

FAST TRACK TO GLORY

*A NOVEL BY
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CHAPTER 1

NINA JUMPED OFF the Intercity the moment it pulled into Heidelberg Central Train Station. A growing crowd of passengers absorbed her and carried down the open roof platform. Seeing a gap in the flow of bodies, she squeezed through and stepped aside between two metal benches.

A digital clock hanging over the platform showed 21:50. She grimaced and put her business suitcase down.

On her tiptoes, she craned her neck, scanning the surroundings over groups of excited travellers who were moving to the exit.

Did she arrive too late? No one was holding a sheet of paper with her name on it.

She reached down to a side pocket of her suitcase and pulled out the pearl-black envelope with an Italian Ministry of Culture seal. A bicycle courier had handed it over three hours ago, just when she was calling a taxi to take her to the airport so she could catch the last flight home from Frankfurt to Venice.

Inside was an invitation to a confidential meeting in the Heidelberg Castle tonight at ten. Massimo Campana had scribbled his signature at the bottom. Above it she read: "Again, please excuse the short notice. I will be sending a chauffeur to collect you, Signora Monte. Please wait at the platform."

Nina had never met Campana. She suspected he was relegated from another department lately, as she knew employees in the Ministry well. They had called her to consultations before. Most recently on interpretation of religious rituals depicted on walls of the amphitheatre, dated second century A.D., that were unearthed close to Rome's Fiumicino airport.

But the Ministry had always informed her in advance what they expected from her.

Tonight was odd in this respect. One hour and seventeen minutes' journey from Frankfurt left her without any valid conclusion as to why her professional advice was required, why they organized such a gathering that late and outside of Italy.

Shivers crawled over her body despite the cashmere jacket wrapped around her torso. Early September in Germany was cooler than she was prepared for.

She bounced on her feet to warm herself up. She was supposed to be at home now, relaxing in a long, hot, scented bath with a glass of red wine in her hand.

The crowd on the platform thinned out. Then it was only Nina.

Feeling abandoned, without a sign of a promised driver, in the city she didn't know, she grabbed the handle of her briefcase and rolled it behind her to the station's hall.

When she entered the building, the rich smell of coffee, toasted sandwiches, and pastries reminded her of a half-eaten almond croissant she carried in her handbag. She hadn't had time to finish it when rushing to catch the train over here, and then she had forgotten about it.

She navigated her way to the exit.

In a lane adjacent to the station, taxi after taxi drove off, but the queue of customers was long. Those more impatient continued on foot.

'Signora Monte!'

Nina turned to her left. Four metres away, a man wearing a navy suit and a hat in the same colour came up to a skinny girl in her early twenties dressed in a chiffon blouse, tight blue jeans and shiny metallic sneakers. The chauffeur towered over her one-metre-sixty, give or take, frame.

Had he really confused her with Nina? What had Massimo Campana told him she looked like?

Although Nina had to admit that the girl was the same height. Her straight black hair cut at the shoulders was similar too. When she turned her head, Nina also caught a glance of her face, the olive skin tone and subtle jaw line mimicking her own.

But despite the resemblance, Nina didn't look as if she were going to a Justin Bieber concert, and the time when she starved herself to fit into a size six glorified by *Vogue* had long been left behind. After all, she turned thirty-six last month.

She felt growing irritation at the chauffeur for his mistake, and at Massimo Campana for robbing her of the pleasure of the hot, soothing bath she deserved. This morning, she had gotten up at five o'clock to prepare for a hectic conference day in Frankfurt on ancient scientific thought, where she had given two long lectures on social and religious movements in the Mediterranean.

The girl smiled at the chauffeur, who was close to her age, and shook her head. He winced and excused himself, took off the hat and ran his fingers through his short auburn hair.

The passengers dispersed, and now only two of them were left standing by the main entrance to the train station.

He noticed Nina, and rushed towards her. 'Signora Monte. I'm sorry for the delay. My name is Felix,' he said in Italian with a noticeable German accent. 'With that crowd coming to see the fireworks, I couldn't find a parking space closer to the station. Whew, I thought you were already gone.'

'Buonasera, Felix,' she said. 'Good evening.'

He picked up her briefcase. 'I'll take you to the castle. Follow me, please.'

He started to walk off.

Nina shadowed him two steps behind. 'How long have you been doing this job, Felix?'

'Ahem ... this is the first time, Signora,' he said, glancing at her over his shoulder. 'I do all sorts of things to pay for my college.'

At least that explained his lack of professionalism and coming late. Her students were the same.

Nina meant to ask what he was studying, but at times she had to jog to keep up with his swift pace. She preferred to concentrate on the road so as not to sprain her ankle on some sidewalk pothole where the sporadic street light wasn't reaching.

He led her away from the stream of people. After two hundred metres, Nina sighed when he finally stopped at a parking square neighbouring a shopping mall.

‘I’m sorry, Signora Monte,’ he said, opening the rear door of an Audi A6. ‘Was it too fast? My girlfriend is teasing me that I should walk like normal people.’

‘She might have a point,’ Nina said and clambered into the car. ‘Unless you’re training for a marathon.’

‘No, Signora. I just don’t like wasting my time moving from one place to another.’ He closed the door and put her suitcase into the boot.

Then he took a seat behind the steering wheel. ‘If I could, I would run everywhere.’

He turned around to her. ‘Do you like running, Signora?’

Nina never pictured herself to be one of those people who got up at five or six to go jogging in the park. With spending too many hours behind her desk at university, though, perhaps she needed to think about it.

‘I presume you don’t know anything about the meeting you’re taking me to,’ she said, fastening the seatbelt.

‘Oh no.’ He pressed a button and the engine hummed to life. ‘I wouldn’t know anything about that. My job is just to bring you to the castle.’

The car pulled out from the shopping mall, and soon Felix drove into congested human traffic. He used the horn now and then to shove off pedestrians who were marching in the middle of the road. Nina saw groups of teenagers, families with small children, a man carrying on his shoulders a boy who was waving an inflated crocodile balloon attached to his forearm, and an ambling older couple, holding hands.

It took twenty minutes to reach the point beyond which the car traffic was not permitted. Two men clad in fluorescent yellow vests moved a heavy barrier aside. Felix touched the rim of his hat and gave them a quick nod.

The Audi swung sharply left and then right, narrowly avoiding a scattered group of schoolboys who stepped on the asphalt. From there, the ride up the road, leading to a hill overlooking the city and the Neckar River, was swifter.

A few minutes later the car pulled over in front of the gateway to Heidelberg Castle.

‘Here we are, Signora,’ Felix said. ‘This is the entrance.’

Nina pressed the button on the door and the car window slid down silently.

The castle looked as if it were becoming deserted, and the several men she saw through the gate walking in the dim yard were staying to make sure no elders, children or sick people were left behind.

‘Signora, this is it. Please follow through the gate tower, then straight through the yard. Someone will meet you there.’

Nina took another glance at the gloomy yard. No one awaited her. ‘Are you sure?’

‘This is what I have been instructed to tell you,’ Felix said.

‘Of course you have.’

‘Please leave your luggage in the car. I will pick you up after the meeting.’

She opened the door and stepped onto the cobblestone pavement. The moment she shut the door, the car drove off.

The tower was built from red brick and was as high as a four-storey building. Above the entrance, two statues of medieval knights, armed with swords and lances, guarded the gate.

Next to them, two lions stood on their rear legs. There was a clock on top of it, but it was too dark to read the time.

Nina rubbed her shoulders with her hands. Then she went through the entrance and walked into the vast courtyard, which was surrounded on all four sides by the castle buildings. She relaxed, seeing that it was better lit than what she had seen from the car. More people bustled about the square, carrying boxes, some tools, briskly crossing the yard.

Across the square, there was a brighter lit entrance; probably the main building of the whole complex.

When a man came out of there, and made merely ten steps, Nina knew he was there to bring her in, and not only because he walked straight in her direction and seemed to smile at her. He wore an elegant grey or cream suit while everyone else around was in their working clothes.

He held out his arms when he was the last four metres away from her. ‘Signora Monte, welcome! My name is Massimo Campana.’

He stopped to let through two workers who were carrying long pipes.

Campana was a good-looking, fifty-something, stylish man, and Nina thought that it must be stressful work at the Ministry that covered his forehead and eyes with too many furrows. His short hair had grey streaks at the sides and was thinning.

When the workers went about their job, Campana stepped forward, took Nina’s hand and squeezed it firmly. ‘Welcome. Welcome, Signora!’

‘Good evening, Signor Campana.’

He pulled her towards the castle entrance. ‘Everyone is waiting.’

He was taller than Nina, but not by much as he hunched forward.

‘I was hoping for a briefing before the meeting. Your invitation was quite vague,’ Nina said.

‘I know, and I truly apologise for that,’ he replied. ‘You will find out everything soon enough. I can only tell you that the name of our host is Christoph Gerst from the German Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Our French partners sent a representative of their Ministry of Culture and Communication in the person of Julien Traverse. Although, from his bearings, I’d say he works for Defence.’

Campana had a low, self-assured voice, the kind that was in the habit of giving instructions, not taking questions.

When they were in the middle of the courtyard, the lights changed to a red colour, engulfing the castle in a crimson glow.

‘Aha, the show is about to begin,’ he said and pouted his lips. ‘Pity we will miss it.’

For one short moment Nina lost her sense of direction, and let him guide her. She felt as if she were being dragged from behind the scene to the main stage of a school theatre, to be thrown into penetrating spotlights to perform a play without knowing its script.

He released his soft grip on her arm when they entered the castle.

Inside was murky, and Nina smelled a slight whiff of fresh paint in the air. They walked out of the shadows into a well-lit corridor. To her left, she saw man-sized figures of former nobles of the castle, or so she guessed. To the right, horned animal trophies lined the wall. Nina shuddered. She would have never put up anything like that in her home—it felt like an alley in an animals’ graveyard.

Her high heels clanked hurriedly on the corridor's marble floor, giving the sound she considered inappropriate in any graveyard.

Massimo Campana, who was two steps ahead of her, stopped abruptly at a door guarded by a bulky man dressed in a black suit. His head and face were clean shaven; he looked like a celebrity bodyguard. Without a word, the man opened the door.

Campana gestured to Nina.

'After you, Signora.'

CHAPTER 2

NINA SAW TWO men sitting at a wooden few-hundred-year-old table set in the middle of a ten-by-ten metre room. They were engaged in a conversation, oblivious to her and Massimo Campana's arrival.

Above the men, a single chandelier hung from a stucco ceiling decorated with colourful paintings. A stove stood in the left corner. Court scenes were depicted on its green tiled walls. Beside it was a second door. Was it also guarded?

'Gentlemen! I'm back with our charming expert. Let me introduce Signora Nina Monte,' Campana said in impeccable English. 'We can continue in untroubled fashion now.'

Nina exchanged brief pleasantries with both men, and took a seat at the table across from them in the carved, upholstered arm chair that harmonized well with fuchsia walls and a polished marble floor.

Campana sat next to her. He put his burgundy briefcase on the table, pulled out a stack of documents, and browsed through them.

Four bottles of water, glasses, coffee cups, a jug, and appetizing pastries lay on the table, untouched.

Christoph Gerst pretended to be interested in Campana's documents, but he kept glancing at Nina with a nonchalant smile. He was dressed in a burgundy turtleneck sweater and a dark-yellow sports jacket with elbow patches. His short blond hair was trimmed in a stylish manner and combed to the side. If that bodyguard was indeed hired by celebrities, Gerst could be one of them.

Julien Traverse, who was the oldest person in the room, maybe in his late sixties, wore an exquisite Italian suit and a purple mosaic tie. Nina thought that behind the old-fashioned, thick lenses, his eyes looked oddly large.

'As you all have been already informed...' Campana started, and then paused, looking at everyone.

Nina asked herself who, in his mind, *all* was.

'...the progress in the search for the item of our interest is at its peak.'

'Signor Campana, do you mind presenting the credentials of your associate?' Traverse said and folded his hands on the table.

Nina looked at the brownish patches on the back of his hands. Then her eyes shot up. *What did he say?*

'I've only been informed that Ms Monte is a professor at the University of Padua,' he added.

She raised her eyebrows.

‘We shouldn’t have any doubt in the competences of our Italian friends, Monsieur Traverse,’ Gerst said flatly.

For a person who represented as powerful a country as Germany, Christoph Gerst looked surprisingly young.

Traverse disconnected his magnetic glasses at the bridge ‘Dear Christoph, the matters we discuss here are too grave. I will leave nothing to chance.’

Campana frowned at the Frenchman. ‘Monsieur Traverse, Signora Monte has been studying and teaching history of religions at the Department of Historical and Geographic Sciences and the Ancient World at the University of Padua, which she is also head of. I can assure you that her credentials are flawless.’

The firework show set off above the castle. Gerst pushed his chair back, crossed to the windows and shut them. The explosions stifled to a level allowing a conversation.

When he sat down, Nina felt his gaze boring into her with increased interest.

‘I doubt there’s another individual in Italy able to overshadow the credentials of Signora Monte,’ the Italian went on. ‘In addition, Signora and the Italian Ministry of Culture are well acquainted. Nevertheless, details of our previous dealings will not be the subject of this meeting.’

‘So what is it?’ Nina’s words came out in an uncontrolled manner. ‘I’m sorry, Signor Campana, but you’re making me guess what is expected of me, and I feel quite confused at being kept in the dark.’ She paused when three muffled explosions made the water in the bottles vibrate. ‘And *why* are you organizing this meeting during the fireworks?’

‘I agree.’ Gerst sent her an emphatic smile. ‘Signora Monte must be thoroughly briefed.’

‘This was exactly what I was getting to,’ Massimo said.

Traverse spread his palms on the table and opened his mouth, but the blasts of fireworks grew to a deafening level for a moment.

Nina touched her forehead. She started feeling uneasy in a small medieval castle room with three strangers who couldn’t tell her why she was there. She opened the bottle of water and drank straight from it. Glancing back at the door she had walked through, she saw that it was now secured by another man.

She flinched, feeling a hand on her arm.

‘Are you all right, Signora?’ Campana said.

‘Yes,’ she said in a low voice. ‘Although, I might have lost track of this conversation. But please—continue.’

Campana hesitated for a second and then dug out another document.

‘Before tonight, only four persons have been allowed to see it. Now, you’ve joined our group.’ He offered her a large picture. ‘Do you know what this is?’

Nina looked at the underwater photograph of a shipwreck. Her anxiety at being in the wrong place at the wrong time receded.

‘It’s a warship galley, I presume,’ she said.

‘You *presume*,’ Julien Traverse said.

Nina shot him a glance over the frame of the photo. ‘I’m not an expert at underwater treasure hunts, if this is why I’m here.’

The Frenchman averted his gaze. It felt like a tiny triumph; so he wasn’t as threatening as she imagined.

Campana cleared his throat.

A discreet smirk crossed over Gerst's face. 'It *is* about a treasure hunt,' he said. 'Sort of.'

'This picture was taken three days ago on the bottom of Lake Garda,' Massimo Campana said. 'It was quite a coincidence that the whereabouts of the ship has been discovered only now. As it so happens with many great things, they often come unexpected, Signora.'

Her head started to throb. 'Signor Campana, I may be an expert at history of religions, but I am certainly not an expert at underwater excavation. I still don't understand.'

'True; however, we are hopeful that you *are* an authority on what we intend to find inside this galley,' Campana said.

Nina scanned the photograph.

'What you see,' he went on, 'is a galley that sank during the battle of Maderno in 1439. It was a period of wars between Venice and the Visconti family.'

'Wars in Lombardy. The history of Italy before unification,' Nina said. 'Venice, being at war with Milan, went to great lengths to help Brescia, their protectorate, which was under siege. As Milan controlled the south of Lake Garda, Venetians sailed their ships up the Adige River. From there they used five hundred oxen and three hundred men to drag six galleys over the mountains to the north of the lake. Each galley weighed one hundred tons. A third of the people perished in that gruelling expedition.'

The Italian glanced at Traverse with an expression of: "I told you."

'The Venice fleet was eventually defeated, and this,' Campana said, pointing at the picture in her hands, 'is *Santa Lucia*, one of their ships that went down.'

'And ... you have found something valuable on board and you want my expertise to confirm its authenticity. Am I right?'

'We don't have it in our hands yet,' Traverse said. 'We are confident it will be found any time now.'

Nina put the picture on the table. 'Do you mind me asking what the French government has to do with all of that? And,' she said, looking at Gerst, 'German, for that matter?'

Traverse winced. 'Ms Monte, I think I can also speak in the name of our German partner.' He pointed at Gerst with his open palm, as if she needed a clue who the German partner was. 'The artefact in question might be lying on the bed of an Italian lake, but it never belonged to Venice, or to Milan, or to the later Kingdom of Italy.'

'Monsieur Traverse,' Campana cut in, 'the item might not belong to Italy, but Lake Garda certainly *is* part of my country. The ship in which the item lies is our heritage. And you gentlemen are here due to ... let's call it, friendly surveillance.'

Traverse raised his chin and pouted his lips as if finding an insult in that statement.

Nina understood where the tension among them came from. The three countries spied on each other. Germany, France and Italy had sent their men to something that, on the surface, was a joint undertaking.

Christoph Gerst propped his elbows on the table and leaned towards her. Nina could smell his citrus aftershave. 'Signora Monte, let me tell you about your part in all of this. As soon as the item is located and secured, you will be kindly asked to confirm its authenticity.'

Nina frowned. She had already said that, hadn't she?

'We count on you,' Campana said. 'There are great hopes in regard to what we will unveil, but we need an interpreter. It may change many things.'

‘What kinds of things?’ she asked.

‘What kinds of things?’ Traverse said with a half-smirk. ‘*All* kinds of things. The world without terminal disease, poverty, without limitations that plague our population.’

She couldn’t imagine such a place. But she could easily imagine the world without Julien Traverse.

‘It has potential to become an enormous step in our evolution! I only wish the French nation had its men among the crew who are right now exploring the wreck,’ Traverse added coarsely.

‘If I understand correctly,’ Nina said, ‘you’re fighting over something that you haven’t even seen yet.’

Both Gerst and Traverse started to speak at once. Nina raised her outstretched palm over the table, causing the gibberish to die away.

Massimo Campana spoke first. ‘Monsieur Traverse, you will be pleased to know that Mister Lammert van der Venn and his crew of experts in underwater exploration are the best possible choice for this enterprise. And,’ he said, glancing at Nina, ‘if Signora Monte will join them, we couldn’t have assembled a better team.’

Traverse stared into Campana’s eyes, as if they were continuing their argument on a non-verbal level.

The Italian gathered his documents. ‘Unfortunately, we have to wrap up for now. We will reconvene in the same place in three days. Thank you, all.’

Nina lifted her eyebrow and bent her neck forward. Was that all?

Traverse and Gerst stood up and shook hands with each other. Nina noticed that the Frenchman wasn’t looking at Campana when he held out his hand to him. The handshake she received from Traverse was a brief limp grip of the tips of her fingers.

‘Let me walk you to your car,’ Gerst said to Nina.

‘Herr Gerst,’ Massimo said, ‘you’ve been an excellent host. Signora Monte and I have further arrangements. Have a good night.’

Gerst set his lips into a disillusioned grin. ‘Absolutely. Good night. Have a safe journey, Signora. I hope to see you again.’

When he and Traverse left the room, Nina turned to Campana. ‘What is going on here?’

He finished shovelling the documents into his briefcase, and said, ‘Our German colleague has a great impression of you, Signora. I don’t think there would be anyone to blame him for that affection.’

Nina felt a flush on her cheeks. ‘What did he mean by saying “have a safe journey”, and what did you mean by “Signora Monte will join them”? Do you really expect me to get involved after that farce?’

‘Let’s walk,’ he said.

When they stepped onto the courtyard, the firework show was over. The stink of burned charcoal and sulphur drifted through the air, stinging at the inside of Nina’s nose.

‘The meeting took place in Germany for your convenience, Signora, as you were already in this country,’ Campana said. ‘The gathering of the ministerial employees in the castle wouldn’t draw too much unwanted attention, but if it did, it would be explainable why we met: cultural exchange, et cetera. But...’ He sighed and said, ‘This is an official version. The truth is I had no other choice but to involve France and Germany. They already knew what

we were up to. And as we gave them no choice when we asked for your and van der Venn's cooperation, they insisted on meeting you immediately. That, we couldn't refuse. Although I knew that by organizing our gathering at such a short notice they had aimed at discouraging you from coming here at all. I'm sorry for that, I'm glad you came. Then, as you've witnessed, the meeting wasn't going well. If we carried on, we wouldn't have come to any valid conclusions.'

He stopped before the gate tower. 'You see, Signora, I wish I knew better what's exactly happening on Lake Garda, and if our German and French partners made an impression on you that they do know, don't let them fool you.'

Campana handed her a leather binder. 'Inside is everything that you need to know about Lammert van der Venn, and your next steps—if you accept, of course.'

'Signor Campana, I have my du—'

'We've informed the university that you'll be off for a couple of days.'

'What?'

'The Ministry thinks it won't take longer. After this is over, we will award your department a generous grant. Think how much your studies would benefit. Naturally, we will add a special bonus for your involvement and for any inconvenience we might have caused.'

Nina furrowed her eyebrows. Never before had the Ministry been so determined to recruit her.

'Let's *assume* I agree to your proposal,' she said slowly. 'What exactly would you expect me to do?'

Massimo pointed through the gate. 'The same driver will take you to Milan. Journey shouldn't take more than six hours. We know that you have an apartment there. Tomorrow morning you will meet Cardinal Vittorio Ermanno Esposito and present him a short briefing from tonight's gathering.'

He must have read her puzzled face. 'Signora Monte, you are the last person I thought I would have to explain to that the Church is always engaged where serious sacral matters are at stake,' he said. 'In the afternoon you will take a train to Peschiera del Garda, and from there a direct bus to Malcesine by the lake, where you will finally catch a breath. Van der Venn will get in touch with you later on the next day.'

'I can see you've already arranged everything,' Nina said.

'We've booked a hotel for you. Although, without a lake view. We have to think about taxpayers. We went overboard with spending this year,' he said, then winced. 'Media are only waiting for any dodgy move a politician would make.'

'No problem. Although, I do hope you booked me for a full board. Three hefty meals a day.'

'Please keep your receipts. We will reimburse your expenses,' Campana said, ignoring her sarcasm. Then he headed to the car that had brought her to the castle.

Resigned, Nina shook her head and followed him.

'Please have a thorough look into those documents. If there's anything unclear, van der Venn promised to explain every aspect.'

Campana came to a stop by the car. He dropped his eyesight for a short moment, then looked up at Nina. 'Actually, it was van der Venn who insisted it was better if you learned everything from him.'

He reached into his inside pocket. 'My private number. You can get in touch with me in case of an emergency.'

Felix opened the door for Nina. She put the folder on the seat and turned back to ask Campana what kind of emergency he had in mind, but he was already halfway back to the castle.

'How was the meeting, Signora?' Felix said when they both settled in the car. 'Have you got your answers?'

Nina switched on the light above her head and opened van der Venn's portfolio. 'I will have to wait for that a bit longer.'

CHAPTER 3

FELIX DROVE THE car down the hill, dancing between pedestrians, but the Audi's speed was much slower than before. It took forty minutes before the car shot onto the A5 highway and sped south.

Nina put down the folder she had gotten from Campana and tried to relax. She reached into her bag and rummaged around for the leftovers of her croissant. She took a bite. It was a bit stale and the vanilla almond custard had dried out slightly, but she was grateful for it nonetheless.

Lammert van der Venn's dossier both saddened and impressed her.

She had read that he was fifty-two years old, birthplace unknown, parents unknown. He had been raised in an orphanage in Amsterdam. At fourteen he escaped and joined the crew of a cargo ship. Then it looked like he had hardly ever put his foot on dry land. At sixteen, South America became his home, where he worked on a Colombian beach in tourism.

When he turned twenty-two, he bought his own boat. He searched for underwater treasures off the coast of the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, St. Martin, the Cayman Islands, and the Bahamas. He had a flair for this business; at thirty-five he owned a small fleet of boats.

He became a millionaire art collector in his early forties, but hadn't ceased in his quest for rare artefacts.

Further, Lammert van der Venn was acquainted with a number of prominent figures from the Caribbean and Africa. Nina read their names. Some of them were hard-bitten dictators from countries that considered human rights a redundant privilege.

Van der Venn's latest project, commissioned by the Haitian government, was a vast excavation off their coast. Nina's eyes opened wider when she read that he discovered two tons of artefacts, jewellery, and gold of a total value of 192 million US dollars.

But it was the last sentence of his portfolio that enhanced Nina's curiosity: "Now he is on an ultimate quest for a spiritual treasure."

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Nothing in the folder gave her a clue what they were after, what lay deep in the waters of Lake Garda.

And the Ministry kept her on a tight schedule. She was to meet the cardinal tomorrow at 8:30 a.m.

She peered forward at the glowing clock embedded into the Audi's dashboard. She rubbed her eyes. Ten minutes past two. No wonder she couldn't gather her thoughts.

The speedometer showed 190 kilometres per hour. She looked out the window and up. It felt like sitting on a soft armchair in an astrological observatory and staring at Milky Way

after Milky Way. It was celestial. She could watch it all night, if only her eyelids weren't so heavy...

'Signora Monte.' Someone shook her arm. 'Signora, we have reached the destination. Do you want me to walk you to the door?'

She shuddered, feeling the cool wind blowing in through the open door. Felix was leaning over her, as if he wanted to kiss her. She recoiled. 'What?'

'My job is done, but I could walk you to the door, Signora?'

She covered her mouth and yawned, glancing around.

The car was parked by the entrance to an apartment building in Milan, her second home in Italy. Her suitcase stood outside, behind Felix.

'No. You must also be exhausted,' she said, giving him a sympathetic smile. 'I'm glad only one of us closed their eyes.'

'I'm very well, Signora. I could walk back to Heidelberg,' he said. 'They pay me lots of money for this job.'

Nina scrambled out of the car. 'Then I'm glad even more.'

He squeezed her hand. 'Thanks, Signora. Good luck!'

Nina headed straight to the gate, thinking about Lake Garda, Lammert van der Venn, and a world without Julien Traverse. And Felix's sincere "good luck."

When she closed the door to her apartment behind her, she went to her bedroom and fell onto the bed. Once her head touched the pillow, marvellous visions of medieval castles, fireworks, and sunken galleys whirled in her head, and pulled her in to taste their abundance.

And something else awaited her there; something, she sensed, that had been there a long, long time. Something of value that was far beyond measurable.

CHAPTER 4

LAMMERT VAN DER Venn swam slowly below the surface of Lake Garda. A depth gauge on his wrist showed one hundred metres. The temperature close to the surface was a pleasant twenty-two degrees Celsius; here it was hardly ten degrees. Clad in a seven-millimetre-thick drysuit, he didn't feel the cold.

In his hand, he held a powerful but fragile HID dive light. High intensity discharge increased the output of the bulb to five thousand lumens. The other two torches mounted to his lightweight helmet weren't as strong. The lights gave him a field of vision of eleven metres ahead in otherwise zero-visibility surroundings.

He made thirty-five meters along the rugged lakebed, but there was nothing to be seen yet.

He swam slowly for another reason. At this depth, his ninety-five-kilo body consumed a combination of oxygen, helium and nitrogen, supplied in twin cylinders on his back, five times faster than on the surface. Another three decompression cylinders to safeguard his ascent were strapped to his side.

Through the thick glass of his helmet, in the penetrating glow of HID light, he saw a one-metre-high pillar protruding from the lakebed, five metres ahead.

When he had dived in the same spot yesterday, he had almost disregarded it, but his hunch hadn't let him pass. Rightly, because that pillar turned out to be the tip of a mast.

He shifted his torch off the mast and down.

Emptiness—as if the lakebed were gone.

He broke three Cyalume glow sticks and let them descend. Then another two.

A reddish glow engulfed the majestic shape of *Santa Lucia*.

Van der Venn stared, amazed, at her thirty-metre-long body that was sitting in a straight position jammed in a cavity, as if made to hide the galley from the very first day when she sank, more than half a millennium ago.

Hundreds of shattered oars on both sides let the ship fit into the hollow. Her second mast was smashed—its broken half jabbed into the deck in the middle of the galley.

Van der Venn broke two more sticks and left them on the edge. Then he regulated a pressure valve of his diving wing—a horseshoe-shaped inflatable buoyancy bladder fitted in between the twin tanks and an ultralight aluminium back plate that was held by a harness tightened to his body.

He descended ten metres and hovered over the once glorious ship, then swam along her length, manoeuvring between the ropes that floated loosely, still attached to the broken mast. With great care, he touched the decayed planks of the main deck.

He moved down into a black hollow where the deck was smashed open.

The visibility plunged in the belly of the ship. Jagged, decaying walls were swallowing the light. As though to compensate that, he heard his steady breath and heartbeat much louder, as if the sound could be trapped in here and bounce off. But not the light.

Van der Venn swam through the opening in the wall, three metres ahead. He saw an entrance to another room, turned his body and swayed his legs, letting the momentum propel him forward. He grabbed the doorframe and pulled.

A chunk of wood stayed in his hand. He squashed it between his fingers like a jellyfish, and then looked around.

Several barrels, chests loaded with cannon balls, swords, spears and muskets were scattered across the room. In the corner was a cage. It looked like a jail for one person. Behind metal bars there was a wide open coffer with untouched soldiers' pay.

His gaze slid off the gold and travelled to the far end of the armoury.

Van der Vann knew he wasn't alone.

Two fleshless skeletons floated by the wall. In the glow of his torches, he recognized on them the remains of Venetian infantry uniforms, which somehow prevented the skeletons from complete disintegration. They weren't part of the regular galley's crew. Two loaded crossbows with bolts still hung on their necks.

He pushed the water with his fins.

One foot of each soldier was chained to the massive, one-metre-tall-and-wide chest that stood between them. It was made from solid wood and reinforced with iron bars all over. Van der Venn believed that it would take four strong men to lift it off the ground when not submerged. In spite of that, it was still nailed to the deck.

Four huge padlocks protected its load. They were the reason he had failed to open it yesterday.

He smiled. Tonight he came better prepared.

He reached for a nickel-plated hydraulic cutter from a pocket on his thigh, and clutched the first padlock between its blades. The six-hundred-year-old iron gave up with ease. So did the second, the third and the fourth.

Van der Venn lifted the lid and held it upright. Even in the water it felt heavy. Lights on his helmet illuminated another chest the size of plane-cabin luggage. A discoloured Christian cross was painted on its top.

He slowly opened a smaller lid.

A nearly overwhelming sensation of relief swept over him. Every muscle in his body responded and relaxed.

Finally. Finally, he had found it.

A stone tablet, which measured twenty-five centimetres in length and width and three centimetres wide, lay on something that once must have been an expensive purple satin. Strange writing was engraved into the stone. Van der Venn could not read it. Only a handful of people could. Maybe even less than that, but he didn't worry about that now.

He took it into his hand with care, as if it might fall apart with the slightest touch. If it was really much older than the galley, it could crumble.

Tingles ran through his fingers and farther up and down his body, as if the tablet were charged with electrical energy that penetrated the synthetic rubber of his gloves.

He felt happy and mellow, like after a glass of whiskey. He felt like dancing, although he had never danced. Now he could, if not for the tight drysuit clinging to his body. What if he took it off? He would be free to succumb to that growing sensation of tranquillity and glee.

Not that fast. Listen. Listen to it, Lammert! And he heard it. He heard that thought rattling at the back of his head that he had tried to chase away for the last five minutes, but it kept coming. Two words kept coming louder. And louder.

Nitrogen narcosis.

The mixture of gas he was breathing wanted to deceive him. To make him careless. It was impairing his ability to make the correct decisions and to focus. He had experienced this before when he was exposed to the elevated pressure of deep waters for too long.

If he stayed longer down here, the gas would keep interfering with his judgment. It would provoke him to be bolder than he should.

Van der Venn calmed his mind and his breath. He unclipped a desert-sand-coloured carbon-fibre briefcase from his harness, opened it, and slid the tablet in. The water was pushed away when he sealed it back. Then he closed the heavy chest.

He turned away to make his way back.

Wait. Not so fast.

Another thought popped up in his head. Nitrogen narcosis was something to worry about, but he had it under control. He was an experienced diver. He had more time.

What if there was something else in that big chest—something he didn't notice before because his eyes went straight to the tablet?

He lifted the lid. It was super light this time, and he let it fall back, peering inside. Nothing else was there. Van der Venn shrugged his shoulders.

Then he heard a muffled crack. It was funny because he thought it was his shoulders that cracked when he raised them. Only he knew that wasn't true.

He glanced up. The wall behind the chest had been smashed by the lid. The torches on his helmet penetrated nothing but darkness.

Another sound. It was louder. Coming from somewhere above.

He wasn't sure if he was hallucinating or if something was really happening on the upper deck. Hallucinations were the next stage of nitrogen intoxication—loss of consciousness would follow.

He looked up just in time to see the tip of the broken mast sliding towards him. Two seconds later it crashed into his back, slipped to his side between the decompression cylinders, and pinned him to the deck.

Van der Venn cursed in a loud voice. He choked on the air and coughed. His heart rate accelerated, his lungs burned. He let go of the briefcase. With his vision blurred he watched the water current caused by the crash take it away deeper into the guts of the galley.

He felt dizzy. If he could only sit down on solid ground, take one deep breath of fresh air, feel a strong breeze on his face.

He let the torch fall, pulled out a titanium knife from a pocket on his forearm and cut off the cylinders. He freed himself, but the cylinders stayed under the mast. The light floated on a cord attached to his arm, and for a moment it blinded him. Disorientated, he squeezed his eyes shut.

When he opened them, he saw a distorted shape of Venetian infantry illuminated by the lights in his helmet. The infantry seemed to be upside down.

He grabbed the soldier by his legs, turned his own body and climbed up. With each grip, van der Venn's fists crushed the skeleton's bones until there was nothing left. Then he pushed himself lightly up off the open chest, watching the Venetian crossbow falling down from the fragmented soldier.

The instant the weapon touched the deck, a lead bolt blasted off and hit van der Venn under his armpit. It punctured the skin of the buoyancy wing. Bubbles of air rushed from it, shooting up. He gritted his teeth. His safeguard to ascending without a risk of decompression sickness became useless.

Careful not to touch anything, he swam out of the galley and sat on the cavity, clutching his fingers to its edge. The glow of the sticks he had left there before was fading.

Along with the air left in his twin tanks and a pony bottle strapped to his arm, he calculated that it should be just enough to make it to the decompression back-up cylinders that he had left secured to the diving shot-rope attached to a buoy floating on the surface of Lake Garda. The other end of the rope was held by a thirty kilo lead weight dropped to the lakebed.

He closed his eyes; around him was almost darkness anyway. The pounding in his skull made it hard to remember in which direction the rope was.

CHAPTER 5

AFTER TWO HOURS of a controlled ascent, during which van der Venn kept his eyes glued to the depth gauge, his crew hoisted him on board an ultra-modern yacht, *Snovia*. When his feet touched the deck, he winced and leaned, propping his hands on his knees to relieve the strain on his lower back.

He removed his helmet and took a few shallow breaths. His lungs still burned. The air was crisp. The night was warm and quiet. The waters of the lake kept its serenity.

‘Are you all right, boss?’ Waaberi asked, helping him take off the diving suit.

Van der Venn replied with a short nod.

Waaberi remained still, fiddling with the suit. His chest muscles were nervously flexing and relaxing under his T-shirt that featured two leopards supporting a shield with the white star—Somalia’s national emblem.

‘Boss ... to me it looks like you should use a decompression chamber.’

‘Start the engines, Waaberi!’

‘Yes, boss!’ He put the wet suit down and sprinted to the captain’s bridge.

‘Stop staring,’ van der Venn said to Sander Klaff. ‘There’s nothing to celebrate yet. Be patient.’

The three diesel engines roared to life.

‘Why don’t you let me go down there with you, as we usually do? You’re taking avoidable risks,’ Klaff said and pointed at the cylinder with the mark left by the mast, and the punctured wing. ‘And where’s the rest of your tanks?’

‘It was more complicated this time. *Different* and complicated.’

‘It’s the same as on the day you hired me seven years ago,’ he said and stretched out his slender arms. ‘There’s fucking water, something deep underneath, and we take it out. Simple.’

‘This must be done my way,’ van der Venn answered. ‘Besides, if I needed help, I would take Waaberi.’

‘What?’ Klaff craned his veined neck forward, stretching the rigged boat tattooed under his left ear. ‘That little African shit? He’s too young for a dive like that!’

Van der Venn took a step towards him and rested his heavy arm on Klaff’s shoulder. Klaff’s head was at the level with van der Venn’s chest. ‘Seven years, or seven seconds. As long as you work for me, you will do as I say.’

Klaff’s weather-beaten face was blank. He said in a low voice, ‘Waaberi might be right about that decompression chamber.’

‘I don’t need decompression. I’m just tired. It shows, apparently,’ he said and turned away from Klaff. ‘Go and help to navigate. I want to be out of here immediately.’

That was the end of discussion. Klaff wouldn't dare to test his patience any more. Besides, van der Venn didn't pay his men to fear him. That was self-destructive. That was wishing for a day when his crew would fail him. No. He needed them to be efficient. And they were efficient, because he paid them not only in cash.

He kept them in a constant state of excitement. He made them explorers. He made them adventurers. He made them gamblers, always eager to see what came from the depths of oceans, seas or lakes.

Van der Venn always handpicked his men to his liking. He needed to know they were properly suited to the hard work at sea. But often he preferred doing things alone. He was used to it because it had started a long time ago.

The place where he grew up, St. Augustine's orphanage in Amsterdam, had left him no other choice. He'd had to fight with other kids. It was never pretty. At twelve, he broke an arm of one boy, and a wrist of another. A third one escaped with a bleeding nose.

He had a reason. A good one.

Respect.

They laughed at his plump and short body. They called him names from strip cartoon books. Van der Venn had erased those nicknames from his memory. If he wanted, he could bring them back, but that wouldn't do him any favours. Forty years later, the abuse would taste the same.

After that, the people who ran the orphanage isolated him from the other kids. They said he had antisocial personality disorder.

Idiots. How can a twelve-year-old be antisocial?

They gave him pills. He refused to take any. They forced them down his throat. He tried to bite off two of his minder's fingers. They left him alone.

When they let him out of isolation, no one annoyed him anymore—he annoyed no one.

One good thing that came out of those years in Amsterdam was that they had taught him how to read and write. How to fight, he learned on his own. It came naturally. Those years hardened him in a way no family would ever be able to do.

And those years made him promise something. The promise he kept fulfilling every day of his life: he would never allow anybody to push him around. He would be the strongest. He would be independent. He would have everything he needed. And he would despise weak and pathetic human beings.

All of that became reality.

But despite having enough money to never work again and being able to live whatever life he wished, how could he do it? How could he do it if the world held secrets that only people like him had enough courage to reach for? Things compared to which his wealth meant no more than a lousy overcoat to a beggar who'd won the lottery.

Tonight he had in his hands one of those secrets.

Tonight he held the tablet in his hands. It was special. Not exactly like he had imagined it, but at least now he knew that it existed.

Could it really give him immortality?

Nina Monte would know the answer.

Van der Venn looked into the distance, at the towns built around the shoreline of the lake. They shone with thousands of flickering dots. Tens of thousands lived there, unaware what their lake had preserved on its bed for half of a millennium.

And what a glory it was to bring to the one who took it.

CHAPTER 6

THE SUN WAS picking through the purple curtains of Nina's bedroom. She opened her eyes and squinted at her wristwatch. Nearly 7:30 a.m. She rolled to the side, yawned and stretched her arms and legs. Incredibly, after three hours of sleep, she felt rested.

She took a shower, had breakfast, and before she put on her clothes, it was ten minutes past eight. But she wasn't going to be late for the meeting. Her apartment was three metro stops from Piazza del Duomo.

Nina reached the Duomo metro station at 8:27 a.m. She climbed up the stairs and into the open.

The seventeen-thousand-square-metre piazza was already besieged by tourists. In the middle of the square, to her right, she passed the monument of King Victor Emanuel II, who watched over the Gothic cathedral and other surrounding buildings like the Royal Palace, Carminati Palace, and Galleria, an old prestigious shopping mall named after the king.

Duomo di Milano, the Milan Cathedral, took the central point of the piazza. Every time Nina visited this place, she stood speechless for a moment, staring at the white-and-pink carved marbles of an elaborate façade covered with more than one thousand statues and gargoyles. Over one hundred cathedral spires reached into the sky, the tallest of them as far as one hundred eight metres.

It had to take an architectural genius to put it all together. But not one genius only. Many prominent figures had been involved in the construction that lasted four hundred years.

Nina came to a stop in front of a visitors' entrance; groups were not allowed in until 9:30. The queue was short and when her turn came, a tall guard pointed at her bare shoulders. She pulled out a floral-print silk scarf from her purse and threw it around herself to comply with the cathedral's rules. The guard gave her an approving nod.

She walked into Duomo di Milano. It was quiet and pleasantly warm inside. Among the smell of flowers and candles, she inhaled a faint scent of incense used by priests during a mass.

Daylight slipped through vibrant religious scenes depicted on the stained glass of huge Gothic windows. Forty twenty-five-metre-high columns supported the ornamented ceiling of a stunning structure able to accommodate forty thousand worshippers. Every square metre of the church was decorated with something.

Nina ambled down the central nave and then turned into a parallel aisle, admiring the sculptures of saints, the sarcophagi of bishops, and the woven tapestries that hung on the both sides.

Other visitors mirrored her behaviour. Some were taking pictures, but only those with yellow bands on their wrists. Those who didn't pay for the right to use their cameras were now and then still sneaking a photo with their mobile phones.

Nina scanned the surroundings in search of the cardinal. She had no idea what he looked like. She deduced that he must have been better informed than she had.

She paused at the end of the aisle in front of the statue of a saint. When Nina had seen it for the first time in her early teens, she hadn't given a second thought about the long cloth thrown around the man's arm and across his waist. Later she had found out that he held his own skin.

'The statue of Saint Bartholomew by Marco d'Agrate,' she heard a voice say behind her, and turned around.

An elderly man with an oval face and brown eyes behind rimless rectangle glasses stood two metres in front of her. He was clad in a black cassock with scarlet piping and buttons. A little above his waist he wore a scarlet fascia, which hung down on his left side. On his chest, a pectoral cross hung on a cord. A scarlet zucchetto covered his head.

'One of the twelve apostles of Christ, flayed and crucified in Armenia in the first century,' Nina said, glancing back at the statue. 'For bringing Christianity.'

'I was told you are an outstanding historian, Signora Monte,' the man said and smiled. Lines on his face shaped a heart around his lips and down to his chin. He extended his hand. 'My name is Cardinal Vittorio Ermanno Esposito.'

'Pleased to meet you, Cardinal,' Nina said and shook his hand.

'You must be tired, having travelled all the way from Heidelberg last night,' he said. 'Would you prefer to reschedule our meeting?'

'Cardinal, as far as I know, I should only inform you about the progress of yesterday's gathering,' Nina said. 'The problem is that I'm not sure if there *was* any progress. For me to be of any help, you would have to tell me first what it is that everyone, with all due respect, including you, wants so badly.'

'Do you know, Signora Monte, for what reason the Ministry called you?'

'They know me and they know I'm reliable,' Nina said with confidence. 'Besides, apparently the man who leads the search had something to do with it.'

'Do you really think that a *man* can be in charge of such a divine operation?'

'I don't believe in God, Cardinal Esposito.'

'So I've been told,' he said, amused.

Nina raised her eyebrows. 'I'd really like to know what my role is and what you are looking for.'

He put his hands together, like for a prayer, and raised them to his chest. 'Signora, do you know what the biggest wish of a human being is?'

'My first guess is money, power, and sex.' She bit her lower lip. Had she gone too far with her honesty?

Esposito let out a discreet chuckle. 'Yes, all of those. Unfortunately. But they are desires of sinful men. I'm asking you what the desire of a pure heart is. Although, a desire that should not be.'

He spoke slowly, articulating every word to the point that she thought he was reciting from a script. She felt no authority in his voice, which she expected she should in the presence of such a high priest in a Catholic church. But she wasn't a member of his church.

'How many men of a pure heart have you met, Cardinal?'

His grin disappeared. He turned away from Nina and looked at the altar. 'I will tell you, Signora, what that desire I'm talking about is.' He paused as if making sure she was listening. 'We would like to find God in ourselves.'

It made no sense. Wasn't it the pillar of the Christian faith? Maybe he had said "to find God *for* ourselves."

She brushed those thoughts aside and said, 'I don't understand how it is relevant to what is happening at the lake, Cardinal.'

Esposito glanced at her. 'Come. Tell me about the meeting.'

He took a seat on the closest pew, smoothed his cassock, and motioned to Nina to join him.

While she was reporting what happened in the castle eleven hours ago, the cardinal listened to her with his hands clasped together on his lap, and with his eyes closed.

When she finished, he did not move. Nina thought that he had fallen asleep. Then he knelt and started talking in a low voice. She joined him on her knees to hear his words. Was this what a person felt during confession?

'My child, you must be vigilant with what politicians have to say. Their promises always have a double meaning,' he whispered.

'Promises? No one promised me...' She trailed off, thinking about funds for her department. 'How do you know I've been promised something?'

'What they're looking for,' he continued, 'doesn't belong to any of them. It belongs to the faithful men of our holy congregation. It was under Church protection a long time ago, but was lost. For those reasons, it cannot fall into the hands of infidels.'

The cardinal turned to her. His eyes were watery.

He wagged his finger at her. 'You will be *personally* responsible for bringing it to me, no matter what.' His tone of voice changed into a conspicuous threat.

'But, Father, I can't—'

He put his hand on her head. Nina spontaneously bowed.

'My child, everything we do is, in the end, God's will. A thin line separates conscience and our obligation to the Almighty. I trust you will understand when the time comes.'

Then, as suddenly as he tensed, he relaxed, and that heart-shaped humble smile he had welcomed her with returned. 'You must not be afraid of anything, for God will be at your side at all times. You will have my prayers with you.'

With awe, and on her knees, feeling awkward, she watched him briskly walk away. The soft soles of his shoes let out no sound on the stone floor of the cathedral. Soon he disappeared behind the altar.

Nina pushed herself to her feet and hastened to the exit, wondering if she did well accepting Massimo's Campana job offer. So far the riddle from Lake Garda had only brought her more frustration.

She felt as if all the statues of saints and martyrs were picking at her, especially Saint Bartholomew, the man who was flayed for praising the word of God.

Her shoulders became heavier and heavier. She trudged the last few metres like a drowning person to the surface of the water.

Outside, the sunrays engulfed the Piazza Duomo. Long queues of organized pilgrims waited for their turn to visit the holy cathedral. Nina put on her sunglasses and headed through the square, mingling with tourists, their cameras recording every image around them.

She pulled the scarf from her shoulders, letting her bare skin absorb the warmth of the early September sun.

In daylight, what Esposito told her was not only abstract, but also made her uneasy. If there were a God, the Almighty, the one who began everything on Earth, for whom people erected majestic structures like Duomo di Milan, she would never find him in herself. Regardless of if that was a sin or not.