CHAPTER ONE

Rome – Wednesday 2 February 1661, nightfall

The bells of the Château Saint-Ange were ringing out for all they were worth, announcing the evening service. A silhouetted figure hurried along the wall of the southern tower as if trying to escape the din, then crossed towards the Tiber and disappeared down the stairway which led to the riverbank. Buffeted by gusts of wind and squalls of cold rain, the shadowy willows growing against the wall now covered it almost entirely. François d’Orbay let go of the folds of his rain-soaked grey cloak. He paused for a second at the bottom of the steps, allowing his eyes sufficient time to become accustomed to the half-light, then pulled down his hood to protect his head and started walking again, along the overgrown riverbank. The boat was waiting for him, moored to a ring. Without a word, d’Orbay nodded a greeting to the boatman and jumped on board. The boatman leant across and pushed the boat away from the wall, then took the oars while his passenger settled himself on a wooden plank wedged across the stern. Borne along by the current, the boat made good progress, the boatman’s skill keeping it close to the quayside, and almost invisible from the riverbank.

As they were passing Ponte Mazzini, the boatman suddenly lifted his right oar, causing the boat to lurch towards the opposite bank. The boat picked up speed in the current and was heading swiftly for the wall when, at the last moment, the boatman swung it sideways against a stone outcrop just beneath the surface of the water. The
hull scraped along the quayside and the boat came to a sudden halt.

    Plunging his hands into the water, the boatman grabbed hold of a rope and fixed a copper snap hook to it. He signalled to his passenger to duck down.

    Guided by the cable, the boat entered a tunnel where there was barely a finger’s depth of water beneath the hull. Stretched out in the boat, d’Orbay gazed up at the mossy, vaulted roof, pressing the hood of his cape over his face to protect himself from the stench of sewers that caught in his throat.

As the darkness grew more complete, the boat slowed down. The boatman’s voice echoed in the tunnel:

    ‘We are almost there, sir.’

    D’Orbay did not reply; he was too busy trying to focus on the glimmer of light which had appeared in front of the boat. The air became lighter as the tunnel broadened out.

    He could make out five torches mounted on the wall, and opposite them a quay of white stone with a staircase leading upwards. Leaving his guide there, d’Orbay jumped out of the boat. He walked swiftly, his boots echoing on the stone floor.

    Before long he detected the muffled sounds of a conversation. A moment later, pushing aside a heavy curtain of dark velvet, he entered a room whose rich decorations contrasted strongly with the bare underground passageway he had just come through. The bare, damp stone gave way to panelling in precious woods, adorned with paintings and decorated with two large Venetian mirrors reflecting the pale light from the candles.

    François d’Orbay let out a sigh of satisfaction as he saw the smiles of the six men present, who had fallen silent as he made
his appearance. Six of the fourteen, he thought as he passed across the stone threshold. Six who have come from England, Spain, Italy, Austria and Poland.

They were seated in large, black-leather armchairs, all identical but one, whose back was crowned with a gilded wooden sun, and whose arms extended to form the claws of a griffon. Five plus one, thought d’Orbay, gazing at its occupant with a mixture of affection and respect. Giacomo Del Sarto, a faithful friend and a doctor who was capable of miracles. Giacomo Del Sarto, the great and mysterious master ...

‘I am happy to see you again, Giacomo.’

The tall, thin man he had just addressed did not answer, but signalled to him to sit down. Taking off his cloak, d’Orbay threw it onto a chair and came forward to greet each of his fellow guests.

‘A thousand pardons for my lateness, my friends. The journey was not entirely without incident.’

Still without a word, Giacomo gestured that this mattered little, then leant forward to pluck the starched cover from the round table before them. Once this was removed, the marble table revealed at its centre a mosaic motif, featuring the same sun surrounded by fourteen interlinked arches.

‘Now that our Brother from Paris has arrived, I propose that we get straight to the point. Some of you are no doubt wondering why I have summoned this extraordinary assembly. Would you enlighten us, François?’ he added, turning to d’Orbay.

‘Our information regarding Mazarin’s health has been confirmed,’ he replied. ‘This time he really is mortally ill. No matter that his mages predict a prompt recovery; he is close to death, even if he is Chief Minister. The rats are already busying themselves behind the scenes, and Paris is buzzing with talk of his succession, in both