

PROLOGUE

Rome, Italy

March 30, 2018

With a curious expression, Evangeline Marquesa accepted the package from the concierge. She bid him, “*Buono notte,*” and stepped into the private elevator that would whisk her up to her penthouse apartment. As the doors slid closed, she turned the parcel over in her hands. It was small and square and was so light it felt as though there was nothing in it. The typewritten label on the front bore her name, but there was nothing to identify the sender.

Once in the foyer of her suite, she kicked off her red patent stilettos. With one hand she held the parcel. With the other, she picked up the ice-cold glass of Chardonnay the maid had placed there just minutes before her arrival. In the kitchen, she pulled a set of scissors from the knife block on the counter and carefully slit open the package. The manila wrapping fell away to expose a distinctive light blue box. *Ah, my sweet, you are so romantic.*

She put down her wineglass and lifted the lid of the Tiffany box. But instead of the expected exquisite piece of jewelry, in the pillowy soft folds of velvet sat a perfectly manicured man’s pinkie finger. Still wearing the distinctive signet ring that she had gifted its owner.

The Lalique wine goblet fell from her hand. Crystal splinters danced across her bare feet and ankles like tiny birds in flight before they alighted en masse in a puddle of pale gold liquid. Her screams punctured the stillness of the night.

Vancouver, British Columbia

March 30, 2018

Shannon St. Clair turned into her driveway off Point Grey Road and parked the pearl-white Tesla X in a bay of the four-car garage. She grabbed her yoga mat from the backseat and entered her home.

Upstairs in her bathroom, she stripped off her workout gear. The wall-to-wall mirror assured her that her body was still as good as it was in her twenties. Long toned legs ended at the perfect triangle of her pubis. Followed by curved hips and a flat stomach. Voluptuous breasts, with a little bit of help, sat full and perky as they formed the foundation of an exquisitely shaped clavicle. *Not bad for a yummy mummy in this town*, she mused as she turned on the shower.

Just as she was about to step in, her cell phone pinged. She sighed. Jess had probably forgotten her lunch again. She picked up the phone from the vanity and squinted at the image through the thickening cloud of steam. She leaped back. The phone slipped from her hand and skittered across the slick stone floor. As if by some malevolent force, it landed faceup, unbroken.

Frozen on the screen was an instantly recognizable face. Alongside it was an image of what looked like the charred remains of a burned-out car.

London, UK

March 30, 2018

Dr. Anna Braithwaite parked in the university's staff lot and walked across the grass heavy with predawn dew. She unlocked the door to her office and research lab situated on the bank of the Thames where the City of London met the West End. She dropped a pod of Death Wish Coffee into the Keurig and hung up her coat. Timing it perfectly, she retrieved the steaming mug and added a few grains of Stevia. Taking the first pungent sip, she entered her office, sat down at her desk and turned on her computer.

Briefly, she saw a reflection of herself in the darkened monitor before it sprung to life. The image that took its place and filled the screen made her heart stop dead in her chest.

CHAPTER ONE

Rome, Italy

March 31, 2018

Special Prosecutor Nicolás Moretti, accompanied by a female police officer, arrived at the home of Evangelina Marquesa. Situated just steps from the Tiber River and opposite Castel Sant'Angelo, properties like hers typically sold for upward of twenty thousand euros per square meter. Although the demand was still high for the historical buildings with views that overlooked the rooftops of Rome, Mrs. Marquesa had clearly opted for one that included four stories, modern fittings, a private elevator and valet parking.

Nico presented their credentials to the uniformed doorman and waited until advised that Antonio Marquesa's wife—about to be known as his widow—would see them now. He pointed to the far side of a vast, intricately inlaid marble foyer. “Take the elevator to your right, up to the penthouse floor. The signora will be waiting.”

The first thing Nico saw when the elevator door opened to the exclusive suite was a fluffy little white mop of a dog running in circles, as if it were a battery-operated toy stuck in the on position. A few seconds later, its mistress breezed into the foyer.

“Coco, bad dog. Come here, this minute.” She reached down and scooped up the canine, who wriggled in her arms and licked her face.

“I'm so sorry, I thought I'd have time to catch her before you arrived,” she said in perfect Oxford English. For the first time, she looked at her visitor.

“Ooh, aren’t you gorgeous?” she said, ogling Nico. The young officer stepped out from behind him. “Oh, there’s two of you.” She was clearly disappointed.

Evangeline Marquesa’s hazel eyes, burnished with flecks of gold, tilted up at the outer corners like a cat’s. An elfin-like fringe framed her face. The rest of her deep auburn hair was piled on top of her head in a haphazard bun. Around her neck she wore an enormous chunky layered necklace that almost covered the ample cleavage visible above a tight black lace camisole. The little dog continued to wriggle in her arms.

“Oh, my goodness, just let me dispose of this...this little rug rat, and I will be right with you.”

Nico heard a door slam, and in a flash the woman returned. “Please, do come in.” She waved for them to follow her. “Yes, you, too.” Her singsong invitation begrudgingly included the policewoman. “Is it too early for a glass of wine?”

Before either of them could answer, they’d arrived at a spacious, well-appointed kitchen. Stark white, with wall-to-wall stainless steel, it was spotless. Their hostess glanced at the clock on the wall.

“Only two o’clock. Oh, well, it’s five o’clock somewhere in the world, wouldn’t you agree?” She reached into an overhead cupboard and extracted three wineglasses.

It was unusual for Nico to be tongue-tied, but this whirlwind of a woman had thrown him decidedly off-kilter.

The policewoman spoke up. “Signora Marquesa, I’m Officer D’Angelo. May I ask if you live here alone?”

“Please call me Evangeline. My husband and I have a home in Malta, but I much prefer a pied-à-terre here in Rome.” She winked at Nico. “Something more intimate, if you know what I mean.”

“Officer D’Angelo and I won’t have wine, thank you. And perhaps it would be better for the moment if you didn’t either.”

Her eyebrows arched. Or did they? Her inquisitive expression seemed to be a permanent feature of her tanned and sun-freckled face. From his research, Nico knew her to be sixty-two years old, but she could easily have passed for early to mid-fifties. She looked to be about five-foot-six or -seven and carried her slightly padded curves well.

“Is there anyone else here with you at the moment?” the officer pressed. “Staff, perhaps?”

“No, it’s just Coco and me. My husband is in Calabria on business. I find it a dreadful place, so I usually come here when he travels. The maid has gone for the day. Why?” It was as if it had just occurred to her to ask.

Nico thought he saw a glimpse of something cross her face. Nervousness? Expectancy?

D’Angelo cleared her throat. “Signora Marquesa,” she began. “I’m afraid we have come with some...difficult news.”

There was that fleeting look again. Marquesa’s hand trembled ever so slightly as she touched her necklace, turning the beads over and over as if counting the rosary.

“It’s about your husband,” D’Angelo continued. “Antonio Marquesa was involved in an explosion—a possible car bombing—in St. Julian’s, Malta. There were no survivors. I’m so sorry.”

“Well, Signora Marquesa’s reaction was certainly interesting,” Nico told Sergio Barilla, his assistant prosecutor, when he called from his hotel. “I can’t shake the feeling that she seemed relieved once she learned it was her husband we’d come to tell her about.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, in the pause between D’Angelo telling her we had come with some difficult news, and that her husband was dead, I detected something running through Marquesa’s mind. Her cheeks became flushed and her blinking more rapid.”

“Well, people do deal with grief in different ways.”

“True, but before being told who the bad news concerned, it was as if she was searching for an appropriate reaction. Then as soon as she was told it was her husband, I saw this wall go up—”

“Have the police checked her alibi for the time in and around the car bombing?” Sergio asked. “It was most certainly detonated by remote, so there’s a fairly wide time window. Can she account for the time before and after that?”

“Yes,” Nico replied. “I checked the investigating officer’s notes. At the time of the explosion, Mrs. Marquesa was in the air flying from Tropea to Rome. She was met at the airport by her driver, and then she attended a black-tie charity gala later that evening. That has all been verified.”

“Did she attend the gala alone?”

“I’m not sure, but it was in the newspapers and she was seen by hundreds of people. Why do you ask?”

“Well, I can’t believe what I’m about to say in this day and age, but many women wouldn’t feel comfortable being all dressed up at an event like that without having a man accompanying them. Especially someone like Evangeline Marquesa.”

Nico had done some digging into the socialite’s background and observed that she certainly liked to be shown off to her best advantage. And it almost always included an attractive man on her arm. Sometimes her husband; often not.

Nico chuckled. “I’m glad *I* didn’t say that! Lest I be mistaken for a chauvinist. But you make a good point. What do we know about the Marquesas’ marriage?”

Sergio flipped through the pages of a thick file folder. “Antonio Marquesa traveled a lot. Neither of them spent much time here in Tropea, so I suspect his wife was left to her own devices much of the time.”

The implication wasn’t lost on Nico. In Italy, it wasn’t unusual for both husbands and wives to have lovers on the side. Evangeline Marquesa, who was considerably younger than her late husband, didn’t look like the type to stay home alone, reading a book. Especially when in Rome.

“It seems that Mrs. Marquesa is independently wealthy,” Sergio interrupted Nico’s thoughts. “Nothing in her background indicates she’s ever had any kind of a career. In fact, quite the opposite: she came from a wealthy family and she married into an equally wealthy banking family. From what I read, it sounded more like a merger of conglomerates than a romantic connection.”

Nico had to agree. The Marquesas had no children together, and she had none. Antonio had four children by a previous marriage, all of whom were fully grown and scattered throughout Europe with their own families. Interestingly, none of them had chosen to remain in their native

Italy. All appeared to have exited shortly after their father married Evangeline. Notably, none had attended the wedding.

CHAPTER TWO

Vancouver, British Columbia

April 1, 2018

To say the home of Chaz and Shannon St. Clair was opulent would be an understatement. In the course of his former career as a homicide investigator with the RCMP, Reid Devlin had seen his share of mansions. One of his last cases before leaving the force involved a ten-million-dollar “teardown,” a dichotomy that could only be appreciated by those in the Vancouver real-estate market. The standing joke in the department was that in British Columbia, BC stood for Bring Cash. Apparently, the St. Clair pad had been built for the hefty price tag of fifty-two million dollars. It was now worth in the region of seventy-five; he’d done his homework. By comparison, the owners of the “teardown” would have been considered to be living in a hovel.

Some people have more money than sense, Reid thought as he pulled around the circular driveway in front of the house and made his way across the crushed rose-pink gravel to the front door. Had he not held out his PI credentials at the gatehouse—which now seemed to have been half a mile back—he was certain the two private security guards wouldn’t have let his beat-up Honda RAV4 taint the interlocking brick driveway that led up to the palatial home. He pressed the doorbell, knowing full well he’d already been announced by the guards. As the chimes echoed through the house, he straightened the preknotted necktie he kept in the car.

A regal-looking woman in a maid’s uniform opened the massive door and stepped aside for him to enter. “Please follow me,” she said as she led him through a foyer approximately the size

of the entrance to the Vancouver Art Gallery, then into a slightly smaller but tastefully appointed library. The faint smell of lemon furniture polish hung in the air.

“Mrs. St. Clair will be with you shortly. May I offer you something? Coffee or tea?”

The truth was Reid had just guzzled down a Tim Hortons coffee on the way over. He glanced down to check if he’d spilled any of it on his shirt. If he had, thankfully the tie covered it.

“Coffee would be great. If it’s no trouble.”

A minute or two after the maid left, he heard the tap of high heels approaching. His gut tightened; no matter how many times he’d had to visit the family of the deceased, it never got any easier. At least it was no longer his job to deliver such news. However, instead of a wife who had probably not slept for forty-eight hours after receiving such devastating news, a stunningly beautiful blonde swept into the room.

“Mr. Devlin.” She leaned in, hand outstretched. “Our security people called to say you were on your way up.”

Reid jumped to his feet and shook her hand.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice.”

The woman had blue eyes, almost iridescent, and a full, sensuous mouth. Reid concentrated on staying focused on those attributes versus the ones below her neck. “Mrs. St. Clair, I’m so sorry for your loss.”

She gave him a generous smile. “Please call me Shannon. Mrs. St. Clair always makes me want to look around for my mother-in-law.”

No danger there. She definitely didn’t look like anyone’s mother-in-law. She also didn’t look like a grieving widow. His eyes brushed over her bronzed shoulders, again trying not to focus on the strategically placed open circle of her shocking-pink sleeveless dress. The cutout fabric

framed two perfectly uplifted breasts that he was trying valiantly not to notice. At five-foot-ten-and-a-half, he towered over her diminutive figure, which made it difficult not to look downward.

“Please have a seat. I just passed Dora and she’s bringing coffee.” She sat across from him and crossed her tanned legs, exposing perfectly toned thighs. Her smile remained, but her eyes were laser-focused. “In the meantime, I assumed you’d require a retainer.” She handed him a check. “I’m not sure what your customary amount is, but I’m hoping this will be enough to get you started immediately.”

He glanced at the amount and nearly swallowed his tongue. He was about to tell her that he hadn’t necessarily come to take her on as a client. Rather, he just wanted to ask her a few questions about her late husband. However, both the amount on the check, as well as the maid entering with a silver tray of coffee and cookies, stopped him from doing so.

“Thank you, Dora. Please hold all my calls and close the door behind you.” When they were alone again, Shannon St. Clair turned her attention back to Reid. “So, is the check sufficient for you to start looking into my husband’s disappearance?”

Perhaps she hadn’t grasped that her husband was dead. This wasn’t a missing-persons case. “Mrs. St. Clair...er, Shannon. I think we need to take a step back for a moment.” He pulled his notebook from his jacket pocket. “Would you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

And so, over several cups of coffee, while struggling to keep his eyes somewhere north of Shannon St. Clair’s neck, Reid Devlin made detailed notes. All the while, the number of zeroes on the check that was nestled in the inside pocket of his jacket chided him not to be overly cautious about taking her case. God knows that Devlin and Associates—which, as of yet, *had* no associates—could use the business.

“You mentioned that your husband often traveled to Malta on business, and yet you are in doubt that he was there at the time of the St. Julian’s car bombing.” Devlin’s former partner, who was still with the RCMP, had told him that while investigators were almost certain St. Clair had been in the car that day, they hadn’t recovered enough remains for a positive identification. “Is there a reason you think he was still here in Vancouver and not in Malta?”

“Other than he told me he was going out for a few days of fishing and his boat isn’t in its slip at the marina? No.”

Odd that she said *his* boat. Most couples would refer to it as *our*. “Was he accustomed to going out on the boat without you?”

“Oh, my goodness, I never set foot on that thing. Just sitting tied up at the dock makes me seasick. I’ve been like that since I was a child. My kids tease me that I can’t even go over to Vancouver Island on the ferry. Fortunately, we have a helicopter, so I can get most places I need to that way.”

Of course you do. If that were true, however, it eliminated the wife from taking the boat from the marina.

“He told me he’d be back in time for our anniversary,” Shannon continued. “We had plans to go up to our home in Whistler. Just the two of us, without the kids.”

“Did he say if he was going fishing alone? Were any buddies perhaps joining him?”

“Why, I have no idea.” She looked surprised. “I never asked.”

By his own admission, the reason for Reid’s own marital breakup was the long hours he worked with the force and his general lack of interest in his wife’s comings and goings. But up until the end, even he would have known if she’d planned to go somewhere overnight. And with whom.

CHAPTER THREE

Sussex, United Kingdom

April 1, 2018

Inspector James Padwick stood across the street from Dr. Anna Braithwaite's three-story home on Sutton Road. He pulled the collar of his raincoat up against the biting cold of an unusually vicious April day, even by East Sussex standards. With the erratic shifts of weather all over the Continent, he might need to get used to this being the new normal.

He put one foot forward to step off the curb when a taxi whooshed by, spraying rainwater across his shoes and halfway up his trousers. *Lovely*. What was it about UK taxi drivers that they seemed to aim for the largest puddles in closest proximity to a pedestrian? He looked both ways and crossed the street.

The area the Braithwaites lived in had changed dramatically since he was a boy growing up in nearby Eastbourne. He'd spent summers there with his grandparents, whiling away blissful days on the chalky white Downs. More than once, he and his friends had to be rescued when they misjudged high tide and couldn't get back along the pebbly beach on foot. Now, this formerly quiet residential road had become a busy mishmash of large but run-down homes, small commercial storefronts and co-op housing.

He pushed open the rusty gate that separated an overgrown front garden from the pavement and ascended several cracked and peeling concrete steps. He was just about to ring the bell when the door suddenly opened.

“Oh, hello.” The woman looked startled. The first thing James noticed were her red-rimmed eyes. Clearly, she’d been crying. Hardly surprising, given the circumstances.

“I was just checking if the post had been delivered.” She held out her hand. “You must be Inspector Padwick. I’ve been expecting you. Please come in.”

She led him through a threadbare-carpeted entrance hall. Directly ahead was a steep set of worn oak stairs. To the right was an open set of double doors, through which James followed her. “I’ve just made some coffee, but I can put the kettle on if you’d prefer tea.”

“Coffee would be fine, thank you.” He looked around to where he might deposit his wet coat before sitting.

“I’m so sorry. Let me take your coat.” She pushed her shoulder-length hair from her face. Against her porcelain-white skin, her cheeks flushed, enhancing her strawberry-blond coloring. When she turned, her profile showed an aquiline nose, high cheekbones and a strong jaw. She must have been quite beautiful at one time. Today, though, she had on a worn plaid shirt, faded jeans and felted wool slippers. A pair of glasses was perched on top of her head.

“I’m sorry, I’m in a bit of a mess since I... since my husband’s death.” She moved several piles of what looked to be academic papers off one end of the settee so James could sit. One entire wall of the sitting room was taken up by an aquarium, though he didn’t see any fish in it.

“Please don’t apologize. That’s to be perfectly expected. I’m very sorry for your loss.” He heard someone walking across the floor above. “Is there someone here with you, Mrs.—I’m sorry, Dr. Braithwaite?”

“We have renters on the two floors above. And it’s Anna. Please call me Anna.” She poured them both coffees. “Believe it or not, two research scientists don’t make that much money. A year ago, we could no longer manage the upkeep of the house, but we didn’t want to sell it. So,

we turned the upper floors into two small flats.” She stared off into space. He wondered if she was considering the fact that now she would have even less of an income. Hopefully, there was some life insurance.

James took a sip of the strong coffee and put his cup down on the table between them. “Anna, do you have any reason to believe your husband might have been in some sort of danger?”

“Clarence? God, no. I don’t mean this to be disrespectful, Inspector, but my husband wasn’t the most exciting man on earth.” She seemed lost in thought for a moment. “I suppose the same could be said of both of us, really. We don’t have children—our life is our work. *Was* our work.” She looked down at her hands. The only jewelry she wore was a simple gold wedding band and a small, thin watch that was at least a couple of decades out of fashion.

“I just can’t believe anyone would want to harm him. Clarence and I met at Cambridge when we were both doctoral students.” Her chin trembled. “Of course, we’ve both moved on since then.”

James was aware that neither of the Braithwaites were still at one of London’s most prestigious universities. In his research, he’d learned that the trials Anna Braithwaite had been developing for a cutting-edge new cancer drug had gone sideways and she’d left Cambridge in disgrace. Whether Clarence had been fired as well, he didn’t know, but in any event, it would have been colossally difficult to remain there after his wife’s professional debacle.

“It would seem your husband traveled a great deal. Had he decided to go into a different line of work after your, er—?”

“It’s all right, you can say it, Inspector. After I was fired from Cambridge.”

“I’m sorry,” was all he could think to say.

Her eyes welled up. “Thank you, but don’t be. I was fortunate that another university took me on almost immediately. Clarence had taken it upon himself to find potential investors who might back my new set of trials.” She turned woeful eyes toward him.

“In truth, I think my husband felt he needed to put some distance between us. For some reason, he seemed to think that what happened was his doing. But it was due to a fault in the design of the clinical trials. An underrepresentation of different types of people that the drug was designed for. In part, it was a lack of experience of certain members of my team, but ultimately, I was responsible. Clarence was devastated.”

The pain James saw etched on Anna Braithwaite’s face was raw. Visceral. Possibly, he was witnessing the cumulation of years’ worth of agony. The kind that surreptitiously moves into one’s body until it inhabits their soul. And now, her husband with whom she’d shared the ultimate sacrifice was dead.

“Anna, was there an investor or any group in particular that showed interest in your research, specifically in Italy?”

For a split second, a look of befuddlement crossed her face. Then it was gone. “Italy? No, I don’t think so. Clarence spent most of his time in France and more recently Malta. Apparently, he’d made a contact there in a private bank.”

James nodded and tucked that away to ask Nico Moretti about. “Does the name Antonio Marquesa mean anything to you?”

“No, I’ve never heard that name before. But Clarence really didn’t speak much about his business trips.” She twisted her wedding band. “Was he in the car when it was blown up?” Her voice faltered. “I still can’t believe that’s how Clarence died. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“It’s believed there was another person by the name of Charles, or Chaz St. Clair, from Canada in the car, although it hasn’t been confirmed yet. Does that name ring a bell?” He didn’t tell her that investigators were having trouble finding remains. They only had CCTV footage from outside the hotel in St. Julian’s to go on.

Anna slowly shook her head. “Do you think it was one of them who was the intended target and Clarence just happened to be with them?”

“That’s obviously something we’re looking into.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help, Inspector,” Dr. Braithwaite said as she walked James to the door. “If I think of anything, I’ll certainly call your office.”

“That would be appreciated. In the meantime, you have my assurance that the local police will keep you abreast of any developments regarding your husband’s death.” Anna handed him his coat and he put it on as he stepped outside.

“Just one more thing,” he said, pausing on the bottom step. “Have you received any unusual messages or texts either before or after your husband’s death?”

It was in that one backward glance—seemingly a casual afterthought—that he caught the fleeting expression that crossed her face. In one-twentieth of a second, Dr. Anna Braithwaite had given herself away.

Although exhausted, James wasn’t ready to turn in yet. He poured himself a brandy, opened his laptop and checked his emails. The first was a reply from one of his officers regarding whether or not they could get a warrant to search Anna Braithwaite’s computers and mobile phone. Both her personal one as well as at her university office. The good news was that they could, but

James preferred to schedule a second visit with her and see if he might question her further. If they went in too heavy-handed, she'd be unlikely to be forthcoming. He couldn't get the fleeting look she'd given him when he'd asked whether she'd received any unusual texts or emails out of his mind.

He dealt with a few more issues, and by the time he powered off his computer it was almost midnight. He considered calling Nico Moretti, who had enlisted his help on the investigation. However, with Italy being an hour ahead, he decided against it. He yawned and drained the last drop of brandy from his glass.

Tomorrow, he'd go back to see Dr. Braithwaite, get a few things done at the London office and then get out of soggy old England and, with any luck, escape to the sunnier climes of Calabria, Italy. The department would pay for it and, once there, he could confer with Nico in person.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rome, Italy

Nico was working late when the call came in regarding the identification of a body found in a dumpster off a back alley in the heart of Rome. It was a routine murder investigation, but as the special prosecutor in charge of certain homicides and organized crime in Italy, Nico's office was notified of anything unusually suspicious.

"He had a rap sheet of mostly petty crimes. A dime a dozen these days, right?" the officer from the Carabinieri—Italy's military police—said.

He knew the officer well and waited for an explanation of why he'd called Nico. "Do you have an ID yet?" he asked.

"Yeah. Whoever killed him made it easy for us. He had his wallet on him. Complete with a couple hundred euros. Name is Carlo Avenatti."

"And what, pray tell, does Mr. Avenatti do that he walks around with that kind of change?"

"Nothing unusual that I can see. My people tell me he was a minor player in the local nightclub scene—really more of a wannabe than anyone of substance. Apparently, he was known to escort good-looking rich women around. Possibly he threw in some extra benefits, thus the cash."

Rich women would actually pay two hundred euros just to be escorted? Nico mused. Who knew?

"Anything else?" While he appreciated the officer keeping him in the loop, he still wasn't quite sure why he'd approached Nico personally.

“Er, this is one thing,” the officer replied. “He seems to have had his baby finger hacked off.”

“You mean, it had been surgically removed, as in amputation?”

“No, I mean hacked off. As in just before he died.”

Nico examined the photos prior to and after postmortem. Bottom feeder of rich women though he might be, in death Carlo Avenatti had become significant for two things: two evenings ago, he had been on the arm of Evangeline Marquesa, and as far as could be seen, with all his digits intact.

Second, his body was discovered in a dumpster just two blocks from her penthouse apartment.

“Mr. Moretti!” Evangeline gushed when Nico stepped off the elevator. “What a delightful surprise. At this late hour can I assume this is a social visit?” Her impish smile went all the way to her upturned eyes. “Perhaps this time you can join me in a glass of wine.” She brandished her own half-full glass playfully. “I’m assuming you’re off duty, yes?”

She certainly didn’t appear to be the grieving widow, Nico thought. Unfortunately, because of the strict security and the presence of the concierge downstairs, the element of surprise of his visit was somewhat limited. Judging from the telephone conversation he’d overhead between the concierge and Marquesa, she had indeed been taken aback. However, she seemed sufficiently recovered in the few minutes it took for Nico to arrive at her suite. Something he was beginning to think the woman was quite skilled at.

“I’m afraid not, but thank you,” he said, refusing wine for the second time. “I have actually come on a matter of police business.”

“Ah, more developments on my husband’s murder? It’s good of you to keep me informed personally rather than having to deal with the police here in Rome.” Her tone held a twinge of distaste.

Tired after already working a full day, Nico was not in the mood to parry. He pulled a photograph from his leather folder. “Signora Marquesa, I’m wondering if you might know this man.”

“Please. It’s Nicoló, isn’t it? Or do you prefer Nico? You must call me Evangeline—” Her eyes traveled to the photograph in his hand, at which point the color drained from her face.

Instinctively, Nico reached out to take her wineglass before it fell from her grasp.

“How dare you?” Evangeline spluttered after Nico had led her to a chair, afraid she was going to faint after seeing the photograph of the dead Avanatti. “What are you really doing here, at this hour?”

“With all due respect, Signora Marquesa, I will be the one asking the questions.”

“Am I under arrest?”

“Not yet. However, we do have a warrant to search your premises. In particular, to remove your computers and any other devices you might have.”

“You what? You can’t be serious.” If it were possible, she turned an even whiter shade of pale when a member of the Carabinieri appeared at the entrance to the vast lounge that looked over the city.

“Special Prosecutor Moretti is very serious, Signora,” the officer said. “You can make this much easier on yourself by cooperating. Otherwise, you will be taken into custody and you can explain yourself at police headquarters.”

“But I’ve already told Mr. Moretti everything I know. This man, Carlo Avenatti, has escorted me a couple of times to fundraising galas when my husband was out of town. It’s not like it was a secret—we were photographed in all the newspapers.”

“It seems your relationship extended to more than him just being an escort, wouldn’t you say?” Nico said.

“I beg your pardon?” The playful cat’s eyes had narrowed to a calculating glare.

“It would appear that you and Mr. Avenatti had a standing appointment at the Luxuro Hotel every Thursday afternoon. Would you like me to show you the hotel records and CCTV footage of you both entering and leaving separately?”

After ninety days, most hotels rerecorded over their security tapes, but everything they needed had been captured within the past few weeks.

“On April 2, just two days ago, CCTV show you and Mr. Avenatti entering the Luxuro separately. Three hours later, only you came out.” It would appear that long before escorting her to galas, they had become friends with benefits.

When asked if she would like to see the footage for herself, Evangeline Marquesa requested a lawyer. When told that Carlo Avenatti’s body was found in a dumpster just two blocks from her home, minus a digit, she waived her rights, admitted the affair and showed Nico the “gift” she’d received in a Tiffany box.

Even without the coroner’s report, at least they’d established that Avenatti’s death couldn’t have been more than two days ago.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tropea, Calabria

Having returned to his office in Tropea, Nico concluded his meeting with Sergio, in which they discussed Evangeline Marquesa. He was about to call it a day when his assistant buzzed.

“Ms. Calleja on line one for you, Nico.”

Nico punched the button on his desk phone. “Ariana, your ears must have been burning. Are you in town?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because I was just about to pack up and go home for a lonely dinner. I’d much rather be dining out with you.”

“I heard your office is looking into the Marquesa murder.”

“Well, it’s nice to talk to you too. I’m fine, thank you for asking.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just that—”

Nico swallowed a sarcastic retort. By now, he should have been used to Ariana getting down to business with little or no attempt at small talk. While only having been in her prosecutorial role in Malta’s capital city of Valletta for a little over a year, she had quickly made a name for herself. She was tough, persistent and had little patience unless it served her purpose.

“We are working the Marquesa murder,” Nico replied. “I gather that’s the reason for your call.”

“It is. I understand you’ve interviewed the widow. What can you tell me?”

“Well, it’s a long story, but I’d be happy to have Sergio send you copies of our notes.”

“Well, fortunately for you I happen to be free this evening and I’m at our usual table.”

Nico leaped from his chair and moved to the window. Across the street, in Cannone Square, the lights of the outside café glowed warm and inviting against the darkening sky. Ariana appeared at the entrance, mobile in one hand, waving to him with the other.

“Sneaky woman,” he said, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice.

“I’m hungry and your cocktail is getting warm.”

After being greeted warmly by the restaurant’s owner, Nico strode across the room to the water-view table he and Ariana always occupied when she was in town. True to her word, a Negroni was sitting at his place, a glass of red wine in front of her. He bent to give her a kiss on both cheeks and pulled out his chair, where he sat scrutinizing her across the table. Her usually glossy, auburn hair was dull and there were dark circles under her eyes.

“What?” she asked.

“You’ve lost weight.”

She dismissed his remark with the flick of her hand. “You’ve lost more hair.”

At the age of thirty-eight, that was a fact Nico was painfully aware of. “And you look tired,” he added. Truthfully, she looked exhausted. “When was the last time you took a day off?”

“Ha! Who’s the one to call the kettle black? I hear you’ve been sleeping on your office couch.”

He raised his glass. “Touché and salute.” He made a mental note to have a word with his assistant, Gina.

Ariana was ravenous and insisted they order before getting into their conversation about the Marquesa case. They never ordered off the menu, instead preferring to leave it to the owner or

one of his people to decide for them. Once the server had left their table, Ariana wasted no time in pressing Nico for details.

“So why, when the car bombing involving Antonio Marquesa took place on Maltese soil—in my jurisdiction, by the way—can my office find no sign of Mrs. Marquesa? It’s like she’s disappeared off the face of the earth. Which, as I’m sure you know, is quite unusual for her.”

Nico took another sip of his drink. “What can you tell me about him? Was he known to Maltese police or your office before the bombing?”

“Oh, no, you don’t! Don’t answer my question with a question. Where is the widow Marquesa?”

“So, that’s why you’re here in Tropea.”

“Nico!”

“What?” He grinned at her. “That wasn’t a question.”

“Okay.” She looked him straight in the eye and, slowly, her serious expression gave way to a smile. “If you show me yours, I’ll show you mine.”

“You haven’t made me an offer like that for a long time.” He held her gaze a moment longer, remembering the last time they’d been together. Ariana’s cheeks flushed.

“Mrs. Marquesa is in protective custody,” he said.

“From whom?”

There was a break in the conversation—or was it a sparring match?—while a waiter brought out a platter of cold appetizers. Ariana had speared several slices of prosciutto and dry-cured black olives before he’d gotten halfway back to the kitchen.

Nico helped himself to a slice of *melanzane alla mozzarella* before she demolished that, too. Neither of them spoke while savoring the simple but fresh antipasti. Having finished his Negroni, he refilled Ariana's wineglass and poured one for himself.

Over time, Nico had learned that when swapping information on joint cases with Ariana, he had to give in to blind faith. Faith that she in turn would divulge as much as she could without jeopardizing her end of the investigation.

"A day after the bombing that killed her husband, Mrs. Marquesa received an anonymous package," he said. "She didn't tell us about it until after her lover, Carlo Avenatti, turned up dead in an alley just blocks from her apartment."

Ariana fixed him with an intense stare. "What was in the package?"

In deference to her appetite, Nico waited until she had finished chewing a piece of *crostini all olive*. "Ah..." He cleared his throat. "Avenatti's baby finger. Recognizable by a signet ring Mrs. Marquesa had bought for him."

Ariana's eyes widened. "Blackmail?"

"Don't know. We've been monitoring courier packages and mail sent to Marquesa's apartment since then, but so far, there's been nothing further."

"Where do you have her?"

"You know I can't tell you that," he replied when the waiter had removed their plates and reset the cutlery. "And now it's your turn. What can you tell me about Antonio Marquesa?"

"My office has been watching him for years. Long before I came on the job."

The "job" was that of the top anticorruption prosecutor in Valletta, a position which had never before been occupied by a woman.

“We know he was closely associated with Alesandru Baldisar. His number two apparently,” Ariana continued. “The rest, as you can imagine, is more than a bit murky.”

That was likely an understatement. Alesandru Baldisar, the third-generation owner and president of Malta’s largest private bank, was a master at subterfuge. His tentacles reached far beyond his native Malta, or Italy.

“You think he was behind the car bombing?” Nico asked. “Why would he turn on one of his own?”

“We don’t know that he did, but the chatter we’d been hearing just prior was that a client Baldisar Bank laundered money for was calling in his markers.”

“Mafia?”

She shook her head. “Not sure. With the bank’s client list, it could be anyone from a member of Azerbaijan’s ruling family, to one of our own corrupt elitist cronies in the governing party of Malta. It’s kind of hard to see the forest for the trees.”

Ariana had grilled branzino along with a side of *peperonata*—pepper and tomato stew—to share with Nico’s favorite, pasta carbonara. “*Bon appetito*,” she said before expertly excising her fish from its bony spine.

“Which brings me to Carlo Avenatti,” Nico said.

“The lover?”

“He might have been the Marquesa woman’s lover, but here in Calabria, he was rumored to be a low-level errand boy for the Capizzi family. More of a wannabe, really.”

Ariana let out a low whistle. They both knew the Capizzis were widely thought to have been responsible for the assassination that had killed Ariana’s predecessor, Riccardo Conte.

“Word on the street is that Avenatti knew too much, and being low on the totem pole, he could be eliminated without causing too much attention. Which brings me to—”

She put both hands up as if she already knew what was about to come next. “Don’t say it. I already have twenty-four-seven protection both at my office and at home. What else do you want me to do?”

That’s why she’d lost weight and looked exhausted. She used to talk to Nico about such things. “How long ago did this start?”

Ariana put down her wineglass. “Two months. I started getting threats.” Her eyes filled with tears. “Hugo was left on my doorstep, dead.”

Hugo was Ariana’s beloved hound. His mixed breed had no other distinction than being rescued, and unconditionally loved, by his mistress. Nico reached across the table for her hand. “I’m sorry, Ariana. I know how much he meant to you.”

She swallowed hard and blinked away the tears. “So, as you can see, you did the right thing by putting Evangeline Marquesa into protective custody. If Avenatti indulged in any type of pillow talk, she could be in an inordinate amount of danger. Even if the Capizzis just *think* he did.”

Still dwelling on Hugo’s death, Nico nodded and drained his wineglass.

“Which is why—” Ariana fixed him with that laser-focused stare of hers “—you need to take me to her immediately.”

If Nico had entertained any hope of enjoying an after-dinner drink at the apartment Ariana kept in the historical section of Tropea for when she was in town, it faded the minute she made her demand to see Evangeline Marquesa.

After making a call, they walked back to his place to get his car. They were silent as he navigated the Audi up the winding road into the hills above the town. They both knew the area well, having often visited one of the artisan farms for dinners al fresco. Before Ariana's new job, they'd managed to spend an entire weekend cycling on e-bikes from one farm to another before returning to her place, where Nico would stay overnight. Even though it had only been a year and a half, it seemed like a lifetime ago. He wondered if Ariana ever thought about those times.

"Do you think Antonio Marquesa could have had Avenatti killed?" he asked. "We still haven't nailed down the exact time of Avenatti's death, but it's possible Marquesa could have given the order before he died in the bombing."

"Why? Because he was his wife's lover?" Ariana looked over at him from the passenger seat. "I didn't think you were quite so pedestrian about such things."

"Because I'm Italian and male?" he replied, feeling a bit wounded. "Not all men are made in the same mold, you know." Prematurely balding and having to wear large round spectacles to read, he felt nothing like the mythical Italian male.

"I really don't think so," she said, ignoring his comment. "But I do think his widow likely has some valuable information Baldisar and his ilk wouldn't want getting out in public. But to be honest, it's more the Capizzis I'm worried—"

Just as Nico rounded the last hairpin bend before the safe house where Evangeline Marquesa was being kept, the sky lit up in a fiery, orange glow. They could feel the heat through the closed windows.

"Oh, my God, Nico. Is that—?"

CHAPTER SIX

Vancouver, British Columbia

The sun's rays that glinted off the water in front of the St. Clair home almost blinded Reid as they penetrated the floor-to-ceiling windows. Shannon St. Clair's maid had led him to what she referred to as the "morning room." It was morning, all right, and it *was* a room. He wondered if they had a room for each time of day. He watched a family of seals stick their heads out of the water, curiously look around and then, one by one, disappear beneath the surface.

Reid's former partner and current investigator with the RCMP had left the St. Clair residence just minutes before. After seeing Leo Barclay's unmarked car entering the St. Clair's driveway, Reid had had to cool his heels until he saw him exit the mansion forty minutes later.

When Shannon St. Clair entered the room, it was a different woman than he'd met just two days before. When they shook hands and she thanked him for coming, her blue eyes were a dull slate-gray, empty and haunted. Perhaps it was only now that the reality of her husband's death—her children's father, who was never coming home—had finally hit her.

Her hand visibly shook as she handed him a cup from a coffee tray. She wasted little time in telling him Inspector Barclay had just left.

"I want to hear what you and he discussed," Reid said. "But first, I need to ask you a question."

Sitting rigidly upright on the couch across from him, she looked so brittle he thought she might snap like a twig.

"Of course. Whatever you need."

“If I’m going to investigate your husband’s death, I need you to be absolutely honest with me.”

Her eyes filled with tears. She chewed her bottom lip, now devoid of lipstick.

“Shannon, is there something you’re not telling me? Did anything happen between you and Mr. St. Clair before he left for...er, went out fishing?”

She shook her head but didn’t make eye contact.

Reluctantly, but knowing it was the right thing to do, he reached into his pocket and retrieved the check he still hadn’t cashed.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t help you if I don’t know all the facts.” He handed her the check as he got up to leave. “I can see myself out.”

“No, please.” Her face crumpled. “*Please.*” She blinked away tears. “There *is* something I haven’t told you.”

She pushed her cell phone across the coffee table. “I received this on March 31.”

Reid picked up her phone and clicked on the arrow to start the video. It was a thirty-second clip of a scorched and blackened car, smoke still emanating from it. It must have been taken in the aftermath of the bombing, after emergency workers had arrived. He could see rivulets of foamy water running down the cobblestone street, and sirens could be heard in the background. So Shannon St. Clair had known all along her husband hadn’t disappeared while out fishing.

“Have you shown this to the police?”

Tears fell into her lap as she shook her head from side to side.

“Why not? This could be critical to their investigation.” Maybe the other two men were just collateral damage, Reid thought, the real target being Chaz St. Clair. But why?

“I can’t,” she replied, barely above a whisper. “Swipe to the next one.”

He did so. The mother-daughter resemblance was unmistakable. The child had perfectly straight, sun-streaked blond hair, a wide smile and beautiful cobalt-blue eyes. Even at nine years of age, she had the same lithe, toned body as her mother. But it was the message that got Reid's attention. *What a shame if she wins the race but something happens to that beautiful face.*

"I have the money to pay them. Then they'll leave my daughter alone. If I go to the police, they might... Oh, God, this is all my fault!"

"Mrs. St. Clair...Shannon, why would you say that?"

Over the ensuing hour, it turned out there was a lot Shannon St. Clair hadn't told him.

Reid sat at a table in the cafeteria of RCMP headquarters, referred to as "E" Division, nursing his second black coffee while he waited for his former partner. Leo had already texted him twice apologizing for the delay. Something about being detained taking a witness statement.

Reid was scrolling through his emails, several that demanded payment for overdue bills that, thank God, he'd now be able to cover thanks to the St. Clair advance. Finally, a harried-looking Leo appeared, a cup of coffee in his hand.

"Hey, it's so good to see you, man." He reached out to clasp Reid's hand. "I'm sorry to be so late, but you know how it is."

Reid did know. He remembered all the overcooked or warmed-up dinners, and Sally's cold stares when he arrived home hours later than he'd promised. The date nights when she'd been left sitting in a restaurant waiting for him over a glass of wine, when he'd called to say he couldn't make it. It went on like that for years. Until it didn't.

But it wasn't his early retirement—something he'd already put in for in an attempt to save his marriage—that had put a stop to it. It was him coming home unexpectedly in the middle of the

day to pick up some reports he'd forgotten and found her in bed with some other guy. That's what definitely had ended it.

"I bet you don't miss those days now that you're your own boss," Leo said. He took a gulp of his coffee. "I envy you, man. I'm seriously thinking of jumping at it if they offer another round of early retirements." His face lit up with that big goofy grin that made Reid realize how much he missed working with Leo.

"Maybe you'd take me on, and we could be partners again." When Reid didn't reply, Leo's grin slowly faded. "Hey, what's up?"

"You mentioned on the phone that you're working the St. Clair case." He took a swig of his coffee. "Pretty high-profile, I guess."

"No shit. One of the biggest challenges is staying one step ahead of the media. Jesus, they're like vultures." Leo shrugged. "Given who Chaz St. Clair was, I guess it's to be expected."

Reid nodded. "Chaz St. Clair's wife...er, widow, has hired me. To do a private investigation."

Leo's cup halted midway to his lips. "You're shittin' me, right?"

Reid didn't know if he should be offended that Leo was stunned that he was the PI Shannon St. Clair would hire, or if it was that she'd hired a private investigator, period.

His answer came swiftly. "No offense, but why would she hire an outside investigator when the brass is practically falling over themselves to give this case everything we've got? At the expense of more important ones that should have precedence, in my opinion. For Christ's sake, it didn't even happen on our soil. Most of my work has been doing a workup for the foreign liaison officer handling it."

“Well, to be fair, she thought her husband had gone out fishing for a few days. She’s having a hard time wrapping her head around the fact that he was even *in* Malta, never mind that he’s dead.”

Leo’s eyes narrowed. “Did she tell you he traveled there a lot on business?”

“She did. Did she tell *you* that his boat is missing from the marina?”

Leo rubbed his hands over his two-day shadow. “Yeah, we found it in dry dock over in False Creek. Their captain took it over there for some work on the hull. He said St. Clair had him schedule it, knowing he’d be out of the country and wouldn’t need the boat. His story checks out.”

That shot down Reid’s theory that maybe the captain had something to do with his boss’s disappearance and could have taken to extorting the family. After all, how many people would have known their daughter had a race coming up? *What a shame if she wins the race but something happens to that beautiful face.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tropea, Italy

Nico directed his anger toward the speakerphone on his desk. “Tell me something I don’t already know. I lost a state’s witness and two police officers in that goddamned fire. I want to know how that happened by the end of the day.” He terminated the call and put his aching head in his hands.

There was a rap at the door before Sergio entered, open laptop in hand.

“Boss, I think I’ve got something.”

Nico waved him in.

“Obviously, the cameras we had on the safe house were destroyed in the blaze.”

Nico sighed. Was it too much to ask for someone to tell him something he didn’t already know?

“But,” Sergio said as he put his laptop on Nico’s desk and spun it to face him, “we have the feed that came in up until the moment of the fire.” He walked around behind the desk and, standing beside his boss, started the surveillance tape. “Okay, now watch closely.”

Nico leaned in. It looked like they were witnessing a shift change. Two officers in, two out. There were always two on duty at any one time. One officer waved to the other and immediately got in his car and drove off. The one remaining—instead of getting in his car and following suit—looked around furtively. Then he went around to the back of his car, opened the trunk and took out what looked like a large sports bag. Again, he looked around before he disappeared in

the dark, along the side of the house. A few minutes later, he reappeared. Conspicuously without the bag. Finally, he got in his car and drove off.

Nico saw red. “Are you telling me it was one of our own? That set a safe house on fire with two of his fellow officers in it?” Not to mention a state’s witness.

The intercom buzzed. “Not now, Gina,” he barked, then immediately felt like a shit.

“Sir, I think you’re going to want to take this.” Unless members of the public were present, Gina never called him sir.

Sergio went back to his seat in front of his boss’s desk.

“Don’t go anywhere,” Nico commanded as he punched the button for line one.

“You’re on speaker.”

Nico was out at the site of the fire, watching investigators painstakingly sift through what was left of the charred safe house in search of identifiable human remains. He couldn’t help but think of Evangeline and the two officers who had been caught inside. He’d been told that the explosion from the propane gas tank alongside the house wouldn’t have given them any warning to get out. What a horrible way to die. The overpowering smell of soot, mixed with something caustic, prickled his nose.

When Reid Devlin returned his call, he turned his back on the devastation and walked toward his car.

“I might have something,” he said.

At this point, Nico would take anything he could get.

“It appears Shannon St. Clair isn’t as financially flush as she thought she was.”

“Go on.”

“She tells me she went to the bank just to check on her accounts. I have my doubts about her story—who actually walks into a bank these days?” He chuckled. “Anyway, it turns out her finances are unraveling like a cheap suit.”

“Meaning?”

“Her phone’s been ringing off the hook from banks and creditors. She’s discovered there are no fewer than three mortgages on their fifty-two-million-dollar house—which she said she had no knowledge of. It looks like the St. Clair mansion had become Chaz’s business bank of last resort.”

Looking past the scrubby brown hills above Tropea, to the panoramic view of the Tyrrhenian Sea beyond, Nico couldn’t conceive of a house worth fifty-two million dollars. On the drive up, he’d passed a luxury home for sale, complete with three hectares of land and outbuildings, for three million euros. On a prosecutor’s salary, he wondered how anyone could afford even that.

“That is interesting,” he agreed. “James called earlier to report that Dr. Braithwaite is also experiencing financial problems.” Three women who didn’t appear to know each other, but finally, there seemed to be a common thread.

“However, that doesn’t account for Antonio Marquesa, who was not only wealthy in his own right, but so was his dead wife.”

A beep indicated another call was coming in. “Hold on a second, would you?” Nico took the mobile away from his ear to look at the caller ID.

“Reid? Hang on, it’s James. I’m going to conference you in.”

He put Reid on hold and accepted the incoming call. “Damn, you were right, mate!” James said. “You’ll never guess what—”

“Hold on, I’ve got Reid on the other line. I’ll patch you through.”

With the two calls connected, James told them about his discovery. “You were right, Nico. Anna Braithwaite did have a phone we didn’t find in our initial search of her devices.”

“A burner?”

“Well, yes. But rather of a thrifty sort, I’d say.”

“Sorry?” Nico asked.

“It would appear that frugal Anna Braithwaite, instead of buying a cheap throwaway phone that couldn’t be traced, recycled an old one that had been lying about, loaded a new SIM card into it and used that as her burner device.”

“Pretty stupid for a research scientist,” Reid offered.

“Yes, well, a PhD doesn’t necessarily make for a degree in potential criminal activities.”

“And do we know what she was using it for?” Nico asked, watching an investigator walking toward him, shaking his head, indicating they hadn’t found anything.

“My team are investigating that as we speak,” James replied.

“Thanks, James. Call me as soon as you have something.” Knowing he was nine hours ahead of Reid, he added, “You too, Reid. No time is a bad time.”

He knew he wouldn’t be getting much sleep any time soon.

Following confirmation that it was, indeed, one of their own who started the blaze that killed three people, Nico thanked his contact in the Carabinieri and hung up the phone. It was going to be a long night.

Ordinarily, he would have welcomed an intense evening of slogging through the intricacies of an investigation with Ariana. But tonight wasn’t one of those times. She and Sergio were camped out in his office, each taking an end of the beat-up leather couch, juggling computers on

their laps. The coffee table was littered with take-out containers of food that had been brought over from Cannone Square. Nico felt as stale and stiff as the coffee that sat taunting them in the glass carafe Gina had made before she left. He looked at his watch; that was four hours ago.

From his own desk, he half listened to Sergio and Ariana playing tag team. Sergio would feed her names and backgrounds of known criminals under investigation by their office, and Ariana would search for anything that might crossmatch them to Alesandru Baldisar or other persons of interest in Malta. Meanwhile, Nico focused on the Capizzi family.

“Shit,” Sergio said. A married father of two little girls, he glanced sheepishly at Ariana. “I’m sorry.”

She smirked. “I know this is hard to believe, Sergio, but I’ve heard worse.”

“Guess who our rogue officer was once married to?”

Without looking up, Nico shook his head.

“Graziella Capizzi.”

Simultaneously, Ariana’s head shot up and Nico’s feet slid off his desk onto the floor with a thud. “Vittorio Capizzi’s daughter?”

Sergio nodded. “Looks like it.”

Nico’s and Ariana’s eyes met. They both knew you didn’t divorce a Capizzi. The only way out of a marriage with one was through death. And last he checked, Graziella Capizzi was very much alive.

That could only mean one thing: the Carabinieri officer who set the fire at the safe house was on the Capizzi payroll. And after he’d served his purpose, the odds that he was now dead were a hundred to one.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was after ten when Nico dragged himself back to the office after finally calling it a night at 3 a.m. He'd no sooner taken his jacket off when Gina buzzed to let him know she had James Padwick and Reid Devlin on the line. They'd worked joint cases before, and Nico hadn't hesitated to bring them in on this one. In that the car bomb victims were from different countries, he needed eyes on the ground that he could trust.

Before he asked for an update since their initial call, Nico told them about Carlo Avenatti's death and his connection to the Marquesa widow.

"So, from what we know," Reid summarized, "essentially we have three women in three different countries who appear to have no knowledge of each other. But their respective husbands were killed in the same car bombing. Do I have that right?"

"Pretty much," Nico said. "What have you two got at your end?"

"Well, here's a new wrinkle: mine is being blackmailed," Reid said. "A day after the bombing, someone sent Mrs. St. Clair a photo of her nine-year-old daughter taken at the kid's private school sports day, along with a text, but with no demands.

"You think it's related to her husband's murder?" Nico asked.

"Well, this is where it gets interesting. The St. Clairs' daughter, Jessie, needed a bone marrow transplant when she was four years old. Parents are usually much less likely to be potential donors as they wouldn't both share the exact same genetic makeup as their kid. The more probable match—and it's only a twenty-five percent chance even then—would come from a sibling. In the St. Clair's case, that would be their older son, Wesley. But he wasn't a match either."

“Not unexpected,” Nico said. “You said even a sibling might only have a twenty-five percent chance, right?”

“Except that when St. Clair and his son were zero matches, it didn’t take Chaz long to figure out that his daughter might not be his, so he had a paternity test done without his wife’s knowledge.”

“Don’t tell me,” Nico said. “He’s not her father.”

“Jesus, that must not have sat too well,” James interjected. “How long did she say her husband had known?”

“Well, it was five years ago that the kid needed the transplant. But she only discovered within the last few months that her husband had managed to get a swab from their daughter, and had his own DNA tested against hers.”

“As James said, that probably would have put a strain on their marriage,” Nico said. “But I don’t see that it could have had any connection to her husband’s death. All three men were killed in the same explosion in Malta.”

They all sat with that for a few seconds, until James broke the silence.

“I’d be surprised if Anna Braithwaite isn’t being blackmailed as well,” he said.

When Nico asked why he thought that, James told them about her reaction to his parting question when he’d visited her home.

“I’ve got my office looking into her mobile phone and computer records,” James added. “I’m assuming the RCMP are doing the same with the St. Clair woman, Reid.”

“They would be if I’d told them she’s being blackmailed. As a private investigator, I’m not obligated to tell the police.”

“Get your head on straight, man,” Nico told Reid. “If both Shannon St. Clair and Anna Braithwaite are being blackmailed, it’s obviously more than mere coincidence. You need to tell the police before I do.”

CHAPTER NINE

Vancouver, British Columbia

Reid had taken Nico's warning seriously about telling the RCMP what he knew about Shannon being blackmailed. He would call Leo, fill him in on what little he knew and let the police take it from there. Maybe they could get out for a beer, like the old days. And talk about joining forces in his PI business. But first, he owed it to a paying client—at least he hoped he'd be paid, given the recent developments—to call Shannon St. Clair and give her the heads-up.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Devlin," the maid said when she answered the phone. "Mrs. St. Clair and the children have gone away for a few days. She thought it might be good for them to spend some family time together, following Mr. St. Clair's d—well, you know."

Reid's chest tightened. "Dora, do you know where they went?"

"Why, yes. They've gone out on the boat. Captain George came and got them personally. He was so thoughtful he even brought her a packet of Dramamine."

Now his spidey sense kicked into high gear. "When was this?"

"Hmm, a little over an hour ago. Is everything all right, Mr. Devlin?"

Reid hung up without saying goodbye and hit speed dial for Leo.

He blurted out the story of Shannon being blackmailed. "She never goes out on the water, Leo. She can't even get on a goddamned ferry she gets so seasick. The captain must have forced her."

“Okay, I’ll get hold of the coast guard. They couldn’t have gone far if the maid said they’d left within the hour. I’ll call you as soon as I have something. But after that, my friend, you’ve got some explaining to do.”

Reid knew Leo was referring to him having held back the blackmail info.

Knowing he wouldn’t be able to concentrate on anything at the office until he heard back from Leo, Reid headed to the marina where the St. Clairs moored their yacht. As he’d expected, the slip was empty. Whatever it was that caused the captain to take it out of the water and into dry dock had obviously been dealt with. With that thought came the next: that the boat might have been tampered with for this very occasion. He popped his third antacid of the day.

“If you’re looking for George, you just missed him. Hauled out of here about thirty minutes ago.”

Reid looked up to see a man in oily coveralls walking down the dock, wiping his hands on a rag. “I offered to give it a once-over, what with the missus and the kids going out with him...” He stopped wiping his hands. “Don’t know that I’ve ever seen her before. The missus, I mean.”

“Did they look all right?”

“I guess. She looked a little green around the gills, if you know what I mean, but the kids were excited. George seemed in a hurry. Just cast off and booted it outta here.”

Reid was about to call Leo to report what little he’d learned when his phone rang.

Leo had beat him to it. “Where are you?”

“At the marina. Why?”

“They’ve been intercepted, just heading out past the Lions Gate Bridge.”

Ironically, that would have put them almost in front of the St. Clair house, in the outer harbor off the wealthy enclave of Point Grey.

“Are they—?”

“It sounds like they’re fine, but apparently Mrs. St. Clair was pretty anxious to get off the yacht. Coast guard officers transferred them to their boat while they apprehended the captain. Sounds like he’s playing let’s make a deal, not realizing that’s not what the CCG does.” Leo chuckled. “I’ve got my people on the way down to the government wharf to meet them. I shouldn’t let you do this, Shifty, but if you want to join us, be there in ten.”

Having a beer with Leo occurred quicker than Reid might have thought. But not before he was thoroughly chewed out by his former partner.

“I’d forgotten why I loved working with you,” Reid said after Leo had delivered his diatribe. “You never played well with others.”

Leo shook his head, but a grin pulled at the corners of his mouth. He took a long draw on his beer.

“So, it didn’t take Captain George long to roll over,” he said, filling Reid in on the interview that followed the captain’s apprehension. “His full name is George Smith. Original, huh?”

Reid smiled.

“Turns out he’d known for some time that his boss, Chaz St. Clair, had been laundering large amounts of cash at the River’s Edge Casino. Seems Smith knows one of the pit bosses there.”

River’s Edge had been in the news, along with a handful of other BC casinos, for years. They were now the subjects of a year-and-a-half-long commission that was finally established to look into rampant money-laundering. It was well known that the head of the commission was frustrated by the slowness of various federal agencies to comply with their oversight obligations. The attorney general for British Columbia had recently been quoted, saying, “Most troubling to

me is the apparent failure of FINTRAC, the federal anti-money-laundering agency, to share what it knows about what is happening in British Columbia with the commission.”

“How long has he been shaking down St. Clair?” Reid asked.

A server approached their table. Leo nodded and held up two fingers for more beers.

“If I believe his story—and I think I do—only recently. And only Mrs. St. Clair.”

“So, Chaz knew his captain was aware he was money-laundering?”

Leo nodded. “For sure. Smith would often take the family yacht to pick him up after he’d flown in and completed a trip to the casino. For which Chaz cut him in. But with St. Clair dead, Smith’s extra income dried up and he decided to go after Shannon by threatening to harm her kids.”

“So, he sent the text about the daughter?” *That* would interest Nico. It would at least rule out Baldisar or the Capizzi family.

A couple of hours and several beers later, Leo pushed back his empty plate after demolishing a humungous burger and fries. Reid had opted for the chicken strips and Caesar salad, all the while coveting Leo’s burger.

“Did you mean that?” he asked, snagging Leo’s last fry. When they’d worked together as partners, it had been a standing joke between them. Leo always left his last fry for Reid.

Leo stifled a belch. “What?”

“That you loved working with me.”

It was close to midnight by the time Reid let himself into his Eastside apartment. Bello, the cat that Sally had more than happily let him have following their divorce, gave him a royal reaming

out. Then he sat in front of the bottom drawer that contained his tinned and dried food. Laser-focused and yowling.

“All right, all right, you old fleabag.” Reid filled his bowl. “Put a sock in it while I make a call.”

He dialed Nico’s cell number and was caught off guard when a woman answered.

“Uh,” he stammered. “I think I might have the wrong number.”

“Are you looking for Nico?”

Reid heard a muffled conversation and Moretti came on the line.

“Hey, I’m sorry to call you so early,” Reid apologized. “I just thought—”

“It’s all good,” Nico assured him. “But it’s late your time. What’s up?”

Sinking into a dilapidated easy chair—another thing Sally had foisted off on him—he watched Bello inhale the contents of his bowl and filled Nico in on the day’s events.

“That *is* interesting,” Nico said. “But at least we know that whoever set fire to the safe house that killed Evangeline Marquesa was a local actor, and not connected to the blackmail of your client.”

Reid thought he sounded exhausted.

“Have you spoken to James?” Nico asked.

“No, not yet. I thought I’d call you first.”

“Okay, I’ll be at the office within the hour. Get some sleep—you sound like you need it—and I’ll reach out to James. Text me when you’re available and we’ll set up a call.

CHAPTER TEN

Reid filled Bello's empty bowl as he waited for his morning coffee to brew, and for Nico's assistant to patch him through to the conference call.

"Jesus, you eat a lot. You must have stayed up all night gorging yourself."

"Excuse me, mate?" It was the distinctive north London accent of James Padwick.

"Sorry, James. I didn't mean you. My cat— Never mind. How are things at your end?"

"You have a cat?"

"Gentlemen, please," Nico interrupted. "James, fill us in on Anna Braithwaite."

"Well, what we found on her burner phone proved to be interesting. What we didn't find when we went to pick her up for questioning was the good doctor herself."

Reid took a swig of his coffee. "Meaning?"

"She's disappeared."

"Say again?" Nico asked.

"Vanished. She called in to her lab at the university to say she was taking some personal time. Under the circumstances, her superiors didn't think anything of it. They were aware of her husband's death."

"And when you went to her house?" Reid asked.

"Well, that's the most interesting of all. There's a for-sale sign in front of the house and one of her tenants said they saw her get into a taxi yesterday, with luggage. She didn't say anything to them, either about going away or putting the house up for sale."

"I'm sure you've checked flights," Nico said.

"Of course. Nothing. She's not on any manifests or future bookings with any of the airlines."

“Well, she can drive anywhere she likes within the European Union without being tracked,” Nico said.

“Until Brexit, mate. I never thought I’d wish it would come sooner. At least then she’d show up on some checkpoints.”

“More to the point, James, what did you discover on her burner phone?”

“She only contacted one number, both by text and phone call.”

Reid poured himself a black coffee, knowing James loved nothing more than holding them in suspended animation. Now *there’s* someone he’d love to have a beer with if he ever got over to his side of the pond.

Nico, apparently, didn’t possess the same patience. “James! Who did she contact?”

“Sorry. We don’t know who yet. But I *can* tell you where.”

He cleared his throat. “Valletta, Malta.”

Tropea, Italy

As Nico locked up, leaving Ariana behind in his apartment, he chuckled to himself. It was obvious Reid had been thrown when a woman answered his mobile. In truth, Ariana had just stopped by with coffee and *cornettis* in exchange for using Nico’s internet while hers was down. He’d been disappointed that that was the reason for her early-morning visit but was careful not to let on.

Over a quick breakfast, Nico had filled her in on James’s findings and the one contact he’d found in Anna Braithwaite’s burner phone. The fact that they’d been able to identify the recipient of her texts and phone calls as being in Malta meant the phone at the other end was *not* a burner.

“I suppose she could have been in touch with her husband while he was in Malta,” Ariana said. “But why wouldn’t she just use her usual mobile?”

Nico shook his head. “I thought of that too, but James said Anna had no idea her husband traveled to Malta on business. She only knew that he had several meetings with potential investors here in Italy.”

“So, who would she be contacting in Malta and why surreptitiously?”

“Hopefully, James will have the answer to that by the time I get to the office. Oh, by the way, would you mind watering the plants while you’re here?” She raised an eyebrow and unpacked her laptop, ignoring him.

With that, Nico let himself out of the apartment and headed to work.

“Bingo,” Ariana said as she burst into Nico’s office. Gina hovered behind her, shaking her head, but they both knew it was impossible to keep Ariana out when she wanted something.

He stood to relieve her of a pile of file folders she was precariously balancing in her arms.

“Can I take those from you?”

Ignoring his offer, she put the pile on a chair and picked some loose sheets of paper off the top. “I had my people go back to an extensive search we’d done in connection with an anti-Mafia investigation. Clients of Baldisar Bank.” She laid out several pieces of paper on Nico’s desk.

“This—” she pointed to the first pile “—is a list of numbered accounts our office has been scrutinizing. No names, just numbers.”

Which, Nico knew, were totally untraceable.

“These,” she said, her index finger stabbing the second stack, “are all the accounts known to belong to the Capizzi family.”

They were also numbered accounts. “And you know this how?” Nico asked.

“You don’t want to know,” she said dismissively, and pointed to the last stack. “And these are the accounts belonging to the late Antonio Marquesa and his wife.”

Nico reached over and thumbed through the sheaf of paper. There was page upon page of accounts.

“His, we got legally,” Ariana said, as if anticipating his question.

She picked the remaining bundle of file folders off the chair—it had to be half a meter thick—and dropped it on his desk with a thud.

“These contain every transaction, in every one of these accounts, over the past year. We actually have three years’ worth, but these ones I can attest to because they were done using my investigators after I became special prosecutor.”

One of the first things Ariana had done when she took over from her predecessor, who had been assassinated, was to launch an investigation of the Italian Mafia’s expanding presence in Malta. Her investigation had focused on one of Italy’s most dangerous clans. The ensuing report read like the who’s who of the underworld. Mafia bosses who appeared to operate legal businesses were actually laundering enormous amounts of cash gained through criminal activity, through Maltese banks. She had successfully found proof that no other prosecutor had found—or had the balls to report. Either way, it was no wonder she had to have twenty-four-seven security.

“I know you’re going to enlighten me as to how all these accounts tie together.” He looked up at Ariana, who was still standing in front of his desk.

“And would you mind sitting down?” He was getting a crick in his neck and the beginnings of a tension headache nudged his temples. “How are we going to go through all this paperwork?”

She leaned down, putting both hands on his desk, and looked him in the eye.

“Nico! My office has done all the hard work matching transactions in the numbered accounts with those of the Capizzis and Antonio Marquesa. And there are numerous connections, I might add. I’m practically handing this to you on a platter.”

Looking self-satisfied, she finally sat. “Now, all you have to do is get a warrant to search the Capizzi family’s accounts, and I believe you’ll find a match between the transactions in Malta and their accounts here in Italy. They washed their money in my country and it came into yours clean as a baby’s bottom.”

Simple as that might sound, Ariana’s pronouncement did little to alleviate Nico’s growing headache. Though perceived by many as the Wild West of Europe, Italy didn’t give its prosecutors unlimited reach into citizens’ bank accounts. Even citizens like the Capizzis. Getting a warrant under the best of circumstances was difficult.

If you unknowingly applied to a corrupt judge, it was damn near impossible.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Whether it was sheer blind luck, or the gods of justice were smiling on him, Nico got the warrant he needed to look into the Capizzi accounts in Calabria. Well, at least the ones they owned up to. Who bloody knew what could be hidden in an elaborate labyrinth of the rest of their untraceable financial assets? But for now, this would suffice.

He pulled anybody that fogged a mirror off the cases they were working on and assigned a specific aspect to each of his junior prosecutors and their staff. Even Gina was drafted, which seemed to put a spark in her step. After Nico got the documents he needed from the banks—and there were many—Ariana and Sergio took over what was usually a staff lunchroom. From there, they set up a quasi-clearing house.

Taking a break from his own self-assigned duties, he marveled at Ariana's rapid-fire efficiency as she fielded never-ending questions from his staff, at the same time directing Sergio and his small team. It was as if she were an omniscient presence hovering overhead, knowing all things in all places. As people ran in and out of her makeshift office, she'd check it against what Sergio had, and put it in a filing system that in all probability only make sense to her. She reminded Nico of a maestro directing a symphony.

It took more than three back-to-back sixteen-hour days, countless containers of take-out food—Cannone Square Ristoranti thought he'd gone mad—and liters of coffee Gina still managed to brew in between her own assignments. But finally, the golden words Nico had so desperately wanted to hear, came.

On the morning of day four, Ariana and Sergio appeared in the open doorway of his office. He'd long since dispensed with jacket and tie; his shoes, which he'd kicked off, sat under his desk, and he felt like he had a jackhammer going off in his head. He must have looked a sight.

"Nico," Ariana said quietly. They both stepped into his office and Sergio closed the door behind him. Part of Ariana's strategy in giving things to different staff was that no one person knew the sum of the parts. There were several reasons for this. One, they could never be too sure there wasn't a mole among them, but mostly, it was for the staff's personal safety. Nico knew no one was more acutely aware of this than Ariana.

He looked at the figures that sat before him. Her face, pale and drawn, looked as if she hadn't an ounce of energy left. Sergio's expression echoed her exhaustion. At first, Nico thought they'd come to tell him they still had nothing. The night before, he'd heard Sergio telling the team to go home and have dinner with their families and to get some rest. By day three, even the youngest among them looked like they had forgotten what sleep and a decent meal was. Nico himself was so fatigued he felt too nauseated to eat.

"We've got him, Nico," Ariana said so quietly he wasn't sure he heard her correctly.

"You've...?"

Sergio reached over and put his laptop on Nico's desk. On the screen was an elaborate flowchart with a veritable spider's web of lines and arrows.

"What am I looking at?" Nico asked.

Ariana took the lead. "This is a complete workup of the connections between Vittorio Capizzi's accounts here in Tropea to a specific account at Baldisar Bank in Malta. It should give you enough to keep you gainfully employed for the next few years." She tucked her hair behind her ears.

“That’s the big stuff. However, in the process, we found one transaction—small potatoes compared to the rest. But it was made recently. Just weeks before the car bomb that claimed two other victims.”

“Antonio Marquesa?” Nico guessed. Marquesa was, after all, the second highest-ranking executive after Alesandru Baldisar himself. And it had long been rumored they had been laundering money for several crime families for years. But then, who would have killed Marquesa?

“Close,” Sergio said. “Look here.” With the laptop’s cursor, he circled an area that looked like something you’d see of a zoomed-in section of a large city on Google Maps. “We’ve matched a payment made from Capizzi to Carlo Avenatti.”

“How did you do that? We didn’t have a warrant for Avenatti’s accounts.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Nico!” The color came back into her cheeks. “If you continue to play by the rules, you’ll continue to get what you’ve been getting.”

Sergio suddenly became fascinated with picking the lint off his jacket, no doubt in an effort to ignore the fact that his boss was being chewed out in front of him.

Nico’s next thought was quite uncharitable, but he kept it to himself. No use in embarrassing Sergio further.

“Was Carlo being paid to bed Evangeline? For services rendered,” Nico asked.

“Fifty-thousand euros would be fairly generous for that, don’t you think?” Ariana replied. “Even though it’s chump change for Capizzi.” She looked at Nico as if to make a peace offering, which he ignored.

“I don’t get it. Why would the Capizzis pay money to Avenatti? Would he even be on their radar?”

“I’m glad you asked.” Ariana looked suitably chastised as she turned it over to Sergio.

“Nico,” Sergio said. “Do you remember when you told me after you first visited Mrs. Marquesa’s residence that you thought something seemed off about her reaction to her husband’s death?”

Nico nodded.

“Well, the Capizzi family had found out that Antonio, who was tasked with laundering a lot of their accounts, was skimming off them. Vittorio personally had put Alesandru Baldisar on notice that he wanted Marquesa dealt with.”

“From what we know about Baldisar,” Ariana took over, “he’s many things, but as far as we know, he’s not a murderer. Not yet anyway.”

“It occurred to me that the room at the Luxuro might have been bugged,” Sergio said. “Afterall, they had a standing booking for the same room every time. It turns out it was. But not by who you might think.”

“By whom?” Then the penny dropped. “Avenatti himself?”

Sergio nodded. “During their—how do you say?—*pillow talk*, Signora Marquesa strongly hinted that she wouldn’t be totally grief-stricken if something were to happen to her considerably older, and apparently boring, husband. Avenatti, being the wannabe that he was, took that to one of Capizzi’s underlings, who, as it turns out, knew his boss wanted the same thing.”

“And Capizzi saw the opportunity to distance himself by having Avenatti make the hit.” Nico sat back, digesting the information. “They all got what they wanted. The Capizzis and Evangeline got rid of Antonio. And Avenatti got to go from being a bottom feeder to an associate in one of Italy’s most powerful crime families.” He blew out a long breath.

“Unfortunately for Carlo,” Ariana said, “he only got to enjoy his new position for a short time. And Evangeline never got to play the merry widow.”

“Thanks to me putting her into protective custody,” Nico said.

“Don’t beat yourself up. You couldn’t have known.”

Sergio nodded in agreement. “That’s why the safe house was torched, and Carlo Avenatti ended up in a dumpster. The deed was done and they both knew too much.”

“And the two men that were killed along with Marquesa,” Nico said. “They were just collateral damage?”

“Don’t feel too bad for them. They were involved in the skimming, but it was Marquesa who initiated it and then recruited the other two to expand his operation. They all got greedy.”

Nico shook his head and scratched the day-old stubble on his chin. Or was it two days? He’d lost count.

Sergio turned to Ariana, who sat beside him. “Marquesa didn’t need the money. Why?”

She reached out and touched his forearm. When he turned, she looked him straight in the eye.

“Do the Capizzis need the money?” Ariana asked. “Does Alesandru Baldisar need the money? It’s not about money, Sergio; it’s about power and greed. Two things, my friend, that will never go out of style. Not in my lifetime at least.”

Her hand still on Sergio’s arm, she looked over at Nico. In spite of his exhaustion, he felt that familiar jolt of electricity as they locked eyes.

“And until it does,” she said, “don’t ever lose sight of the end goal. Ridding our respective countries of the parasites that use us as hosts while leeching every drop of blood they can. *That*, my friend, is why we all do what we do.”

EPILOGUE

JAMES

James Padwick hung up the phone after being debriefed. Notwithstanding the disappearance of Anna Braithwaite—which he still hadn't solved—he was glad the case had come to a conclusion for Nico's sake. He had sounded like he was on verge of collapse. At the same time, he was disappointed he wouldn't be going to Italy to continue the investigation. Of course he knew Nico would welcome his visit, but the taxpayers of soggy old England wouldn't be paying for it.

He scratched his head. What the hell? EasyJet flights and the like were dead cheap, and he was owed some time off. He picked up his mobile and made another call.

Booked on the 3 p.m. flight from Heathrow to Lamezia Terme, James hastily threw a few things in a bag, left a voice mail for his second in command to get in contact with Anna Braithwaite's realtor and jumped into a waiting taxi.

While they made good time for a weekday in London, he looked at his watch as they slowed to a crawl in the snarl of traffic approaching the airport. As if sensing his anxiety, the driver looked at him in the rearview mirror.

"Don't worry, guv. It might be tight, but I'll get you there in time. Going off for a holiday, are you?"

James gave his best impression of a smile, and worried anyway. Doing his best not to repeatedly keep looking at his watch, he gazed out the passenger window. Similarly frustrated drivers tooted their horns and threw their hands up in frustration. Great! Just what he needed, a collective case of road rage.

But true to his word, Raj—obviously a short form of the name on his displayed license—spotted a break in the adjacent lane and shot through it like it was the eye of a hurricane. Horns blared, but James was impressed.

They were almost at the ramp that led to the departure drop-off area. As Raj waited behind several taxis for his turn to pull in, James noticed a woman standing on the curb waiting for her driver to retrieve her bags and deposit them on the pavement. Her shoulder-length reddish-blond hair fell across her face as she fished in her handbag, probably looking for a tip. The next taxi in line gave a quick toot of his horn.

“Almost there,” Raj said. “If this lady would just get a move on.”

She obviously found what she was looking for. As she reached out her hand to tip the driver, James spotted her plain gold wedding band. And on her wrist, an out-of-date thin gold watch.

He was already out of the taxi and sprinting toward the glass doors.

“Hang on, guv, I’ve got to...hey! Your luggage...” was the last thing James heard as the automatic doors whooshed open and he charged into the crowd.

REID

When Nico called, Reid Devlin had been on his way to meet Leo at the pub around the corner from his apartment. This time it would be him that kept his former partner waiting. He’d continued the call outside before going in, but he could see Leo at a table he’d snagged by the window and motioned that he was on the phone. Leo already had a beer in front of him and gave him the thumbs-up that he understood. He was buying, which came as a welcome relief seeing as Shannon St. Clair’s retainer check had bounced. If only Reid’s ex-wife could have been so patient. Maybe he and Leo had the makings of another partnership after all.

“I’m glad it worked out for you,” Reid said when Nico was finished. “But hey, if you ever need help over there, be sure to call me, eh?” He envied James for having already been to Italy on a couple of cross-border cases. If only that had been in the cards for him, he might have stayed with the RCMP. Now, as a struggling PI, he’d never...

He gave himself a mental kick in the ass. What was that old saying, he mused as he put his phone in his pocket: “Good guys finished last.” Forget about it, man. There was also “Slow and steady wins the race.”

With that in mind, he yanked open the door to the pub and headed in to meet the man who would be his first “associate” in Reid Devlin and Associates. Knowing Leo, though, it would probably have to be Barclay and Associates. And he did have rank.

Maybe they could meet somewhere in the middle.

NICO

After sending Sergio home to his wife and family, Ariana helped Nico clean up all the papers and put them, along with laptops and thumb drives, into the office safe. Gina would take care of putting their workspace back to some semblance of normalcy in the morning. She’d shown how capable she was of much more than her secretarial role, and he made a mental note to talk to her about a promotion when all this was over. Based on what they’d come up with in search of an almost missed fifty-euro payment, he’d need a lot more help than they presently had.

“Are you hungry?” he asked Ariana as she fetched their coats from the closet.

“I might be,” she replied. “But I’m so tired, I don’t think I have the capacity to act like a civilized person and sit down to eat.”

Nico totally understood, but he tried not to let his disappointment show. They'd been together virtually twenty-four-seven for days; it would seem strange to go their separate ways so early in the evening.

“But if you don't mind leftovers,” she said, “I've got food in the fridge and a good bottle of Tenuta Iuzzolin Paternum.”

Nico raised an eyebrow. Not only was that one of Calabria's most expensive reds, but it had become quite difficult to find.

“They must pay their prosecutors well in Malta. Are you sure you want to waste that on me?”

“Good point,” she said, as if considering. “Sergio's gone home. And besides, he's married.” She turned and looked over her shoulder as she put on her coat. “You'd be second choice, so if that's a problem—”

Nico reached over to turn off the light and brushed his hand across her hair. “Let's go,” he said. “Suddenly, I'm starving.”
