gold hair pointing the viewer to the always-present tension between desire and death. The anxiety that comes from wanting the pleasures of this life plus the rewards of the next.

Forget the metaphor. Pierre G isn't an egghead. He threw his lot with the common people too many years ago. He doesn't care how many trees fall in the forest with no one there to hear them. It's the ones he hears go bang! big-time, first-hand, that make the evening news.

But he does remember this. It's the neo-Platonists – Intro to Philosophy at *Cal* in Berkeley, where he completed his undergraduate studies – who best explain Botticelli's Venus, Simonetta Vespucci, and, in the end, even Martha.

Especially Martha. It is through the attraction to life, through the port of earthly pleasure, that men are drawn finally to an understanding of divine love.

"If you want me, Pierre," Martha says, "then you have to want what I stand for, too."

Simonetta, beautiful and erotic, luscious and supremely desirable, waits patiently on the wall of the *Musée Condé* for the serpent bite that might lead her lovers, if they are wise, to an insight long discounted by Pierre G's secular constituency. She will sacrifice her young, lovely life to lead men to a vision of the Good.

Martha. Another honey-trap, with an advanced university degree and an unshakeable conviction that good and evil are forces to be reckoned with, even in this hard, new world. She grows up an underground Catholic in East Germany. Nazis, Commies: these forces are all the same to her – and still very alive. *In fact*, she fears, *my country may re-emerge as a sinister power in a united Europe.*

Her love for Pierre G? When she is not researching Europe's woes, she wants to redeem this fast-paced, top European news-caster from the fanatic illusion that the old continent has a united and prosperous future.

Definitely time to go, he thinks. Get dressed, before she wakes up and zeroes in with those hazel-into-blue eyes.

He pauses at the window. Touches the glass.

No more clients crawling out of BAR ZANZI BAR.

Pierre G heads for the shower. He has a traveler's body, tall, lean, muscular, a lilt that always draws looks from the person next to him at the bar, on the street, at the movies. He runs his fingers through the thick, curly hair even the ENN make-up crew can't make right.

Focus on the story, PG. Yesterday's interview with Vladimir Tuman, Ukraine's Minister of Finance – a privatization gone sour, money-laundering on a grand scale. Billions. Pierre G spends the better part of an hour playing 'Twenty Questions' with the guy before his cameraman John switches his Sony betamax off. This Minister has a lot to say – just not to Pierre G.

Sitting on the side of the bed, he grabs his cell phone, runs a search, keywords Ukraine/Vladimir Tuman/finance minister/scandal...

Nothing in the news.

No one else has the story. Not even close.

His producer Jerry will want big numbers, big names, allusions to possible jail time.

Pierre G needs, and can offer, more. The banks aren't alone in this – international mafias, complicit government officials are involved. Systemic looting. Oligarchs bleeding the country. Russia trying hard to repossess Ukraine. But will ENN let him say it?

The EU needs to come down hard on money laundering... this might be just the tip of the iceberg.

Maybe not. Who knows.

Tuman's more likely to get a 180-second spot. In fact, the spin could go either way - keep the network's options open. *Maybe Tuman is onto something. Perhaps he's nuts. How to find out which?* The newscaster's eternal question.

Pierre G must find more hard evidence, before ENN fills the evening menu with news-lite: East-West tensions, violence in the Middle East, crooked politician arrested in Italy, opposition activists beaten up in Moscow, another shoot-out at an American college. European youth looking for jobs that aren't there.

Minister Tuman. Corrupt privatization in Ukraine. Better say 'looting', in a country that has wasted away since independence. He'll set the story up without any fireworks. And then, if he does get more - YouTube, Twitter, emails, a second, even a third source - he'll turn up the heat. His producer will go wild, but what the hell? Unless he can elaborate on Tuman's information, put the competition on the same scent, barking in the distance behind him, he might as well sum up the show the same way the audience will, when they click off. "Same old shit."

Vibration. It's the cell phone he just stowed in the pocket of his robe. The bright little screen recognizes the caller: Jerry, his pain-in-the-ass producer.

"Hola, buddy. What's the deal, so early in the morning?"

"This, my friend, is a special wakeup call. Unidentified commandos have grabbed a hot missile. A big, fucking rocket. For NATO it's a FROG-7, the Ruskies call it the LUNA-M. Nobody's on it but us. Yet."

"When? Where?" Pierre G moves back into the bathroom. Martha is still asleep. "A couple of days ago. In Transnistria, about 30 clicks from some shithole called Grigoriopol. Near the border between Ukraine and Moldova."

Jerry pauses. He seems to be talking to an assistant. "You can see the place on Google earth, a hole in the ground. Seriously, pal, there's no one in Grigoriopol. Many Slavs, some Tartars, and a bunch of hillbilly Germans Stalin deported to Dogpatch after the war. Non-indigenous Krauts, *capisci?*"

Pierre G pushes the bathroom door shut, and turns on the faucet. The sudden flow of water muffles his response. "Missiles in Transnistria violate international agreements," he says.

“Really? How much are we paying you, Bosco, for these sophisticated insights into foreign affairs?”

“OK, Jerry. How big is it? The rocket...”

“Shit. An SSM? Twenty, maybe twenty-five feet long. Unguided, single stage. Weighs in at three fucking tons.”

“Range?”

“600 miles, if it’s what we think ...Could be more.”

Pierre turns off the water, and hunches down on the edge of the tub.

“Is it naked, or with a payload?”

“That’s for you to find out, Bosco.”

It is too early for this kind of crap. Even from your boss. “The throw weight? Can I ask, or is that a mystery too?”

“Nah. You’re gonna love this. NATO says a Luna-M, if it’s armed, can carry 30 kilotons of TNT. The Americans say 50.”

“Fifteen kilotons were enough to obliterate Hiroshima,” intervenes Pierre G.

“Exactly. A rocket that can carry a bomb two, maybe three times that size, about to be stolen from a Russian convoy, by unknown people even a dumb ass like me knows are up to no fucking good.”

“Who intervened? U.S. Navy Seals? Israeli Shayetet-13 commandos?”

“Dunno. For you to find out.”

“A loose rocket, in Europe. Is that what you are saying?”

“Yes, buddy, yes! Maybe armed, maybe ready to blow some smug London banker, or a sheik in the Mideast, to goddamned kingdom come... Some story, huh, kid?”

Pierre G hates Jerry’s sarcasm, but admires his news sense. He knows when big-time ratings wait at the finish line.

“I had something else in mind today.”

“Well, whatever you wanted to do...”

“The Tuman story, you remember? Large scale money-laundering in Ukraine?”

“Looting in Ukraine, is that news? Well, drop that and get your ass to the scene. We booked a flight from NetJets. A Falcon 2000 is waiting for you at Tegel. Not even the prez gets such treatment. It’ll take you to Cisinou, the capital of Moldova. Departure at 8:10 a.m. Rental car already booked. Head north, to Grigoriopol. Don’t count on the GPS navigator. Apparently no roaming over there,

buddy. The Russians may have blocked the system. You'll need the cell-sat. Think Hemingway. Hell, think me."

Jerry is a native New Yorker with a BA in engineering, a Columbia J-School dropout, who couldn't wait to get to Vietnam in '68 to freelance for AP. After that, Panama, Grenada, Haiti, then Iraq and Afghanistan. Next the drug wars in Colombia and Mexico. He's been a producer at ENN, a senior management job, since 2010. And he hasn't been this excited for a long time.

"Keep your helmet on and your socks dry."

"I hear the Russians are moving part of their army from Transnistria to Crimea," says Pierre G. "By now it must be a free-for-all black market of weapons."

"Oohh, yees. Transnistria is a bang-bang shoot 'em up strip of no-man's land. Russian mobsters run the show. Ivan pays corrupt pols who pay renegade soldiers, who steal big, bad guns, or whatever, for global mafias with billions in secret accounts." Jerry pauses again. Lowers his voice. "The story could be huge, PG. International arms theft. Criminal trafficking in nuclear weapons. Cold War II may turn into World War III."

"You know me: I already feel the adrenaline..."

"OK. So here's the rest of the tale. Just the day the missile goes missing, the government of Moldova breaks up a big trafficking ring. CYA. Transnistrian scofflaws jacking off the EU for big money: trade fraud, false end-user certificates, fake country of origin. They throw the stuff on a truck, pay border officials to look the other way. Here comes the interesting part," Jerry adds, "the loose end. One guy, maybe a key mafioso, gets himself killed. Fellow named Anthal - first name, last name, dunno. Lots of cash on the body."

"These are not two separate stories, right?" asks Pierre G.

"Hard to say at this point."

"On my way. But I need a cameraman. John was with me in Ukraine the other day..."

"Forget it. This is between you and me. Ain't NATO I'm worried about, or Interpol. Or even the Russians. It's the Germans. Ya' think the Krauts, as nuts as they are about mushroom clouds, are going to let the media film any of that? Not when the story might be about a *nuclear* threat on their door step, pal. They'll kill this station if we don't play it right."

"I need evidence," says Pierre G. "What am I going to show otherwise? My notes?"

"Pack your camcorder, but watch yourself, kiddo. We're talking live ammo down there. Still gotta lot to learn if you wanna grow up to be a real correspondent."

"Sure." Pierre G presses the red off-key on the phone. "Ciao."

Just time for a quick shower, a capful of mouthwash, and a fresh shirt. Pierre G pulls on the pants he left hanging on the inside hook the night before.

Soft knock on the bathroom door. "Pierre?" Martha opens the door.

"Good morning, darling." He kisses her. Like a man who means it.

"You're leaving?" She knows the drill, and she doesn't like it.

"Listen, darling. Big story about to break. Some very bad men may have stolen Luna."

"The moon is gone? Poor lovers, what will we do without it?"

"The Russians call it that. It's a nuclear missile. Possibly armed with a nuke. Ready to go."

"Like you. All the time."

He shoves his wallet, the iPod and two smart phones into his vest pockets, picks up the shoulder duffel bag he always keeps packed. In it are the three best tools of the trade: an ultra-slim laptop, a hand-held Panasonic camcorder with wireless pinhole lenses, and an Iridium satellite phone able to provide global coverage and unlimited communication mobility. Six pounds all together.

"I'll be back, love. I always come back..."

She opens the door to the hall. "Today's our anniversary, Pierre. Thought we were going to celebrate..."

He walks the few steps to the elevator, pushes the button, and looks back at her, at Simonetta, still wrapped in her sumptuous sheet and still not happy.

She raises a pale arm, sliding it up in one languid motion along the inside frame of the entry door to her apartment. A very small smile is swimming up through her annoyance. "Oh swear not by the moon, my love, the inconstant moon..."

Agreed! Smiling back he steps inside the lift and watches its door close. *But just what would you have us swear by, Martha, in this bad, mad world?*