



"THE RIDE OF YOUR PAST LIFE."

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international bestselling author

PAINTER OF THE DAMNED

**THE KEY TO ULTIMATE POWER IS
HIDDEN IN THE PAST**

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1589 A.D. Republic of Venice



The blade grazed Angelo Mascari's cheek, missed only by the turn of his head, followed by a lunge to the chest. The Whip Snake lashed a lightning-fast double-tap. Angelo parried at the last second. His opponent pranced back on the platform and stared him down *en garde*, the tip of his sword trained on Angelo's throat.

Swiping the face was forbidden in this demonstration, but neither the judge nor Angelo's Master Fabris called it out. Despite the friendly nature of the bout, death seemed but moments away.

The crowd clamored for more.

Never had Angelo dueled before such an audience. Spectators filled Piazza San Marco to the edges of the Palazzo Ducale, the basilica, and the arcades. He raised his rapier in defense. Exhalations skated across the polished steel in heated cloud bursts.

The Whip Snake's epithet suited him not only for his speed but also for his physique. Lithe and reed-thin, taller and skinnier than Angelo, Rocco Bonetti—the name his mother surely preferred—grinned, knowing the potentially lethal move was illegal. Angelo had thought the moniker pompous before the bout, but now found it accurate. Deadly accurate.

Spectators shouted for Angelo's defeat—an outcome that seemed more inevitable with every passing second. Ten minutes prior, he was supremely confident; it was by luck or defensive maneuvers that it hadn't ended already.

He felt his tanned complexion reddening beneath the late-spring Mediterranean sun. Beads of sweat rolled from his wavy, dark locks, threatening to land in his eyes, but averting his focus for even a half-second to wipe his brow would lead to an embarrassing loss, if not the end of his career. Or worse.

The snake shuffled his feet and tapped the platform with his rapier.

Angelo jumped back, poised to protect himself.

Laughter erupted from the piazza. The Whip Snake's body vacillated in a hypnotic rhythm, his face breaking into a sharp smirk. At twenty-one, a single year older than Angelo, his opponent knew how to milk his moment, giving the audience the entertainment they desired. That he toyed with Angelo in front of the most eminent people in Venice, including the doge, the leader of the Republic, fueled white heat within. He'd have words with this so-called reptile—assuming the man didn't perform another prohibited move and kill him.

It seemed all of Venice watched. As a rising fencing star, he'd been selected to participate in an exhibition with the Whip Snake, who hailed from a rival academy. Angelo was flattered he'd been chosen as the top bill from Master Fabris's school. A victory could lead to a sponsorship from Renzo Scalfini, which was crucial to lighten Angelo's burdens. He owed too many debts to too many people, all of whom watched the contest from the jubilant crowd.

Yet despite the promise of laurels and coin, Angelo only cared about impressing one spectator: Isabella Scalfini—*Renzo's wife*. He would not disappoint her.

True to his name, the Whip Snake swayed side to side in his trademark stance. He swiped the air with his rapier, as if severing the head of an invisible foe kneeling before him. Angelo stood stock still, following Master Fabris's instruction. 'Patience for the right moment is a thing of beauty,' he'd say.

Beauty. *Isabella*.

Though Angelo couldn't see her, he felt her eyes removing his doublet, shirt, and pantaloons, as she'd done less than twenty-four hours prior. The warmth from her lips remained on his inner thigh. The taste of her body lingered on his tongue. He craved more.

The Whip Snake struck, as if sensing his opponent's internal distraction.

Angelo parried and stumbled backward, nearly slipping off the platform.

Spectators exploded with cheers. Even in a friendly bout with no purse, they hungered for blood.

Recovering his footing, Angelo shook his head and forced his brain to concentrate. How to beat a snake, particularly such a quick one? A child of an island city, he had little experience with the creatures. A friend once captured a serpent on the mainland. When the boy removed it from the box, he'd held it by the neck. But going for the Whip Snake's neck was an illegal move. Then again, the judge said nothing upon his opponent's cheek strike. Surprise made a snake more lethal, but snakes could be trampled—*especially* if surprised.

Without another thought, Angelo charged. He hacked relentlessly, startling the Whip Snake. Metal struck metal, clanging as Angelo's opponent parried and retreated down the platform. And then Angelo took a risk—he aimed for Bonetti's neck, but without intent to strike.

As anticipated, Bonetti postured for defense.

Switching to a more elegant form, Angelo flicked his wrist and struck Bonetti's breastplate.

The Whip Snake's jaw popped open, stunned.

Angelo, too, was momentarily dazed by his victory. When realization set in, he launched his fists into the air with a triumphant grunt and paraded the length of the platform to face the spectators on both sides. Though not one to gloat, he reveled in the adoration from a crowd that longed for his death moments earlier.

The whole of the festival applauded as he stepped off the platform.

The prettiest girls in Venice rushed over, congratulating him and clasping his muscles. Maidens batted their eyelashes and shielded their blushes with folding fans. He enjoyed the attention but scanned for his beloved in the massive crowd.

Every Venetian agreed this year's Festa della Sensa had been the most glorious in memory. In the symbolic ceremony of Venice's marriage to the sea, Doge Cicogna had lobbed a golden ring into the Venetian Lagoon as a thousand boats donned with flags of La Serenissima's coat of arms entered the Grand Canal. A parade of red and yellow flags bearing St. Mark's winged lion cemented The Serene Republic's position as the greatest naval power in the world. Partly a celebration of the successful conversion of the Rialto Bridge from wood to stone, each vessel passed beneath the structure to cheers.

Festivities had continued that afternoon in a feast for the senses, as the duke graced his citizens with the commencement of a week-long jubilee in Piazza San Marco, showcasing song, dance, and theater, as well as feats of strength, dexterity, and gallantry on the horse. The celebration culminated with the main event—prowess of the blade.

A slap to the back of his head cut Angelo's search short. He turned to find Master Fabris staring down at him, his crimson-and-gold flat cap angled to the side. The fencing legend, with his curly gray hair and long mustache, was half a head taller than Angelo; his perfect posture made him seem like Mars himself—and as eternally angry.

“I didn't teach you to hack away like a Turkish street rat,” Fabris said.

“Apologies, Master Fabris, but—”

“You embarrassed me in plain view of the entire city. They'll think I instruct my students to cower in fear then flail wildly without a strategy or plan.”

“But Master, that *was* my strategy.”

Fabris narrowed one eye and raised the brow over his other.

“Snakes can only be defeated at the neck. Or crushed altogether.”

Fabris relaxed his face and offered the slightest of smiles. “Rocco Bonetti is not a real snake.”

“No, but the move brought a victory to your illustrious school.”

If Master Fabris meant to offer his agreement or compliment, Angelo would never know, for Fabris received a pat on the back.

“Well done, Fabris,” said the short, blond man with a long goatee. “You performed with purpose.” He shook hands with Fabris, who nodded his thanks.

Angelo assumed the stranger was Nicoletto Giganti, master of the rival school, for beside him, with his head hung low, stood Angelo's recently deposed opponent. Giganti's fitted turquoise velvet waistcoat matched his beret adorned with an ostrich plume, which Angelo had thought fell out of fashion some years prior.

“We had wondered what strategy you'd use to best the best. It was the Whip Snake's first defeat.” Giganti extended his hand. “Well played, indeed, Mascari.”

“Gràssie, siòr,” Angelo replied, giving the man a vigorous handshake.

Fabris tipped his head to Giganti, before Giganti nudged Rocco. “Don’t stand there like you’re still in the falcon’s talons. Lose honorably.”

“You did well, Mascari,” the Whip Snake said. “This time. I look forward to our next bout.” With a sullen bow, he turned on his heel and headed into the crowd.

“Forgive me,” Giganti said. “I haven’t had to train the cur to lose with grace. Now Angelo, I understand you seek a sponsor. I could introduce you to—”

Fabris held up his hand. “I shall ask favor of sponsors when he’s ready.”

The men exchanged words, but Angelo scarcely heard.

Despite the conversation about his future, he resumed scanning the pedestrians meandering amongst street performers and food vendors. He searched for her in eager anticipation, like a young boy expecting a panettone on Christmas morn. It wasn’t long before he spotted his true love: Isabella Scalfini, the young wife of Renzo Scalfini, controlling partner of the largest timber collegantia in the Republic.

She stood beneath the Column of San Todaro, fanning herself, laughing with a friend. Isabella wore an intimately familiar sky-blue dress that accentuated her auburn hair and dark eyes. What her blonde friend wore, he noticed not.

“I believe I have found my sponsor,” Angelo said. “Please excuse me, siòri.”

After a bow to both men, Angelo continued his mission. A costumed marching band interrupted his path. Their drumming matched the excited beat of his heart. He allowed them to pass; then in rhythm to the music, he strolled over to Isabella.

“My ladies,” he said to the women, taking a rare opportunity to converse with the eighteen-year-old beauty in flagrant view for all to see. “A most delightful afternoon for the grandest festa to be held in our most serene city.”

Unable to look away, Angelo locked his gaze with Isabella's. Her almond-shaped eyes smiled upon seeing him. Her presence entranced—no, *ensnared*—him. And he savored every moment of it.

“Congratulations on your victory. Siòr Mascari, is it not?” she asked, her olive skin brightening.

The sweetness of her voice always sparked memories of delicacies Angelo's mother baked. Combined with the floral and cinnamon aroma emanating from Isabella's embroidered white leather gloves, his mouth watered.

“Gràssie, siòra,” he replied. “We met at Siòr Balbi's Christmas Ball. Do you not remember?”

“Clearly I do. Otherwise, I wouldn't have remembered your name. Perhaps you are the one who has forgotten.”

“I could never forget you, Siòra Scalfini.”

“I meant you have forgotten your manners. Or are you generally in the custom of approaching noble ladies without our husbands present or without so much as a gentleman by your side?” Isabella widened her eyes as they landed on Angelo's neck.

His hand instinctively went to the target of her gaze—the silver crucifix she'd given him some weeks prior. He hadn't removed it since. It must've slipped out during the duel. He tucked it back into his shirt.

Her friend arched her eyebrows and snickered with disdain, oblivious to his silent conversation with Isabella.

“Siòra, I—” Angelo started.

“Go easy on the rascal, Siòra Scalfini,” a voice said from behind them.

The three turned to find two men approaching.

Angelo was already acquainted with *i Fratelli Uccello*—the Bird Brothers. With every meeting, more and more, he wished their paths had never crossed. Though, had they not, he never would have met Isabella. The flaxen-haired Vito Uccello strode up to them. His sharp, eagle-like features and broad posture always posed a threatening presence. His smaller brother Ivan followed a step behind. With raven hair and a tight face, the man scowled at everything he saw. Beady eyes darted over Angelo, as if stalking a mouse. Without a word, he knew what the Bird Brothers wanted—the black book they'd tasked Angelo to retrieve from Renzo and Isabella's bedroom. After six months, he was no closer. Well, he *was* closer but hadn't the desire to complete the task.

"I'm sure Angelo has a strong reason for approaching unaccompanied ladies, and we can vouch for him," Vito continued.

"Indeed," Angelo said. "I was, in fact, looking for Siòra Scalfini's husband."

"I believe he's speaking with the Minister of Finance," Isabella replied.

"Ah, see," Ivan said to Isabella's friend. "No cause for concern."

Angelo stole a look at Isabella. She observed him a second longer than appropriate. That she was putting on a show prompted an audible sigh of relief. Scenes of the previous day's activities reflected in her eyes, causing a hardness in his pantaloons he needed to quell with less arousing thoughts.

Vito took a long gulp from his wooden mug and burped. A rank cloud of regurgitated anchovies, garlic, and red wine wafted through the air. The two wavered from inebriation, as Ivan took a swig from a bottle, then refilled his brother's mug.

The brothers cured his potential embarrassment.

"On such a day," Vito said, "there is cause for celebration and, and—"

“And gaiety,” Ivan offered. He brushed a lock of hair off the shoulder of Isabella’s friend.

“Guard yourself, sir,” she said, shooing his hand away.

Ivan scowled, his tightened eyes seeming to bore into her skull. She sidestepped closer to Isabella.

“Come now, ladies,” Vito said. “It’s a beautiful day—and a day for beauty and love. Community and sharing. Perhaps a day for... sharing love.” Vito massaged Isabella’s shoulder. She tensed and looked at Angelo.

Fury sizzled within him. Vito surely meant to provoke a reaction; Angelo would be a fool to counter.

“Perhaps you can both join us at the masquerade tonight.” Vito’s hand slithered down Isabella’s arm to her waist.

Angelo gripped the hilt of his rapier with such hatred that his knuckles turned ashen white.

“Remove your hand from Lady Scalfini,” he said, “lest you wish to lose it.”

“Mind your place, Mascari!” Vito kept his palm on Isabella.

“Mind yours, sir,” Isabella said, squirming out of his hold.

“What did you say, woman?”

“Ah, there’s my husband,” she said, pointing to a man in his early forties with a pock-marked face and a frame twice the size of Angelo’s. He limped toward them, tucking a large, thick envelope into his jerkin. “He’s your friend, is he not?”

“Indeed,” Vito said. He and Ivan stepped back from the ladies.

Vito’s words were the last of the conversation Angelo heard. The thought of yet another man attempting to possess Isabella churned his stomach. He would abandon

his career—he'd abandon *everything*—if it meant he and his love could live in peace. As the group turned toward Isabella's advancing husband, Angelo stole off into the crowd, nearly barreling over a boy wearing a red gondolier's hat with a white feather.

I



Present Day

Nick O'Connor bumped into a young boy in a red hat with a white feather as Julia dragged him through a throng of people. On either side of the corridor stood rows of marble columns, each topped with a crystal orb. A faceless, naked old man used a paintbrush to splatter a column. It wasn't the man's decrepit body, but the claret-colored streaks he made on the marble that caused Nick to shudder.

A rhythmic drumming pounded his ears.

"...Nick! Come on. Not again—not now!" His wife flicked her gaze back to him, her emerald eyes imploring him with exasperated desperation. She plowed forward, weaving through the people, hauling him along, her honey-blonde ponytail bobbing with their steps.

Nick glanced at the boy to make sure he was okay. The kid was fine. And his feathered hat was gone, replaced with a red baseball cap.

As Nick turned forward, the columns disintegrated into space. A busy train terminal, similar to a modern airport, appeared. He recalled where they were—Milan's Central Station. And where they were headed—the U.S. Consulate. But he couldn't figure out why they were walking at such a brisk clip, nor why Julia was leading him like they

were seconds from missing their train. Though the regression to Angelo had receded and his memory was fuzzy, he was certain they just got *off* a train. It was a five-minute cab ride to the consulate, but it wasn't a life-threatening emergency. Or was it? Events of the previous days felt more nightmarish than nearly being killed by the Whip Snake. Fragments of images lurked in his mind: The Palazzo Ducale, Carlo, della Porta, Tintoretto, *Paradise...* Isabella.

The pounding intensified in volume and tempo, like a drummer on an ancient galley, gearing up for ramming speed.

Again, Nick checked behind him. A college kid also in a rush had a pair of headphones on; a thumping techno remix of *I Am the Walrus* emanated from them.

Relieved the intrusion came from modern technology, Nick unwound in the comfort that he and Julia were finally going home. Less than a day, and they'd be in their own bed. *No turning back now*. He wouldn't forget Venice anytime soon, or ever, but then he noticed the real reason why his wife was in such a hurry.

Fifteen feet behind the college kid, two uniformed cops matched their pace. One locked eyes with him. The other spoke into his radio.

"Please, Nick! Snap out of it," Julia yelled. "We gotta move."

A tidal wave of sickening emotions he couldn't begin to sort washed over him; memories stampeded his brain. After escaping Venice under cover of darkness, they had spent the night in an inn on the mainland. They woke early and caught a train to Milan. Their goalpost was the consulate, where they'd apply for emergency passports, if not protection, before flying home.

He assumed the cops were following them because Detective Fanella in Venice put an APB out. Rage boiled in his gut; the O'Connors were so close to their destination.

Nick had enough of all the damn obstacles. He squeezed Julia's hand and matched her speed so she wasn't yanking on him anymore. She met his gaze and understood in a blink: her husband was back. He let her lead, grateful she had taken charge. The exit sign came into focus, his newfound fluency in Italian helping out.

Twenty feet to the door, then a cab. They could sprint to the consulate and request amnesty.

Julia skidded to a stop, holding him back. Two more policemen appeared at the exit, blocking their path. He pivoted around. The cops to their rear were nearly on them. A fifth officer approached from the side. Sprinting back to the platform and crossing the tracks was an option, but he didn't want to put Julia in any more danger.

In their hesitation, the police were on them like a pack of dogs.

