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Carmen Covito  
**The Red and the Dark**

a Mondadori novel

Read the first chapter



Translation by Ercole Guidi

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## CHAPTER ONE

It's him or me. I've got no choice. I've got to squish him: no way I'm gonna sleep alone with a roach bobbing about. No way! The hard part will be to catch him, he's going too fast, he's pointing to the armoire, if he gets underneath... He has turned! The moron has turned toward a little piece. He is hiding behind. But it's a small Art Nouveau piece, all legs and volutes, a feather.

"Your first time in Aleppo, is it really? then a night at the Baron is a treat you owe yourself. They are going to restore it, sooner or later: but for now, you'll see, you'll see, Grand Hôtel right out of the past, untouched, everything just like when Lawrence of Arabia used to call on as a kid," I repeat to myself imitating researcher Gentilomo's uvular 'r's. In fact. In the hall still hang the posters of the Thomas Cook & Sons, perfectly faded, and it is certain that the scratches along the big staircase are those left by the trunks of old Agatha Christie, who came here to sleep with her young archeologist husband.

But even in my single room - which is not on the first noble floor, that is on the second counting the ground floor,

but on the third, where they must have dispatched the maids and the butlers of the retinue, then, I suppose - the decor has never been touched by an idea of modification. Might the roach, too, be genuine antique? I'm going to kill him anyway.

"Instead we are booked at our usual little hovel, very neat to tell the truth, *chez Madame Olga*," just eight-hundred Syrian Liras, you know, as opposed to the forty bucks that's going to cost me for a bath in a tub with no plug, even though it's got the lion legs and the antique enamel arabesqued with runs of rust, tone over tone, with the water nice and hot. The plug I had put in myself, gloating for thinking of taking one of those universal ones along, and while I dried myself and lent a benevolent ear to a concert for drainage and plumbing that, all in all, did not clash with so crepuscular a setting, I went back to my room and turned the little switch knob. In the yellowish light, the swift and brown movement on the tiles makes me scream, almost. I hate cockroaches! And here we aren't in the field and I don't have to feign it was nothing not to seem a pain in the ass to the others. It's you and me, you lousy crasher: now I'm going to firm the towel around me, tighten my grip on my secret copy of the *Archeological Photography Guide for Dummies* and I'll whack you. First I've got to move this sort of sinuous little table with a small flap full of tiny little drawers: a dresser, perhaps. Or a writing-desk? Much nicer than the armoire and bed, though, so heavy, bulky, stuff from the Thirties, I guess... Oh. As I move the wee Art Nouveau thing from the wall, I see no track of the cockroach. There is only a pale spider; was, rather: squished and done away with; that'll teach him to lay in wait and then come out at night and explore the room and me, no thanks, no tiny little legs in my face, not here. After three nights tossing and turning in my damp sleeping sack waiting for dawn and the next toiling up and down the excavation sites, I do have the right to a peaceful sleep, don't I now? That's why we came to Aleppo, for the hard-earned Friday off. Thus I push the little piece back a-

gainst the wall and, the book ready to execute every single enemy insect, I cautiously start pulling out one little drawer after the other.

No beasts. All the receptacles are empty and clean: lined, even. Goodness knows when someone ever bothered to cover their bottom with some white paper now turned into ochre in clustered little dark stains. I look again. Under the veil of very fine dust, they appear almost as lines of writing. What do you know! I might even come up with something exciting after all. A Christie's unpublished manuscript, perhaps... I let go of the book and with both hands I pull out a drawer and I lift one of the sheets with great care. It's thin, friable, a wee bit comes off a corner, yet the paper is of a stupendous quality, filigreed, oh yes: old writing paper that with the time has become quasi transparent. That which I'm looking at holding my breath is only the back side, with a sepia-colored ghost emerging to the surface. I turn the sheet. It is indeed a letter. Written in an antiquated handwriting all curves and flourishes, with vigorous strokes that here and there cross out a line. It's in English, but I can make it out.

*Baron's Hotel, Aleppo*  
*March, 1916*

*Margaret dearest,*

*little sister, little bird. Your parcel is here, at last, and - I'm ashamed to admit it— while I was trying on those wonderful French petticoats and the absolutely perfect black dress I behaved like a debutante. Can you picture your proud big sister*

*hopping and turning all about the room like a dervish in a rapture? If I still had my pistol, I'd have shot at the ceiling for the happiness.*

*Unfortunately, the laces got seriously damaged in the trip, but let us consider ourselves lucky: the underwear combination is in excellent conditions. The truth is, I really needed it, for as if the rest weren't enough, the last rainshowers have reduced my already exiguous wardrobe to a pitiful, downright unpresentable collection of rags : and here, between Von Sanders' officers, the railway's engineers and the Pasha's staff, there are parties almost every single night.*

*By the way: the Worm is still here. As soon as he learned of my return he came on to me again, this time with a whole crate of champagne! Outrageous, don't you find? And I even had to feign I liked the compliment - you do know why. Hold on to yourself, now I'm going to spill out the worse: only after I put away all my new garb was I struck by the thought of how much precious time you must have subtracted to your duties on account of my frivolities. Don't you find me unspeakable? But it's the Orient. That's what you*

*become like, ready to exult like a child, and like a child to grow sad at the first disappointment.*

*I am sorry to hear that you, too, had to face the terrible chair of the dentist. Might this be our destiny? I should dare suppose that not by chance our family coat of arms, albeit under false pretense, does feature a bridge. But fear you not: mine, no one has ever noticed, not even at the minimum distance allowed by decency - and sometimes much closer than that - so I do not see why yours should get you upset. And now that, as I hope, I got a beautiful smile out of you, let us come to the serious stuff.*

*I beg of you, do try again. Father has got to drop me a line, or at least a telegram: I can not accept such a mistrust and obstination toward myself!*

[follows a long crossed-out sentence] *What you must at all costs get into his Antediluvian Head, is that not only do I feel, but I really Am Useful to Us All - more I can not say, you do understand, do you not? - and that even under different circumstances I should be glad to [crossed-out sentence] bind my fate to the man that Father coarsely calls "The Bedouin," and has in deed more nobility than us - but no, better*

*not touch this subject, you do know what Father is like: just tell him again that Sheikh Zafar ibn Rashid al-Aswad is persona grata to Lord C.*

*And that he must do with that much. For you only, little bird, will I add, from sister to sister, from woman to woman, that the gates of the secret garden are open and the fortress has been conquered.*

*Margaret dear! in my wandering about I have lit many fires, yet none has ever seemed to me as bright as that infernal firebrand. Would you believe it? Well, whether you believe it or not, do hurry; even I cannot hold off this situation for too long, and if Father will not get around to it, my letter of credit remains waste paper. If he does not wish to write to me, have him write his banker, at least.*

*Juliet*

But at this point I've already pulled out all the other drawers and I'm meticulously removing one sheet after the other. There are six in all: one is of a thicker and grayer paper and, oh-oh, it is written in Arabic; one is white; two more are daubed with doodles and drawings and little numbers of the type that are drawn when lost in thoughts; then a readable small sheet pops out. It seems written with the same ink and by the same hand of my first letter. I seize it eagerly. And to no purpose. It's in German.

«Cettina Schwarz?» questions me a cavernous voice. What

is it, now? Could it be that rummaging through these old papers I evoked something? Out of instinct I gather them into a little heap and I look over my shoulders, ashamed, but you never know. The room seems as before empty, my bags rest tranquil upon the bed-cover's faded flowers funereal garlands, and even the curtains hang lifeless on either side of the door-window. There isn't a breath of wind, thus my cold sweat makes perfectly sense. And then, after all, it is evident that the ghosts, despite all the hotel management's efforts, do not exist. That's it. No one's called out my name. I still had some water in my ears, or else to cause me to overhear it must have been my usual guilty conscience over the fact that I don't know German. Yet, with this family name of mine, not learning German was the only form of practicable escape, when I was at school. Then I found others, so many of those others that studying it slipped out of my mind...

«Madam Cettina Schwarz! » there you go again. No, someone's really calling me, it's the voice of a man, outside the door, and only now he is beginning to knock, the bungler. First you knock and then you call, do you not? not the other way around! And then you go on freaking people out and arousing a sense of guilt for nothing...

«Coming! », just the time to hide the papers in the nearest pocket of the handiest bag, that of the cameras, oh-oh, why did I ever do that? I've got to put the little drawers back in place, now, search for the dressing-gown, which you never find when you need it, put it on, and open I do. On the landing is a porter, bent square-like. Was he peeping at me through the keyhole? But if he must be as old as Methusalem! While taken aback I stare at his turtle-like nape and at the back of his vintage red coat, the old timer drags his feet back and forth a couple of times, simulating a heel-click. No, he wasn't peeping: it must be either advanced arthritis, or I am the object of a wery antiquated deference.

The hereafter voice, catarrhal, interspaced by shortages of breath articulating every single word-start as if written in block letters, is announcing to me down-up: «Madam



Cettina Schwarz is Awaited By The Italian Doctors In The Petit Lounge. »

The dinner with my archeologists from Parma! I've got to run... Ah, the tip. The museum-like porter has done four flight of stairs without elevator, at his age; but couldn't he phone? The tip, sure. I search in the purse of the change, then I think again and I look for the wallet of the dollars, what the hell, I can pay in heavy currency - a one-buck note - this satisfaction of hearing myself addressed with a «Thank You, Madam » as if I, too, had been a traveller with the pistols and the laces and the mysterious sheiks of a far back past.

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