

The Icelander

One

The Present Day

This was not part of the plan.

That was all he could think as he crossed over the Rio di Palazzo on the *Ponte dei Sospiri*, the Bridge of Sighs, with its white limestone walls and stone windows with iron bars, from the *Palazzo Ducale di Venezia* just as the late afternoon sun was slipping from the autumnal sky, explosives in one hand, detonators and a roll of wire in the other.

There was no time to admire the Venetian view, just as terrified prisoners of a bygone age wouldn't have on their way from the interrogation rooms of what was once the majestic gothic Palace of the Doge of Venice to meet their fate in the cold, dank and dark prison cells, cells that once held Casanova, perhaps Venice's most famous and intriguing escapee.

Had he looked out across the lagoon towards the Church of San Giorgio Maggiore, he would have seen the two approaching power boats and maybe the paratroopers from Italy's elite Folgore unit massing between the columns of San Marco and San Teodoro on the edge of *the Piazzetta*, near St Mark's Square.

On a normal Sunday evening the *Ponte della Paglia*, the bridge that faces the *Ponte dei Sospiri* would have been filled with visitors from all corners of the globe trying to take a picture with the Bridge of Sighs in the background.

But this wasn't any normal Sunday in Venice.

The Icelander was a long way from his home on the southern shore of Faxaflói Bay near Reykjavík. Trapped within the exclusion area that had been hastily set up around the Doge Palace, Jón Stefánsson was figuring out his next move.

He had been in a lot tighter corners than this during his time on the fishing fleets back in his native country. He had been prepared for the unexpected, just like his old father had always instilled in him.

He just hoped those he had recruited for the journey were made of the same stuff. They had a lot to live up to, but he suspected they had ulterior motives because they had agreed too readily. It was something he would have to deal with, sooner rather than later, but for now, he had enough to be going on with.

“Die, you bastard. Die!”

The woman, probably the wrong side of forty, plunged the bread knife deep into the elderly man’s stomach as he lay on the floor of his living room, seemingly accepting his fate.

“Have you got *nothing* to say for yourself?” she screamed, her hands now covered in his blood. “Like *sorry*?”

The man looked up at her, his eyes now glazed so that he couldn’t quite make out who this woman was. He had lived here alone for the past three years or so since the death of his wife whom he loved dearly. He wasn’t afraid to die. Truth be known, this crazy woman was doing him a big favour, which was why he didn’t put up any resistance when she had burst into his little bungalow.

“Well, *I* am not sorry, you pathetic little bastard,” snapped the woman as she twisted the knife until he finally surrendered to the inevitable.

She moved away from the body and went into the bathroom where she washed the blood from her hands. She looked at her reflection in the mirror and hated what stared back at her. This was her life now; this was her destiny.

On to the next target. Another piece of shit.

Forty minutes later, Sinead O’Boyle was shifting uncomfortably in her seat, the safety belt around her waist cutting into her. With the back of her left hand she arrested a silent tear as it made its way down her cheek and on to her chin.

No one on the Ryanair flight from Dublin to Treviso, a half hour’s drive from Venice, noticed her. After all, to all intents and purposes, she was just another passenger among the one hundred and eighty on the Boeing 737. The reality was something else.

As she gazed out from her window seat, down at the storm clouds below, she wondered if they had found old Doherty’s body yet. She didn’t feel sorry when she had plunged the knife into him after he had done what she had wanted. He had it coming to him. No one would miss him. Certainly not many of his patients down at the village surgery. *Bastard.*

She wondered what her alcoholic mother Mary would make of it all when the story finally unravelled.

Sinead sighed heavily and turned away from the window; thankfully, the seat next to her was empty – in fact, there were quite a few empty seats. It seemed not a lot of people wanted to go to Venice today. All things considered, mused Sinead, they'd made a wise choice. It certainly wouldn't have been Sinead's chosen destination, but then little in her life had actually been her decision.

A pain suddenly shot across her right breast and she gently massaged it with her left hand. Doherty had done a decent job before he died, she'd grant him that. She bit her lip until it subsided. *It's worth it, the pain is worth it*, she told herself as she thought about her next target up front in the Ryanair cockpit.

Pilot Rory McConnell was oblivious to what was about to unfold behind him.

Lyndsay Mitchell had worked her way up from being an eighteen year-old rookie reporter on the Westmeath Journal to court correspondent with the *Irish Times*; it had been a pretty boring journey that had taken five years out of her life, but it was all ending here. Today she was being trialled as a hard news correspondent on the Dublin quality daily.

“Anything to drink, miss?”

“Gin and tonic, thanks.”

The air hostess handed her a sachet of gin and a small can of tonic water. “That'll be five fifty euro.”

Lyndsay stared momentarily at the sachet, the sort of sachet you'd expect to have a sauce or a vinegar in, but not gin; whatever next!

She gave the hostess a ten euro note and told her to keep the change; after all, this was a good day, a life changing day and one worth a little celebration. Ahead of her lay the biggest story of her relatively short career, one that could propel her to bigger and better things – like the foreign desk on the *London Times*.

She ripped open the sachet and poured its meagre contents into the plastic cup and then added just a touch of tonic water, leaned back in her seat and took a sip, glancing momentarily out the window at the storm clouds below.

God, I hope it's not a bumpy landing.

She closed her eyes. It was good to be alive.

Two

Sinead O'Boyle didn't have a happy childhood and today all those awful memories of a fateful afternoon in Derry came flooding back as she peered out the window of the Ryanair flight.

"What are you getting for Christmas?" asked Louise, brushing her long red hair away from her freckled face with one hand while the other tightly gripped a heavy schoolbag.

"Dunno," replied Sinead, shrugging her shoulders. "I'm hoping for some make-up from Woollies."

"I'm getting a new tranny," piped up Angela, her big brown eyes wide in excitement at the very thought.

"You already have a radio," said Louise, frowning as she looked across to her friend.

"But it's blue."

"And what's wrong with blue?" asked Sinead, suddenly becoming aware they were the only three on the footpath leading up to the housing estate in the heart of the Bogside where they all lived. They had known each other from the first day in primary school and did everything together.

"It's not pink, that what's wrong with it," explained Angela. "I want a pink one."

"And you always get what you want," said Louise, jealously. "I wish I had parents like yours."

"Me, too," said Sinead, stopping. She tugged on Louise's sleeve. "Stop," she said, looking around her. "Do you hear it?"

Her two school friends looked bewildered. Louise clutched on tightly to her bag. Angela stared nervously over her shoulder.

"Stop it: you are frightening me," whispered Louise.

"I can't hear anything," said Angela.

"Right," said Sinead. "It's gone very quiet; no one's on the street."

“Oh my God!” exclaimed Louise. “We better run.”

They knew what would happen next. It was part of their daily life. It was just that sometimes they forgot, perhaps subconsciously choosing to ignore the reality of their world. Somebody had obviously given the word to clear the street, but somebody had neglected to tell the three girls.

“Oh shit!” cried Sinead as a British Army foot patrol emerged from a side road in front of them.

There was no warning before a volley of high velocity shots rang out from the first floor window of a derelict house to the girls’ left. The soldiers hit the ground and immediately returned fire at the IRA gun gang.

“Run! Run!” screamed Louise, abandoning her school bag as Angela followed behind her.

“No!” yelled Sinead. “Get down, get down!”

There were more shots as a gun battle erupted around them. Sinead fell flat on her stomach and glanced fearfully up the street, relieved to see Louise and Angela also on their stomachs. Thank God, she sighed and closed her eyes as bullets ricocheted off the tarmac.

One of the soldiers began running towards the house where the IRA gunmen were holed up while his comrades unleashed another volley of fire. He was level with Sinead now and paused briefly. “You okay, love?”

Sinead nodded; she wasn’t going to tell him she’d wet her knickers. Her mother would kill her.

The soldier moved on as the firing subsided. He was at the gate to the pathway that led up to the front door. He wasn’t expecting more return fire from the IRA men. If events ran true to form, they’d be long gone out the back door to some safe house deep in the Bogside. He turned and waved his comrades forward; there were four of them.

Sinead struggled back on to her feet and was running up to her friends when the explosion ripped through the derelict house. A booby trapped front door claimed three of the soldiers.

“Oh my God, my God, Holy Mary Mother of Jesus!” shrieked Sinead. “Help me, somebody help me!”

She was on her knees, tears streaming down her face, hands covered in blood when neighbours from nearby houses ran out. “Louise, no Louise, please God, no.”

A man pulled her on to her feet as two women bent down to help Louise and Angela. There was nothing they could do for the girls. They’d been caught in the crossfire.

Lyndsay had been dozing after her gin and tonic when the plane hit turbulence as it flew over Bristol on its way out across the English Channel. She awoke with a start; the man sitting across the aisle was still engrossed in a Dan Brown novel.

Since joining the Irish Times, Lyndsay had had no time for boyfriends; she was fully focused on her career. The only thing she missed about a relationship was the intimacy, but the longer she remained celibate the easier it became.

God, I hope I'm not becoming frigid, she thought.

She considered the task ahead of her. Everybody who was anybody would be in Venice. The story could be the making of her. She just hoped she would be up to the job of meeting a twice daily deadline.

Little did she realise, the challenges would be more daunting than that.

By a very long way.

“Have they made any contact?”

“Not yet, sir.”

This time yesterday, there had been thousands of foreign tourists milling around St Mark's Square in the centre of Venice and along the water front; now not even the famous and infuriating pigeons dared venture into the area, increasingly occupied by the *Esercito Italiano*, the Italian army, and members of the *Carabinieri*, the gendarmerie and military police, who had roped it off to the public. Also on the ground were several individuals from the *Guardia di Finanz*, Italy's specialized military police force.

In the air above the square, a couple of helicopters from the *Aeronautica Militare Italiana*, the Italian airforce, kept a watchful eye, while out in the lagoon were a number of vessels from the *Marina Militare*, the Italian Navy.

To compound matters, high tide was sending the sea water over the walls, into the square and the surroundings shops.

“Al-Qaeda?” Aberto Ghirlandaio headed up the *Carabinieri*. This was a first for him; he was not quite out of his depth, but close.

“Don't think so,” replied General Edgardo Bugiardini, Chief of Staff of the *Esercito Italiano*. “Not quite their style.”

“Do we know what their target was?” Aberto was still five years from retirement from a job that had been a way of life for the last sixteen years, but the way things were going he wasn’t sure if he’d make it to Christmas.

This was not what he needed just now.

Then the ground shook. The General glanced nervously at the police chief. Soldiers who had been occupying the square began racing towards the water front where the remains of a gondola spread across the surface.

A second blast followed.

It blew out the windows of the five star Hotel Dandolo, glass shards raining down on the terrified staff inside.

“That was a bomb.” Edgardo was stating the obvious. Aberto agreed.

Venice had been immune to terrorism until now; the nearest attacks had been in Rome. Aberto remembered his time there when a car bomb exploded in 1987 near the U.S. Embassy, after which terrorists, allegedly from a group calling itself the Anti-Imperialist International Brigade, fired rockets into the American and British embassy compounds in protest against an international economic summit conference being held in the city. It was only a matter of weeks later that Aberto was thankfully transferred to Venice; it had been heaven. Until now.

Aberto was making his way to the water front when his mobile rang. “They want to talk.”