a novel by the author of A DEATH IN VIENNA

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DANIEL SILVA

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

For Neil Nyren, steady hand on the tiller,

Patrick Matthiesen, who gave me Isherwood,

and, as always, for my wife, Jamie, and

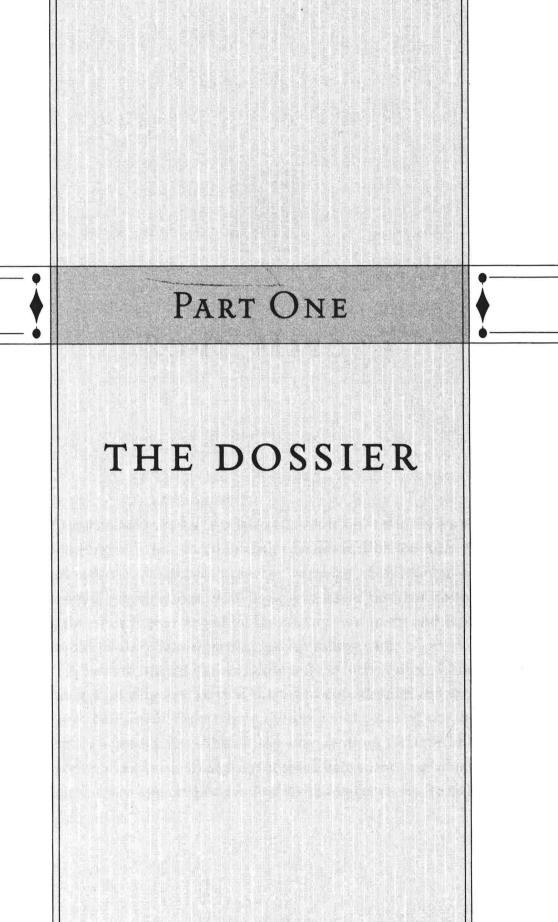
my children, Lily and Nicholas

If you live to seek revenge, dig a grave for two.

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PRINCE OF FIRE



1

ROME: MARCH 4

THERE HAD BEEN WARNING SIGNS—THE SHABBAT bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires that left eighty-seven people dead; the bombing of an Istanbul synagogue, precisely one year later, that killed another twenty-eight—but Rome would be his coming-out party, and Rome would be the place where he left his calling card.

Afterward, within the corridors and executive suites of Israel's vaunted intelligence service, there was considerable and sometimes belligerent debate over the time and place of the conspiracy's genesis. Lev Ahroni, the ever-cautious director of the service, would claim that the plot was hatched not long after the Israeli army knocked down Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah

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and stole his secret files. Ari Shamron, the legendary Israeli master spy, would find this almost laughable, though Shamron often disagreed with Lev simply as a matter of sport. Only Shamron, who had fought with the Palmach during the War of Independence and who tended to view the conflict as a continuum, understood intuitively that the outrage in Rome had been inspired by deeds dating back more than a half century. Eventually, evidence would prove both Lev and Shamron correct. In the meantime, in order to achieve peaceful working conditions, they agreed on a new starting point: the day a certain Monsieur Jean-Luc arrived in the hills of Lazio and settled himself in a rather handsome eighteenth-century villa on the shore of Lake Bracciano.

As for the exact date and time of his arrival, there was no doubt. The owner of the villa, a dubious Belgian aristocrat called Monsieur Laval, said the tenant appeared at two-thirty in the afternoon on the final Friday of March. The courteous but intense young Israeli who called on Monsieur Laval at his home in Brussels wondered how it was possible to recall the date so clearly. The Belgian produced his lavish leather-bound personal calendar and pointed to the date in question. There, penciled on the line designated for 2:30 P.M., were the words: *Meet M. Jean-Luc at Bracciano villa*.

"Why did you write *Bracciano villa* instead of just *villa*?" asked the Israeli visitor, his pen hovering over his open notebook.

"To differentiate it from our St. Tropez villa, our Portuguese villa, and the chalet we own in the Swiss Alps."

"I see," said the Israeli, though the Belgian found that his visitor's tone lacked the humility adopted by most civil servants when confronted by men of great wealth.

And what else did Monsieur Laval remember of the man who rented his villa? That he was punctual, intelligent, and extremely well-mannered. That he was strikingly good-looking, that his scent was noticeable but not obtrusive, that his clothing was expensive but restrained. That he drove a Mercedes car and had two large suitcases with gold buckles and a famous label. That he paid the entire monthlong lease in advance and in cash, which Monsieur Laval explained was not unusual in that part of Italy. That he was a good listener who didn't need to be told things twice. That he spoke French with the accent of a Parisian from a well-heeled arrondissement. That he seemed like a man who could handle himself well in a fight and who treated his women well. "He was of noble birth," Laval concluded, with the certainty of one who knows of what he speaks. "He comes from a good bloodline. Write that in your little book."

Slowly, additional details would emerge about the man called Jean-Luc, though none conflicted with Monsieur Laval's flattering portrait. He hired no cleaning woman and demanded the gardener arrive punctually at nine o'clock and leave by ten. He shopped in nearby market squares and attended Mass in the medieval lakeside village of Anguillara. He spent much time touring the Roman ruins of Lazio and seemed particularly intrigued by the ancient necropolis at Cerveteri.

Sometime in the middle of March—the date could never be reliably established—he vanished. Even Monsieur Laval could not be certain of the departure date, because he was informed after the fact by a woman in Paris who claimed to be the gentleman's personal assistant. Though two weeks remained on the lease, the handsome tenant did not embarrass himself, or Mon-

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sieur Laval, by asking for a refund. Later that spring, when Monsieur Laval visited the villa, he was surprised to discover, in a crystal bowl on the dining room sideboard, a brief thankyou note, typewritten, along with a hundred euros to pay for broken wineglasses. A thorough search of the villa's stemware collection, however, revealed nothing was missing. When Monsieur Laval tried to call Jean-Luc's girl in Paris to return the money, he found that her telephone line had been disconnected.

ON THE FRINGES of the Borghese gardens there are elegant boulevards and quiet leafy side streets that bear little resemblance to the scruffy, tourist-trodden thoroughfares of the city center. They are avenues of diplomacy and money, where traffic moves at a nearly reasonable speed and where the blare of car horns sounds like a rebellion in distant lands. One such street is a cul-de-sac. It falls away at a gentle pitch and bends to the right. For many hours each day, it is in shadow, a consequence of the towering stone pine and eucalyptus that loom over the villas. The narrow sidewalk is broken by tree roots and perpetually covered by pine needles and dead leaves. At the end of the street is a diplomatic compound, more heavily fortified than most in Rome.

Survivors and witnesses would recall the perfection of that late-winter morning: bright and clear, cold enough in the shadows to bring on a shiver, warm enough in the sun to unbutton a wool coat and dream of an alfresco lunch. The fact it was also a Friday served only to heighten the leisurely atmosphere. In diplomatic Rome, it was a morning to dawdle over a cappuccino and *cornetto*, to take stock of one's circumstances and pon-

der one's mortality. Procrastination was the order of the day. Many mundane meetings were canceled. Much routine paperwork was put off till Monday.

On the little cul-de-sac near the Borghese gardens there were no outward signs of the catastrophe to come. The Italian police and security agents guarding the perimeter fortifications chatted lazily in the patches of brilliant sunshine. Like most diplomatic missions in Rome, it officially contained two embassies, one dealing with the Italian government, the second with the Vatican. Both embassies opened for business at their appointed times. Both ambassadors were in their offices.

At ten-fifteen a tubby Jesuit waddled down the hill, a leather satchel in his hand. Inside was a diplomatic démarche from the Vatican Secretariat of State, condemning the Israeli army's recent incursion into Bethlehem. The courier deposited the document with an embassy clerk and puffed his way back up the hill. Afterward, the text would be made public, and its sharp language would prove a temporary embarrassment to the men of the Vatican. The courier's timing would prove providential. Had he arrived five minutes later, he would have been vaporized, along with the original text of the démarche.

Not so fortunate were the members of an Italian television crew who had come to interview the ambassador on the current state of affairs in the Middle East. Or the delegation of local Jewish crusaders who had come to secure the ambassador's public condemnation of a neo-Nazi conference scheduled for the following week in Verona. Or the Italian couple, sickened by the new rise of European anti-Semitism, who were about to inquire about the possibility of emigrating to Israel. Fourteen in all, they were standing in a tight cluster at the business entrance, waiting to be body-searched by the embassy's short-haired security toughs, when the white freight truck made a right turn into the cul-de-sac and began its death run toward the compound.

Most heard the truck before they saw it. The convulsive roar of its diesel engine was a violent intrusion on the otherwise still morning. It was impossible to ignore. The Italian security men paused in mid-conversation and looked up, as did the group of fourteen strangers gathered outside the entrance of the embassy. The tubby Jesuit, who was waiting for a bus at the opposite end of the street, lifted his round head from his copy of *L'Osservatore Romano* and searched for the source of the commotion.

The gentle slope of the street helped the truck gather speed at an astonishing rate. As it rounded the bend, the massive load in its cargo container pushed the truck heavily onto two wheels. For an instant it seemed it might topple. Then somehow it righted itself and began the final straight-line plunge toward the compound.

The driver was briefly visible through the windshield. He was young and clean-shaven. His eyes were wide, his mouth agape. He seemed to be standing atop the gas pedal, and he seemed to be shouting at himself. For some reason the wipers were on.

The Italian security forces reacted immediately. Several took cover behind the reinforced concrete barriers. Others dived for the protection of the steel-and-glass guard posts. Two officers could be seen pouring automatic fire toward the marauding truck. Sparks exploded on the grille, and the windshield shattered, but the truck continued unhindered, gathering speed until the point of impact. Afterward, the government of Israel would commend the heroism shown by the Italian security services that morning. It would be noted that none fled their po-

sitions, though if they had, their fate would have been precisely the same.

The explosion could be heard from St. Peter's Square to the Piazza di Spagna to the Janiculum Hill. Those on the upper floors of buildings were treated to the remarkable sight of a redand-orange fireball rising over the northern end of the Villa Borghese, followed quickly by a pitch-black mushroom cloud of smoke. Windows a mile from the blast point were shattered by the thunderclap of the shock wave, including the stainedglass windows in a nearby church. Plane trees were stripped of their leaves. Birds died in mid-flight. Geologists at a seismic monitoring station first feared that Rome had been shaken by a moderate earthquake.

None of the Italian security men survived the initial blast. Nor did any of the fourteen visitors waiting to be admitted to the mission, or the embassy personnel who happened to be working in offices closest to the spot where the truck exploded.

Ultimately, though, it was the second vehicle that inflicted the most loss of life. The Vatican courier, who had been knocked to the ground by the force of the blast, saw the car turn into the cul-de-sac at high speed. Because it was a Lancia sedan, and because it was carrying four men and traveling at a high rate of speed, he assumed it was a police vehicle responding to the bombing. The priest got to his feet and started toward the scene through the dense black smoke, hoping to be of assistance to the wounded and the dead alike. Instead he saw a scene from a nightmare. The doors of the Lancia opened simultaneously, and the four men he assumed to be police officers began firing into the compound. Survivors who staggered from the burning wreckage of the embassy were mercilessly cut down.

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The four gunmen ceased firing at precisely the same time, then clambered back into the Lancia. As they sped away from the burning compound, one of the terrorists aimed his automatic weapon at the Jesuit. The priest made the sign of the cross and prepared himself to die. The terrorist just smiled and disappeared behind a curtain of smoke.

2

TIBERIAS, ISRAEL

FIFTEEN MINUTES AFTER THE LAST SHOT WAS FIRED in Rome, the secure telephone rang in the large, honey-colored villa overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Ari Shamron, the twice former director-general of the Israeli secret service, now special adviser to the prime minister on all matters dealing with security and intelligence, took the call in his study. He listened in silence for a moment, his eyes closed tightly in anger. "I'm on my way," he said, and hung up the phone.

Turning around, he saw Gilah standing in the doorway of the study. She was holding his leather bomber jacket in her hand, and her eyes were damp with tears.

"It just came on the television. How bad?"