

THE FUTURA RING

CHAPTER ONE

Isola Della Morte Prison, Venice – 2020

The cowering man's mouth emitted several strange phutting noises as he gathered the courage to continue speaking to the nearly bald, middle-aged woman who was glaring at him angrily through the glass dividing screen.

'B-b-but, M-M-Maud, they just s-s-s...' He ceased his quiet staccato words and whimpered while he wrapped his bright orange cloak tighter around his rotund body.

'Shot him, Toby, they *shot him!* I *know!*' growled Maud down the black intercom phone. 'The CNI bastards murdered—'

Her words were cut short by a shouted order filling the stark white interior of the visitors' room.

'Five more minutes – *get on with it!*' barked the white-clad woman in clear English that was tinged with strong Milanese tones. Before returning to her surveillance office, the guard stood for a few seconds behind Maud, slapping the end of a stout cudgel against her white trousers. She did not hear Maud's chuckle at her attempt to intimidate the prisoner.

Toby sucked in a mouthful of air before attempting his words once more. 'Y-y-yes, they s-s-shot him. My b-b-brother, Xavier. H-h-he—' Words fell away as loneliness filled his world.

Toby's head drooped, his moist eyes momentarily scanning his fluorescent blue flip-flops. He made more phutting noises before mumbling, 'Why d-d-do t-t-that? He only collected old f-f-furniture and p-p-p—'

He was cut short by Maud.

'Oh, you *stupid* boy,' she mocked with one eyebrow raised, shaking her head in disbelief. 'You still believe he only collected stupid old

sixteenth-century Tudor and Spanish furniture, paintings and artefacts? Probably worth a *bloody* fortune, though! Why didn't he love *my* pastime? There are so many beautiful and *expensive* paintings from the Impressionist period that should – obviously – be *mine*,' stated Maud in a slow, deliberate and justly tone. 'Silly man! Tudor and Spanish sixteenth-century things are so dull. Mind you...' Her words tailed off as her eyes focused on Toby's bright orange cloak. She slowly shook her head and uttered a sound of disdain.

Toby absorbed the sound – a familiar one that he had frequently heard expressed with feeling by his late brother. He expected more derogatory words to follow, but instead there was a strange, unfamiliar silence.

Maud's visitor timidly raised his head, his eyes rolling upwards, trying to glimpse her expression to ensure it was safe to utter what his brain wanted him to say. His eyes met hers. He was confused – her face looked conciliatory.

'Who, you silly old chap, is looking after you? Who brought you here?' asked Maud in an uncharacteristic and thoughtful tone. She looked behind Toby and saw no one. He obverted her probing stare as she continued her questions: '*Well?* Who's your minder? Someone unfortunate – it *must* be! You'd get lost in a public convenience!'

Toby began his phutting noises again and then thought for a few seconds – which was far too long for Maud.

'*Well*, you stupid boy?' she asked, reverting to her usual cutting manner and raising her voice.

Toby jumped at her sharp tone, oblivious to her insulting description. He rolled his eyes as he stuttered, 'H-h-he is very n-n-nice to m-m-me.'

Maud's eyes narrowed as she leaned purposefully forward. 'Toby, who the *hell* is here with you?' she demanded, wary it might be a police or

agency minder. ‘Who brought you here? Who *is* the unfortunate having to babysit *you*?’

‘Oh. It’s...’ Toby delved into the depths of his brain, his face lighting up with satisfaction when he remembered the name. ‘You m-m-mean T-T-Tommy?’

Maud leant back on the metal chair and raised her eyebrows as she let forth a raucous laugh on hearing the minder’s name.

Sadness filled Toby’s brain, hearing that familiar disparaging laughter once more; his mouth drooped at the corners. ‘D-d-don’t laugh, Maud. They wouldn’t let him c-c-come in here t-t-to see you. I left h-h-him at the...’ His sentence dwindled to silence, except for a series of quiet phutting noises.

‘*Tommy Perlmann is here? That numbskull, East-End, furniture-plagiarising idiot is here? And he’s looking after you?*’ she queried scornfully, slapping her thigh several times with amusement.

‘H-h-he had to stay in the...’ Toby’s mind searched for the words, ‘the recep—tion r-r-room.’ He then added, ‘But I d-d-do miss my Eagle’s C-C-Cliff.’

‘Huh!’ Maud blanked out the unlikely picture of Tommy caring for Toby and resentfully declared, ‘That lovely Catalonian villa estate and all that *bloody* money – *so much money* – stolen by the state. What I could have done with that capital. What a shocking waste!’

She cupped her hand around the telephone and whispered with a triumphant smile, ‘But they only got a *fraction* of it – *idiots!*’

‘Ah... B-b-but my Xavier was a lovely brother t-t-to *me*.’ Toby’s face lit up, saying, ‘He l-l-loved me so m-m-much, he gave me my own m-m-money in a S-S-Swiss account. The c-c-code number is one, three, n-n-nine—’

He was abruptly halted by Maud. She was not only surprised by the existence of this Swiss account, but also at Toby’s willingness to give away its access code.

‘You... you *idiot!* One doesn’t broadcast one’s account access code to every Tom, Dick and Harry, especially in *this* place. Oh, God. You *really* are a total twat.’

Toby’s head sank further into his bright orange cloak while his confused brain wondered where these three men were hiding. In an instant, his thoughts returned to his account numbers.

Maud heard a multitude of phutting noises followed by some quiet words.

‘B-b-but I have f-f-fourteen more numbers to tell you... *Only y-y-you, Maud.*’ He raised his head and managed a weak smile. ‘What a nice b-b-brother I had.’ He sighed, tears beginning to fall from his closed eyes as he dipped his head once more.

Without a shred of feeling, Maud looked directly at Toby and said in a curious tone, ‘Mmm... You *are* a strange imbecile – *but* you can remember long strings of numbers, eh? Never thought about this, but perhaps you’re one of those *savant* people?’ She chuckled.

Toby stared blankly at her and asked dejectedly, ‘M-M-Maud, why are you in this d-d-dreadful p-p-place?’ He sniffed several times, then tipped his head sideways, leant forward and cautiously pointed at Maud’s head. ‘And why d-d-do you have that very s-s-hort haircut?’ He emitted several more phutting noises before asking, oblivious to the reasons for her incarceration, ‘Why don’t you j-j-just leave?’

‘My dear, sweet and very *simple* Toby,’ she began, cupping her hand around the intercom phone once more, ‘I’ll let you into a little secret: I won’t be here for much longer,’ she boasted with a wicked chuckle. She released her hand from the phone and said, ‘And to tell a teeny bit of truth, I have to admit to being a rather naughty lady, here in lovely Venice.’

Maud looked away from Toby and stared at the sunlight that reflected off the lagoon, streaming through the narrow top-hung windows. Her mind drifted back to her unsuccessful robbery – a setback for her, but one that

caused a great deal of hilarity; she had named it a 'silly sausage blunder', a name that produced a fit of noisy laughter every time she thought of it. She burst out laughing even now.

Toby smiled at Maud's new-found happiness and felt a strong desire to join in with whatever was making her laugh. He began creating strange-sounding screeching noises that were far removed from happy laughter.

Maud's daydreaming ceased abruptly, curtailed by Toby's peculiar-sounding noises. She turned her head in a deliberate movement and locked on to his playful eyes, frowning intensely at him. The power imbued in her fearful expression extinguished his laughter and caused a torrent of insecurity to grip his body; he melted into his bright orange cloak.

'What the *hell* was that cacophony of evil-sounding noise?' she barked, while she laced her arms together and leant back. She sighed heavily for several seconds, then continued with her story as if Toby was a willing and knowledgeable listener.

'Now, where was I? Ah, yes. You see, some clever Italian chappies put together a rather unique exhibition in Venice's Chamber of the Great Council. They managed to get together three of Claude Monet's Impressionistic paintings of the Doge's Palace – such exquisite and beautiful things, painted in 1908.'

Toby yawned, not comprehending one word of her story, and Maud noticed.

'*Toby!* Are you listening, dear boy?' He sat up, hearing his name. Maud continued. 'But the *pièce de résistance* of this exhibition was to be the first showing of an unknown and uncatalogued *fourth* painting of the Palace, worth *ten* times as much as the others. And, well... You know, I just *had* to own it.'

Toby rubbed his eyes and yawned once more, to Maud's annoyance.

'*Toby!* Wake up! What I'm describing will be *very* important to you in the future – *so listen!*'

His eyes stirred at Maud's command.

'Now, my caper – as they used to call it in the old days – was going tickety-boo until some stupid *Carabinieri* disturbed—'

Before she could finish her sentence, a firm hand grasped her shoulder.

'*Questo è tutto! Il tempo è finito! Muoversi!*' ordered the guard. '*Di addio al tuo strano amico.*'

Toby sat motionless, oblivious to Maud receiving her 'time's up' order and the guard's disparaging remark.

The seated prisoner inflated with rage then abruptly pivoted around, springing from her seat, her face fiery red and flushed with anger. She wrenched the guard's hand from her shoulder and brought it down across the back of the metal seat. The cracking of the guard's wrist was followed by a cascade of screams that reverberated throughout the building, the woman's face full of horror at seeing her hand bent to an unnatural angle.

Even Toby stirred with the frantic activity in front of him, his brain acknowledging the commotion of violence unfolding behind the security of the partition. He stood up, straining to look through the glass as he attempted to understand why there was a gyrating mass of yelling guards in front of him. He saw bodies, arms and legs contorted in different directions, completely forgetting they were trying to control Maud, who was buried beneath them.

Toby emitted a shrill scream as an ear-piercing klaxon sounded to announce the emergency.

A security guard burst into the visitors' room and dashed across to him; she firmly grasped his left shoulder while spitting out an order in clear English: '*You're leaving!* It's time to ditch your crazy friend.' She wrenched Toby from his seat, and without any respect or subtlety, she frog-marched him towards the exit. Toby reached the double doors before his addled brain assembled enough syllables to say anything.

‘W-w-why are you b-b-being so h-h-horrible? S-s-stop it now! You shouldn’t b-b-be doing this t-t-to m-m-my—,’ his words ended with a shriek as the guard pushed him into a dimly lit corridor, the peeling, dirty white walls and polished floor echoing the squealing noises from the worn and rust-laden door hinges.

The guard tugged violently at Toby’s bright orange cloak, exposing his distraught expression. ‘Go to the exit – where you came in – *there!*’ She released her grip from his shoulder and pointed. ‘Forget your friend. She’s *never* getting out.’

Toby stayed statue still. He began emitting slow phutting noises, his mind overloaded with violence and noise. He sighed for a moment, gaining some relief from scrunching his toes into the soft foam of his flip-flops.

‘I said *move!*’ repeated the angry guard, the order thrown at him with growing impatience.

Toby summoned up the remaining parts of his ebbing contact with reality and whispered the words that were still swirling around his aching brain: ‘You shouldn’t b-b-be doing that t-t-to her! S-s-stop it... now! She’s m-m-my—’ His protestations were cut short.

‘What did you say? Look up and say that,’ commanded the guard, as she grasped the sides of Toby’s jaw and raised his chin without any compassion.

Toby gasped with surprise at the involuntary movement of his head, his flitting eyes desperately attempting not to meet the guard’s stare. He repeated his words.

‘You shouldn’t b-b-be doing that t-t-to her! S-s-stop—’

The guard reacted with even more anger, and shouted in Italian, ‘*Oh, sì? Devi trattenero qualcuno pazzo e omicida come lei!*’ She saw Toby’s blank, puzzled stare and reverted to English. ‘That twisted bastard of what is supposed to be a *woman* has nearly— *Cazzo!* What do you say in English? Yes. She’s nearly torn off the hand of my friend. You *can’t* be

gentle with someone like that. You're her weird friend, so you must know she's a *caso mentale* – a nut job – like you. You *must* know that? What do you say in English? Yes. That crazy upper-crust bitch, Maud Daphne Sinclair, *is* totally mad!