

CHAPTER ONE

Rafael Benito Castigi tossed his groceries on the counter like a bruised quarterback handing off a ball. He might have lost his taste for the game, but it was twenty to nothing. He'd never quit in the first quarter, and he wasn't about to start now.

Grimly, he put everything away, hating the tiny refrigerator, the tiny apartment, and his tiny life. What happened to the time when he arose eager for the day, the next mission, the next country to save?

Oh, working with Nick Escavido as a security analyst was interesting enough, but the buildings were too easy to break into, the fatcats they worked for too complacent. Might as well face it. He was bored.

And when he got bored, he got antsy.

And when he got antsy, the need to drink almost overwhelmed him.

With leashed violence, Rafe slammed a T.V. dinner in the mini-microwave before he remembered he had a dinner date. With that cute little number down the hall. Pulling the frozen dinner back out, he carefully wrapped it in cellophane, stuck it back in the package and put it in the freezer. If the Seal training had taught him one thing, it was to utilize every skill and every resource because the smallest detail could make a difference between living or dying.

Rafe stared into his freezer. Listen to him, equating a frozen dinner with the tools of his old trade. Once a Seal, always a Seal. Even when they'd cashiered him out of the service with a trumped up dishonorable discharge.

Furiously, he shut the freezer door hard enough to jolt the fridge against the wall. No matter how much he liked Nick and Isabella, no matter how crazy he was about that bouncing baby boy of theirs, he was gonna have to quit, find something more interesting to do. Before he totally lost his edge. Why that loss should bother him since he'd vowed three years ago to never again kill another soul, he wasn't sure. But it did.

Dissatisfaction with life in general and himself in particular had made him invite his floor's newest occupant out on a date. It would be the first date he'd had in over three years. Oh, he'd bedded his share of women since returning to the city--he wasn't *that* depressed--but the ritual of dating had held little charm for him when he viewed the world through an alcoholic haze.

As he showered, he wondered what had drawn him to the girl. She was a pretty little thing, supposedly did something in marketing for a big firm. And she was blond. He'd always had a thing for blonds, liked her looks well enough to impulsively invite her out. In fact, she reminded him a bit of Honor.

Honor....Rafe's smile grew wistful. He often recalled the last time he'd seen her, regal in velvet, holding that rascally Renaissance rogue's hand as she stepped into the mirror and into the past. He missed her and Dom both, and was sorry that the illumination they'd apparently found was not to be his. Such a fantastic journey, he suspected, was possible only for the devout. After all, Nick only went back to Renaissance Italy to protect Ernie, having not the slightest inkling at the time that he'd find his own destiny in a time and a mission he scorned.

Stepping out of the shower to collect a thick towel, Rafe had to smile. It had almost been worth the past year or so of boredom just to watch cool, calm, cynical Nick go nuts over a

woman who turned his rational reality end over end. There was only one way to describe Nick's mood while he rescued Isabella from one scrape after another, in the present and the past...

Tizzy. That was what old Auntie had called that perpetual state of frenzy. Even now, when he and Isabella were married, Nick always lived his formerly orderly life on the edge, wondering what his impulsive, passionate wife would do next. And he loved every minute of it.

A heavy sigh escaped Rafe. He hated to admit it, but he was envious. He'd never been one for the slippers and robe routine with the little wife by his side, but women like Isabella and Honor sure kept life interesting.

Funny thing about fate. Rafe shuddered, recalling the fantastic rays the mirror cast as it opened a window into a world long gone. He had no interest in going near that magical mirror, and little faith in a power beyond the end of his own arm. But seeing Isabella almost every day, understanding the adjustments a girl from the 1500's had to make in her new husband's modern world, made Rafe realize that somewhere, life still offered adventure.

Even for the likes of burnt out ex Navy Seals....

Briskly, Rafe rubbed down his hard, muscular body. He flexed his biceps in the mirror. At least the visits to the gym had paid off. That softness creeping up on him had reversed itself when he stopped drinking. He turned away from his craggy face, disinterested. He'd never understood what women found attractive about his ugly mug, but Isabella assured him that he was *'molto bello.'*

An hour later, showered, shaved and dressed in khakis and a button-down shirt, he walked down the hall to knock on the girl's door. He handed her a small box of Godiva chocolates, trying not to remember the last time he'd offered one of these as a gift, to Honor. And how, at the time, the little gold package had cost him his last dime.

Miss Marketer offered him a chirpy smile. "Thanks." She tossed the box inside on a table and locked her door. He swore that her thick blond do bounced even when she stood still. She must have been a cheerleader.

They'd barely walked to the street before Rafe realized he'd made a mistake. He had about as much in common with this Ivy Leager as a wolf had in common with a lap dog. Same species, but that was about it.

Gallantly, he listened to her drivel about the bargains she'd found at Bloomie's, trying to pretend fascination as he pulled her chair out for her at the intimate Italian restaurant he'd selected.

"...and the shoes were seventy-five percent off. Can you believe it?" When she stretched out a long, shapely leg so he could admire her designer shoe, he did feel a stirring of interest, but it had nothing to do with her personality or conversation.

"Imagine that. So...you a Jets fan?"

Her expression glazed over. "Sure. You think they'll make the World Series this year?"

Rafe gave up.

As soon as he decently could, he paid for their tab and escorted her out the door.

"Is it true you were really a Navy Seal?" she asked as they strolled down a side street, opting to walk instead of take the subway at this late hour. It was an O.K. part of town.

"Yeah. Watch your step." He pulled her aside from a puddle, but she wasn't distracted.

"Why'd you quit?"

Rafe was about to give an evasive reply when he sensed movement behind them. A scraggly white dude brandished a puny knife at them. Rafe had cleaned his nails with a bigger blade.

"Give me your wallet, big man!" The would-be robber jabbed at the air in front of Rafe's nose.

The girl screeched and jumped sideways, twisting her ankle in her impractical designer shoes. She started to fall. Rafe caught her with one hand and grabbed the guy's knife wrist with the other, closing his fingers slowly in a brutal vise.

But the panicked girl struggled so hard she pulled Rafe off balance.

The robber wrenched his wrist away, jabbing wildly. The knife tip slashed the girl's lambskin leather jacket. She gave a bleat of terror and turned to run.

Sighing, Rafe let her go, turned on the tall, skinny robber and kicked him in the knee. The guy's leg buckled, but what he lacked in weight he made up in fight. Surging forward on his other leg, he moved in, the knife extended toward Rafe's chest.

Vaguely Rafe sensed the girl watching from a safe distance, but then the old moves came back, and he was too busy fighting to think. Rafe dodged sideways, catching the guy's arm and twisting it. Amazingly, though, he refused to drop the knife, lashing sideways at Rafe's groin with his good knee.

No more Mister Nice Guy....With a Karate chop on the guy's wrist that forced him to drop the knife, Rafe began a systematic pummeling of the robber's head and shoulders. If the silly idiot had stayed down every time Rafe punched him, he might have stopped, but the guy had more grit than sense. Finally, the girl's frightened whimpering impinging on him, Rafe drew back a fist and cold-cocked the robber on the chin. His shoulders hit the sidewalk first, so forceful was the blow. He went down, and he stayed down.

Rafe turned to see to the girl, but she backed away, her hands up to ward him off. "Get away from me, you....you....killer!"

Freezing where he stood, Rafe stared at her. *Killer*. A memory flash of the kids carrying balloons right before the mines blew them to kingdom come almost made him groan. But he shoved the ugly image away and asked emotionlessly, "You hurt?"

She stared at his unmarked clothes and face. Only the slight redness at his knuckles gave any indication that he'd been in a fight. Collecting her tattered jacket and equally tattered dignity around her shoulders, she stalked off. "I'll see myself home, thanks for nothing."

Her steps faded. While Rafe was staring down at the robber, wondering what the hell to do with him, a cop car pulled to the curb.

By the time he finished filing his report, and they matched the robber's prints to those of a twice convicted mugger, he was weary. Even as one of the cops took him home--or at least back to the apartment--he leaned back against the seat, more depressed than ever since Honor and Dom dragged him kicking and screaming back to life.

That night, he sat alone in his cramped breakfast room until the sun came up. On the table before him sat two objects.

One, his passport.

Two, a fifth of aged bourbon.

Choose one or the other. Go back to the mid-East, maybe work on some of the oil rigs, anything that required getting his hands dirty. Sheer physical exhaustion was better than all this

time to think. He was sure as hell certain he'd never be content the way his life was now. He wasn't cut out for respectability. He'd tried for over a year, but once a Seal, always a Seal.

Or once a lone wolf, always a lone wolf.

At dawn, he rose to pack.

Isabella answered his knock, the baby on her hip. Her striking face lit up, framed by that incredible fall of auburn hair. "Rafe, *avanti!* It is too long since you came to see us."

Her English grew better daily, he was glad to see.

The baby gurgled and held out his hands to his favorite playmate. His throat tight with emotion, Rafe took the chubby little boy with Nick's black hair and black eyes, but he vibrated with Isabella's passion and mischief.

Under Isabella's approving gaze, Rafe bounced the boy up in the air, catching him securely in his big hands. The baby laughed.

A door opened. Nick exited his study, smiling when he saw Rafe. "So, can't stay away from us, huh? Not even on a Saturday morning." Nick put his arm around his wife.

After she put the baby down for a nap, Isabella insisted Rafe stay for breakfast. With long-suffering patience, Nick forced down the burned toast, charred bacon and hard eggs, winking at Rafe across the table. But Rafe had never seen Nick so happy before he had to eat Isabella's earnest offerings. She was a smart girl. She'd get the hang of everything.

As he helped wash up, Rafe finally broke the news. "Well, uh, actually, I came to say good-bye. I got a noon plane reservation to Milan, and from there on to Kuwait."

Simultaneously, Isabella and Nick turned on him.

"No, Rafe!"

"I'll give you a raise, if you stay, buddy!"

Wiping his hands dry on the towel, Rafe sighed. "Yeah, well, that's nice, but it's not the money. I'm not cut out for corporate respectability, Nick. I tried, you know I did."

Gritting his teeth together, Nick bit back more protest. He nodded. "I know. But....what will you do over there?"

"I got a coupla buddies who retired, work in the oil fields. They've always said if I want a job, just let them know."

Isabella started to say something, but Nick caught her shoulder and said gravely, "You have to do whatever will make you happy."

A short laugh escaped Rafe before he could stop it. Happy? He wasn't sure he could even spell the word anymore. But he only said, "You got Ernie's address? I want to tell him good-bye."

Nick smiled. "I thought you wouldn't go near his place because of the mirror."

Rafe shrugged. "Hey, we all have our hang-ups....I gonna leave you in a pinch?"

"I'll never be able to replace you, Rafe, but I'm not referring to business." Nick punched him lightly on the shoulder, as if he knew it was the only physical affection Rafe could accept. "You keep in touch, or I'll sic Ernie on you."

Rafe gave a mock shudder. Awkwardly, he kissed Isabella's elegant cheekbone. "Keep him busy, Bella."

Her saucy smile won a pinch on the rear from her husband. "Oh, I shall."

They walked him to the door.

"You ever need anything at all, you just let us know, Rafe," Nick told him.

"Same to you. And....thanks, Nick. I never would have survived the past year without you." As Rafe walked back outside, he wondered if the old saw were true.

When God closed a door, somewhere he opened a window....

No one answered his knock at the elegant condominium Ernie had insisted on purchasing when Nick married. But the door was open, so Rafe poked his head inside. He knew Ernie was friendly with half the people in the building, and assumed Ernie would be right back. He really did want to tell him good-bye, so he went in.

Ernie had taken the picture of Honor he'd found in an old art book and had it reproduced and blown up. The rendering took pride of place over Ernie's elegant antique couch.

Trying to ignore his own loneliness, Rafe stopped in front of it. He stared at Honor and her two children, wondering if God, somehow, somewhere, had a plan for him, too.

Under a closed door down the hallway, something started to glow. The light was so bright that it cast rays even through the cracks.

His breath catching in his throat, Rafe backed toward the entrance. He knew what stood behind the door. He'd never been afraid of any man, but the power that activated that mirror had nothing to do with man.

His heart lurching in fear, he reached behind him for the knob.

"Rafael Castigi," said a soft, musical voice.

His hand dropping, Rafe closed his eyes in denial, but he'd heard that voice once before. When Dom and Honor transitioned. The angel's voice came from nowhere, and everywhere. He couldn't say whether she spoke inside his mind or in the room, but she certainly spoke inside his heart. Torn between fear and fascination, he backed another step until he brushed up against the door.

"Rafael Castigi," murmured the voice again. Softer, sweeter, drawing him inexorably beyond his own hard, contained self. A gossamer, silken thread that constricted Rafe's rib cage until he couldn't breathe, he couldn't think.

But he could walk....When he opened his eyes, he was standing in Ernie's spare bedroom before the mirror. Stunned, he stared down at his own sneakered feet. How had he gotten here?

"Rafael, do you enjoy the shadows?" The angel looked down at him, her filmy robes wisps of glory against the soft white of her beating wings.

The light radiating into every corner made her question all the more incisive. How did she know, this ethereal being who hovered over him like the judgment of the God he'd forsaken, that he often felt like a scurrying creature of the night? Afraid of illumination, but fearful and alone even in the dark.

Some warrior he was. But his gaze was drawn to the clearness in the middle of the mirror. There, his true enemy stood, the one who kept him from finding peace.

Himself. He couldn't stand the trained killer he'd been, but he didn't like what he was becoming....He closed his eyes against his own wavering reflection, but he could not block the sound of her voice.

"Rafael, you are needed in a world beyond your own."

His eyes snapped open. Needed? The vise around his chest loosened enough for him to gasp, "B--but where? And how do you know?"

"It was written that others would risk their lives to bring you back into the light. But you have only half emerged. The final step you must take yourself."

What nonsense was this? Rafe shaded his eyes with his hand, trying to get a good look at that heavenly countenance, but the light was so bright that he could not clearly see her face. Besides, on a deeper level, perhaps in the soul he'd tried for years to pretend he'd lost, he knew sight was immaterial now.

This truth could only be felt in the heart.

"What do you want of me?" He felt sick, faint with mixed fear and exhilaration. He'd wanted a challenge....

"Earth's descendents are in peril at the dawn of the next millenium. They have need of you."

"But what--"

A severe frown descended on that luminous countenance, muting enough of the light that he could finally see her face.

She was so beautiful that she brought tears to his eyes. He was unworthy to even stand in her glow, much less be blessed with the love he felt flowing over him in waves.

"Do you have courage enough to fight for right?"

Why did she persist in talking to him in riddles? Rafe swallowed. "But what does God want me to do?"

Her wings stopped beating until she hovered there in mid-air. He felt the weight of her answer even before she replied softly, "Even heaven has need of warriors, from time to time. But it is not God's will to dictate. The choice is yours."

The rays of light bouncing off the ceiling and walls softened to an unearthly glow.

A strange image formed in the mirror. Twin blue moons cast soft light down on a sandy stretch of beach. The stars above were larger, brighter than any Rafe had ever seen, and the constellations formed strange shapes.

The pale sea that washed up on the shore had a strange luminescent foam that reminded Rafe of a pink pearl. When the tide washed back out, obviously pulled powerfully by those twin moons, it left a pearly pink deposit that mixed in sparkly remnants with the white sand.

The trees lining the edge of the beach were odd, tall like palms, but thick with bluish green fronds more like weeping willows. The leaves dragged the beach, dancing languidly in a strong breeze. As Rafe watched, wondering if he was glimpsing heaven itself, the peace was spoiled.

A harsh sobbing pant broke the quiet of waves and wind. A girl, tall, lissome, with a glorious head of pale gold hair flying about her hips, ran into view, her small feet leaving imprints in the pristine sand. She had her head turned as she looked fearfully over her shoulder, so he couldn't see her face. She was dressed in a strange silvery sheath that sparkled in the moonlight. It came only to her knees and bared her arms, displaying a magnificent form. She was barefoot, and as he watched, she stumbled and fell over a piece of brackish driftwood.

For an instant, she stayed prone, sobbing with shortened breath and fear as a group of men in strange black uniform ran up the beach after her, their booted feet stomping her footprints into dust.

A thrill of alertness almost forgotten ran down Rafe's spine. Automatically, he reached for the pistol he always carried in a shoulder holster. Vaguely, he sensed the angel saying something to him, but his acute attention was on the girl and the soldiers. She leaped to her feet to run, but the stumble had cost her dearly. She'd barely taken two steps before two soldiers were on her.

Rafe spared a quick glance at the angel. "I accept."

And he stepped into the mirror, down on to the pink and white sand, arriving as the soldiers caught the girl between them. One lifted a lock of that gorgeous hair to his face. The other ran a hand down over her slim body.

Their laughter was a universal sound that apparently bridged time and tide. Rafe had heard it many times before, even sometimes from his own fellow Seals.

The lust of conquest and battle, of spoils about to be fought over. Not this time. "Get away from her," Rafe growled, his Beretta pointed in a capable hand.

More soldiers ran up the beach, and he knew this might be a very short adventure, but he had few options. If he could wing the two who held the girl, maybe....

The two soldiers froze, staring at him in astonishment. The girl, too, turned to look. Rafe took one quick glance at her and away, but his steady breathing quickened, and not from fear.

Her eyes were bruised violets, looking at him through dark, tear-stained curly lashes that matched her dark brows. Her skin was so fair, her features so perfect, that she reminded Rafe of the angel he'd just left.

For a moment, the four stared at each other.

Then one soldier, who wore strange geometric quadrilateral chevrons on one shiny black sleeve, bared sharp, pointed teeth in a smirk and said to his companion, "Another time traveller, Hadrian! This one wants to be her savior. What an amusing spectacle this barbarian and the little empath will make for the Chief Consul!"

Rafe had little time to wonder why they spoke a strange dialect of English. Not exact, but close enough that he could pick out their words. Resigned, he tightened his finger on the trigger, aiming at the officer's collarbone.

A terrible, high pitched ululation almost knocked him from his feet. One of the approaching warriors pointed an odd weapon at him. It had a megaphone for a barrel, and glowed with an eerie spout of flame that was like a laser, yet had no heat. The arc sizzled through the air, seeming drawn by the metal of Rafe's gun.

Instantly, the Beretta melted into white-hot goo, burning Rafe's palm before he could drop it. He didn't take time to wince, or lick his wound. Automatically switching tactics, he lowered one shoulder to rush the two officers, but other soldiers descended on him, pounding with gloved hands and kicking with sharp-toed boots.

Rafe managed to beat several of them aside, lashing with his feet and chopping with the side of his unwounded hand, but they overwhelmed him by sheer numbers. One brandished the strange megaphone weapon, pressing a button on the side. Before Rafe's astonished eyes, the megaphone folded in upon itself, leaving a formidable billy club.

The weapon lifted high, its tip glowing red in the bluish moonlight. Rafe tried to duck, but he was held too firmly. The club descended with a crack upon his cranium.

His eyes rolling back in his head, Rafe caught one last flashing glimpse of the girl.

Her big violet eyes were wet with tears. But for him? Or herself? He did not know, but she was so forlorn that he burned with shame at failing her.

And then he knew nothing.....

By slow degrees, Rafe awoke, wondering if he was in another alcoholic delirium and just hadn't realized it yet. Hearing came back first. He heard familiar sounds in the distance: marching feet, and the slapping of hands upon weapons. Was he back in boot camp?

Feeling returned next. He shifted restlessly, feeling something soft and warm under his skin. All of his skin. As his leg moved, he felt a fur covering fall away and realized he was naked.

Sight came last. Hazy light fell in diffuse waves upon a cell of creamy stone. Copper-colored metal bars made an ugly gash upon a bright turquoise sky. Apparently day had come in this strange reality.

Rafe sat up, cradling his pounding head as he looked around more closely. The same sturdy alloy formed bars at the cell opening, beyond which he could see a dark, empty corridor. At first, he thought he was alone. But in the corner against the bars, which was the only area of the tiny cell not taken up by the plush bed Rafe lay upon, another pile of furs moved.

His eyes had adjusted to the muted light now. He just made out a long swath of pale gold hair above the red spotted brown furs. The same skins covered him. They were larger, and stranger, than any animal skin he'd ever seen. He hoped he didn't have to encounter one of the beasts living.

Unblinking eyes glowed at him in the dark. They were luminescent in the shadows, reminding Rafe of feline eyes back on Earth. The girl? Why did she watch him so warily?

A loud popping sound was matched by a yelp from the girl. She bolted to her feet, away from the cell bars, and Rafe realized she'd been jolted with whatever passed for electricity here.

As she moved, standing up into brighter light, the furs fell away, revealing a tall, curvaceous, perfectly shaped body. Her full breasts were capped by pale pink aureoles, so firm they barely swayed with her motion, and her tiny waist flared into generous but not large hips. The vee between her long, powerful legs was centered by a puff of golden blond hair. She was gorgeous, obviously human, and exactly what he lusted after in a woman. His body reacted accordingly.

She'd been about to duck down for the furs again, but his avid stare seemed to turn her to stone. Her gaze fell upon his own groin.

Rafe felt himself turning red, and he automatically covered his erection with an edge of the fur.

Coarse laughter seemed to fill the cell.

"By the gods, despite his natural endowment, perhaps the barbarian is a virgin as well," said a voice that sounded like the same one that had taunted him earlier.

Abruptly, Rafe realized three things.

One, the tiny red specks aimed at the bed from all four corners were cameras, and they were being watched.

Two, the girl he'd crossed time to save was a virgin and anything but grateful to him.

And three, these ruthless soldiers who seemed to have watched too many bad Cecil B. de Mille movies expected him to prove true to type and perform for their amusement.

Defiantly tossing off the furs, Rafe stood and walked over to the girl, cursing them and his own persistent arousal with every step.