

SCOTT MARIANI

*The Doomsday
Prophecy*

AVON

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AVON

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1

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For Malcolm and Isabelle

‘Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein:

For the time IS at hand.’

Book of Revelation 1:3
The Holy Bible

Chapter One

Corfu, Greek Islands, June 2008

The first day

It was night when they took her.

They'd found her living on the lush island and watched for three days in the sun before they figured out their move. She was staying in a rented villa, isolated and shaded by olive trees, high on a cliff above the crystal-clear sea.

She was living alone, and it should have been easy to snatch her. But the house was always filled with party guests, and the dancing and drinking was virtually round the clock. They watched, but they couldn't get close.

So the team planned. Right down to the last detail. Entry, acquisition, extraction. It had to be subtle and discreet. There were four of them, three men, one woman. They knew this was her last day on the island. She'd booked the flight from Corfu airport next morning and was flying back home – where she'd be far, far harder to take.

So it was tonight or never. Strategically, it was the perfect time for her to disappear. Nobody would be looking for her in the morning.

They waited until evening, when they knew the farewell party would be well underway. Their car was a rental saloon, bland and inconspicuous, paid for in cash from a local hire firm. They drove in silence and parked off the road, unseen in the shade of the olive grove a hundred yards from the villa.

And watched quietly. As expected, the villa was lit up and the sound of music and laughter drifted through the trees and across the cove. The white stone house was fine and imposing, with three separate balconies where they could see couples dancing and people standing around drinking, leaning out over the railings, taking in the beauty of the evening.

Down below, the sea glittered in the moonlight. It was warm and the air was sweet with the scent of flowers, just the gentlest breeze coming in from the shore. Now and again a car would pull up outside the house as more guests arrived.

As 11 p.m. approached, the team put their plan into action. The two men in the front seats stayed where they were, making themselves comfortable for what might turn out to be a long wait. They were used to that. The man and woman in the back exchanged a look and a brief nod. She ran her fingers over her glossy black hair, pulled it loosely back and fastened it with an elastic tie. Checked her make-up in the rearview mirror.

They opened their doors and stepped out of the car.

They didn't look back. The man was carrying a bottle of wine – something local, expensive. They walked out of the shadows and up to the villa, through the gate and up the steps towards the terrace and the front doors. The two in the car watched them as they went.

The couple walked into the villa, adjusting to the light and the noise. They said nothing to one another and moved casually, but expertly through the crowd. They knew how to blend in. Many of the guests were already too out of it to notice them anyway, which suited them perfectly. There were a lot of empty bottles lying around and a lot of the smoke wasn't tobacco.

The couple wandered through the cool, white rooms, gazed around them at the expensive décor. They located their target quickly and kept her carefully in sight the whole time.

She suspected nothing.

She was very much the centre of attention, and she looked as though she loved it. They knew that she'd been spending the money freely, carelessly, the way a person does when they're expecting a whole lot more of it. There was plenty of champagne on offer. People milled around the self-service bar in the corner of the main room, helping themselves to as much as they could drink.

The couple watched her the way a scientist observes a rat in a tank, knowing exactly what will happen to it. She was young and attractive – just like her photographs. Her blond hair was a little longer now, and her deep tan made her eyes stand out a bright and startling blue. She was wearing white cotton trousers and

a yellow silk top that had many of the men glancing appreciatively at her figure.

The woman's name was Zoë Bradbury. They knew a lot about her. She was twenty-six and had carved out a remarkable career for her age as an author, a scholar, a historian, a biblical archaeologist with a solid reputation among her peers. She was single, though she had a crowd of men around her and liked their company. The couple could see that much for themselves from the way she was flirting and dancing with all the good-looking guys at the party. She was English, born and raised in the city of Oxford. They knew the names of her parents. A whole raft of information about her. They'd dug deep, and they were good investigators. It was what they were getting paid for.

The plan was simple. The woman would drift away after a few minutes and the man would get closer to the target. Offer her a drink, maybe flirt a little. He was in his early thirties, toned and good-looking, and he was pretty sure he could get close enough to slip the dope into her drink.

It was a slow-acting chemical that looked exactly like the effects of too much wine, except that it made the victim sleep for hours. The way she was knocking back her drinks, nobody would make a big deal of it when she had to retreat to her bedroom to sleep it off. The party would wind down, people would leave, then they'd move her out to the waiting car. The motor launch was already waiting at the rendezvous-point.

As they'd anticipated, it wasn't hard to get close to her. The guy introduced himself as Rick. Chatted and

smiled and flirted. Then he offered her a Martini. She wasn't about to say no. He walked to the bar, mixed her drink and quickly added the contents of the vial. All very professional. He was smiling as he brought it back to her and placed it in her hand.

'Cheers,' she giggled, raising the glass in a mock toast, the gold bracelet on her wrist slipping down her tanned forearm.

And that was when the plan started going wrong.

They hadn't noticed the man standing in the corner of the room until he suddenly strode across, moved in fast and took Zoë's arm, asked her if she wanted to dance. They knew his face. They'd seen him a few times while watching the villa. He was about forty-five, slim and well-dressed, a little greying at the temples. A good bit older than her other boyfriends. They'd paid him little heed – until now.

She nodded and put the glass down on the table untouched. Then the man did something strange for someone who looked so sober. He nudged the table with his knee, a clumsy sort of movement, but almost as if he'd done it deliberately. The glass toppled and the drink spilled to the floor.

And they had only one vial of the stuff. They watched as the older guy led her onto the terrace, out into the starry evening where the people were dancing to the slow jazz beat.

So the couple did what they were trained to do: they improvised. Their communication was all in the eyes and minute gestures undetectable to anyone who didn't know why they were there. In seconds they had a new

plan. To hang around, merge into the background. Slip through a door and stay hidden in the house until the guests left and she was alone. Easy. They were in no hurry. They moved quietly out onto the crowded terrace, leaned against the wall and sipped their drinks.

They observed some kind of tension between the target and the older man. The two of them danced for a while, and he seemed to be attempting to persuade her of something. He was whispering in her ear, looking anxious but trying to keep it discreet.

Nobody noticed except the couple. Whatever he was saying, she refused. For a second, it looked like an argument was brewing. Then he backed off. He ran his hand down her arm in some kind of conciliatory gesture, pecked her on the cheek and then left the party. The couple watched him walk to his Mercedes and drive off.

It was eleven thirty-two.

By quarter to midnight, they saw her glancing at her watch. Then, unexpectedly, she began making moves to usher the remaining guests out of the villa. She turned the music off, and the quiet was abrupt. She made her apologies to them all. She had an early flight in the morning. Thank you all for coming. Have a great night. See you sometime.

Everyone was a little surprised, but nobody was too upset. There would be plenty of other parties going on across the island on a warm summer night.

The couple had no choice but to leave with the others. There was no chance to slip away and hide. But they hid their frustration well. It was only a minor

glitch, nothing to worry about. They walked quietly back to where the car was hidden under the shade of the olive trees, and got in.

‘What now?’ said the driver.

‘We wait,’ the woman replied from the back seat.

The fair-haired man scowled. ‘Enough of this bullshit. Give me the gun. I’ll go and get the bitch. Right now.’ He reached over and snapped his fingers. The driver shrugged and unholstered the 9mm pistol under his jacket. The fair-haired guy grabbed it from him and started getting out of the car.

The woman stopped him. ‘Low profile, remember? We keep this clean.’

‘To hell with that. I say –’

‘We wait,’ she repeated, and flashed him a warning look that silenced him.

That was when they heard the motorcycle.

It was exactly midnight.