

Prologue

Rome

The young woman came at him with a long bladed knife and in an instant he knew that he didn't stand a chance. He had plied her with drugs, but the drugs hadn't worked and now she was as angry as hell. His friends had warned him not to get involved. They had told him she was evil beyond belief, but how could she be? She had long flowing auburn hair that felt like silk, refreshing blue eyes that sparkled when she spoke, a warm and inviting smile to melt even the most hardened of bastards - and a body to die for.

They said her daddy was a control freak. They said that he kept her and her equally beautiful sister on a short leash, but he couldn't see how that was possible. This girl had a mind of her own. She was self-assured and opinionated and she took shit from no one.

He had wanted her so badly, but she didn't want to know and so he had discreetly spiked her drink and taken her up to his penthouse in Aventine Hill, an affluent part of Rome just east of the River Tiber, and she hadn't complained until he had pushed her on to the bed, which was when she had produced the knife from what seemed like thin air.

"You fucking bastard!" she screamed, kneeling him in the groin. He bent over double.

The pain was excruciating, but it was nothing compared to when she pulled him up straight and then pushed the cold steel blade into his ribcage, so hard that it penetrated his heart.

There was no sparkle in her eyes now, no smile on her lips, no warmth in her words as he clutched his chest and sank to his knees. He looked up at her and wanted to ask why, but the only thing that came out of his mouth was blood.

"I am Acciai," she said.

It meant nothing to him and he closed his eyes and died at her feet.

Vatican City

The pigeon landed on the crumbling concrete ledge and pecked at the tiny window that looked out across Vatican City, home to just 836 souls at the last count. The walled enclave within the city of Rome, covering an area of just 110 acres, is the smallest internationally recognised independent state in the world by both area and population.

It has many cultural sites such as St. Peter's Basilica, the Sistine Chapel and the Vatican Museums, featuring some of the world's most famous paintings and sculptures.

It is also home to one of the most powerful and influential individuals on earth.

Three times the bird tapped on the window before the elderly man turned his attention to it. His face lit up into a smile and he walked across the sparsely furnished room to bid the pigeon good morning. It flapped its wings to maintain its balance as the old man opened the window. It hopped into the room unafraid and then took flight before coming to rest on a small table where the remains of a breakfast awaited.

It had become a daily ritual over the past couple of months for both man and bird, much to the annoyance of those who lived in other rooms at the Casa Santa Marta. The building sat in the shadow of St Peter's Basilica, across from the less modest apostolic apartments that enjoyed magnificent views of the Square.

When the pigeon had its fill it took flight once more, before gently landing on the old man's left shoulder. It rubbed its feathered head against his cheek and he rewarded it with a light caress of its delicate neck.

He had been warned the pigeon might be diseased. He was told that a man in his position could not afford to fall ill, that his responsibilities were too great and too varied, and that many souls depended on him.

Only yesterday he had been told once again that the bird would be the death of him. He had, as always, refused to listen, a decision that he and those around him would come to appreciate in the months ahead more than anyone could ever have imagined.

Chapter 1

London

Nick Savvas was enjoying a rare day of relaxation in the company of his girlfriend of several years, Lyndsay Mitchell. Earlier, they had been shopping in Covent Garden and had walked down Whitehall to Parliament Square, taking in the sights that included the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben.

Now they were resting in the early sunshine on the steps to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square watching the pigeons at the bottom of Nelson's Column. A party of Japanese tourists was feeding the birds when a traffic warden approached, advising them to stop as it was against the law and they could be fined.

Voices were raised and other tourists in the square joined the argument.

The elderly man sitting next to Nick got to his feet and, waving his arms in the air, shouted, "It's a bloody disgrace!" He then turned to Nick. "A bloody disgrace is what it is. I owe my life to a pigeon, poor old Duke, God rest his soul, and so do thousands of others. Why shouldn't they be fed? What harm are they doing?"

"I agree, sir. You are right," replied Nick. "What regiment did you serve in?"

"The Paras; third battalion - made plenty of jumps over enemy territory and now just like those poor birds, the bloody government has clipped our wings, too. I mean, there was a time when you wouldn't be accepted unless you had done at least eight training jumps - now they're phasing out parachuting; a paratrooper without a chute? How bloody ridiculous. Next they'll put a feeding ban on us old soldiers."

He hobbled off towards St Martin-in-the-Fields before Nick could offer a response.

"What was that all about?" asked Lyndsay, who'd taken a couple of weeks off from her job as a journalist with the *London Times* to spend some time with the love of her life. Not quite a thirtysomething, Lyndsay wasn't as bothered about the 18 year age difference between her and Nick as were her elderly parents back home in Ireland. He was a handsome catch, who kept himself in good shape, generous and outgoing and good to be around.

"I'm not quite sure," admitted Nick, who was between jobs now that Whitehall had decided to disband the Counter Irish Republican Dissident Unit following the untimely and rather messy demise of the man who had headed it up, Major General Harry Williamson.

"But you agreed with him," Lyndsay reminded Nick, who was quietly contemplating the offer of a new position with MI6.

"You always agree with old soldiers," he replied. "But I think I know what he meant about the pigeon."

"Are you going to share it?" asked Lyndsay, gently nudging him. He smiled back at her, thinking how lucky he was to have such a pretty woman at his side and in his bed. He brushed a strand of long jet black hair from her face and looked into her dark green eyes. It seemed to him that they'd been lovers forever, even though in reality it had only been a few short years, but the best years of his life. He was about to say something when a volley of shots rang out.

Venice

The sun was beating down on the tiny streets and bridges around the Grand Canal. The area was packed with tourists. It always was.

"I wish we had left it until later in the season," complained Julie Hall. "I never imagined it would be so crowded."

"It's pretty much like this all year round," explained James, enjoying a cool beer and a welcomed rest at one of the many water-

front restaurants located in the shadow of *Ponte di Rialto*, the Rialto Bridge, one of the four bridges spanning the Grand Canal. "I think a ride in a gondola might be in order; what do you say?"

The couple had travelled to Venice just three days ago for a belated honeymoon after finally managing to get away from their jobs in a busy publishing house in Los Angeles; James was a commissioning editor, while Julie looked after public relations.

Both in their early thirties, they'd met at a book launch three years ago, James attracted to Julie's warm smile, big blue eyes and long dark hair, she to his George Clooney looks and sense of humour. They quickly became an item and neither had looked back ever since.

"Yes, that would be lovely, but not on the Grand Canal; somewhere less busy," replied Julie, before finishing her coffee.

"Agreed," said James, calling over a waiter to settle the bill. "I saw a boarding point on up from the Bridge of Sighs on one of the quieter waterways."

They were staying in the Hotel Danieli on *Riva degli Schiavoni*, just a short walk to heart of the city and overlooking the Adriatic Sea.

Twenty minutes later they were negotiating a price with one of three gondoliers vying for business on a small footbridge. Decision made, they were being helped on board when a woman's screams filled the warm afternoon air.