

The Coat

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Chapter One

The Topaz Night Club, Tirana, Albania. Thursday 2nd August 2012, heavy bass lines reverberated in the night air.

Inside, eighteen-year-old twins Edita and Delvina Enja were at their favourite haunt with some of their college friends. With seminars the following day, Thursday was not a regular night but a birthday celebration prompted this visit. Despite the club's rather drab appearance there was a party atmosphere and the evening was in full swing. Pulsating rhythms and flashing lights created just the right ambience; the dance floor was crowded.

The two girls were inseparable, and identical; even their best friends had difficulty telling them apart. Both were pretty with long black hair, pale complexions and green eyes. As for many local teenage girls, Albanian fashion icon Emina Cunmulaj was their role model. They were dressed in party gear, short skirts and spangle tops; Edita was in black, Delvina, blue.

The girls were from a comparatively wealthy family. Their mother was a teacher and their father, a civil servant, worked for the ministry. The family had eschewed the traditional Muslim culture for a more secular upbringing and schooling. They would be considered liberal in their views.

As the girls danced together they attracted a lot of attention from male admirers. Two of them dressed in black leather bomber jackets were taking more than a passing interest. One of them was speaking animatedly into his mobile phone.

Around nine o'clock, the girls left the dance floor and headed for the toilets.

They walked down the dimly lit corridor at the back of the club, chatting continuously. Edita was rummaging in her handbag for her mobile phone. It wasn't a long passageway, and was adorned with posters of bands and pop stars pasted to the wall. Some were peeling off, giving the club a shabby look. To the right were the male toilets, identifiable by the smell emanating from them; to the left, the ladies' and directly in front, at the end of the corridor, was an emergency exit. They would have taken little notice of the rough-looking man who was stood in front of it, distracted as they were by conversation and the need to send text messages to their friends. Against the noise of the music they would not have heard or sensed

the two bomber jackets following them. The men took one each, grabbing them from behind, hands across the girls' mouths and noses. The girls kicked and flayed their arms but the door was opened and they were bundled out into the yard at the rear of the club and into the back of an awaiting van. Pinned down on the floor of the van, one of the men produced hypodermic needles and within seconds, the girls were asleep.

The men were jubilant, like a military exercise, a job well done. They would be well rewarded for their night's work.

Within an hour the van had arrived in the port town of Durrës. It's a town with over a quarter of a million inhabitants and a popular destination for tourists dating back to Roman times. It boasts the largest Roman amphitheatre in the Balkans. The occupants of the van, however, were not interested in ancient artefacts.

At this time of night, the area around the docks was deserted, and the van attracted little attention as it made its way to the quayside where a small fishing boat was waiting. The van parked alongside and the two bomber jackets got out and checked the coast was clear. The boat's skipper was waiting on deck next to the wheelhouse and, in a shouting whisper, urged the men to hurry up. The girls, still fast asleep, were dragged unceremoniously from the back of the van. The two men lifted them onto their shoulders and carried the girls on board up a narrow gangplank. The skipper beckoned them to follow him down a short flight of steps. He was cussing under his breath at the time it was taking. There was a door immediately in front of them. The captain opened it and the men went in. It was cramped, with just two small beds and a bucket as furnishings. Two other girls were asleep on the far bed just below a small porthole. Edita and Delvina were placed on the other, nearest the door.

The ferry crossing to Bari in Italy takes over nine hours; the fishing boat would take twelve, a lot longer than the speedboats that were used regularly until the recent clampdown by Italian naval forces. With bribery rife, transporting girls into the Italian port was not in itself a dangerous occupation; moving them to other destinations would be more problematic due to border checks.

The kidnapers left the boat and watched from their van as the gangplank was pulled in and the trawler chugged its way gently out of the harbour.

The four girls were sleeping in their cabin below deck. One of the men checked on them periodically; they would be starting to wake up in a couple of hours. For this voyage, there was a crew of three: the captain, a mate and an engineer, who was also on cooking duties. There were four gang-member passengers plus the 'cargo'. Weather was good, with just a moderate swell.

'Should dock mid-morning,' said the captain on enquiry from Georgiou, the Romanian leader of the kidnappers. The boat owner would be making considerably more money for this run than a normal fishing trip, and without the physical effort.

It was not a large vessel; the room where the girls were being kept would normally be the sleeping quarters for the crew when the boat was being used for its intended purpose. There was a galley which also acted as a communal room and the gang spent much of the journey playing cards there.

It was a warm night. All four were dressed in jeans and tee shirts, swarthy looking with dark, trimmed beards; a trademark appearance, it seemed, in their line of business. The three other members, another Romanian and two Albanians, took it in turns to check on the girls.

Below deck, it was Edita who woke first, disorientated, woozy and quickly very, very scared. She shook her sister. 'Delvina, Delvina wake up,' she said. She saw the other girls both sleeping in the next bed.

'Mmmm,' moaned Delvina. 'What is it? What's happening?'

'Wake up, wake up... I think we've been kidnapped,' said Edita.

Edita was the elder sibling, but only by a few minutes. Nevertheless, she had a dominant personality and was a much stronger character than Delvina. Edita would do all she could to protect her sister.

Both girls were disorientated, and still feeling the effect of the drug that would take several hours to wear off.

They listened to the rhythmic chug-chug of the engine and felt the sway as the boat rocked from the impact of a passing wave.

Edita tried to sit up, the room swirled. 'I feel sick,' she exclaimed, and just managed to reach the

bucket before disgorging her evening meal.

‘Urgh,’ she moaned.

Delvina slowly sat up. ‘You ok, Ed?’ she said.

‘No, not really, my head hurts,’ she replied.

‘Where are we...? And who are they?’ said Delvina looking at the two girls who were on the next bed, still sleeping.

‘Don’t know,’ said Edita, holding her head in her hands.

‘Wait, one of them’s waking up,’ said Delvina.

There was a moan coming from one of the other girls. She tried to sit up but dropped back on the bed. Gradually she opened her eyes and tried to focus. The single light in the ceiling flickered as another wave hit the boat. A swell had got up.

The girl looked at Edita and Delvina. ‘Who are you?’ she said feebly. ‘Where are we?’

‘We’re on a boat somewhere. We’ve been drugged. I think we’ve been kidnapped,’ said Edita. ‘I’m Edita, this is my sister, Delvina...Who are you?’

‘I’m Sadia, Sadia Vata,’ she groaned, and held her head.

‘Where are you from?’ asked Edita.

‘From Kavajë,’ she replied.

‘Who’s your friend?’ asked Edita.

‘Don’t know, I was at a disco, I think, but... that’s all I can remember,’ she replied.

‘How old are you?’ asked Edita.

‘Fifteen... You?’ replied Sadia.

‘Eighteen,’ said Edita.

‘What’s going to happen to us?’ said Sadia.

‘I don’t know,’ said Edita. Delvina started to cry.

Edita looked around the cabin. ‘They’ve taken our stuff,’ she said.

There wasn’t much room: the regular crew’s sleeping quarters was designed to hold six, but in bunks. The cabin had been converted to hold two beds, three-quarter size.

‘I need to pee,’ said Sadia.

‘It’s the bucket,’ said Edita. ‘It’s not pleasant, sorry.’

‘It’s ok,’ said Sadia, and she climbed over Edita and Delvina’s bed, removed her pants and stood over the bucket.

She too was dressed to party but the much-loved outfit that her mother had saved for weeks to buy for her was crumpled and soiled.

Edita and Delvina gradually got off the bed. Delvina too needed to use the bucket. Edita looked at the bed, a bare mattress with several dark stains, unmistakably blood, and others that looked like water. She put her hand to her mouth and gasped in horror as she started to comprehend their plight.

A few minutes later, they heard footsteps, then the door unlocking. The three girls moved to the corner; Edita standing in front of the other two protecting them.

The door opened. The girls stared at the man in a state of terror. He was young, mid-twenties, and in different circumstances the girls would have found him attractive; but not now.

He spoke in Albanian.

‘Ah, you are awake. That is good... Keep quiet and do not cause trouble and you will not be hurt. Wait, I will get you water,’ he said.

Before the girls could say anything, he left the cabin and went to inform the rest of the gang.

‘Georgiou, the girls, they are awake,’ he said. He went to the fridge and removed a litre bottle of water.

‘Good, Etrit, yes give them some water, we must look after them. They must be in good condition when we hand them over,’ said Georgiou.

Etrit returned to the cabin and unlocked the door. The girls were still huddled in the corner with Edita in front.

‘Here, I bring water for you,’ said Etrit, and handed Edita the plastic bottle.

‘Where are you taking us?’ said Edita, her voice trembling with fright.

‘Do not worry. You will be well looked after if you do not cause trouble,’ he said, and passed her the water. Edita handed it to Delvina, who started to drink.

Etrit watched.

‘Your friend is not awake yet?’ he said looking at the still sleeping girl on the second bed.

‘Stay there,’ he said, and went to look at her. She was on her side facing away from the others towards the far wall of the cabin.

Etrit turned her over. There was vomit all around her mouth, her eyes were wide open.

He cursed and rushed out of the cabin, locking it behind him.

Edita looked at Delvina then Sadia.

‘Oh my god, she’s dead,’ said Delvina, putting her hand to her head in horror.

‘It looks like it,’ said Edita, and hugged her sister.

A few moments later, the door opened again. Georgiou entered, went to the girl and felt for a pulse. The three others were still in the corner.

‘Here, give me a hand,’ he barked to Etrit. He spoke in English, the common language.

Georgiou sat the girl up and put her over his shoulder in a fireman’s lift.

‘Shut the door,’ he said to Etrit, and left the cabin. The girls were trying to console themselves.

Georgiou carried the girl into the galley, where the others gathered around.

‘Is she dead?’ asked Constantin, the other Romanian.

‘Yes,’ said Georgiou. ‘Here help me. We must remove her clothes.’

They stripped the unfortunate teenager and put her clothes in a plastic bag.

‘Give me a hand,’ said Georgiou, and the men carried the girl on deck and threw her over the side. It was two a.m. and pitch black. The boat was in the middle of the Adriatic; her body would never be found and her grieving parents would never learn what had happened to their beloved daughter. She would be just another of ‘the missing’. Beer bottles and other bits of rubbish were added to the carrier bag containing her clothes. Enough weight to send it dropping gently to the seabed.

‘Here, Etrit, get rid of this,’ said Georgiou. As the youngest member of the group he was used to getting the dogsbody jobs.

He took the plastic bag up the stairs to the deck and dropped it over the side; an ignominious fate for a once-prized possession.

Back in the cabin, Edita was trying to console the other two. Meanwhile, Georgiou was beginning to count the cost of the girl’s demise.

‘Five thousand Euros, that is how much we lose now,’ he said. ‘Who gave her the drug?’ he added.

‘It was me,’ said Constantin. ‘I gave her the same as the others,’ he said. ‘She must have been drinking.’

‘But they were at a party. It is what they do,’ said Georgiou.

‘But how was I to know?’ said Constantin.

‘Next time we must get them without drugs. It is too dangerous. We lose too much money,’ said Georgiou.

Constantin had been admonished. In other gangs he might well have been shot for his error.

‘What do we do?’ said Etrit. ‘We are supposed to deliver four.’

‘They will be one short this trip. We will have to make extra next time,’ said Georgiou.

‘Here, see to the girls,’ and Georgiou produced a holdall. ‘You know what to do.’

Etrit went back to the cabin with the holdall and unlocked the door.

The girls were back in the corner of the room against the wall.

‘What have you done with her?’ said Edita.

‘Your friend is with the fishes,’ said Etrit.

The girls gasped.

‘What do you want from us?’ asked Edita.

‘You are going on a special journey,’ said Etrit. ‘You are to wear these.’

He pulled out four tracksuits from the holdall and four pairs of slip-on sandals.

‘We are not doing it,’ said Edita defiantly.

‘You will do it,’ said Etrit. ‘Or we will put you to sleep again and you see how dangerous that can be,’ he added.

Edita looked at Delvina, who was starting to cry again. Sadia just seemed oblivious to what was going on and started undressing; reluctantly, the sisters did the same. Etrit watched as the girls took off their clothes.

‘Put them in here,’ he ordered, ‘quickly.’

The three bundled their party dresses and shoes into the holdall, then put on the tracksuits.

‘Now you sleep,’ said Etrit. ‘We have a long way to go.’

Etrit left them and locked the cabin.

‘What are we going to do?’ said Delvina. Sadia was starting to shake uncontrollably.

‘Sadia,’ said Edita, ‘Sadia.’

Sadia looked at Edita but her eyes were not registering.

Edita hugged her and Delvina. ‘I don’t know what is going to happen but if we stay strong we will get through this,’ she said.

‘Here, drink some more,’ said Edita, and passed the bottle to Sadia. She took the bottle; her hands were shaking so much she had difficulty in controlling it. She passed it to Delvina. There was little left now.

Edita, in desperation, tried the cabin door handle; she knew it would be futile.

‘We are locked in,’ said Edita. ‘There’s nothing we can do. We should rest, we will need all our strength,’ she added.

All three were still suffering hangovers; it would take a day at least for the relaxant to completely leave their system, and in a few minutes they were asleep again. It was not a comfortable sleep; anxiety mixed with narcotics produced frightening nightmares, and the girls woke frequently. The ship lurched occasionally as larger waves collided with it. The bucket had been in regular use and was now almost half full; the smell in the cabin was nauseating.

There had been regular checks but no more than a cursory glance by one of the gang and the door relocked. Edita was fully awake again by eight o’clock.

‘Delvina, are you awake?’ she said to her sister, who was facing the other way.

To Edita’s relief her sister started to stir and gingerly raised her head to acknowledge her.

‘Yes... Oh, my head, I feel terrible,’ she said.

‘What about Sadia?’ said Edita.

Delvina shook her gently. ‘Sadia, wake up.’

Sadia too opened her eyes.

‘How do you feel?’ said Edita.

‘Not good,’ said Sadia, and groaned. ‘My head aches... and I’m so thirsty,’ she said.

‘The water’s all gone,’ said Edita.

‘What are we going to do?’ said Sadia anxiously. ‘I’m so scared.’

‘I know. Me too... We’re all scared,’ replied Edita.

The three lay there for a while before they heard footsteps coming down the stairs outside the cabin. Quickly, they got out of bed and cowered in the corner. The door was unlocked; it was Etrit again.

‘Ah, good, you are awake. I have brought more water. You must drink. It will be good for you,’ he said, and handed over another bottle to Edita.

‘I will empty this,’ he said, and took away the bucket.

He returned a few minutes later; the bucket had been emptied and cleaned. He was carrying some bread.

The girls were still in the corner; Delvina was gulping down the bottled water. Sadia was just stood behind the sisters, her eyes wide with fright.

‘Here, you must eat,’ said Etrit, and passed the bread to Edita.

‘Why have you kidnapped us? What will you do to us?’ said Edita, handing the bread to the other two.

‘If you do not cause trouble, nothing will happen to you,’ he said.

‘But you have taken us. What about our family? Our parents will be worried,’ said Edita. Delvina was starting to cry; Sadia was dumb with terror.

‘I am sorry,’ said Etrit. ‘Try to rest, we will be in port soon.’

‘Which port? Where are you taking us?’ said Edita.

Etrit left the cabin without answering.

The pitching and rolling to which they had become accustomed was gentler as the boat headed into the port of Bari.

It was Georgiou who opened the door. The three girls were back in the corner. In the daylight he looked more sinister. There was a scar on his right cheek

‘What is happening?’ said Edita. ‘Where are you taking us?’

‘Soon you will leave the boat. You will be put on a lorry to continue your journey. If you do not cause trouble you can walk. If you do, then you will be put to sleep again.’

He produced a syringe from the pocket of his leather jacket.

‘No, no we will not cause trouble,’ said Edita.

‘That is good. I will come for you soon,’ he said, and left the cabin.

The girls sat on the beds not saying anything, locked in their own thoughts and wondering what lay ahead.

Bari is a busy port with regular ferries to Croatia, Albania and even Corfu. As they approached the outer reaches, the captain could see the ancient Castello Normano and the Basilica di St Nicolas in front of him, familiar landmarks to anyone arriving by sea. The boat entered the harbour, passing the passenger terminal on the left where the ferry from Dubrovnik was berthed. To the right there was a long causeway which led to the marina. This part of the port was derelict and deserted, an ideal place to dock and deliver the cargo.

It was ten-thirty when the boat jolted as it bumped against the jetty, and then steadied as the engines were turned off.

The three girls were back in the corner as the cabin door was once again opened. Georgiou was accompanied by Etrit and Constantin.

‘This is what we will do,’ said Georgiou in English. ‘Do you understand English?’

Edita nodded.

‘We will walk off the boat; the lorry will be close by. You will be our girlfriends... yes?’

The girls looked at each other,

‘I said, yes?’ said Georgiou. ‘Do you understand...? Or we can carry you. It is your choice.’

‘No, we will not cause any problem,’ said Edita.

‘Right, you come with me,’ said Georgiou.

The girls left the cabin and followed the men up the stairs. There was an opening on the side of the boat next to the wheelhouse; a gangplank had been placed leading down the short distance to the jetty.

The three men walked across, followed by the girls. The fourth crew member remained on board to help with the refuelling for the return journey.

‘We won’t be long,’ shouted Georgiou to the captain as he led the party off the boat.

He put his arm around Edita’s shoulder like a courting couple might do. Constantin did the same to Delvina; Etrit was with Sadia.

There was a road in front of them, the Molo Pizzoli, which ran the length of the quay; beyond that was just waste ground. The area looked derelict. The group turned left and walked down the road about a hundred yards or so. They could see the transport parked in front of an old, deserted shipwright’s, a soft-top container lorry. There were three men in the cab, and one of them got out to wait for the party to approach. It was a cloudless sky, the earth dry and dusty. The odd weed was trying to make its presence felt, a hardy genus of thistle, but otherwise nothing seemed to be surviving in the arid ground. As they walked by, a lizard, disturbed from its hidey-hole, skittered across the broken paving slabs in front of them and took cover under a jagged piece of concrete, safe from predators.

The girls were still disorientated from the drug and were compliant but reluctant, and very scared, as they reached the truck.

The man approached Georgiou and spoke in Albanian. Edita was trying to listen but could only catch the odd word. There appeared to be a problem; the man from the lorry was remonstrating with Georgiou

and it was clear he was not happy that there was one less girl than expected. Georgiou explained the circumstances and there was then a renegotiation of the price. This time it was Georgiou who appeared agitated but eventually money was exchanged and the three left the girls and returned to the boat.

‘What are you doing with us? Where are you taking us?’ said Edita, again in Albanian.

‘You... be quiet!’ said the man in fractured English. ‘You come, do not cause trouble or you will be hurt.’

Edita had a basic understanding of English from school and took Delvina’s hand and complied. It was Delvina who was shaking now, Sadia was just terrified.

He was an ugly man with three days’ growth of beard and greasy curly black hair which was thinning on top. He would be in his late forties, maybe older, and with his pot belly seemed to waddle rather than walk. He was wearing an old dark tee shirt with white sweat stains under the arm pits. The three were led to the back of the lorry. The man opened the container; there was a set of folding ladders which he pulled and they extended to the tarmac.

‘You... go,’ he said, and the girls slowly ascended the ladder into the back of the container. The man followed.

There were boxes and wooden crates stacked against the sides of the container with a pathway down the middle. The man walked past the girls and down towards what appeared to be the back of the container. There were two levers at the side, which the man turned then pulled. It was a false wall and the back of the container slid open on runners. Behind it was a small room with four sleeping bags and a bucket. It was stifling hot and claustrophobic with next to no natural light. Holes had been drilled in the wall behind the metal joists on each side, which would not be conspicuous to the casual observer or to a harassed customs official. They let in little light and even less fresh air.

‘You stay here,’ said the man, ‘and no talking or you will be hurt.’

‘But we will die here. We need water and food,’ said Edita in English.

‘You will get water... we stop soon and you will get food,’ he said.

He left them and slid the door shut. The girls could hear the levers turning.

‘We are going to die,’ said Sadia.

‘No, we must not. We must stay strong,’ said Edita.

‘But where are they taking us?’ said Delvina.

‘I don’t know but I think we’re in Italy. Did you see the signs? They were in Italian,’ she said.

‘I didn’t notice,’ said Delvina. Sadia sat down, put her head in her hands and started to cry again.

There was a roar and a shudder as the truck started up. The air brakes hissed angrily as the truck was crashed into gear. There was a sickening smell of diesel. Edita was thrown sideways and managed to hold onto the wall to stop her falling. Then she sat down next to her sister.

‘God it’s so hot,’ she said, unzipping her tracksuit top and taking it off. The others did the same.

The truck headed down the Molo Pizzoli and turned right onto the dock road parallel with the Corso Vittorio Veneto, the coast freeway. They came to the outer gates which controlled the port and two custom officers carrying clipboards flagged down the truck. One approached the cab and handed a clipboard to the driver. There was activity in the cab, and the clipboard returned. No-one would see the one hundred Euro note attached to it as it was passed back.

The officer waved the truck through.

It would be a long journey as the driver eased the truck onto the coast road and out of the city on the Via Napoli, then on towards the autostrada. The route would take the truck over the southern Apennines to Naples, and then north.

In the container, the conditions were dire. Diesel fumes filled the air, attacking the throat and causing the girls to cough violently. They tried to sleep but it was impossible as the truck lurched along the highway; every gear change, every slight acceleration was exaggerated within the confines of their makeshift prison. Sadia appeared to be in a trance-like state whilst Edita and Delvina held onto each other for comfort. They were desperately thirsty. Despite promises, no water had been provided and it was two

hours before the girls felt the wagon turn sharply before slowing to a stop. They were quickly alert as their survival mechanisms kicked in. They put on their tracksuit tops and, as they had on the boat, huddled together into a corner. The door was opened and a welcome blast of fresh air entered the chamber.

‘You, girls... out,’ said the same man who had incarcerated them, and the girls followed him down the ladder and out of the container.

They blinked in the blazing sunshine as they tried to get their bearings. Edita breathed in gulps of fresh air in an effort to expunge the irritants attacking her lungs. Delvina and Sadia did the same. As their heads gradually recovered, the girls could see they were at a truckstop somewhere in the mountains behind a whitewashed building. The lorry park was large and potholed from wear and tear. It was not tarmac but compacted dirt and gravel. The light was blinding, and the girls shielded their eyes from the glare. There was one other truck about twenty metres away, and a couple of rather ancient-looking cars; otherwise, the place was deserted. A couple of forlorn-looking olive trees were at the far end as the ground fell away into a deep valley.

‘We need water,’ said Edita to the potbellied man who looked to be in charge.

He put on a pair of sunglasses and was joined by two other rough-looking men. They were of similar appearance but younger – father and sons, realised Edita.

‘You will get water and food if you do not cause trouble,’ said Potbelly.

There was some discussion between the men. Edita could not make out the language clearly, but it was possibly Italian, she thought.

‘You stay here,’ said the man in his broken English. They were behind the truck and not in direct view from the cafe. One of the other men went back to cab and produced a litre bottle of water. He handed it to Edita, who immediately passed it to Delvina; she took the top off and drank. It was tepid and not thirst quenching, but she drank in gulps before passing the bottle to Sadia.

The two younger men walked towards the front entrance of the cafe, out of sight of the lorry, and went inside. Ten minutes later they came back with more bottles of water and six focaccia filled with ham and cheese. They shared them out and handed the girls one each. Sadia took a bite but she had to force it down.

After three mouthfuls she gagged and brought it up. She was bent over coughing as the watery bile stung her throat.

‘Do not try to eat too much now, just small pieces. We must save some for later,’ said Edita in Albanian. She passed Sadia the water and she drank. There were tears in her eyes induced by the vomiting.

Delvina had withdrawn and was nibbling the side of her bread in a world of her own. Edita could sense what was happening; she needed to do something.

‘I need toilet,’ she said to Potbelly in English.

‘You go bucket,’ he replied.

‘No, I am... bleeding,’ she said.

The man thought for a moment and said something to one of his ‘sons’.

‘You go with him. He will stay with you. You cause problem you will be hurt,’ he said. ‘Understand?’

‘Yes,’ said Edita.

Edita walked towards the cafe with the younger of the two men. He would be in his early twenties but had the same menace as his ‘father’.

Inside the cafe it was refreshingly cool from the air conditioning. There were around twenty tables but only three were occupied. All the time Edita was thinking; she needed to get away and try to get help. The younger son was close to her, within touching distance, so running would not be an option. She saw the ‘toilet’ sign and walked towards it. He nodded and she went inside. It was a single cubicle with a pan that looked as though it hadn’t been cleaned for some time. Above it was a small window which was open. Edita made a quick decision, stood on the toilet seat and climbed through.