

Everything Floats Up  
in Porto d'Oro  
*An Elias Thorne Thriller*

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First Edition

*For those who know that underneath the perfect surface, nothing is ever truly still.*

# Table of Contents

Chapter 1 .....	6
Chapter 2 .....	20
Chapter 3 .....	34
Chapter 4 .....	50
Chapter 5 .....	65
Chapter 6 .....	78
Chapter 7 .....	94
Chapter 8 .....	107
Chapter 9 .....	123
Chapter 10 .....	137
Chapter 11 .....	152
Chapter 12 .....	166
Chapter 13 .....	182
Chapter 14 .....	195
Chapter 15 .....	208
Chapter 16 .....	222
Chapter 17 .....	234
Chapter 18 .....	248
Chapter 19 .....	267
Chapter 20 .....	289

# Chapter 1

Porto d'Oro was the sort of place that pretended it had always been inevitable.

It sat on a bend of the Mediterranean coast where the cliffs were shaved clean for villas and the sea below was so calm it looked arranged. From the road above, you saw terraces stacked like steps, lemon trees clipped into obedience, and white parasols opening and closing with the slow rhythm of money. The marina curved inward like a protective hand, holding a small fleet of yachts whose names were painted in tasteful fonts: two syllables, three at most, nothing too eager.

Elias Thorne was already on the terrace when the first deliveries arrived.

The staff called it the upper deck, though there was no ship, only the illusion of one. The stone balustrade looked out over the infinity pool, then over the drop, then the sea. It was early enough that the pool surface still held a thin skin of night, a dark mirror that swallowed the pale sky.

He stood with one hand on a coffee cup he did not drink from, the other resting lightly at his belt as if he had somewhere to put it. Linen shirt, open at the neck, sleeves rolled with unstudied care. Sunglasses in his hand, not on his face yet. He had learned that in Porto d'Oro you never looked like you were shielding yourself. You looked like you were choosing what to see.

A cart rolled out from the villa's service corridor, pushed by Paolo, the chef's nephew who had been assigned to mornings and acted as if it were an insult to be awake.

"Signore Thorne," Paolo muttered.

Elias nodded. "Is the fish here?"

Paolo jerked his chin toward the plastic crates. "Sea bass. And the clams."

Elias lifted a corner of ice, glanced at the fish with a practiced squint, as if he could tell freshness by the angle of an eye. The sea bass was fine. Everything in Porto d'Oro was fine. That was the problem. Flaws were rare enough to be dangerous.

"Put them in the kitchen," Elias said. "And tell Marta I want the lemons from the lower grove. Not the terrace ones."

Paolo's lips tightened, but he nodded and turned the cart toward the corridor.

Elias waited until the cart was gone, then let himself exhale.

Below, the gardener's team moved between potted citrus and lavender, snipping and sweeping. One of them paused to look up, then looked away quickly. Elias did not take it personally. The staff looked away from everyone. That was part of what the guests paid for, along with the view and the silence and the sense that no one was watching. Elias knew better. The staff watched constantly. They watched shoes, watches, how a man held his glass, which guests tipped in cash and which made a show of signing.

He checked his own hands. Nails trimmed. No dirt in the cuticles. The gold signet ring sat on his right little finger, the crest worn shallow. It had belonged to the dead man. Almost everything Elias wore had belonged to the dead man, at least at the beginning. He had replaced pieces gradually, like boards in a ship, until the only thing left was the name.

A movement on the far end of the terrace drew his eye.

Countess Allegra de Luca stepped through the french doors as if she had been waiting behind them for him to turn his head.

She was not old, but she carried the kind of authority that made age irrelevant. Hair the color of dark honey, twisted into a knot that looked careless until you realized no strand was out of place. A thin robe of ivory silk, barefoot on the stone. She held her phone loosely, as if it were an unpleasant accessory.

"Elias," she said.

"Countess," he answered, making his voice light. He did not say buongiorno. He had learned the rhythm of her preferences. She disliked greetings that felt like stage directions.

She came closer, stopping at the balustrade where the pool met the sky.

"Did you sleep?" she asked.

"I did." It was not a lie, but it was not complete.

Allegra's eyes moved over him, quick and clinical, the way a jeweler appraises a stone. "You're up early for a man who says he sleeps."

"I like the quiet," he said. "Before everyone arrives and makes it about themselves."

A faint smile touched her mouth and vanished. "They make everything about themselves. Even death."

The word hit the air too sharply for a morning conversation.

Elias watched her, careful not to react too fast. "Is someone dying?"

"You tell me," she said. "That is what you do here, isn't it? You tell people what is happening, before it happens."

She turned her head, and her gaze landed on the villa's glass doors. Behind them, the interior still held the dim coolness of night. Elias could see his own reflection faintly in the pane. A man with an easy posture and a carefully casual shirt. A man who belonged.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Allegra shifted her weight. "I had a call last night from Milan. Someone asked after you."

Elias forced himself to blink slowly. "Asked after me."

"Yes." She looked back at him. "Not by your name."

There were ways to handle a trap. You could jump out of it, or you could stand still until the jaws closed and hope it was only a performance. Elias chose stillness.

"What name?" he asked.

Allegra's mouth softened again, not into kindness, but into satisfaction at having placed him under a light. "Ettore Morelli."

The sound of it was a hand around his throat. Ettore. The name that lived at the bottom of him like a buried stone. He had not heard it in Porto d'Oro. He had not heard it for years.

He let a small, puzzled laugh escape, as if the name were an absurd mistake. "I don't know an Ettore Morelli."

Allegra's eyes did not shift. "You should. He used to work on boats in Naples. He had a scar along his thumb, like a split seam. The call was from a man who claims he hired him once. He said Ettore disappeared. He wondered if he turned up here, because he heard about a man named Thorne with an accent that doesn't quite land."

Elias held his cup tighter. The porcelain was warm. His hands were steady.

"My accent?" he said. He kept the question almost amused.

"Not quite London. Not quite anywhere," Allegra said. "It is like a suit from a good tailor that pulls strangely at one shoulder. Only someone who has worn the real thing notices."

Elias leaned his hip against the balustrade, adopting a posture of relaxed contempt. "People in Milan gossip. They hear a name and they attach it to whatever story entertains them."

"You think I am entertained?" she asked.

He met her gaze. "I think you are bored."

For a moment, he thought he had miscalculated. Allegra's expression tightened, and the air between them sharpened. Then she surprised him by laughing, a short sound with no warmth in it.

"Yes," she said. "I am bored. And when I am bored, I peel things."

"Fruit?" Elias offered.

"People," Allegra corrected, and then she looked down at the pool.

The infinity edge spilled into a trough that led to a hidden filtration room below the terrace. The water level was always perfect. It never showed a ring, never showed debris. Even the leaves seemed to fall somewhere else.

Allegra's voice turned casual. "Do you know what I like about this pool?"

"That it looks like the sea," Elias said.

"That it is not the sea." She lifted her phone. "In the sea, things can disappear. Here, everything floats up eventually."

Elias felt the urge to reach for something to do with his hands, to adjust his cuff or put on his sunglasses. He resisted. Stillness was safer.

"You're implying I have something to hide," he said.

Allegra's gaze flicked to his ring. "Everyone here has something to hide. It is why they come. They think the privacy is purchased. They think it comes with the villa and the gate and the security man at the road who pretends not to recognize their faces."

She stepped closer, and Elias caught her perfume, something green and bitter beneath the floral notes.

"You are different," she said softly. "You hide in plain sight, but not like the others. They have lives and they hide the parts that don't match the brochure. You have a brochure and you hide the life."

Elias felt his pulse in his throat. He made himself smile.

"You're giving me too much credit," he said. "I'm just a man trying to run a household full of demanding guests."

Allegra tilted her head. "Are you?"

Before he could answer, the terrace door opened behind them.

Marta, the housekeeper, emerged with a tablet in one hand and a folded napkin in the other. Her hair was tied back so tight it pulled her eyebrows into permanent disapproval. She walked toward Elias with the controlled urgency of someone delivering a small disaster.

"Signore," she said, nodding at Allegra without addressing her directly. "The yacht captain is on the phone. He says the guests will be early."

Elias nodded. "How early?"

"An hour."

Elias turned his head slightly, calculating. "Tell him we will receive them. And ask Paolo to set the terrace table now. The one under the lemon trees."

Marta hesitated. "The Countess's breakfast?"