

Chapter 1

Milan, Bonaparte Hotel

Milan's Aristocracy pays its respects

The great hall of the Bonaparte Hotel was almost bursting at the seams. Milan's *crème de la crème*, the richest of the rich and the most beautiful of the beautiful—the latter conspicuously often in company of the former—were gathered on this balmy spring evening. Luciano Arseti, one of the wealthiest men in all of Europe, had summoned them, more than three months ago now, and they all had answered his call. An invitation from the man who owned the largest and most important oil pipeline south of Russia was not something anyone could easily turn down. And so, among Arseti's guests were politicians, media moguls, oil and gas barons, and top athletes and actors. In short, it was one of *the* social events of the year. There was no one here who didn't have some claim to fame. Michael Corvus also attended the joyous event, looking exceptionally striking in the black tailcoat he had procured specifically for the occasion. Evenings like this were not normally his cup of tea, nor did the dress code reflect his usual preference. In fact, Michael Corvus wasn't even one of the guests invited to the *soirée* at the Bonaparte Hotel—he was a waiter, one of many whose job it was to make sure that the people who considered themselves better than the rest always had a full glass of champagne in their hands. Just one bottle probably cost more than his worn-out, old hatchback. But of course, he kept all these thoughts hidden. Michael Corvus was a professional through and through.

"Here," said one of the kitchen assistants, depositing a tray of fresh champagne glasses into his hands. Before Corvus even had a chance to say anything, the hasty young man had disappeared back into the kitchen. Corvus shrugged and climbed the narrow steps from the basement of the hotel. He passed through a small side corridor and directly into the banquet hall, which was buzzing with muffled voices. The Bonaparte Hotel had excellent soundproofing, but even that couldn't contain the noise of hundreds of people in the banquet room. He walked toward the door, which swung open at him into the corridor just before he was about to open it himself. Another waiter was leaving with an empty tray. As was the custom, they were both far too busy for any pleasantries and passed each other wordlessly, one heading for the stairs, the other into the great hall. The sheer dimension of the great hall was extraordinary. It hardly seemed like a hotel. The circular room had staircases leading to a gallery which was as crowded as the hall itself. Sections of the walls were mirrored, making it even more imposing, and enormous chandeliers hung overhead. The bright light fell freely on the hundreds of people

chatting, men and women in tuxedos and evening gowns talking, laughing, and, above all, gossiping. A gigantic buffet had been set up to Michael Corvus's right side. The five long, broad, offset tables were laid out with enough food to satiate Milan's abundant hungry population for several weeks, even months. Instead, it was being served to people for whom hunger was barely a vague concept and who still complained about the selection as they filled their tiny plates, inevitably causing a great deal of the exquisite delicacies to end up in the trash. He didn't dwell on such thoughts for long, however, and began his journey around the hall. He had acquired a tunnel vision that filtered out everything he didn't need to see. All he saw were empty champagne glasses and plunging necklines and generous cleavage just begging for closer examination. There was plenty of both to keep him on his toes. As he walked around, Corvus kept an eye on the hustle and bustle in the hall. He saw at least three men making out with women they would otherwise stay miles away from if they knew who they were married to. The host, Luciano Arseti, stood in the center of the hall on a raised, circular platform where a group of musicians played Beethoven's String Quartet No. 4 in C minor, engrossed in conversation with Milan's mayor. Or rather, the mayor was doing everything in his power to win over Arseti's approval, looking like a lovestruck puppy dog while the oil magnate smiled wearily and his eyes wandered over his guests.

It took barely five minutes before the full glasses on Corvus's tray had been replaced by empty ones. He returned to the corridor leading to the kitchen, where his tray was promptly replaced with a fully loaded one, and returned to the great hall for his fifth circuit of the evening. He continued working in this rhythm for another sixty minutes and, gradually, his legs grew heavy. Then, on his eleventh round, another waiter tapped him on the shoulder as he passed. Corvus looked at him questioningly, whereupon the waiter gestured to one of the staircases leading to the gallery. There stood a stocky man in a burgundy three-piece suit, gesticulating wildly, as only Italians could, with one of the country's most famous professional soccer players. Corvus looked at his watch. Sure enough, it was already close to nine thirty. Showtime.

"Got it," he said quietly to the waiter. "Do the others know?" The other man nodded, and they separated again so as not to arouse suspicion. Corvus had become so absorbed in his work that he had almost forgotten the real reason he was here and had completely lost track of time. He went back to the kitchen, where he placed the tray with the empty glasses on a table and turned to go.

"Just a minute!" a woman's stern, imperious voice called after him. He turned to see Signora Perti, who was something of a slave driver down here. She was responsible for the smooth cooperation between the kitchen and the service personnel. "Where are you going?" she barked at him. "Take a full tray with you!"

“Sorry,” Corvus replied calmly and politely. “I’ll be right back. A lady has spilled red wine all over her satin dress.” When Signora Perti didn’t respond, he added, “Over her very white satin gown.” Hearing this, her stern features softened and she said, “What are you waiting for?!” He turned on his heel and took three steps across the kitchen when something slapped against the back of his head. The slave driver had thrown several damp rags after him. Corvus picked them up, left the kitchen, and threw the rags into the nearest trash can. When he returned to the great hall, he was met with thunderous applause. Not for him, of course, but for Paolo di Paci, the great tenor. The surprise guest of the evening was to perform his version of “E lucevan le stelle” from *Tosca* in honor of Arseti, a huge fan of Puccini operas. Di Paci had just taken the stage and called Arseti, who had known nothing of all this, to join him. While the oil magnate, accompanied by applause and bravos, thanked his wonderful wife for this jaw-dropping surprise, Michael Corvus strode through the crowd, looking for the man in the burgundy three-piece suit. He finally spotted him in the gallery, leaning against the gilded balustrade listening to Arseti, who was moved to tears, expressing his appreciation.

Corvus took the wide steps at a rapid pace, weaving past dozens of strangers until he finally stood before the man he was here to see in the first place: Riccardo Ordiz.

“Signore Ordiz,” Corvus said, tapping the man on the shoulder. Ordiz turned to him and looked at him with an impatient expression framed by a pair of bushy eyebrows.

“What?” he whimpered.

“I beg your pardon,” Corvus placated him politely. “But you’re wanted on the phone.”

“What?” repeated Ordiz sharply. “Impossible. I can’t now. Tell them I’m busy.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve been told in no uncertain terms that it’s an emergency.”

“I don’t give a damn!” snapped Ordiz, causing some of the bystanders to turn to them.

“As you wish,” Corvus said, arms raised placatingly. “Then I will tell Signore Remarghi that you do not wish to speak to him.” When Ordiz heard that name, his face instantly went pale.

“Re-Remarghi?” he asked, and his anger, his impatience, seemed to blow away. All that was left was nervousness and a hint of panic.

“Remarghi,” Corvus confirmed, “that’s how he introduced himself on the phone.”

“I... Well, all right,” Ordiz finally relented.

“Very well. Follow me, please.” Corvus led the way and, after making sure Ordiz was following him, headed for the wide staircase down into the main floor. As they made their way through the crowd, Paolo di Paci began the aria, accompanied by soft plucks of orchestral music from the large speakers on stage.

“Damn, I wanted to hear that...” Ordiz complained sullenly, and kept stopping and turning longingly

toward the stage. Corvus could certainly sympathize; the aria from Puccini's *Tosca*, in which Mario Cavaradossi sings his last words to his beloved and tells how much he loves life, was surely one of the most beautiful and moving ever written, not to mention sung, by the great Paolo di Paci. "*Ed olezzava la terra...*"

"Perhaps we should continue. I'm afraid that Remarghi didn't give the impression of being an terribly patient man," he said to Ordiz, tugging the immaculate fabric of his sleeve. They moved on just as di Paci's singing started to become more passionate and with at least as many tears in his eyes as large portions of his audience. "*O dolci baci, o languide carezze...*"

Corvus pushed open a mirrored side door and led Ordiz across the adjoining room. Then they turned into a long, dimly lit corridor.

"Where's the phone?" asked Ordiz, looking around with a sour expression. "Is it the one in my suite?"

"It's not far now," Corvus replied. Twenty yards ahead, a door opened on the right side of the hallway, and a man in a tuxedo stepped out and strode down the corridor. He nodded to Corvus and Ordiz as he passed them, then disappeared up the stairs. When they reached the same door, Corvus stopped and pointed. "In there," he said. Without thanking him, Ordiz opened the door. A more intelligent man would have immediately noticed the heavy, metallic smell of blood that lingered in the air. A more intelligent man than Ordiz would have also tried to turn on the light first instead of entering the pitch-black room without a thought. After a few seconds, however, even Ordiz seemed to catch on that something was wrong here.

"What...what's going on?" he asked, hesitant and uncertain. "Where's the—" He broke off as the door slammed into the lock. Michael Corvus switched on the light. Ordiz screamed when he saw what had been buried by the darkness. They were standing in a room, twenty-by-twenty-foot large, with tables and chairs pushed up against the walls, leaving the center of the room open. There in the center lay the bodies of four men, their throats slit, their tuxedos bloodstained. A considerable amount of blood had already accumulated in the meantime, now only slowly creeping toward the walls of the room. Ordiz stared at the bodies of the men, their wide-open eyes gaping lifelessly at the ceiling, their faces distorted from their struggle. Men he knew very well. He turned to Corvus, opened his mouth to speak, moved to confront him. However, Riccardo Ordiz had signed his own death warrant when he accepted Arseti's invitation, and he, like his friends, would not be leaving this room alive tonight. He took a step toward Corvus with his fist raised to strike when Corvus made a lightning-fast move, too fast for Ordiz's eyes to follow. A blade flashed in Corvus's hand. *E non ho amato mai tanto la vida*. He took a step back, the dagger disappearing back into the leather sheath below his left breast, and looked at Ordiz. Blood poured en masse from a fine but deep cut across his neck. Ordiz staggered backward, his

hands pressing against his severed, gurgling throat. He looked urgently at Corvus, his eyes searching for an explanation, mutely asking *why?*

“Did you actually think we wouldn’t retaliate?” asked Corvus, watching the life drain from Ordiz without an ounce of pity, with no discernible emotion at all. “That we wouldn’t avenge our people?” Ordiz’s eyes flashed in a moment of realization, but otherwise grew duller. He took another step backward and stumbled over one of the bodies on the floor. He fell onto his back, lying across one of his dead friends, retching and gurgling, spitting blood, his hands pressed further to his throat, his eyes turned pleadingly to the ceiling, as if God would leap to his aid at any moment.

“The hour is past, and I die in despair,” Corvus translated the last lines of Puccini’s aria. “And I never before loved life so much.” After thirty seconds more, Ordiz was gone. His body, no longer twitching, combined seamlessly into the pile of corpses on the floor. Now Corvus had no time to lose. He stripped off his tails, shirt, and pants and stuffed them into one of the plastic bags that lay on a table against the wall. Under the table was a large sport bag from which he took out a new carefully folded and shrink-wrapped tuxedo. He hurriedly put it on, tied up the plastic bag with the waiter’s suit, went to open the window, and threw the bag into the warm night air. It sailed through the dim light and landed in a dumpster standing below. Michael Corvus closed the window again and walked back to the door, careful not to step in the ever-growing pool of blood. He turned off the light and left the room, closing the door behind him. Halfway down the corridor to the stairs, two people approached him: a man wearing the same tailcoat as Corvus had worn earlier and a puzzled-looking Italian in a black suit. Corvus passed the two, nodding to the waiter. And as his foot touched the first step, he heard the waiter say:

“Don’t worry, signore. The telephone is just beyond that door.”