

Sun and the Bees

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extract

Chapter 1

Rome, Italy - 28th September 2004

Sparkling lights glittered in the windows of the chic boutiques that lined the city streets. Their reflections mingled promiscuously with the headlights of the cars that edged slowly forwards in the deluge. Ancient cobbled gutters had been swiftly transformed into raging torrents washing the accumulated daily detritus into wide grilled gullies that could hardly cope with the sudden volume of rainwater. The warm September evening, that had started serenely, had become unexpectedly unseasonably cold, very wet, and extraordinarily windy. People were scurrying about in all directions, taking refuge in shops that were unaccustomed to welcoming such a crowd of diverse customers at that time of day.

A young man was making his way along the inundated pavement in the direction of the *Plaza di Spagna* and the Spanish Steps. From time to time, in the hope that the storm would soon abate and, in order to catch his breath, he stopped and took shelter in a doorway. He cursed his lack of foresight in neglecting to carry an umbrella, but then, when he had left the condominium in the *Via Cicerone* near the *Piazza Cavour*, the sky was still blue and the last rays of the setting sun were delicately painting the eternal city with a celestial golden light.

The evening promenade across the city normally was a daily pleasure for him. As an observer, rather than a participant, he absorbed the vitality that the city represented, the sights and the smells, the bustle and the noise. Moreover, although his contribution was always somewhat passive, he nonetheless felt that he was an integral part of the city; and it was this that made him feel alive.

The walk from his little apartment on the west side of the Tiber to the museum where he worked routinely took no longer than about forty minutes. He had left his apartment half-an-hour earlier, he was already soaked, and he had completed only a third of his journey. When he had left home, he had not been in a hurry. Now, after spending so much time sheltering, he was beginning to worry that he might end up being late.

The thunderstorm seemingly came from nowhere. There was hardly any warning before the heavens began to wreak mayhem in the streets of Rome. One minute the sky was clear and, in the next it was as black as night. Moreover, the wind that proceeded, heralding the arrival of the rain, urgently searching for somewhere to hide, blew people and rubbish chaotically in every direction. The downpour that ensued was

torrential, of diluvium proportions. Traffic came to a standstill and all the cars had switched on their lights. The usual sound of screeching tyres and the incessant revving of motorcycles and scooters, eager to be the first to leave the traffic lights, was subdued and drowned by the noise of the rain pounding on the ancient streets and pavements, and the sound of water gurgling as it ran along the gutters.

Paulo Spinelli was on the Ponte Cavour, crossing the Tiber, when it had begun to rain. At first, it was only a few large drops. It was astonishing, he reflected, that so much water could remain together in one large globule falling so swiftly to earth. Yet evidently, it was possibly and, as several hit him on the head and shoulders, he noted that the drops were also icy cold. He idly contemplated as he ran that the slightest reduction in temperature might well have produced hailstones the size of quail's eggs.

Then, as the raindrops became smaller and more regular, the intensity of the rain increased and lightning flashed across the sky to be followed instantly by a clap of thunder. Paulo made for the other side of the bridge hoping that he would not be completely drenched by the time he arrived. Sheltering in the doorway of an office, he looked up at the sky. Another flash of lightning and a roll of thunder exploded from the heavens.

It was improbable, even without the distraction of the storm that Paulo would have noticed either of the two men who were discreetly trailing him. In any event, why should he have had cause to suspect that he was being followed? He represented a threat to nobody, he had no enemies, and he wasn't rich.

The younger of his two shadows was a disaffected youth of medium build. He was well tanned, wearing cheap jeans and a tee shirt under a light-blue nylon, zipped jacket. He was also wearing a baseball cap, which was sodden and did little to shelter his head.

The other man was much older, old enough, in fact, to be the youth's father. He also bore the appearance of belonging to a different generation. His comportment alone endowed him with a patina of experience and self-assurance that suggested that he could look after himself if necessary, no matter what the situation. He was taller than the youth and better dressed; wearing pressed black trousers, a black polo neck sweater, a dark leather jacket, and leather shoes. As well as the black leather bag he clutched in his left hand, he was also prudently carrying an umbrella. And so, the man continued on his way, unobserved, while the other two, the pursued and the youthful pursuer, paused for an instant to shelter from the fierce intensity of the storm, one in a doorway to an office, and the other under the less effective cover of a large plane tree by the roadside. Whist he was still not yet pressed for time, Paulo knew that he could not wait too long; eventually, he would have to take his chance in the rain.

Paulo was due to relieve his colleague Giorgio at the *Galleria D'Urbano* at 10.00 p.m. and Giorgio would be most

unhappy if he were late. It was then that Paulo's shift started. He was one of six security guards at the museum. They worked in pairs and staggered their shifts, so that only one person changed at any one time. There was a different routine to that of the museum staff, who worked a more conventional day from 9.00 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. Paulo's shift finished at six in the morning.

The hours suited his temperament. He went to work in the summer in the evening when the sun was going down and the stars were coming out, and he went home with the dawn. The city always seemed to be on the move at these times of day. It also gave him the opportunity during the afternoon to sketch. He had an interest in art and was ever keen to improve his skills. Maybe one day he would have the courage to attempt to paint for a living. It was a dream he had yet to realise.

The *Galleria D'Urbano*, his place of work, was a small, private, well-respected museum, situated in the *Via della Quattro Fontane* near to the *Palazzo Barberini* and its Metro Station. The museum specialised, amongst other things, in items of Greek antiquity, including icons and other religious artefacts.

When the owner, Count Emilio Giuseppe di Cantaglione, established the museum, he had deliberately located near to the *Palazzo Barberini* and the *Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica*. Thus situated, the Count surmised, his *Galleria* would inevitably attract more visitors. It not only succeeded in doing just that, but he also attracted, much to his satisfaction, some important private collectors to exhibit alongside his own family treasures and acquisitions.

Nevertheless, simply as a museum, it was not a huge financial success; it just about paid for itself. However, the Count profited hugely from its use as a centre in Rome for Romano-Hellenic studies. Several American Universities sent students every year to study at the *Galleria D'Urbano* and, consequently, its future, and that of the Count, was reasonably secure because of the income from the States alone. In addition, the Count's Annual University tour to the States reaped further benefits in terms of donations and even legacies and gave him the opportunity of inviting important and influential people to his villa on Lac Lemane near Geneva. Invitations were rarely refused. Spending even just a part of the long academic vacation as the guest of the Count at his villa on the shore of the lake was an temptation that few could resist. Lecture tours were consequently secured for a further year and the regular influx of students for the following academic year was cleverly guaranteed.

Giorgio had started his shift at two that afternoon and there had been very little to do. On his round of the exhibition rooms, he cautioned the same mother with two over exuberant and badly controlled children on three separate occasions. Finally they left, the mother frustrated and completely exhausted by her disobedient and unmanageable brats. Giorgio picked up a few sweet papers, directed people to parts of the exhibition that they had not seen, and gave a brief, but not very

scholarly explanation of an Orthodox Greek icon that left his audience unimpressed with both the artefact and the explanation of its special interest.

Between rounds, which he made hourly, he passed the time in a small room near to the entrance. The room was furnished with an array of closed circuit television screens, security switches, keys, video recording devices, a coffee machine and lockers. After the museum closed, as the office staff left with any students who were still in the museum, he and his colleague activated the night security devices and checked that everything was functioning correctly.

At 6.00 p.m. Gina arrived to relieve Giorgio's colleague. He had already changed out of uniform and was ready to leave. Gina would be there until two in the morning and Giorgio finished at ten. They had four hours together. Indeed, Gina was one of the main reasons why Giorgio continued to work in the museum. It was not that he had a particular thing about older women and Gina was only twelve years his senior, but Gina was the woman who had taught him everything he knew about sex in the time that he had worked at the *Galleria*.

Not academically bright, Giorgio had left school with great relief at the age of eighteen and found work immediately in the museum. His friend, Paulo Spinelli, who was going to relieve him shortly, had been at school with him. Their friendship had endured despite Paulo going to university to study art history. Paulo was particularly grateful to Giorgio; his friend had found him the job in the museum.

It wasn't exactly what Paulo was looking for when he left university, but opportunities were scarce, he needed work, and the prospect of working in such a place, surrounded by objects that fascinated him, was better than doing nothing. As for Giorgio, it was just a job. If something else more interesting came along then he would probably move on. Still, he often reflected, the job paid reasonably well for someone without qualifications and then, of course, there was Gina. Most jobs have their compensations, some have perks, he had Gina, and that was motivation enough to stay at least for the time being.

When he started work at the museum, Gina had fascinated him. She had rather taken him under her wing, first as mother or an elder sister might, and then subsequently, as a lover. She was a brunette with big brown eyes and full lips. Her long wavy hair fell almost to the middle of her back and appeared to exaggerate the curves of her amply proportioned body as it tumbled carelessly over her shoulders and over her full breasts.

When Giorgio had first met her, he had found it difficult to keep his eyes off her and she knew immediately that she had a conquest. His youth and vigour excited her, but he was timid. It was Gina therefore who had to take the lead, but then, being sexually quite experienced and naturally very tactile, it was something that came to her easily. Giorgio was shocked at first, but soon he became accustomed to her passionate and uninhibited desires and was happy to accommodate her. It was

a lustful relationship, which both profited from knowing that it had little possibility of a long-term future.

Outside, it was still raining heavily and the sound of thunder was rolling around the seven great hills of Rome. Illuminated now and then by explosive flashes of lightning that backlit the insides of the clouds, the swirling sky appeared like a black and white version of Dante's *Inferno*. Paulo decided that he had no choice other than to make a move.

Leaving the shelter of the doorway, he headed again towards the Spanish Steps. With his head held down against the rain, he still did not notice the youth in the baseball cap keeping abreast of him on the other side of the road. Nor did Paulo notice the man with the umbrella and black leather bag who was holding his hand up to his face and looking intently into a shop window as he passed him by.

He progressed slowly, dodging in and out of shop doorways, interrupting his short dashes with an occasional respite that enabled him to catch his breath. Whenever he stopped, the older man would pass him by, sometimes crossing diagonally to the other side of the road. At the same time, the youth would run ahead and then wait somewhere discreetly until Paulo passed him again.

Paulo turned the corner by the *Fontana della Barcaccia*. The fountain, designed by Bernini father and son, in the form of a boat, stands at the foot of the Spanish Steps. Pope Urbano VIII had commissioned it in 1627 and displayed on the carved stern and the bow of the sculptured boat were the sun and the bees, symbols from the Urbano family crest.

Behind the fountain, the deserted Spanish Steps had momentarily taken on the appearance of a gigantic waterfall as rainwater cascaded down the wide elegant flights. Paulo took shelter again in a doorway and the man with the umbrella passed him once again on the other side of the road. Thus, their game continued.

In the museum, another very different game was about to start as it did most nights at about the same time. Giorgio was sitting on the desk on which there was an array of television monitors. Gina came back into the room having finished her round and turned her key in various security devices to record her progress through the museum. Giorgio knew what was about to happen next and the anticipation had already stirred him.

He continued to sit on the desk as Gina approached. She removed her jacket and her automatic pistol, which all the guards were obliged to wear when the museum was closed. Placing them both on the desk next to Giorgio, she moved to where she could rub her crutch against his knee, biting him gently on the lip at the same time. Then, inserting her tongue into his mouth to search for his, she continued to insist her movement up and down on his knee as he eased his legs apart. As he did, Gina slid his zip down and then slid her hand into his trousers to find what she was looking for. It was already rigid.

Giorgio gasped. He let her play with him for a moment then slid off the bench and pulled her skirt up. She had already

removed her pants and with her legs slightly apart, he put his cupped hand on the mound between her thighs and the lips that were already moist. They continued standing for a few moments before Paulo moved to one of the rotating chairs, sitting on it after lowering his trousers. Gina lifted her skirt, and then settled herself on top of him, undoing her shirt and lifting her bra to reveal her breasts. Their lovemaking did not last much longer as Giorgio, overwhelmed by the rubenesque bounty that rebounded rhythmically in front of his eyes, tantalising and torturing his consciousness, came very quickly with an explosive and unavoidable climax.

Gina, disappointed at this much too rapid release, dismounted. Having rearranged herself to pass by the camera in the corridor, she went out of the door to cross to the ladies room opposite to wash herself and replace her pants having retrieved them from her skirt pocket.

Spent, Giorgio laughed, regarding his now flaccid member before tucking it back into his trousers. He was still trembling, unable to move, reflecting that it was as well that there were no cameras in the room, although, he sniggered, they would probably make a fortune selling the rushes to the pornographic industry.

When Gina returned, Giorgio was getting ready to do his round. He had already put on his uniform coat and securely clipped his automatic pistol into the holster on his belt. It would not be long before he took it off again, when Paulo arrived to relieve him in an entirely different way.

The two very attentive trackers and their rather inattentive target were by then rapidly approaching the museum. It now became crucial that they kept much closer to Paulo and, whilst this increased the risk that he might suddenly realise that he had company, it remained unlikely that any such thought would come into his head. He had no reason to suspect that anyone should follow him, especially on such a foul evening. Who would follow him anyway, and for what purpose?

Gina observed Paulo's arrival at the entrance of the museum. She was expecting him. He was slightly later than usual and Giorgio had already completed his last round when Paulo arrived.

The CCTV camera placed on the outside of the building had a limited field of vision and the two pursuers stayed just out of its range, slipping black balaclavas onto their heads. Paulo pressed the buzzer and waited to speak into the microphone. Gina answered the phone, acknowledging Paulo and activating the lock to allow him to enter. As she did so, Giorgio stole up behind Gina and placed his hand on her breast as she turned to kiss him. It was a brief moment of negligence that was to reap dire consequences.

However, even if this temporary lapse of concentration had not occurred, Gina would probably have seen very little. The man with the umbrella had deftly moved his umbrella into a position where all three of them were concealed from the surveillance camera. As the door catch released and the door

sprung ajar, Paulo found an automatic pistol fitted with a silencer pushed into the soft flesh under his chin to encourage his forward movement. On the other side of him, the youth suddenly grasped Paulo's arm and helped him through the door.

Whilst the trio made their rapid, but slightly clumsy progress, up the short flight of stairs from the reception desk in the hall near to the entrance, Gina and Giorgio were still engaged in their last passionate farewells of the evening. Gina had just turned around to look at the monitors again, when all three burst noisily into the small room. Giorgio, surprised by their brusque and unexpected entry, automatically felt for the pistol at his waist. It was a stupid move and it seemed at the time that it probably cost him his life.

The tall man, who was carrying the silenced automatic pistol, fired two shots in quick succession at almost point blank range. The first bullet hit Giorgio high in the chest, but most probably, it would not have killed him. The bullet punctured his lung, hit the edge of his shoulder blade, chipping off a piece, before coming out near his armpit and embedding itself in the wall behind. The second and fatal bullet hit him as he was projected backwards by the shock of the first. It struck him in the head below the chin, passed through his throat, and exited at the back of his neck just below the skull.

Giorgio immediately collapsed to the floor, frothing at the mouth, gurgling horribly. He was bleeding profusely. Gina dropped to her knees to help him, but the taller of the two men kicked her violently away from his bleeding victim to join Paulo who had been thrown by the youth into the middle of the room.

Whilst the tall man kept the gun trained on Gina and Paulo, the youth took out a roll of wide tape from the black leather bag and, after gagging both, he tied their hands behind their backs. Paulo could feel the youth trembling as he carried out his task. When he had finished, he pushed them to the floor and then secured their feet with the tape. Then, he forced them to kneel while he tied their hands and feet together. When he had finished, he kicked them over to lie sideways on the floor. They were completely immobilised. The intruders then switched off the security cameras, disabled the alarm system, and, leaving all three guards sprawled on the floor, went out of the room into the heart of the museum. They knew what they had come for. Their instructions were very precise.

Gina tried to shuffle towards Giorgio who was still making dreadful noises as he slowly died. He was hardly conscious, inexorably and cruelly his lifeblood was flowing away. She could do nothing; she could only lie next to him in a gathering pool of blood. He was so beautiful, she thought, and so young. As he died, she wept at the thought of his disarming youth and innocent smile.

Chapter 2

Geneva, Switzerland - 29th September 2004

It was not until the next day that Count Emilio Giuseppe di Cantaglione was contacted by the Rome *carabinieri*. He was spending a week at his spacious art deco villa near Geneva. The Count, a bronzed, slightly portly balding man in his early fifties, was still in his pyjamas and silk dressing gown. He was sitting on the villa's south facing terrace when the telephone rang at about 9.30 a.m. He was just about to start breakfast.

The view across the lake towards Mont Blanc was breathtaking, but despite the distant snow, it was already warm on the terrace. The wisteria, which had just finished flowering for the second time that year, rambled over the pergola, providing the stone-paved terrace with welcome shade from the sun that was already high in the sky.

It was the Count's housekeeper, Mathilde, a small round woman of an uncertain age, who answered the telephone. The Count had heard the phone ringing but typically ignored it preferring instead to enjoy the morning paper while he drank his first cup of coffee. When Mathilde rushed out onto the terrace in a state of shock and announced that the Rome police wished to urgently speak to him, he knew instinctively that the call was probably ominous.

The officer that he spoke to informed him of the break-in, the robbery, and the murder of one of his employees. The Count remained silent while he listened to the sombre story, utterly shocked and devastated by the dreadful news.

The officer briefly described the chronology of the events. The *carabinieri* had been alerted sometime shortly after 2.00 a.m. when the relief security guard arrived for his shift. Despite trying the buzzer several times at the entrance to the Galleria, he got no response and therefore decided to call the police. The *carabinieri* tried phoning the museum but without success. Then, they called the Fire and Rescue Services to provide support. They both arrived at the museum within a few minutes of each other and discussed how they were going to force an entry into the building.

In fact, it did not take them long. An abrasive disc cut through the steel on one of the barred windows on the ground floor as if it was butter and then, having extricated the grill, they removed the glass. They had briefly considered trying to break down the entrance door but concluded that it would have taken them all day to get through it. Apart from the heavy, carved oak boarding that covered both sides of the door, which rendered it virtually impregnable in any event; it also had a steel core.

Once inside the building, they found Gina and Paulo bound and gagged next to the body of Giorgio, which was cold and already showing signs of rigour mortis. Gina and Paulo received some preliminary medical treatment before they were taken to hospital, both suffering from shock. The forensic team arrived soon afterwards to begin their detailed investigation of the scene of the crime.

Having been extensively photographed from every angle and, after the criminal pathologist had completed his initial forensic investigation; Giorgio's body was removed to the morgue. There did not appear to be anything particularly curious about the manner of his death; that he had been shot, and had bled to death, was evident. There would be an autopsy of course, but the police already knew that they were dealing with a murder investigation.

Before leaving, the forensic investigation team also took photographs of the entrance, the room in which the murder had been committed, and a broken cabinet in one of the galleries. The whole area was dusted for fingerprints and all the videos were removed from the recording equipment in the small room for later examination.

'Who was it that was killed?' enquired the Count, his voice still shaky from the shock he had just received; his mind still trying to come to terms with the horror of the dreadful news.

'His name was Giorgio Calcagno.' The police officer replied.

'Oh dear, poor Giorgio,' was all that the Count could manage to say while trying to conjure a mental picture of what might have happened. 'How awful!'

'There was only one cabinet which had been broken into,' the police officer explained to the Count. He described the case and where it was positioned in the gallery.

'Are you able to remember what was in the case? Was it extremely valuable?' the officer asked.

'If it is the case that I think it is, I believe it was probably a Greek Icon, but not one that had a huge monetary value. It certainly was not worth killing anyone for.'

'Very few things are,' commented the police officer, adding with a cynicism born out of his long experience dealing with such desperate crimes, 'but it happens nonetheless, and with remarkable regularity!'

The captain informed the Count that the building had now been sealed. It would remain sealed until the Count came to Rome to inspect and confirm with them what had been stolen. When could he come to Rome, the Captain asked? The Count replied that he would try to book a flight that day. The officer thanked him.

'We will also need to start interviewing all your staff, not just the security people, everyone who has a connection with the museum. I assume you have no objections to that?'

'No, none at all,' replied the Count, what could he object to? It seemed perfectly normal. The thought rebounded on him. No, it wasn't normal; it was altogether quite abnormal;

horrible even. He grimaced. How could people do such things? The officer spoke again interrupting his disturbed thoughts.

‘We have already met your director, Signora Mancini. She had been very helpful in providing the names and addresses of all your employees.’

‘Yes,’ said the Count, still feeling remote and stunned by the news.

‘Perhaps you could call me when you arrive in Rome?’ The tone of the Captain’s voice was imperative rather than questioning. ‘We need to meet with you most urgently. I’m sure that you understand.’

‘Perfectly, Captain. Perhaps you could give me your coordinates?’ responded the Count. Captain Rossi gave the Count details of where he could be contacted, but the Count’s mind was already moving on to thoughts of getting on a flight to Rome. The captain thanked him again and said goodbye. The line had already gone dead when the Count put the telephone down.

It seemed that the crime had been committed at night and the Count immediately began to wonder how the criminals had managed to get in undetected. Captain Rossi had not said. He was curious; indeed, it had not been that long ago when he had commissioned a new security system in the museum. He had used a company in Geneva to assist him with the project. It was a company with which he had great confidence, he had been a friend of Christian Lefèvre the founder and he knew the family well. The company had also organised interviews and screened new security staff when they were recruiting. As the firm still had a contract to maintain the security system he decided to call them.

Still feeling profoundly shocked, the Count asked his housekeeper if she would kindly book him a flight to Rome that evening and then call Myrmidon SA in Geneva to enquire if an appointment could be arranged before he left for Rome. If it were possible, he would prefer a meeting with Madame Lefèvre.

As his housekeeper turned to leave and make all the necessary calls, the Count sighed and looked down at his cold coffee and an uneaten croissant.

His appetite for breakfast had deserted him.

Chapter 3

Sophia, Bulgaria - 29th September 2004

The Air Austria flight from Leonardo da Vinci Airport to Sophia, Bulgaria, left on time at precisely 8.35 a.m. There had been some doubt that the flight would be able to maintain its allotted slot as one of the passengers was late booking in. Thankfully, the young man's progress through security was rapid; he had no bags to check in with.

After the thunderstorms, which had travelled across central Italy during the previous evening and for a good part of the night, the atmosphere seemed to have been thoroughly cleansed. There was an unusual clarity to the air and the pilot was looking forward to the flight that would take them east over the Apennines towards the Adriatic Sea.

The older of the two criminals had arrived an hour and a half before the flight was due to leave. He was relaxed despite the cold-blooded murder he had committed the previous evening. After depositing his suitcase at the check-in, he went through to the Departure Lounge. At Security, having first shown his passport to a rather disinterested official, he was then thoroughly examined by the airport security staff, who apart from putting him, his hand luggage and his jacket through the usual scanning devices, asked him to empty his black leather travelling bag. He obliged them willingly and they sifted through the items that were spread out on a low bench in front of him. They were not looking for anything in particular, and they did not find anything of significance. Theirs was simply a random check. He was one of the first people to go through the gate into the departure lounge that morning and their shift had only just started.

The youth was travelling lightly; he had only his passport, and a ticket. He was nearly late and was the last person to board the aeroplane. Following closely the instructions that his colleague had given to him after the robbery, he had already disposed of the gun and the icon.

Near to Rome's Central Station, he had found a builder's skip outside a group of shops that were being renovated. He quickly hid the gun and the icon under some sheets of plasterboard, thinking that other debris would soon cover them and that they would be buried with the rest of the building debris when the skip was emptied. He was not to know that his assumption was significantly flawed.

Despite running into a storm over Albania, the same bad weather that had traversed central Italy the previous evening, the plane landed in Sophia on time at 11.00 a.m. The sun was shining on the mountains to the south of Sophia and the city

was innocently unaware of the wet, windy violence that would arrive later that day from the west.

The older and rather better dressed man in the leather jacket was a Bulgarian. His name was Todor Kubrat and he was travelling first class. He was in his mid-fifties and, in comparison to the youth with whom he was associated, had an almost distinguished appearance. His neat greying hair, his straight back and slim athletic build, indicated someone who ate sensibly, drank moderately, and kept fit. His attention to his appearance suggested that he was also fastidious, and perhaps even, rather fussy. The nicotine stains on his teeth and fingers however betrayed one of his vices, others were less obvious.

Kubrat was a former member of the Bulgarian Secret Police, an organisation that no longer existed. After faithfully serving the communist government for all of his working life, the regime had been officially dismantled rather ignominiously following the quiet revolution that took place in Bulgaria in February 1990.

Todor Kubrat had held the rank of Colonel in the Secret Police, an equivalent to that of a Colonel in the Russian KGB, an organisation with which he had enjoyed very close contacts. After the Secret Police had been disbanded, Kubrat, still too young to be retired and expert in many areas, was redeployed in a new civil counter-espionage and anti-terrorism department. He hardly noticed the difference. It was much the same thing, his masters had changed but little else, all in all it was business as usual.

However, with the collapse of the communist regime, organised crime quickly filled the void that remained in the relative chaos that followed. Kubrat took advantage of this disorder and began to develop some rather useful connections with the Bulgarian Mafia. The opportunity of working in two conflicting areas enabled him to improve his everyday living standards whilst enhancing his pension prospects.

His assistant, although such a description was much too grand and implied some formal employment arrangement, was a displaced person from the former Republic of Yugoslavia. The youth was not a Bulgarian, although his passport declared otherwise. He was originally from Kosovo and he had worked for the Bulgarian Mafia out of expedience. Travelling second-class and seated well away from the older man, he was, somewhat shocked, very hungry, and still damp from spending the night in the open air.

However, the mission that they had undertaken in Rome, for which he believed they were to be extremely well rewarded, was for neither the Secret Police, nor the Mafia. Indeed, the youth was ignorant of many things, not the least of which was who had commissioned the violent act, to which he had unwittingly found himself a party.

In truth, it had been commissioned by a far more dangerous group of people than the Secret Police, or the Mafia. Devoutly religious, they had sworn that they would not cease their activities until the whole world was of their faith. Rather than persuade through reason and example that mankind as a

whole should voluntarily adopt their faith they had resolved, quite cynically, that it would be more effective, more economic and overall, much quicker, to terrorise, maim and kill, destabilising society wherever they could. Such is the Love of God in whom they believed; Praise be to Allah.

Such methods had seldom worked in the past; history was a witness to their failure. Unfortunately, history had never formed a significant part of this group's curriculum, only learning by rote, dogma, and a kind of group hysteria engendering hate that was essential to giving basic meaning to their lives.

Chapter 4

Geneva, Switzerland - 29th September 2004

Sophie Lefèvre was a woman in her mid-thirties. She was a petite brunette with large brown eyes and a haircut that verged on punk. She was a co-director of Myrmidon SA. Sophie was looking forward to her meeting with Count Emilio. It was over three years since they had last met in a business capacity, and many more, she recalled, since they had met socially. The Count had been a friend of her father's and had visited their home by the lake quite often before her father's sudden death. The project that her company had undertaken for the Count at his museum in Rome was a result of this amicable association. The commission was still clear in her mind. Overall, the project had gone well and she had happy memories of spending several days in the city.

When the housekeeper telephoned, the urgency of the meeting surprised her. Sophie spoke to the Count, remembering him to be a calm and measured man, having a deportment that came with wealth and breeding. That he should be quite so agitated seemed rather out of character with his usual relaxed attitude that was engendered by his having time to amuse himself and indulge his pleasures. Alarmed therefore by his curiously troubled tone, Sophie agreed to a meeting in her offices at 4.00 p.m. that afternoon. Apparently, the Count was to catch a flight to Rome that same evening and it was arranged that his housekeeper would drive him to Sophie's office at Meyrin, and that Sophie would arrange for him to be taken to the airport, after their meeting.

The company, Myrmidon SA, had been established by Sophie's father in the late nineteen forties and had grown significantly over the years. It specialised in a wide range of security services, including the installation of security systems, recruiting and training personnel, as well as clothing and arming them. In the sixties and seventies, the firm had also been involved in some rather shady deals, hiring and equipping mercenaries for clients operating in Africa, and in South America. Now, under Sophie's direction, they were rather more circumspect and since Marcus had joined the firm, they had tightened up even more.

Sophie had met her co-director, Marcus Tregay, as a result of a contract in which she had been duped to provide two bodyguards, to protect him in a supposed Witness Protection Scheme. However, without her knowledge, her client had secretly doubled the bodyguard's fees and revised his instructions radically, modifying their mission to assassination, rather than protection.

Marcus Tregay, ex Special Boat Service, a former Military Attaché, and Colonel in the Royal Marines had been the bodyguard's target, but the two operatives failed in their mission and, as a result, had paid a heavy price. Sophie then became a murder target for her dissatisfied client, Milovan Banović, an indicted war criminal from Bosnia who was pursuing a vendetta against Marcus. That Marcus and Sophie met was almost by chance, but they joined forces and worked together to outwit and defeat Banović. Much to their relief and ultimate satisfaction not only did they succeed, but they also found, through the process of working together, a perfect partner in each other.

Marcus had served with the Special Boat Service, the marine equivalent of the SAS. Technically, he was a great asset and especially familiar with the nature of Sophie's business. Indeed, he was the business partner she had been looking for since she had taken over the firm. However, he was more, much more. Sophie loved him, she relied on him, she had confidence in him, and now, she could not imagine life without him.

For Marcus, in addition to his love for her, he had discovered for the first time ever in his life a stability that had previously been so elusive. Apart from Sophie, he had also found a home, contentment, and direction in life. They had worked and lived together for over a year and life was good. Life was very good.

Marcus was absent when Sophie received the call from the Count. He had been attending a trade fair in Munich, where a number of international firms in the armaments and security business were displaying their products and services. He was due back at Geneva Airport at 2.30 p.m. that afternoon.

Sophie thought that it would be helpful for Marcus to meet the Count. However, her motivation was stronger than that. Sophie really wanted the Count to meet Marcus. It was more personal than business and she recognised that it was engendered by a mixture of pride and happiness. Marcus was a new acquisition in her life and she wanted to show him off. She wanted everybody with whom she had ever been associated to meet Marcus, so they would know how lucky she was, how happy she was, and how clever she was.

'I mustn't think like this,' she had told herself more than once, but she couldn't resist it, it made her smile and imparted a warm glow of self-satisfaction.

Marcus had said on the phone the previous evening that he would get a taxi from the airport, but Sophie suddenly, on an impulse driven by nervous anticipation, decided to go and meet him.

As she opened the door to her office to leave however, her thoughts turned to Delphine, her former secretary. Feelings of anger, sadness, and guilt came surging back. Delphine had been tortured, raped, and murdered by Banović. Under duress, Delphine had revealed Sophie's location to him. Fortunately, Delphine was unaware that Marcus was also at the chalet in the mountains and Banović left Delphine believing that he would

find nothing other than another soft target. Banović lived only a few hours longer than the last of his many victims. Sophie took a deep breath.

‘I’m going to the airport, to pick up Marcus,’ she told her new secretary.

Anne-Marie was an energetic, enthusiastic, twenty six-year-old. She was a graduate of the School of Translation and Interpretation at the University of Geneva, where she had studied Spanish and Italian, to add to her existing fluency in French, German, and English. Having a postgraduate degree in Legal Translation made her a real asset to the firm.

‘When do you expect to be back?’ Anne-Marie asked, picking up a pencil to write on her notepad.

‘About three-fifteen I hope, unless of course the plane’s late,’ Sophie replied. Anne-Marie could hardly fail to notice that there was a distinct sparkle in her eyes. ‘I’ll phone you on the mobile if there’s a problem, but I will be back by four in any event to meet the Count. If Marcus’s plane is delayed, he’ll have to get a taxi.’

Anne-Marie smiled. She got on well with Sophie and she enjoyed working for the firm. Despite always being busy, a relaxed atmosphere pervaded both the offices and the workshop. It was a successful business, it was expanding, and the future looked secure.

Sophie bounced down the stairs to the ground floor and skipped towards the front entrance, waving at the two girls in reception. Her red Porsche 911 Turbo, her toy as she called it, was parked on the forecourt. Leaving the office in the afternoon, especially when the sun was shining, even more especially when she was going somewhere with Marcus, gave her a such a sense of freedom and adventure - it was almost like playing truant.

She parked the car in the ‘*Arrivals*’ car park and went inside the concourse of the airport to view one of the television screens to see if the plane from Munich had already landed. It was delayed and due to arrive fifteen minutes late. It was not much, but it was disappointing and frustrating. Sophie took the escalator up to the concourse and the departure lounge. There was a small bookshop where she could buy a newspaper. It would be something to read whilst she had a coffee and waited.

The range of international papers to choose from was quite extensive, and some were even papers flown in that morning. She thought of her secretary and her avid desire to read anything Italian and bought *La Stampa*, one of the leading Italian tabloids. After collecting an espresso in the self-service café, she sat down at a small round stainless steel table. Then, she called Anne-Marie on her mobile phone, to say that they would be a little late and started to read the paper.

Her Italian was not bad. Being Swiss, she had been obliged to learn French and German, but she also spoke Italian and English and, like Marcus, Sophie also spoke Russian. Her mother was of Russian extraction and had insisted on her learning the language as a child. It had proved to be very useful.

Sophie scanned the usual articles about the Italian politics and Silvio Berlusconi's latest controversy, as well as comments on AS Roma's mediocre start to the football season. However, she couldn't concentrate and then, as she was about to put the paper down, she read the stop press.

Security Guard Brutally Murdered

A Security Guard was murdered late last night at the Galleria D'Urbano in the Via della Quattro Fontane. The murder is believed to be associated with an attempted robbery. The police have not issued any further details at this stage.

Sophie was stunned. This must be the reason for the Count arranging an urgent meeting, she thought, and then immediately started to worry about the firm's contractual liabilities. Perhaps there had been a fault in the security system that her firm had installed? Maybe one of the security guards they had selected, was a member of a criminal gang? What other possibilities were there?

Then again, she reflected, it was most unlike art robbers to indulge in murder. Art robbery was usually a more delicately planned and executed crime. Sophie wondered why the guard was killed and, she was still deep in thought, when she realised how much time had passed. Marcus was likely to be coming through Passport Control and Customs at any moment.

Scampering down the stairs, she even wondered if she might have been too long and missed him. Once on the arrivals concourse, she went straight to one of the windows to see if she could see him waiting for his baggage at one of the oval conveyor belts. He was there, she saw him. She almost jumped up and down with glee, like an excited child, until she realised what she was about to do and tried to be more composed. However, she could feel the tension; waiting, even for a short time, was far too frustrating.

When eventually Marcus pushed through the double doors and came from behind the fenced barrier, she could restrain herself no more. Unconscious of the crowd around her, she ran up to him, threw her arms around his neck and hugged him passionately.

'Oh Marcus, I missed you so much.'

He had been away for almost three days! Such is love!

The Count arrived at the office punctually on time. One of the girls in reception immediately took him upstairs to Sophie's office. Anne-Marie welcomed him and apologised, explaining that Madame Lefèvre would be back very shortly. She offered him a coffee but he politely refused and patiently sat waiting for Sophie to arrive. It was only a few minutes later that Sophie and Marcus arrived, but Sophie was already feeling guilty for having kept her client waiting.

As soon as she saw him she began to apologise profusely. The Count rose to his feet and shook his head. 'It's no matter, Sophie,' he said, addressing her informally as an old friend of the family. 'It's simply a delight to see you again.' He took her

hand delicately and brought it towards his lips. Sophie now felt embarrassed as well as culpable and, blushing slightly, gestured that the Count should go straight into her office.

‘Shall I leave my things here,’ he said, pointing at a small tan leather case and a matching overnight bag.

‘I’ll look after them if you like,’ volunteered Anne-Marie getting up from behind her desk.

‘Thank you so much, my dear.’ He smiled at Anne-Marie and then followed Sophie into her office. Sophie looked over her shoulder towards Marcus who was still hovering in the corridor.

‘Marcus, you are going to join us, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, OK - I’ll just drop this stuff off in my office. I’ll come straight back.’

Sophie followed the Count into her room.

‘Please take a seat,’ she said, pointing towards the black leather armchairs set around the glass topped coffee table. ‘Would you like a tea or a coffee, Count Emilio?’

‘Thank you, no. Nothing. Better not if I’m travelling.’

‘So,’ started Sophie, ‘remind me first what time your flight to Rome is?’

‘I have to book in before six so I imagine we have little more than an hour, if indeed we need that long.’

There was a quiet knock on the door as Marcus came into the room. He closed the door and walked over to join Sophie and the Count.

‘I’d like you to meet Marcus. Marcus Tregay. He’s my new partner.’

‘Business or otherwise?’ The Count asked mischievously as he stood up to greet Marcus.

‘Business and otherwise.’ The Count immediately perceived the delight with which Sophie answered his question.

‘I am very pleased to meet you Marcus. You’re a lucky man.’ Marcus smiled at the Count as they shook hands. ‘How did you two meet?’

‘Long story,’ replied Marcus candidly, then adding, to avoid being rudely abrupt, ‘rather by chance, in fact. It was an interesting and unforgettable experience.’

The Count, who had been a mountaineer when he was younger, recognised *interesting* to mean anything from mildly exciting to highly dangerous.

‘Sounds like a bit of an adventure,’ he remarked with a twinkle in his eye.

‘I assure you that it was!’ Sophie interjected.

‘I insist that you tell me about it sometime then, Marcus.’

‘I would be very pleased to, but not now, I understand that we’re somewhat limited for time and that you have a plane to catch to Rome.’

‘Yes indeed.’ The Count and Sophie returned to their seats and Marcus joined them.

‘Perhaps I could ask you first, if your visit has anything to do with the break-in last night at your museum?’ Sophie could not wait; the crime was already intriguing her.

‘My goodness!’ The Count was utterly astonished. ‘You seem to be remarkably well informed.’

‘Well, not really,’ admitted Sophie. ‘It was reported in the stop press in *La Stampa* this morning. I read it only a few moments ago whilst I was waiting for Marcus at the airport. I simply put two and two together and arrived at a logical conclusion. It is, isn’t it?’

‘Well, yes, I am distressed to say that unfortunately, it is.’ Count Emilio sighed, his shoulders sagging. He looked desolate. ‘The police telephoned me this morning to inform me about what happened last night.’

‘What did they say?’ Sophie leant forward in anticipation of an exiting story.

‘To be perfectly honest, they actually told me very little.’ He hesitated before continuing. He took his time going over the conversation with the police officer in his head before speaking. Sophie found the silence excruciating. ‘Apparently, one of my employees was murdered last night during what seemed to be an armed robbery. As you can imagine, I was quite shocked by the news.’

Count Emilio di Cantaglione paused, reflecting on the information that he had been given. He frowned, scratched his head, and then shook it slowly in disbelief of what had happened.

‘Was much stolen?’ Marcus asked in the ensuing pause.

‘Well, very little it seems. I thought the police might be mistaken but I then talked to my Director afterwards, who confirmed exactly what the police had told me. I can only say that it seemed quite stupid.’

‘Why, was it stupid, what was stolen?’

‘A Greek Orthodox icon,’ he said, frowning again. ‘But it really does not make any sense.’

‘How do you mean?’ Sophie was puzzled. ‘In what way doesn’t it make any sense?’

‘Many of the objects on display are well known and well catalogued. Typically, they are the sort of objects that you would find in many museums and art galleries. Some are priceless, but others have a rather modest value and are important only contextually. That is precisely why they are displayed; they help to provide a more complete picture of the history and development of the art.’

‘This object, which appears to have been stolen, is an icon. It is not an icon that falls into the first category, that of being priceless. It would not have any great monetary value. Furthermore, displaying it now, publicly, would be risky. Inevitably, it would be recognised sooner or later as having been stolen. Of course, there are private collectors of such objects who keep their collections a closely guarded secret. Nonetheless, I find it quite incomprehensible that one would be prepared to murder simply to acquire it. That’s why I find this theft so perplexing and why perhaps the police are mistaken in their belief that this was really the motive for the crime.’

‘Is it large, this icon, or special in any particular way?’ Sophie asked.

‘No, not at all, no in fact, it is quite small. It’s interesting, well executed, but nothing special. It’s useful in the display precisely because it shows a stage in the historic progression in the art. Globally, however, there are many other examples that fit into a similar slot, some of course have quite a higher value, others, rather less. The one which was stolen could only be described as average.’

‘What sort of value?’ Sophie asked.

‘Less than a thousand euros; hardly worth killing for is it?’

‘It wouldn’t seem so.’ Sophie commented. The Count nodded in agreement ‘So, how can we assist?’

This was really the crux of the matter as far as Sophie was concerned, indeed, the question that had intrigued her ever since she had read the brief article in the newspaper. Now she was impatient to learn what the Count might have in mind for them to do, or if a lawsuit was likely to follow, however unlikely that might seem.

‘As you know, I’m going to Rome tonight,’ the Count started. ‘I have arranged to see the police at the museum tomorrow morning. No doubt, they will want to ask me all sorts of questions. I cannot imagine how I will be able to help them. I was wondering if you could come meet me there, look at the tapes that were recorded that evening, talk to the staff; that sort of thing. I also need to know if we should do anything to improve security. I thought we had done enough and so this is break-in comes as something of a shock.’ The Count paused again, his eyes searching for sympathy and support. ‘What do you think? Do you think that it might be possible for you? I know it’s desperately short notice.’

Sophie was relieved that there was no hint of litigation in the air and rather delighted that an extension to their existing contract appeared imminent.

‘We can certainly help advising on further improvements if these are required. As for interviewing the staff, I think the police might feel we’re perhaps treading on their toes.’ Sophie wondered how to phrase her next comment, preferring to neither upset the Count nor leave him speculating that they were not interested in helping. ‘And, you must appreciate as well, that we are not exactly a detective agency. It’s not really our speciality, solving crimes.’

‘Yes, of course, I do understand that, and I really do appreciate what you are saying, but perhaps you could keep an open mind whilst you check out the system. Maybe adding a few more cameras, alarms and the like may be all that’s required. We should at least do that, don’t you agree?’

‘Well, of course, that is our business; that’s what we do best.’

The Count, on the other hand, was not satisfied to let it rest like that. ‘However, whilst you are there, I would prefer if you could remain flexible on possibly extending your services but, only if it seems appropriate, of course.’ He was sufficiently vague to exclude the possibility of rejection. In spite of this, Sophie, an experienced businesswoman, remained cautious and

somewhat reserved about being inveigled into something that might well fall outside their normal services.

‘What do you think Marcus?’ Sophie looked at Marcus to see what his reaction was. It was becoming more of a habit.

Marcus, on the other hand, whose main experience in life was outside the commercial side of business, clearly felt less constrained. ‘I don’t see why not and, if we turn something up which does help the police, it wouldn’t do any harm. If we don’t, then I imagine that we will all be satisfied the police are doing their best anyway.’

‘Ah, that is what I wanted to hear. That would be very helpful,’ said the Count, hesitantly adding politely, ‘if you agree Sophie?’ Sophie smiled and sighed.

The timing was unfortunate. Now that Marcus had returned from Munich, Sophie had it in mind to take a few days off to go sailing on Lac Lemman. It was getting towards the end of the sailing season and, despite their resolution to take more time off, they had not been out for weeks. On the other hand, she reflected, a trip to Rome might also be rather agreeable. Moved by the thought of a romantic few days in the Eternal City, she agreed, conditionally. ‘OK, but I would like Marcus to come along with me. Would you be happy with that.’

‘I would,’ said the Count, clearly delighted, ‘and to confirm my agreement I’m happy to pay you a retainer now, say, for five working days for the two of you. If you can also come up with a set of proposals how to improve the existing system, provide me with a report with recommendations and an estimate of costs, I will be happy to extend your engagement.’

Sophie, clearly delighted with the deal and with no hint of litigation, swiftly concluded the affair. ‘*Marché conclu!*’ They shook hands.

Marcus drove the Count to the airport and told him a little more of the history of how he and Sophie had met. After dropping him outside ‘*Departures*,’ Marcus drove back to the office to pick up Sophie. On their way into the centre of Geneva that evening, Sophie told him that she had already booked a flight the following morning at 7.40 a.m. for Rome. They would arrive at 9.10 a.m. at Rome Ciampino, and they could catch the train into the centre of Rome. Marcus asked if she’d had time to book a hotel. Sophie said that she hadn’t but thought they would look for somewhere near to the museum. They could do that when they arrived. That evening, after they had eaten supper, Marcus was sitting on the settee holding Sophie in his arms.

‘It’s difficult to believe that it’s ten years since that night in Bosnia when I first saw Banović.’ Sometimes it seemed to him that the intervening time had flown by, at other times, it just seemed like a lifetime ago. ‘You know,’ Marcus said, hugging her gently, ‘that was the beginning of the affair that eventually brought us together. You would have been in your mid-twenties then.’

‘I was, and stupid, and completely lost,’ she said putting her head on his shoulder. ‘But not anymore.’

Chapter 5

Sophia, Bulgaria - 29th September 2004

Todor Kubrat had arranged to meet his contact the same evening of his flight back to Sofia.

Kubrat was uncertain of the man's nationality when he had first met him although he concluded that it was of little consequence in any event. He thought that he might have been Palestinian, but then, he could have been from almost anywhere in the Middle East. Kubrat did not speak Arabic and, even if he did, he could not have distinguished from the man's accent, what part of the Middle East he came from. As the man was reasonably fluent in Russian, reporting on the success of his mission was not a problem.

Kubrat was contented, even rather pleased, that he had completed the contract without a hitch and almost exactly as he had been instructed. He had carried out the project to the letter, with one exception, and that was something he would keep to himself. That evening, he would receive his fee and possibly, he hoped the prospect of further work. Assassination was a new area of work for him and, potentially, it appeared to be very lucrative.

The contact had given his name as Aziz, but Kubrat knew that it was unlikely that he would have told him his real name. Despite the fact that Kubrat did not know whom Aziz represented, or even what they aimed to achieve by the mission he had successfully completed. He did not care, it was of no importance and, he preferred not to know. With the fall of the communism there seemed to be little that still made any real sense in the world.

Kubrat's international socialist communist indoctrination had been good and he was dismayed that the values that he had been brought up to believe in, real communist values, were now despised by the majority of the population and the rest of the world. Before things changed, he had status and power. He understood his principal role in life - that of protecting the communist state and at any cost. Now that society had lost its way, he had also had lost his way. Now, he did not know what he was protecting, or fighting for, or indeed, against. Somewhat rudderless, Kubrat cynically joined what he falsely believed to be the capitalist world, deciding that henceforth he would just concentrate on looking after himself.

Taking a last long draw on his cigarette, he leant over the bridge, looked down at the river, removed it from his mouth and flicked the butt into the slow moving polluted water. It was time to go and meet the Arab.

With increasing cloud cover dusk had arrived early. It had already begun to rain lightly when the two men met on the

corner of the *Boulevard Evlogi Georgiev* outside the Russian Club. Kubrat had heard that the club had a good restaurant but they remained outside the unprepossessing building; they had other, more pressing business to transact. Then, silently, they walked away from it, passing under the avenue of trees that ran alongside the river.

When they were sure that they would not be overheard Kubrat began to report on his mission. Aziz was insistent on every precise detail and asked him to repeat elements of the story until he was sure that there was nothing that he could have missed, or misinterpreted. His attention to detail finally began to irritate Kubrat; he had some difficulty in concealing his displeasure.

Aziz, finally apparently satisfied, smiled and handed Kubrat a large brown envelope containing used Bulgarian bank notes. They parted company immediately afterwards. No further words passed between them, there was no friendly exchange, no – ‘*thank you, it was a good job that you did*’, or ‘*have a nice evening*’, or ‘*see you soon - we may have another job for you,*’ - nothing. In that last respect, the meeting was a disappointment for Kubrat. Still, he had the money, which from his point of view, was the main thing.

Abdul Aziz waited for two cars to go past before crossing the boulevard to the park and the stadium opposite. Kubrat’s assistant, the ill-kempt youth, was already on that side of the road, studying a notice board near to the entrance to the stadium. He was carefully watching the man with whom Kubrat had been talking through the reflection in the glass door to the notice board.

As Aziz turned to the left and began to move away, the youth followed him, maintaining the distance between them. It was a large concourse outside the entrance to the stadium and the youth kept the man in sight as he sauntered, casually kicking the occasional pebble in an imaginary game of football.

The youth also wondered why he had decided to follow him. He had no instructions to do so. He had not really planned to spy on his boss. Perhaps it was just curiosity? Maybe it was because Todor had said that he had to meet him alone and he was just suspicious. Perhaps it was more than just a pay-off, or perhaps it was simply because he felt insecure? Somewhat warily, he tailed the man, never too closely, always regarding him in his peripheral vision.

As the Arab turned to cut across the corner of the park, his course began to converge with that of the youth who, rather than deviating, used the opportunity to pass close to him and regard him in more detail. He was able to distinguish the man’s features very clearly and knew that he would remember him.

The Arab was a small man with delicate features. He sported a neatly cut beard with a white streak running through the centre of it from the fold in his lower lip to where the beard formed a point below his chin. As they crossed each other’s paths, the man looked earnestly towards the road in keen anticipation, quite ignorant of the youth’s interest in him.

The car that he was expecting arrived around the corner of the park and immediately slowed down. Its wipers were beating occasionally, clearing spots of rain, as the view through the windscreen became obscured. Abdul Aziz quickened his pace and met the car as it stopped by the roadside. The door was already open. As he got in and closed the door behind him, the car accelerated. It had stopped for only the briefest of moments before departing into the rain and the dark. However, the youth noted with some curiosity that the car was a long way from home - it had Bosnian registration plates.

Kubrat walked away from his meeting towards the city centre, in the opposite direction to the Arab. He had not mentioned the youth to Aziz, knowing that he would have disapproved. The youth was his affair and his own private pleasure. That night Kubrat would give him his share of the fee and then they could celebrate. A frisson of excitement ran through him in expectation of the pleasure that was awaiting him. Crossing the road, and stepping up the kerb, Kubrat passed through a gate into a small park. It was now beginning to rain more heavily and his pace quickened as he tried to avoid getting too wet before he reached his apartment.

After leaving the park and passing under a stone arch that guarded a wide alley, he continued along the alley to where it narrowed at the far end. There, Kubrat turned and mounted two steps leading to the entrance of a dilapidated art deco building that looked in desperate need of expert renovation.

At the top of the communal stairs, on the fourth floor, he extracted the key from his pocket and opened the door to his small apartment. Kubrat entered savouring the anticipation of counting his ill-earned fee. Once in the kitchen, he removed the envelope from the inside pocket of his coat where he had put it to protect it from the rain. He placed it carefully on the small plastic topped table and looked at it for a moment, allowing himself a smile. Then, he removed his coat and, after folding it neatly, he draped it carefully over a chair.

First, a beer, he thought. Some pleasures are rather more gratifying when they are delayed just a little. Removing the cap from a bottle taken from the door of his new fridge, he poured the cold, fizzing amber liquid into a glass and sat down at the table. He looked at the envelope. It had been easy money. Kubrat grinned with satisfaction.

Now he had to divide the money into two piles, one for him, ninety percent, the other for the youth, the remainder. He was very generous, he thought. He hoped the youth would appreciate his charity.

Kubrat opened the envelope with a kitchen knife. Inside, the used notes were contained in separate, sealed, transparent polythene bags. Sensible, Kubrat thought. If it had rained and the packets got wet, they could have disintegrated, then there would have been used notes everywhere. He sipped his beer. If he divided the money before the youth arrived then they could concentrate on other more delicate, pleasurable activities. He felt that tantalising stir in his loins – but first, the money.

Kubrat extracted the polythene bags and opened one of them, removing a wad of notes and placing them on the surface of the table in front of him. Then, he felt in the pocket of his leather coat draped over the back of the chair and took out a packet of cigarettes and the lighter. He placed a cigarette between his teeth. They say that smoking is bad for your health; he chuckled while lighting it and dragging the cool smoke down into his lungs to fill them with the narcotic that he was craving.

‘So what,’ he said, reflecting without remorse on the horrible act he had committed the previous evening, ‘you don’t live forever, that’s for sure!’

Exhaling and forming his lips to float a smoke ring through the air in front of his eyes, he picked up the beer to take another sip. It was cool and refreshing. The slightly bitter taste and the sensation of the fine bubbles playing on his gums were to be savoured before swallowing it. Then, putting the bottle on one side, to enjoy another swig later, he took part of the wad of notes in his left hand and started counting with his right hand. After he had counted out the first wad, he picked up the cigarette from the corner of the table, put it between his lips, and inhaled deeply. Then, he took another swig of his beer, gathered the next wad of notes, and started counting again. Soon afterwards, he began to feel strange, very strange.

Within only a few minutes, his eyes had difficulty focusing, his breathing was strained, and his limbs felt heavy. At first, he thought that he was having a heart attack; it was as if someone was standing on his chest. Kubrat tried harder to breathe, but the next breath was even shallower than the last. After that, he was soon straining for even the slightest gasp.

His lungs no longer apparently working, Kubrat crashed to the floor convulsing. The onset of this respiratory paralysis was virtually the end for him. As his vision narrowed to a fine tunnel of light, as his pupils became pinpricks, Todor Kubrat died staring, comprehending nothing about what was happening to him.

The VX nerve agent impregnated notes were so potent that the dose he received on his fingers with the first note would have killed him even if he had not counted any further. Certainly, it would have taken slightly longer to die but he was dead the moment he had touched the notes. There was no antidote. He had counted one hundred notes, it would have been roughly the equivalent of sixty US dollars if the notes had been real, but they weren’t, they were counterfeit, they were worth absolutely nothing, as it appeared was his life.

It was the youth, who raised the alarm. He had climbed the fire escape at the rear of the building when he found that he could not get into the apartment. He could see Kubrat lying on the floor, his body contorted with his mouth fixed in a final grimace. Using a nearby public call box, he called the police. He neglected to give them his name and did he did not wait for them to arrive.

Three more people died in similar circumstances to Kubrat before the police and paramedics realised that there was

something extraordinarily lethal in the room. Immediately, the room was sealed off until a special forensic team from the military arrived wearing full protective clothing and equipped to carry out a complete range of tests.

But by that time, Abdul Aziz, the Servant of the Powerful One, was well on his way back to Zenica in Bosnia to report the outcome of the mission and the death of their infidel operative. There was nothing now to link al-Ghalib, the Victorious Ones, with the death in Rome - except of course, the youth, about whom they knew nothing.

Chapter 6

Rome, Italy - 29th September 2004

It was just going dark when Rear-Admiral Roberto Spinelli left the Ministry of Naval Defence in the *Palazzo Marina*. Had he been at his villa in the hills near Tivoli, he would have seen some luminosity in the evening sky, a duck egg blue green spreading up from the horizon into the darkness of the sky above. In Rome, however, the street lighting and the buildings left only a hint that it was not yet night.

As he walked across the *Plaza della Marina* in front of the imposing renaissance building where he worked, the noise of the evening traffic in *Via Flaminia* had already attained its normal, screeching, rush hour volume.

He had received a call that morning from the *carabinieri* to inform him that his son had been taken to hospital suffering from shock following an incident at the museum where he worked. Roberto had wondered if he should visit him. Not only did they not get on very well, they had hardly managed to speak to each other civilly for over a year.

Paulo was a pacifist. He detested the military and for several years, he would have nothing to do with his father. It was made worse by the fact that his father was separated from his mother, who had left Rome to go back to her native Tuscany. Paulo was obliged to remain with his father, but the breakup of the marriage and the refusal of his mother to take him with her, only increased the problems between father and son.

Paulo blamed his father, who, left with bringing up his adolescent son, had tried to force Paulo to take up a military career completely unaware of his son's growing antipathy of anything to do with the armed forces. His son resisted furiously, driving a wedge further between them and, at the first opportunity, Paulo left home to live with friends in Rome. Although his father continued to support him financially whilst he attended University, there was still considerable rancour on both sides. It had been a difficult time.

Meeting him again might cause all the old differences to re-emerge and, if he was in shock, perhaps it was not such a good idea. Maybe tomorrow would be better, he thought. Roberto walked to the central station pondering the idea, wondering whether to turn back and go to the hospital. Finally, he decided to catch the train to Frascati, where he had left his car.

Tomorrow, Roberto decided, he would go and see his son. Tomorrow would probably be better.

Chapter 7

Sophia, Bulgaria - 30th September 2004

Preferring to avoid bumping into the police accidentally, the youth walked around the city rather than loiter in the immediate area of the apartment. Periodically, he returned to the scene, intrigued by what was going on. Each time he had returned, he walked through the park in the direction of the alley. He slowed at the end of the alley from where he could see the entrance to the apartment. And, each time he returned, the activity appeared to have increased. More vehicles arrived; police, emergency services, and then finally, the military.

The police blocked off the alley and evacuated everyone from the art-deco apartment block. In the early hours of the morning, four long black heavy plastic bags were brought out of the building. Two people, dressed in large one-piece suits with special breathing gear, carried the stretchers and manhandled them into the back of the waiting ambulances. Others, similarly dressed, went in and out of the building removing most of the contents of the apartment in sealed containers.

It was clear to the youth on his second round that a major operation was underway, and his third round that something very serious must have happened. He would have liked to get closer but his curiosity was tempered with prudence. There was nothing to do but to wait. Unfortunately, as the activity increased, so did the intensity of the rain persuading him finally that it was time to leave.

Kubrat had looked after him. It was a simple arrangement. In return, he provided him with the sexual relief that he craved. There was no love in it. It was just an arrangement that worked for both of them. It was a surprise when Kubrat suggested that he went to Rome with him. Initially he had thought it was a joke. However, much to his satisfaction, it wasn't. Indeed, Kubrat promised to provide false identity papers to enable him to fly to Italy and return to Bulgaria. This alone convinced him that he should go. Such an opportunity he could not miss; apart from anything else, if the papers were convincing, which he imagined they would be, they could be very useful for the future.

Kubrat had explained that he had a job to carry out and that he required an assistant. They would both be well paid, but they had to travel separately. He would be provided with a ticket and some pocket money. Kubrat told him that they would be robbing an art gallery. However, he had purposely omitted to explain that someone was going to die in the process.

The youth, believing that it was simply an art robbery, which had a sense of adventure to it, was now feeling very distressed about what he had become involved in. Even more

confusing was Kubrat's requirement that after the robbery he should dump not only the gun but also the stolen icon. That, he just didn't understand, but Kubrat had been most insistent

He had done exactly as he had been instructed and thought it wiser not to ask too many questions. Now he wished that he had. Realising that he knew practically nothing about the crime and absolutely nothing about the man who had given Kubrat a package that evening, he felt completely lost. What initially had seemed like an interesting adventure, now appeared to have been a great mistake and his provider and protector, Kubrat, apparently was dead.

The youth's name was Radi Dushku. He was an ethnic Albanian, a Muslim, and was one of many displaced persons living illegally in Bulgaria. Born in Kosovo in 1970, he was brought up by his parents in Izbica in the north of the country. Radi was an only child whose mother had died when he was in his early teens, from cancer, or rather, lack of medical attention. With a proper diagnosis and suitable treatment, she might have survived, but an incorrect diagnosis and no treatment was a death sentence. His father, devastated by the loss of his wife, became increasingly depressive, withdrawn, and incapable of looking after either himself, or his son.

Radi began fending for himself more and more, doing jobs for people, running errands whilst trying to keep up with his schoolwork and looking after his father. It was the only way to survive. They struggled. They were malnourished and Radi was not strong teenager. Manual work left him physically exhausted. He had been beaten up more than once by a gang of Serbian youths who disliked intensely their Muslim neighbours. The Serbian nationalist propaganda that the youths absorbed dehumanised them to the Muslim population, whom they thought were little better than vermin. The experience left him frightened and uncertain of himself, but he was a survivor.

When the Serb Army entered Izbica on the 27th March 1999, Dushku and his father fled south with one hundred thousand other ethnic Albanians. They had heard what the Serbs would do to them if they were caught. They did not know if it was true, but they were certainly not going to stay just to satisfy their curiosity.

His father and he were separated one night when his father, already suffering from dementia, wandered away from the temporary camp they had made. Dushku tried to find him, he searched desperately all that night and the next day, but he was unsuccessful. It was the last time that he saw his father; he was exhausted. Like the rest of the refugees, Dushku just kept moving south.

First, they fled to Prizren, Kosovo's second city. It was only two weeks later when on the 29th April the Serbian Army caught up with them again and drove through the town advising by loudspeaker that all ethnic Albanians were to leave immediately....

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