

SCOTT MARIANI

*The Mozart
Conspiracy*

A V O N

'I know I must die.
Someone has given me *aqua toffana* and has
calculated the precise time of my death
– for which they have ordered a Requiem.
It is for myself that I am writing this'

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, 1791

Chapter One

Austria

9 January

Breathless with shock and terror, Oliver Llewellyn stumbled away from the scene he had just witnessed. He paused to lean against a bare stone wall. Nausea washed over him. His mouth was dry.

He hadn't known exactly what he would find when he'd slipped away to explore the house. But what he'd seen – what they'd done to the man in that strange vaulted room – was more horrible than anything he could have imagined.

He ran on. Up a winding flight of stone steps and through the connecting bridgeway, then back into the main part of the house with its classical architecture and décor. He could hear the chatter and laughter of the party guests. The string quartet in the ballroom had started up a Strauss waltz.

The Sony Ericsson phone was still switched on and in video mode. He turned it off and slipped it in his tuxedo pocket, then glanced at the old wind-up watch

on his wrist. It was almost nine thirty – his recital was due to resume in fifteen minutes. Oliver straightened his tux and took a deep breath. He walked down the sweeping double staircase to rejoin the party, attempting to conceal the panic in his step. Chandeliers glittered. Waiters attended to the guests, carrying silver trays laden with champagne flutes. As he reached the bottom of the stairs he snatched a glass from a tray and gulped it down. Across the room, near a tall marble fireplace, he could see the gleaming Bechstein grand piano he'd been playing just a few minutes earlier. It seemed like hours ago.

A hand landed on his shoulder. He tensed and spun around. An elderly gentleman with wire-framed glasses and a trim beard was smiling at him.

'May I congratulate you on a fine recital, Herr Meyer,' the man said in German. 'The Debussy was magnificent. I eagerly await the second half of your programme.'

'*D-Danke schön*,' Oliver stammered. He looked around him nervously. Could they have spotted him? He had to get away from this place.

'But you look very pale, Herr Meyer,' the old man said, frowning at him. 'Are you unwell? Shall I fetch you a glass of water?'

Oliver searched for the words. '*Krank*,' he muttered. 'I'm feeling sick.' He broke away from the old man and reeled through the crowd. He stumbled into a pretty woman in a sequin gown, spilling her drink. People stared at him. He blurted out an apology and pushed on.

He knew he was drawing attention to himself. Over

his shoulder he spotted security guards with radios. They were coming down the stairs, mingling with the crowd, pointing in his direction. Someone must have seen him slip under the cordon. What else did they know?

The phone was in his pocket. If they found it, it would give him away and they'd kill him.

He made it to the main doorway. The cold, crisp air hit him and his breath billowed. The sweat on his forehead suddenly felt clammy.

The grounds of the mansion were deep in snow. A flash of lightning cut across the night sky, and for a moment the eighteenth-century façade of the house was lit up like daylight. His classic racing-green MG Midget was parked between a glistening Bentley and a Lamborghini, and he headed towards it. A voice behind him called out 'Halt!'

Oliver ignored the security guard and climbed into his car. The engine fired up, he put his foot down, and the MG's wheels spun on the icy cobbles. He headed up the long driveway towards the main gates. By the gatehouse, another security guard was standing talking on a radio.

The tall gilded wrought-iron gates were gliding shut.

Oliver aimed the MG at the closing gap and rammed them. He was thrown forward in his seat and the car's front wings buckled, but he made it through and kept going. The guard yelled at him to stop. He accelerated hard down the icy road.

Within less than a minute he saw the lights of a car behind him, dazzling in his rear-view mirror as it

gained in speed. Snow-laden conifers flashed by in the yellow glow of his headlights.

He saw the sheet ice up ahead but it was too late to do anything. He felt the car go into a skid as he hit it and grappled with the wheel, just managing to regain control. The car travelling behind him hit the glassy surface in his wake and spun into the trees at the side of the road.

Twenty minutes later he was back at the guest-house. He parked the dented MG out of sight around the back and ran up to his room. The storm was gathering and wispy snow was giving way to torrential rain that drummed on the roof. The lamp on his desk flickered as he turned on the laptop.

It seemed to take forever to load up. He didn't know how much time he had. 'Come on. Come on,' he implored.

Logging on to his email account, he scrolled urgently through the inbox to a message entitled ***The Mozart Letter***. It was from the professor. He hit REPLY, his fingers jittery on the keys as he typed.

Professor – Must talk to you again about the letter. Urgent. Will call you. Have discovered something. Danger.

He hit SEND and fumbled for his phone, attaching it to the laptop with a USB cable. *Calm. Stay calm.* Working fast, he downloaded the video-clip file from the Sony Ericsson onto the hard drive.

He didn't want to look at the video but knew he mustn't be caught with it. There was only one place he could send it safely. He would email it to her. Then she'd definitely receive it, wherever she was.

The lights went out halfway through typing the email. In the darkened room, the screen was telling him his Internet connection was broken. He swore, picked up the phone. Dead. The storm had taken out the phone lines too.

Oliver bit his lip, thinking hard. The laptop was still running on its own power. He dug in his briefcase and found the CD-ROM he'd been using to store his research photographs. He slammed it into the laptop's disk drive and hurriedly copied the video file onto it.

Fumbling in the dark he found the box-set of Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*. He'd been meaning to post it back to her anyway and had already stamped and addressed the padded envelope. He nodded to himself. It was the only way. He pulled out one of the Mozart discs and put the CD he'd just copied in its place. Grabbing a marker pen, he scribbled a few quick words on the disc's shiny surface before he placed the music CD on top of it and shut the box. He prayed that if she saw it before he got there, she'd take his warning seriously.

He knew there was a post box not far from the guest-house, off the square at the end of Fischer Strasse, and he ran downstairs and out into the street. The power was still down, the houses in darkness. The lashing rain had turned to sleet and his tuxedo was quickly soaked as he jogged down the slushy pavements. Dirty snow lay piled against the sleeping buildings. The streets were deserted.

Oliver shoved his package into the post box, his fingers shaking with cold and fear, and turned back to

the guesthouse. Now to pack his things and get the hell out of here – fast.

He was fifty yards from the darkened guesthouse when the powerful headlamps came around the street corner and washed over him. The big car bore down on him. He turned to run back the other way but slipped and grazed a knee on the pavement. The Mercedes pulled up next to him. There were four men inside. The back doors opened and two of them stepped out and seized his arms. Their faces were grim. They bundled him into the back seat and the car powered away up through the quiet village.

Nobody spoke. Oliver sat staring at his feet in the darkness. The Mercedes came to a halt, and the men pulled him roughly out of the car.

They were at the side of a lake. The sleet had stopped, and pale moonlight shone down across the water's frozen surface. The village lights had come back on and glimmered in the distance.

All four men stepped out of the car. They hauled Oliver out too and slammed him against the side. One of his arms was twisted up painfully behind his back and someone kicked his feet apart. He felt expert hands frisking him.

He remembered the phone just a second before they found it in his jacket pocket. Fear rose within him as he realized that in his haste he hadn't deleted the video-clip.

The men hauled Oliver off the cold metal of the car and he saw the pistol glint in the moonlight. The man holding it was tall, about six-four, and heavily built.

His eyes were impassive, and below the line of his sandy crew-cut one of his earlobes was twisted and mangled.

Oliver stared at him. 'I've seen you before.'

'Walk.' The man with the gun motioned towards the lake.

Oliver stepped through the rushes and placed one foot on the ice. He walked out across the lake. Ten yards, fifteen. The ice was thick and solid underneath him. Every nerve in his body was screaming, his heart thudding in the base of his throat. There had to be a way out of this.

But there wasn't, and he knew it. He walked on, slipping on the hard, smooth ice. His tuxedo was soaked with sweat.

He'd walked about thirty yards from the lakeside when he heard the gunshot. He flinched – but there was no impact, no pain. He felt the strike of the bullet resonate through the ice under his feet.

That was when he realized they weren't going to shoot him.

He watched helplessly as the blue fissure spread from the bullet-hole in the ice and ran past his feet with a slow, ripping crackle. He glanced back at the lakeside. Saw another man reach inside the car, come out with a stubby submachine gun and hand it to the tall man.

Oliver closed his eyes.

The tall man had a wide grin on his face as he held the weapon tightly at the hip and squeezed off a short fully-automatic blast at Oliver's feet.

The ice was churned into flying splinters. A spider's web of cracks appeared all around him. There was

nowhere to run. The frozen surface beneath his feet groaned, and then gave way.

The stunning shock of the icy water drove the breath out of him. He clawed at the ragged edge of the hole, but lost his grip. The water closed over his head, filled his nose and mouth, pressure roaring in his ears as he kicked and struggled. In the blackness, he knew he'd slipped under the ice sheet. His fingers slithered helplessly against its underside as he drifted away from the hole. Bubbles streamed from his lips. There was no way up, no way back.

He held his breath, and fought and kicked against the ice until he couldn't hold it any longer. His body convulsed as the freezing water poured into his lungs.

And as he died, he thought he could hear the killers laughing.