

## PART 1: MONTE SOSTO

### Chapter 1

Karla Bocelli hated the painting. She had worked at it off and on during the past year and never managed to finish it. But no matter how much she disliked it, she couldn't convince herself to destroy it. It seemed to haunt her.

It was warm and muggy in early June in the south of Switzerland. Patches of mist hugged the mountains behind Lago Maggiore. Karla clasped her artist's portfolio under her arm and brushed a strand of hair from her damp forehead. She was on the way to the old part of Locarno, thinking, once again, of the troublesome picture.

She saw the car just as she stepped into the crosswalk. An old beat-up Fiat screeched to a stop within a few inches away from her. Karla jumped back and dropped her portfolio, spilling its content onto the pavement. Her heart thudded and she took deep breaths, trying to calm the queasy feeling in her stomach. *That smell. Burnt rubber.*

A young man got out of the car and stared at her, stunned. "Are you all right?"

Karla, still dazed, nodded. She bent down and began to pick up her drawings. A few pedestrians stopped but when they realized that nothing major had happened they walked on.

The driver's dark voice rose to an angry pitch. "Jesus Christ. What's the matter with you? You practically threw yourself in front of my car. I could've killed you. Are you suicidal or something?"

"I'm sorry, I wasn't watching." Karla slid the papers back into her portfolio.

"Yeah, well, that's obvious. Wake up, for heaven's sake."

His belligerent voice angered Karla, who was gradually regaining her composure. She stood up, flipped her long dark hair back over her shoulders, and faced him. "I said, I was sorry."

He was tall, broad-shouldered, and husky, with longish dark tousled hair and green eyes, which now glowered at her. He must have been her age or a little older, perhaps in his mid twenties. As Karla continued to pick up her drawings, he approached and bent down to help her.

"You're an artist?" he asked in a friendlier tone as he looked at one of the charcoal sketches.

"Yes." Karla snatched the paper out of his hand.

"I hope your pictures aren't ruined."

"What do you care? Why do you have to drive like a maniac?"

"Great," he shouted. "Now it's my fault?"

"This is a pedestrian zone, in case you haven't noticed." Karla grabbed her portfolio and stepped back onto the sidewalk. Her heartbeat had slowed to almost normal but her knees still felt wobbly.

"Do you always jump in front of moving cars without looking?" He turned around and walked away. "Airhead," he mumbled, shot her a last angry look, got into the car, and slammed the door. He revved the engine which died several times. The car finally started and he drove off, leaving a cloud of stinking smoke behind.

"Jerk. Perhaps a new muffler would help. Never heard of air pollution?" Karla crossed the street after carefully checking the road for traffic. Still shaken, she made her way through the old part of Locarno toward the art store to drop off her drawings to be framed for the upcoming opening.

Karla was a young artist whose first exhibition of her paintings and drawings opened the following Friday. The gallery belonged to a friend and patron of hers. Silvia and her husband were art lovers and devoted some of their time and money to help fledgling artists show their work.

Having recovered somewhat, Karla was able to take in the sights of the old part of this city she loved: the boutiques and small shops along the narrow cobblestone streets, the quaint houses painted in ocher, orange, and pink, the *piazas* with their pots of cornflowers and red and white geraniums, the small simple Romanesque and the more ornate Baroque churches. Karla inhaled the mixture of scents so familiar to her from her childhood when she came here often with her mother and grandmother: the smell of espresso, of grilled meat and fish as well as herbs and spices from the restaurants, stores, and coffee bars.

When Karla arrived at the gallery after dropping off her drawings at the art store, she looked through the tall shop window at the row of paintings on the wall. It was only now that the momentous event began to sink in. She was overcome by a surge of pride and excitement. *My first exhibition*. She knocked on the window. Silvia, who was already in the gallery moving chairs and folding tables, turned around and waved at her.

“So, what do you think?” Silvia stepped back and motioned at Karla’s paintings. She was a woman in her fifties with a wild mane of graying hair. Her outfit was a mixture of *femme fatale* and hippy--low-cut, tight black top and long flowery skirt.

“Great. I like the way you arranged them.” Karla studied the row of pictures. There were a few watercolor and acrylic landscapes with a calm Zen-like feel while many of her oil paintings exploded in fiery reds, yellows, and browns with a volcanic intensity. In addition, Karla had chosen a few more experimental pictures: landscapes which clashed with foreign objects, such as scrap metal, a computer sticking out of a flower. She wanted to strike a balance between paintings that might appeal to regular visitors and those that would receive more attention from art collectors.

“I hope somebody shows up.” Karla sighed. “I’ve been looking forward to this, but now I’m getting nervous. Do you really think I put the right paintings up?”

“Sure you did, they’re great. Relax.”

“The last few of my drawings should be framed and ready by Thursday,” Karla said.

“Good. I left space on the back wall for them. I ordered the snacks and the wine. So we’re ready. Don’t forget the bios. And don’t worry, the opening will be fabulous.” Silvia gave Karla a hug, enveloping her in a cloud of patchouli perfume.

By the time Karla arrived at the stone cottage she rented in the small village at the beginning of the Maggia Valley, the air had thickened. In the direction of Saint Gotthard, the mountain that divided the south from the north of Switzerland, towering heaps of dark clouds were churning, first signs of a thunderstorm.

Karla filled the espresso pot with water and finely ground coffee and set it on the stove, then went into her studio, a room with a skylight and a window facing south. The owner, an artist himself, had the skylight installed since the windows in this typical southern Swiss house were small and the lighting wasn’t good enough for painting. Sitting in front of her easel, Karla began to mix her paints. The picture she was working on was the one she had been thinking about earlier that morning when she almost got hit by the car.

The half-finished oil painting was different from her normally intense colorful landscapes. It was a stark, somber picture, almost devoid of color. It showed the stylized outline of a woman in black, a dark, lonely figure standing at the edge of the canvas who covered her face with her hands. The rest was empty space, except for a glowing spot of color at the right upper corner.

Karla had started the painting after the unexpected death of her aunt the year before. She had been Karla's only remaining blood-relative, aside from her father, who lived in Peru and whom she barely knew. Her aunt had raised Karla since she was five years old after her mother and grandmother had been killed in a car crash. She and Karla had been very close and her death had been a devastating blow.

Scanning the picture with half-closed eyes, Karla picked up a brush, dipped it in a mixture of grey and green paint, then stopped to examine the painting again. The slender, dark figure looked forlorn and lost. Not even the color in the back was comforting. It was orange-red, the sun of the evening, which had lost its warmth.

*Why do I even bother with this thing?* Frustrated with the timid and self-effacing woman in the painting, Karla tossed a sheet over it and put the picture once again into the storage room next to her studio.

The espresso pot hissed on the stove and the scent of fresh coffee filled the room and dispelled the smell of paint. Karla poured herself a cup and decided to drink it black; perhaps it would ease the tension in her head. The slight headache she had woken up with had intensified during the day, in part due to the change of air pressure before the storm and in part, perhaps, because of her tumultuous morning with the young man.

Karla stood by the kitchen window, sipping her coffee, savoring its slightly bitter taste. She tried to picture the man again, his muscular figure, his longish dark hair and, particularly, his expressive green eyes. Too bad they hadn't met under more pleasant circumstances. In spite of his angry outburst, she felt a certain curiosity about him.

A breeze kicked up and shook the azaleas in front of the house. The large creamy-white and red flowers of the horse chestnut trees swayed back and forth. Karla stepped outside. It smelled of rain, damp and musty. The meadows in front of the house were filled with blue, purple, and yellow wildflowers and down the hill the birches, ashes, and tall hazels along the river Maggia leaned into the wind.

Karla went back inside and began to prepare a canvas for a new painting. She pulled the cloth tightly across the stretcher bars with the help of canvas pliers and fastened it with staples. After covering the canvas with a base layer of gesso, she set it aside to dry. She turned on her computer and printed out a stack of bios for the exhibition.

Outside, daylight was fading fast as smoky gray storm clouds were beginning to darken the sky. After a quick dinner of soup and bread topped with cheese, Karla tried to do some sketching but nothing came of it. She was tired and her head still ached. She took an aspirin and went to bed early. Listening to the wind whooshing through the trees, she fell asleep.

Later in the night, Karla woke up drenched in sweat. The bursting of broken glass and a woman's desperate scream for help were interrupted by claps of thunder. At first, she was unable to distinguish between the noises in her dream and the sounds of reality. A whiff of burnt rubber and acid hung in the air.

Karla peeled back her down comforter and sat up, pushed herself to the edge of the bed, and lowered her feet to the floor. She brushed a tangle of hair from her wet forehead and took a deep breath. It had been the same nightmare she had suffered from since childhood, but the thunder

and lightning were real. The grandfather clock in the next room struck eleven times. She must have just fallen asleep when the thunder woke her.

Karla got up and looked out the window. Lightning lit up the sky and the shadows of clouds swept across the meadows. The trees bent over and swayed in the gusts of wind. She went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water, then sat by the window. Sipping the cold liquid, she tried to squelch the shreds of troubling images her dream had left her with: the mangled bodies, the blood, the broken glass, the fire.

“Mama?” Karla whispered into the dark. Her eyes filled with tears. “All I have of you is a scream for help. I barely even remember what you looked like.”

There was no answer, only the thunder in the distance. Karla got up and opened the door to the patio. She stepped outside as it began to rain. First, large individual drops hit her arms and face, then the clouds burst. She bent her head back, closed her eyes, and let the rain pound on her face for a few seconds, enjoying the harsh cleansing sensation. The water soaked through her T-shirt. She began to shiver and went inside, pulled off her top and grabbed a towel to dry herself. Back in bed, she listened to the now steady and peaceful sounding rain and fell asleep again.