

The THIEVES  
of LEGEND

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**Also by Richard Doetsch**

*Half Past Dawn*

*The Thieves of Darkness*

*The 13th Hour*

*The Thieves of Faith*

*The Thieves of Heaven*

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# The THIEVES of LEGEND

A THRILLER

Richard Doetsch

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*For Virginia,  
My best friend.  
I love you with all my heart.*

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*I did not tell half of what I saw, for I knew I would not be believed.*

—MARCO POLO

*Princeps legibus solutus est.*

—THE PRINCE IS NOT BOUND BY THE LAW.

*I will show you fear in a handful of dust.*

—T. S. ELIOT

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## PROLOGUE

### ITALY

The castle sat at the edge of the cliff looking out over the Tyrrhenian Sea, where dark waters blended seamlessly with the nighttime sky at the horizon. Constructed of stone, brick, and granite, the structure was built directly into the cliff face and seemed to grow out of the earth, as if it had existed for all of time.

When approached from the sea, the ancient building appeared as one with the rock, but now, in the depths of night, the glittering windows made it look more at home with the stars of the sky. Constructed in 1650 for the third Duke of Faronte, the castle had traded hands with the rise and fall of the region's fortunes, and had been most recently purchased by a man of vast wealth who was rumored to have made his fortune in some unscrupulous dealings in the Far East.

Michael St. Pierre stood on the edge of the structure's roof, his hand resting upon the stone battlement, feeling like a crusader who had breached the walls of Jerusalem. He took in the stars that filled the sky, the moon that had just begun its climb, the unusually heavy surf, a remnant of a forgotten storm, as it crashed like thunder against the base of the cliff face two hundred feet below.

Anchored a quarter mile from shore was an impressive ship, a 150-foot megayacht; the white Sunseeker belonged to the man whose home Michael stood upon now. He had been watching it for nearly an hour. A

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few hundred yards to its south, a smaller yacht had arrived about fifteen minutes ago, deploying a small tender into the rough water. Michael watched as the tender came closer and closer to the dock directly below him, and after battling the heavy waves, finally managed to secure itself. Now a group of six well-dressed men moving in single file climbed the narrow, steep stairs that had been hewn out of the rock centuries earlier. They paused several times along the way to catch their breath.

Michael clipped his harness to the rope that he had affixed to the metal scupper and threw it over the edge. It had taken him nearly fifteen minutes to scale the hundred-foot façade on the north side of the structure, bathed in shadow, hidden by the growth of forest that stretched up the coast. Due to the façade's knobby granite and stone design, climbing it had been like climbing the face of a mountain that had been dotted with foot- and handholds, making it one of the easier climbs he had done in the past few years. He had trekked five miles through the Italian forest, the rope on his shoulder and a small backpack of supplies giving him the appearance of a hiker. His phone was turned off. His girlfriend and Busch would be pissed if they tried to reach him and couldn't, but the idea of being discovered here by either the people coming to the house or the two people he was closest to was too terrible to contemplate. Explaining he hadn't actually gone to Chicago could prove to be a problem. An unfamiliar rush of guilt filled him, not for what he was about to do but for the deception he'd enacted and for the promise he had broken.

Only one person actually knew where in the world he was: his old friend Simon who had hired him. He was probably sitting down to a nice meal in the town of Tramonti just a few miles up the Amalfi coast. Michael wasn't sure if it was Simon's persuasive argument that had brought him here or his own vanity and hunger for an adrenaline rush, but like an alcoholic who had lapsed, he knew deep down there would be a price to pay for giving in to temptation.

Michael pulled out a black stocking hat and pulled it down over his shock of light brown hair. He wore brown contacts over his slate-blue eyes and had rubbed his cheeks with eye black; it was a rudimentary

disguise, but it would keep away the dogs if his image were caught on video.

Michael took one last look at the sea and stepped off the roof's edge. Falling through the cool air, he silently zipped seventy-five feet down the kernmantle rope. He released his hold on the Petzl stop descender, the self-brake slowing his descent until he came to a large double window that occupied the middle of the enormous stone wall. He hung there a moment, glancing down at the crashing waves two hundred feet below, the froth luminescent. It would not be a pretty death if he fell. He removed a knife from his waistband, guided it through the window sash, and with a quick burst of force slipped the lock on the leaded-glass window.

The castle was guarded by an impressive security system. He had confirmed its presence twenty-four hours earlier with the installer, a man in Naples who was more than willing to talk shop with a fellow security professional. Michael had installed three similar systems in New York and knew that there had been no successful compromise of it to date. He also knew that the owner of the system had chosen not to incur the heavy expense of installing wiring through the stone façade that bordered the rear windows overlooking the sea; Michael understood his logic. Who would ever consider trying to scale the stone structure and risk death on the rocks below?

Michael slipped through the window into the study, a comfortable, dimly lit room with dark mahogany walls and a fire crackling in the stone hearth. A heavy antique desk filled one corner, and deep high-back wing chairs faced the blazing logs. The shelves were filled with antique books and religious artifacts. Michael recognized the painting above the mantel; it confirmed the rumors he'd heard of the castle owner's questionable integrity and his passion for the unattainable. Picasso's portrait of Dora Maar had sold for \$23 million at auction twelve years earlier, but it had only spent one week aboard the yacht of the nouveau-riche Internet mogul who'd bought it before it had vanished in the dead of night. Michael thought of repatriating it and collecting the million-dollar reward, but that wasn't why he was here.

He turned and locked the study's heavy coffered door.

The security man in Naples had been forthcoming enough for Michael to hack his system and pull the security quotes for the castle. Beyond the alarms and the entrance cameras, three safes had been purchased and installed: a gun safe for the garage and two Helix 09 safes, one for the second-floor study at the rear of the small liquor closet on the far side of the room, behind a few boxes of eighteen-year-old Macallan scotch, and the second placed under the bar in the lounge of the Gentlemen's Den. Michael didn't know where the Gentlemen's Den was located, though he'd heard it was a bar not far from the castle. He knew the Helix 09 safe well: its modern design, its electronic keypad. He also knew how to override the lock in the event its owner forgot the code, something that occurred with 65 percent of its purchasers.

But as Michael opened the door to the liquor closet, his heart nearly stopped. The boxes of scotch were already moved to one side, and the safe door stood wide open, its interior light reflecting off the diamond bracelets and necklaces and the precious-gemstone rings that lay in black velvet trays. There was also a Sig Sauer and a faded black-and-white photo of a child in an old wooden frame. Nothing else. No file, no envelope with a family crest upon it, no small red Chinese puzzle box. None of the things he had been told would be here.

Michael stepped back from the liquor closet. The house was utterly silent, which gave him pause. The meeting was scheduled for nine. He'd seen the men arrive; he could smell the faint odor of food being cooked.

He suddenly heard voices through the open window, some sort of commotion outside. When he looked out, he saw the six men on the dock below surrounding a seventh man, pushing him. The man in the middle looked older than the others, his body frail, the hunch of his back attesting to his advanced years. Michael could hear his anguished cries over the sound of the crashing waves.

Against his better instincts, Michael unlocked and opened the study door. He stepped into a dark paneled hallway, the carved rails and Persian rugs giving it a baronial feel. The hallway extended for a hundred feet at least, bordered on the left side by four doorways, all closed, while the right side looked out over a vast reception hall filled with gleam-

ing modern furniture that stood in sharp contrast to the centuries-old castle. Michael pricked up his ears, listening, but there was only silence.

He glanced about, getting his bearings, noting every possible point of exit. And as he peered over the rail, he noticed something protruding from behind the couch in the reception hall that again gave him pause. He headed down the stairs to see if his worst suspicions were true.

Michael carried no gun—he hated them—only the knife at his waist. He was skilled with it, but it possessed no magical properties; it wouldn't protect him against anyone who might be lying in wait. He thought of the Sig Sauer he'd seen in the safe, but it was too late to go back and get it.

As he stepped onto the stone floor of the great hall, his eyes fell on the protruding foot he'd glimpsed from above, and with his next step the rest of the bodies came into view.

Bile rose in his throat, and his heart began to pound. Though he was prepared to witness death, he had not expected this. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't help but picture KC lying there, and it filled him with fear. And anger.

The three women he saw were of various ages, two probably in their twenties and one much older. And the child . . . the child was surely under five.

The gruesome sight was an affront not only to his senses but to his reason. Each of the bodies, the three women and the child, had been decapitated, their heads lying in pools of blood beside them.

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## TWO DAYS EARLIER

“Absolutely not,” Michael said.

“You didn’t even wait to hear what I had to ask,” Simon said, pushing his black hair back from his forehead. He stood up from the barstool, stretched out his body, still stiff from his long flight from Rome, and walked back to the pool table.

“It doesn’t matter, you know I can’t.”

Simon nodded.

They were in the upstairs lounge of Paul Busch’s restaurant and bar, Valhalla. It was Paul’s private retreat, what his wife, Jeannie, affectionately called his man cave: a bunch of beat-up oversized couches and chairs, along with a pinball machine, a pool table, and a dart board. *Monday Night Football* played on the oversized TV on the far wall, while Busch himself stood behind the small bar restocking the shelves.

The restaurant, which Busch had opened three years ago after he’d retired from the Byram Hills police force, had become a huge success. It was the destination of choice for not only the residents of Byram Hills but much of Westchester County. The food was typical American cuisine: steaks, fish, chicken, in generous portions, all served up by Chef Nick Mroz. Busch didn’t believe in trends or in small portions, or in catering to the whims of some nouvelle cuisine food critic. He believed in making people happy.

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“And whatever you were going to ask me, don’t ask KC,” Michael added, holding up his bottle of Coca-Cola for emphasis.

Simon threw up his hands. “I’m just—”

“Don’t.”

“But—”

“This is your fault, you know.” Michael turned around on the stool, watching as Simon picked up a cue and began clearing the balls from the pool table with ease.

“My fault?” Simon said in his subtle Italian accent, keeping his focus on the table. “How is it my fault?”

“You’re the one who said KC and I would be perfect for each other.”

“And was I right?”

“Yes—no.”

“You’re still together,” Simon said, holding up one finger. “She’s actually living with you.” Finger number two went up. “And I think you love her,” he concluded as finger number three slowly extended.

“Don’t you think it’s time you bought her a ring?” Busch asked from behind the bar.

Michael looked up at Paul. “Why do I need to get married again?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Busch said in his mocking tone. “Maybe because you love her, maybe because you want kids . . . and maybe it’s what she wants, Michael.”

“I was married before, and we both know what happened.”

“What are you talking about?” Busch sounded genuinely puzzled. “I pretty much thought those were happy times for you.”

“Well, they didn’t last.”

“They never do,” Busch said quietly.

There was an uncomfortable pause.

“Look,” Michael finally said. “You don’t think I’ve thought about it? But I can’t do it, not yet. I love her; for now that’s going to have to be enough.”

Michael turned back to Simon. “And you, the reason KC and I are together is not because of our backgrounds.”

“I didn’t introduce you because of your backgrounds,” Simon said in protest.

“That’s a load of—”

“Hey,” Busch interrupted, his six-foot, four-inch body still squeezed into the small space behind the bar. “No swearing in front of the priest.”

Simon turned to him and said with a smirk, “That never seemed to stop you.”

“Or you,” Busch said, running his hands through his blond hair, looking every bit like an oversized surfer. “Mr. Man-of-the-Cloth. I’m thinking my ride to heaven may be a bit easier than yours.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be closing up downstairs?” Simon asked.

“You two keep it down while I finish up,” Busch said with a laugh as he grabbed his bottle of beer, headed out the door and down the stairs. “And Simon,” his voice came floating back, “don’t even think of trying to pull Michael into anything. He’s going to be getting married soon. He needs to stay alive for his future bride.”

“Can I at least tell you—?” Simon tried to say to Michael.

“No.”

“Okay.” He sank the last ball, turned around, and leaned against the pool table. “It’s in Italy, a private residence. The owner’s an attorney.”

“I dislike him already.”

“You’ll like him even less when I tell you the rest. He worked the underworld circuit in Europe and Asia, dealt in every type of contraband: weapons, drugs, stolen art, whatever anyone needed. He had no qualms about who he bought from or sold to.

“Turned over a new leaf twenty years ago, raised two daughters, became the picture of a family man. Though that wasn’t really the case. He just covered up his dealings, using middlemen, and continued to dabble in arms and artwork. He became a fanatic for ancient weapons, collecting swords, sabers, fancy pistols and revolvers, daggers, katanas. He bought most of them from the most unsavory people, tucking them away in his home.

“He also became a fanatic for rare books, sea charts, manuscripts—documents that gave him insight into the world of the past. Word came down that he found something very rare, something that combined his two passions.”



Simon paused.

“What?” Michael asked.

Simon smiled, knowing he had his friend’s attention. “Some secret that he was willing to sell to the highest bidder. And that bidder is about as dangerous as they come. Head of a Chinese Triad.”

“Since when does the church care about the dealings of a Chinese Triad? Are they interfering with Sunday Mass?” Michael half joked.

Simon hadn’t performed Mass in all the years Michael had known him. Simon was in charge of the Vatican Archives. He was the keeper of the Church’s mysteries, its secrets and history. He employed methods to protect the Church that didn’t always align with a priest’s job description, but then again, even God’s laws were sometimes broken for the greater good.

“As hard as it may be for you to grasp,” Simon said, “we care about everyone. And I happen to know a bit about what this man is selling.”

“And?”

“It’s a three-page document and a red Chinese puzzle box about the size of a brick, currently in a small house on the Amalfi coast.”

“What’s inside the puzzle box?”

Simon took a deep breath, then expelled it slowly.

Michael hated when he did that. It almost always meant that Simon couldn’t say, but the matter was deadly serious. “Why don’t *you* do it?”

“Because it’s not what I do. It’s what you do.”

“Used to do, remember?”

“I know you, Michael. Playing the businessman—”

“Playing? I think I’ve done more than play.”

“Granted. And you’ve built yourself a nice profitable business. But what I’m referring to goes beyond profits, balance sheets, and paychecks.”

“Simon . . .”

“Michael, you know I wouldn’t ask if this wasn’t serious.”

And Michael understood. Simon was one of the most serious people he knew. In the past, when he’d said something was serious, it had always meant that someone’s life was in jeopardy, not just that some

political powder keg was ready to blow, not just that some smoldering Church issue was causing his superiors at the Vatican to fret. When Simon said “serious” he meant it in every sense of the word.

“I can’t help you,” Michael finally said. “I promised KC.”

Simon nodded. “I respect that.” He held up his beer, leaned over, and clinked it against Michael’s.

“Thanks,” Michael said.

“Do you mind if I ask KC to do it?” Simon said with a half-smile.

“Simon,” Michael said, holding up his hand.

“I’m kidding,” Simon said, his half-smile becoming full-blown.

LATER THAT NIGHT, Michael ran his thumb over the electronic eye, slipped in his key and opened the thick metal door of the two-foot-wide safe behind the desk in his library. It was filled with legal papers—his will, the title to his house and car, a half-dozen contracts—an unused Sig Sauer that Busch had given him, still in its box, and a file box for confidential work papers.

He took several documents off his desk and filed them away. He had arrived home after midnight, and instead of going upstairs to sleep, had opted to finish up a proposal he wanted to take to the office tomorrow morning. As much as he hated admitting it, he was becoming a bit of a workaholic.

What had started out as a small home security business had grown into a corporate consultancy with thirteen full-time employees who performed security installations for sensitive businesses and high-end private clients who needed to go to unusual lengths to protect their most valuable assets. The only client he did not take on was the government. His felony conviction precluded him from working for the federal, state, or local government. Truth be told, he had no desire to answer to bureaucrats who thought the best-qualified person was the lowest bidder.

Michael never tried to cover up the nearly three years he had served in Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, New York. The first and only time he was arrested. He’d been caught stealing diamonds from an embassy

on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, the property of a corrupt ambassador. He had forfeited his success, his freedom, in order to save a woman from certain death. With his prize-filled satchel, Michael had been descending a rope when he'd caught a glimpse of a woman bound and gagged, her assailant standing over her, moonlight glinting off his knife. In Michael's mind, it was a fair trade.

His honesty about his past career more often than not endeared him to his clients, for who could understand security better than a man who truly knew how to compromise it? Michael's business had grown from a small alarm shop to a small warehouse in Byram Hills, New York.

Tucking the folder into the safe, he glimpsed a small blue Tiffany's box on the rear shelf. It had been sitting there for months now, next to his old, battered wedding ring. He had worn the gold band on a chain around his neck for over a year, finally removing it when he met KC, when his heart began to heal.

He had bought the diamond ring at Tiffany's on Fifty-seventh Street in Manhattan. KC had quietly admired the ring every time they stopped by the store. She did not gush over it, or even ask to try it on. She simply gazed at it and became lost in her thoughts for a few moments. And that was all Michael needed to know.

He thought of Busch's words, of Simon's hints about marriage. It wasn't the first time his friends had brought it up. Michael didn't like being told what to do, or being backed into a corner. He knew his own feelings for KC and didn't doubt them. As he looked at his gold ring, he thought of Mary, thought of her death and what he had put her through, thought of the pain he'd endured when he lost her, and the fear he had of going through such a loss again. He looked at the blue box once more and closed the safe.

IT WAS AFTER midnight when Michael crawled into bed.

KC rolled over and looked up at him with her warm green eyes. She wore the red silk top Michael had given her the previous Christmas, the buttons loose, her long blonde hair spilling around her.

"Hey," she whispered in her soft English accent.

“Hey back.” Michael smiled.

Michael kissed her gently, running his hand along her cheek. He settled in beside her, wrapping his arms around her, holding her as they both found a familiar position, their bodies pressed against each other, sharing their warmth. No more words were needed to convey their feelings.

KC tilted her head and kissed Michael again. In a single moment, passion rose up as he returned her kiss, deep and heartfelt, any thought of sleep slipping away.

IT HAD BEEN just over a year since Michael had met Katherine Colleen Ryan on the basketball court, an impromptu blind date arranged by their mutual friend Simon. She had almost kicked his ass, not only with her athletic ability but with her distracting long, lithe legs. Their month-long courtship had been interrupted when Michael learned that she, too, was a thief, and he'd rescued her from a man named Iblis, who had not only trained KC but had grown obsessed with possessing her, only to finally die at Michael's hand in the high mountain reaches of India.

They had returned to Byram Hills and had fallen not only in love, but into a natural friendship, listening to each other as much as talking, taking comfort in the silent moments when just the other's presence was enough.

Every night they would lie in bed and talk, warm in the embrace of the moment after, the sheets tangled about their feet. They had each experienced the death of loved ones and were aware of the fragility and preciousness of life. They revealed their pasts to each other, pasts that were filled with exploits that were slightly to the left of legal, slightly to the right of moral. Each was a thief who had found a moral barometer and had committed crimes that in some cases had served the greater good.

They spent their weekends reveling in head-to-head athletic competitions. While KC was superior in tennis and Michael had the edge in golf, their athletic passions ran more toward basketball and kayaking.

They had competed in triathlons; he was the superior swimmer, leaving her behind, though she caught up and passed him on the bike, with the final leg, the 10K run, an all-out lung-burner to the finish line. No matter the sport, no matter the outcome, there was no question: Each was happiest when the other was around.

But with their type-A personalities, their occasional fights were spectacular. Usually they started over something mundane, like her forgetting to buy white bread or his blindness to the overflowing garbage in the kitchen, and ended with Michael's marching out the door to cool off at Busch's bar in downtown Byram Hills. The anger would usually last a day, sometimes two, but it would always resolve itself with apologies, warm embraces, and incredible make-up sex.

They told each other of their past crimes, sharing things neither had ever spoken of to anyone else. In an odd way, this, too, became a competition, as if they were trying to top each other: Michael's daytime theft at the Vatican, KC's evening grab from the Louvre, Michael's adventure beneath the Kremlin, KC's retrieval of a stolen painting from an African warlord. They had each secretly loved what they used to do: overcoming security and unexpected obstacles, outsmarting the establishment, sometimes feeling the satisfaction of righting some wrong—often at the behest of the man who would eventually introduce them, Simon Bellatori.

They would talk of hypothetical thefts—the White House, Buckingham Palace, MI6—pounding their chests, displaying their ingenuity, each correcting the other on the foolishness of their hypothetical plans.

It was on a warm fall day, two months ago in September, that they had headed into Manhattan to see all the sites the tourists see, the ones the locals rarely ever approach except to show to their out-of-town relatives.

They went to the top of the Empire State Building, looking down on the vast city, standing in the same place where Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr had stood. They visited the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, Central Park; they had lunch in Chinatown.

They finally ended up at the United Nations building on the East Side of the city. They took the ten-cent tour, shuffling along with a group of tourists as they were escorted through the General Assembly and ancillary spaces. Throughout the tour they were the couple in the back whispering, not paying much attention to the guide or their surroundings until they arrived at a special exhibit.

They looked in a glass case filled with artifacts and stones, a display of treasures and jewels from around the world representing what various cultures held dear. There were diamonds from Africa, emeralds from South America, rubies and sapphires from India, gold from Alaska, and in one corner, sitting in sharp contrast to all the glitter, a small black polished stone from a Pacific isle. It made Michael think that what is precious to one person is but a rock to others. What one person finds alluring in a mate could be considered dreadful by another. An objects—or a person's—value was all a matter of perspective,

“You know,” Michael said, as he looked around the room, “the security is pretty tight in here.”

KC smiled. “You’re not proposing what I think you’re proposing, are you?”

“Don’t you think this is a romantic place to propose?” Michael smiled, playing on her words.

“I didn’t mean . . .” KC laughed, though his suggestion made her feel awkward.

Michael took her in his arms and looked at the case of jewels. “I’d steal all that for you.”

“Really? I was thinking of something a bit more simple,” KC said. “Besides, I don’t need you getting caught. Conjugal visits just don’t have the same appeal.”

“Caught?” Michael laughed. “They’d never even know I was here.”

“Really? And how would you do it?” KC said, taking Michael’s hand and walking toward the exit.

“I could build a device that would—”

“Build? You don’t always need to build something. What is it with men and their tools?”

“Oh? And how would you do it?”

KC smiled and paused a moment before answering. “I just need a pen knife, a pair of flats, and my feminine wiles.”

ONE WEEK LATER they were back in the city. Michael took KC to lunch at Smith and Wollensky, and afterward detoured her over to First Avenue, where they found themselves once again standing before the UN under the colorful array of international flags waving in the breeze.

“Michael?” KC asked suspiciously. “Why are we back here?”

Michael simply smiled and led her to the tourist entrance, paid the fee, and joined a tour. As the tour guide yammered on, they once again didn’t hear a single word. Staying at the back of the group, KC pressed Michael about what was going on but he said nothing until they once again came to the display case of jewels.

Michael looked at KC, reached in his pocket, and pulled out a small box wrapped in a white ribbon. He placed it in KC’s hand.

“You didn’t,” KC said.

Michael laid his hand upon hers.

“Is this—?” KC stopped herself and looked over at the case of jewels.

“It’s not a ring,” Michael said softly, a note of regret in his voice.

“Please understand—”

KC put her fingers to his lips. “I know.”

“But do you know that I would do anything for you?”

“Michael, tell me you didn’t pay a little nocturnal visit here? If you had gotten caught—”

“But I didn’t.” Michael stared at her. “And they don’t even know it’s missing. No one pays attention to that little black stone. To some it represents nothing, to people on that Pacific island it means wealth, but to me it means you.”

“Aren’t you sweet,” KC said, mocking him. “And it meant a challenge. Were you showing off for me?”

“You never even knew I’d left the house.”

“When?”

“Monday. You were out cold.”

“I was tired,” KC said. “Did you make one of your little contraptions to get in here?”

Michael tilted his head in the affirmative and looked at the small box. “I hid that in the back of my sock drawer all week.”

“Really?” KC asked.

“I said I could do it.”

“I can’t believe you did it, though; kind of a stupid risk.” KC challenged, “I would have done it with more style.”

“Is that so?”

KC pulled the ribbon on the small jewelry box, gazing up at Michael, smiling. But when she lifted off the top and looked inside, she found it empty.

She looked up at Michael and saw confusion wash over his face. He took the box from her and stared inside. The moment lingered as his mind spun. And then KC smiled, a knowing smile. She took him by the hand and led him to the display case.

And there inside, among all of the precious jewels, was the small black stone in the corner as if it had never left.

“Thursday night,” KC said. “You were out cold.”

Michael stared at her a moment then laughed. “I was tired.”

AS THEY WALKED to Grand Central Station to board the train home, their conversation turned serious, both understanding their foolish ways.

“You know, for a minute there when I saw the jewelry box . . .” KC whispered.

“I know,” Michael said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, but promise me something?”

“Of course.”

“No more showing off. We can’t be foolish.

“We’ll make a vow then,” Michael said. “To each other.”

KC looked deep into Michael’s eyes. “Agreed.”

“WELL, NOW I’M awake,” KC said, mock annoyance in her voice after they had made love.



“So sorry about that,” Michael apologized with a smile.

“How was Paul?”

“He’s good. Giants won.”

KC nodded. “At least we won’t endure a week of his Monday-morning quarterbacking.”

“Simon’s in town.”

“Really? I didn’t know he was coming. How long will he be here?”

“A couple days.”

KC sat up suddenly. “What does he want?”

Michael stared at her, formulating an answer, knowing that he would have to phrase it just right; his face was a truth barometer that KC could read even in the darkness of the bedroom. “He’s just saying hello, had a few work questions.”

KC reached up and turned on the light. Michael sat up and stared at her. He always loved the way her blonde hair fell about her face after they made love.

“Don’t even think about it,” KC said.

“I’m not . . .” Michael laughed; he was already backpedaling.

“What does he really want?”

Michael stared at her a moment and then finally relented. He told her about Simon’s request regarding the simple theft of an envelope containing a three-page document and a puzzle box from a home in Italy.

“And you told him no, right?”

“Of course I told him no.”

“Michael, we made a vow, we both agreed—”

“That’s right, we both agreed,” Michael said as he gazed at her. “So when he asks you—I told him to not even think of asking you, but I know he will—when he asks you, you better give him the same answer.”

“You really think—”

“KC, I know you and forgive me for saying this, but it wouldn’t surprise me if you ran off and did this behind my back.”

KC smiled her get-out-of-jail-free smile that Michael always fell for. But he wasn’t about to let her fall into danger.

“KC . . .”

“I made a vow to you, Michael, I gave you my word,” KC said, kissing him gently on the lips.

## ITALY

MICHAEL RACED UP the stairs of the castle, the sight of the three women and the child, their headless bodies on the floor, burning in his mind. He ran down the second-floor hallway and back into the library. He opened the liquor closet, thrust his hand into the safe, and grabbed the Sig Sauer. He ejected the clip, confirmed the bullet count, and tucked it in his waistband. Without hesitation, he ran to the window. He grabbed the second rope off the floor, tied it to the thick doorknob on the closet, and threw its two-hundred-foot length out the window. He clipped on and dove out the window, sailing down the side of the castle, his eyes darting between the ocean below and the six men on the dock who had shoved the older man into the launch and were heading out to sea.

Michael blew past the building’s stone foundation, flying down the cliff face, his hands burning from the rope’s friction, his feet bouncing off the sheer face as he descended. Nearing the water, he slowed himself and came to a stop. The dock was seventy-five feet to his left.

Michael angled back his body, his feet on the wall, holding himself nearly perpendicular to it, and began to run toward the dock. It was an odd sight as he struggled across the rock face, his feet scrambling along, slowly arcing upward until he could go no further. He turned his body and began to run in the other direction, his momentum increasing with the downward arc of his charge. He ran along the wall to the right until gravity once again stopped him. He reversed direction and this time ran with even greater speed, accelerating as he raced across the wall, but this time as he reached the apex of his charge, he released himself from his harness to fall into the heavy waves fifteen feet below.

He hit the frigid water and swam as hard as he could against the current, struggling against the waves, determined not to be smashed

upon the rocky wall. He was only fifty feet from the dock but it felt like a mile as he pulled and kicked his body through the sea. He finally caught hold of the dock and pulled himself up. Without stopping, he jumped into the launch. He thanked God; it being a private dock, the key was in the ignition. He turned the key and pressed start. The Mercury engine sputtered, coughing and choking, until it sang with life.

Michael looked out across the water and saw the other tender was heading not for the boat that had brought the men to the castle but for the megayacht and was nearly alongside it.

Michael turned the launch out to sea, grabbed the accelerator, and punched it. The boat skittered across the waves, jumping in the air only to land hard on the next wave. It was like a mogul run on skis, his bones jarring with every wave. Michael had no idea what to do. He knew the men had taken the file and the puzzle box from the safe, but they'd also taken the man and killed his family.

As he looked up again, the six men were already dragging the man onto his yacht, and it occurred to Michael that if they'd found what they were looking for, they would already be on their way and would have killed the man alongside the other four. As he drew closer, the wash of the aft light reflected off the rolling sea, illuminating the name stenciled in large gold letters on the rear of the boat, *Gentlemen's Den* . . . And Michael understood.

As he neared the Sunseeker, Michael cut the engine, allowing the launch's momentum to carry him to the yacht's edge. He set his boat adrift and slipped over the side, swimming around the back of the yacht, the heavy waves thrusting him up and down. The kidnappers' launch was tied to the port side, the boat fenders squeaking as they rubbed against the larger craft.

Michael grabbed hold of the rolling ship and slowly climbed up on the swim platform. He looked about. The yacht was much larger than Michael had imagined from shore. Three decks above the water line, climbing nearly thirty feet high, it was truly a mansion at sea. Her polished white hull was adorned with brass fittings and teak rails, her mass absorbing the roll of the waves far better than the flimsy craft he had arrived on.

He climbed three steps, kept to the shadows, and peered into the main salon, an opulent living room filled with all-white furnishings—couches, chaises, and leather chairs, even a white grand piano in the corner. Heavy soundproof glass doors were pulled tightly closed.

The old man was lashed to a chair in the center of the room, his face bloody and tear-streaked, his eyes filled with pain. Five men were scattered about the room, the man obviously in charge crouched down before their captive. His dark hair was pulled into a tight ponytail that hung over his tailored suit jacket.

Three of the men stood with pistols in hand, while a fourth held an elegant polished scabbard, the black leather hilt of a sword protruding from it. While Michael couldn't see the face of the leader, he could see the others; there was no doubt in his mind that he was looking at an Asian group, Yakuza, Triad, Tong, or Bangkok Mafia.

As Michael looked at the ponytailed man, he knew the man had slain the old man's family in front of him, and would no doubt use the same sword on the man once he'd obtained what he had come for. The old man struggled against his bonds, uselessly flexing his arms against the rope. The agony in his face, the tears in his eyes were not from physical pain, but from the sheer torture of his heart.

The ponytailed man held out a dark red lacquered box, turning it about in his hand, Michael caught a glimpse of a fearsome dragon entwined with a tiger etched into its surface and recognized the object that Simon so desperately needed him to steal. The ponytailed man held it before the old man's eyes and screamed in a language Michael didn't understand.

Michael had yet to see the face of the leader as he interrogated the old man, his body, his hands subtly moving with his demands. There was confidence in the ponytailed man's body language, in his actions, superior and exacting. He suddenly dropped the box to the floor and violently stomped on it, cracking it open. He picked it up and thrust it in the old man's face to reveal that it was empty.

The ponytailed man took off his jacket, tossed it aside, then unbuttoned his white shirt. He removed a lighter from his pocket and flicked

it on, the flame dancing above its silver case. And with a powerful grip, he grabbed the man's left hand, bending it up against his constraints, holding the flame to the old man's palm.

The old man's face grew stern, hard like granite, as he locked eyes with his torturer, a test of wills as his palm blackened, as the smoke curled up. And the ponytailed man smiled. He pulled the lighter away, tucked it in his pocket, and pulled out a black box, similar in shape and design to the red one; a dragon engaged in battle with a raging tiger was etched in its top. He held it before the old man and whispered in his ear.

And Michael saw fear pour into the old man's face, an agony worse than flame upon his skin . . . and the old man finally screamed.

Michael averted his eyes and climbed the rear steps, keeping his body low within the shadows, quickly arriving at the second deck, which was far less formal, with a large teak bar, overstuffed couches, and a wide-screen TV on the rear wall. The rear deck was open to the elements, with lounge chairs and towels in the corners. No cost had been spared on the luxurious craft.

Remaining in the shadows, Michael looked about until his eyes fell on an oddly shaped form toward the far end of the room. As Michael's eyes adjusted, he saw the open door to the pilothouse, the glow of instruments casting a green haze in the ship's bridge, and realized . . . he looked again at the form, now discerning the crumpled body of the ship's captain.

A light three hundred yards off the port bow caught Michael's eye. It was heading toward the yacht. He didn't know if it was coincidence or something worse, and he had no intention of waiting to find out.

Michael ran to the bar, slipping behind it. He looked about: at the liquor bottles in their leather hammocks, at the secured glasses, the fully stocked wine cooler. He knew it had to be here. He finally looked at the icemaker; he saw the wide seams, slightly off angle, something incongruous with the exacting detail of everything else on the ship.

He pulled the icemaker out to reveal the other Helix 09 safe. It was listed on the sales quote: one for the *Study*, the other for the *Gentlemen's Den*, the name of the yacht Michael was on now.