

**The
Hammer
of
God**

REGINALD COOK

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The Hammer of God

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**THIS NOVEL INCLUDES PREVIEW
CHAPTERS OF
REGINALD COOK'S NEXT GREAT SUSPENSE
THRILLER IN THE VEIL SERIES**

Blood

OIL, MONEY, & POWER



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Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

2 Corinthians 4:8-9

We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

1 Peter 5:8

Prologue

Pope Pius IX, as was routine when in Rome and not traveling, knelt in front of his chamber window at sunrise for prayer. Seven years removed from the start of his Papacy in 1846, and the anxieties of the church had not waned an inch. In fact, as time edged forward, the mire under his feet deepened.

Riot led to riot, and the Pope was pronounced a traitor to his country. Palma, a papal prelate, was shot to death while standing near an open window. On the steps of the Cancelleria, where he'd gone to open parliament, his Prime Minister, Rossi, was stabbed to death, and Pius had been pressured to promise a democratic ministry. Then, draped in a homemade disguise, with the assistance of the Bavarian Ambassador, Count Spaur, and the French Ambassador, Duc d'Harcourt, Pope Pius escaped from the Quirinal, where his enemies had surrounded him.

Pope Pius returned to Italy, April 1850, after the French restored order to Rome. But cancerous opportunists, who struck down his authority, had terrorized the citizens and committed untold atrocities, all in the name of democracy.

However, nothing vexed the Pope's soul like the vision he'd been wrestling with for the past two weeks. Every morning since it started, he rose before dawn and entreated the Lord with the prayers of an earnest man, begging for the nightmare to pass. This morning, he closed his eyes and moved his lips with wisps, and the heaviness came faster than usual. Sweat flooded his face, burning his eyes, soaking the neckline of his white vestment.

Asmodeus and his band swept into the Pope's chamber unnoticed and encircled the man on his knees deep in prayer, sneering and snorting their delight. Asmodeus towered over the Pontiff. The eleven others formed a semicircle around them both.

Pope Pius continued to pray, squeezing his eyes tight, his murmurs unintelligible. Asmodeus knelt down and whispered in his ear. Tears bled from under Pius's eyelids, and he clenched his teeth and sobbed, "Why, Lord, why?"

Asmodeus and the others watched the Pope pray harder, this time stretching his hands toward heaven, begging for relief, and they laughed.

The windows of the chamber swung open and a brisk wind swept through. Michael and eleven of God's strongest angels breezed into Pope Pius's chamber, pushing back Asmodeus and his band of demons.

Michael recognized each fallen angelic being and took note. Asmodeus, Chief of Demons, Balan, Prince of Hell, Buer, Commander of Fifty Legions of Devils, Hecate, Queen of Witches, Jezabeth, Demoness of Falsehoods, Naamah, Demoness of Seduction, Philotanus, Demon of Pederasty and Sodomy, Python, Prince of Lying Spirits, Ronwe, Demon Commanding Nineteen Legions of Devils, Semiazas, Chief of Fallen Angeles, Sonneillon, Demoness of Hate, and Vetis, a devil who specialized in the corruption and tempting of the holy.

Pope Pius relaxed a bit, the crying abated, but the prayerful murmurs increased.

"What business have you here?" asked Asmodeus, his voice deep, commanding.

"Our task is as always," answered Michael. "One you know well."

"We have permission to be here," bellowed Asmodeus. "Granted by *our* Father."

"For what purpose?"

A hideous, scaly smile spread across the face of Asmodeus. He reached inside his smoldering cloak and pulled out a thick, metallic sword. The others in his band followed suit.

Michael looked around at those with *him*. Raphael, Gabriel, Uriel, Anael, Raquel, Razel, the Archangels. Malakim and Dunamis, both associated with heroes, known to instill courage, also known as "The Shining Ones". Camael, who wrestled with Jacob. Remiel and Tarshishim, who guide the soul.

Michael turned back toward Asmodeus, placed a hand inside his glowing robe, and pulled out a large mallet-like hammer, with a long, worn, sturdy oak handle. The other angels did the same.

Asmodeus took a deep breath and blew a smoldering orange flame from his nostrils. The fire wrapped itself around the swords of each of those who followed the demon.

Pope Pius cried out, “No Lord! No! Do not abandon thy servant!”

A light, brighter than the essence of the sun, flashed through the room and when it faded, Asmodeus and the demons lay prostrate on the floor. Michael and the Lord’s host stood strong, their hammers glowing with the Holy Spirit.

Asmodeus and the others scrambled to their feet, violently waving their swords and slashing the air, spewing sulfuric fumes. They floated above the room, flames pouring from their nostrils like angry demonic bulls.

“Il Martello de Dio,” whispered Asmodeus.

Michael and the holy hosts rose to the ceiling, each hammer at the ready. Both groups charged forward, clashing into an explosion of fiery thunder. Outside the Pope’s window, the sky turned black, and lightning clawed the sky. A hard, dense rain pounded everything in sight, and the window shutters slammed against the building until they were torn from their hinges and sucked up into the sky.

Pope Pius jumped to his feet and summoned his aide. He sat behind his desk, dictated a decree, and made a list of twelve priests to be called to him at once. When the aide left the room the Pope fell back to his knees.

“Bless oh Lord, Il Martello de Dio, The Hammer of God.”

Pius wept.

1

Gazing down into dazzling blue eyes, Charles Tolbert marveled at the milky softness of his lover's skin. Women had rejected him over the years, casting him aside like a half eaten candy bar, but now he was in love.

Charles stroked dirty brown hair, soft and billowy, like cotton freshly plucked from an aspirin bottle. He closed his eyes, took a whiff of just washed skin, the scent of clean, with a hint of soap lightly engulfing his nostrils.

When he lifted his eyelids, the beauty before him enticed him to tears, but he gently bit his bottom lip, fending off the surge of feral emotion. Without invitation, Charles pressed his lips against a mouth he could no longer resist, the moist touch of which sent his heart a flutter, his senses a blur. He pulled back, sporting a smile that could shame the angels in heaven. But as quickly as it came, his joy dissipated like steam rising from the sea.

"What's wrong?" Charles asked. "Have I done something wrong?"

"I can't do this anymore," his lover answered. "I'm sorry, but this is wrong."

Fear washed over Charles. He fell to his knees. "Please, I can't bear the thought of losing you. I know we've both been under a lot of pressure, but I promise it'll get better."

Picking up the white satin robe that lay across a beaten antique couch, Charles slipped it over velvety arms that caused him to lust over the head he'd kissed more than a few times, and the body he'd held with great admiration and envy. He took a few steps back, and admired his *angel*.

"You always say we'll stop, but we don't," his angel said.

"I know, I know," said Charles. "But let's not talk about it now. We'll talk later. You have my word."

No answer came, just wet eyes and red cheeks. Charles cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you. I love you." *There, I said it.* "We'll talk more in a few days, until then let's continue to keep it quiet."

Still no answer came, just a wounded stare. His lover turned the doorknob and left the room. Guilt washed over Charles. He'd broken his vows again, caught up in an affair he knew would destroy his relationship.

He fastened his ice white, high collar shirt, and slipped into his favorite suit, dark and slightly wrinkled. A wood framed full-length mirror, as old as the building he worked in, caught his attention and forced him to look upon the ugliness he so abhorred. He turned away, chest heaving, mouth dry, and plopped down in a blue leather swivel chair behind his desk. *Losing a love that brings me such childlike joy is not something I'm prepared to do. Chocolates,* he thought. *I'll start with chocolates, then a shower of gifts. It's a bit pretentious, but it's a start.* Charles smiled at himself in the mirror, his jet black hair and boyish good looks overriding the monster that now retreated within. He checked his watch. *I'm late.*

He grabbed the tools of his trade and headed for the door, the monster in the mirror right behind him.

2

Strikingly exquisite, the ten foot stained glass image of the Assumption of Our Lady, surrounded by twenty-three angels in a montage of red and multiple shades of blue handcrafted glass impressed Robert Veil. Church was not his favorite place to be during the middle of baseball season, but sitting there in a spiritual ports-of-call that had played host and home to Chicago's eighteenth century Northern Italian immigrants, Robert's heart pounded and his palms moistened. He was about to lay eyes on his godson, Samuel, for the first time in almost six months.

"I bet he's grown an inch or two," Robert whispered to Donovan Napier, Samuel's father.

"An inch and a half since you last saw him," Donovan whispered back.

"Shhhhhh," Donavon's wife, Alison, hissed. "You boys will have plenty of time to stick your chests out over Sam when service is over."

She gave Donavon a sly smile and sat back against the naked wooden pew. Donavon gave Robert a "*we better do as mommy says*" look. He smiled back. *She's your mommy, not mine.*

Robert, born Catholic, defected as soon as he could slip from under his mother's radar, and had forgotten how opulent Catholic Churches could be, Chicago's Assumption Church especially.

Below the stained glass masterpiece up front, hung a stunning recreation of Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece, *The Last Supper*, which would've made the Italian master proud. Smaller, but every bit as impressive, was an extensive splattering of stained glass images, in addition to dazzling mosaics and murals prominently displayed on the walls and ceiling. Robert counted five different types of Italian marble on the altar rail, and a dozen museum quality statues standing sentry on three sides of the remarkable sanctuary. Under their feet lay a sea of deep royal blue carpet so rich, that walking on it seemed a sin.

Robert glanced over at Donavon and Alison. They were still making goo-goo eyes after ten years of marriage. Seeing his old friend so happy amazed Robert, especially since ten years earlier, while they were

working a CIA surveillance assignment in Bohn, Germany, Donavon swore off the lifetime confinement of matrimony, saying *he'd rather roll around naked in broken glass.*

"After service there are a few people we need to meet," Alison whispered to Donavon, who took a deep breath and bit his lower lip. He looked over at Robert. *Save me.*

Marry one of Chicago's treasures, and that's the price you pay, thought Robert, wanting to laugh.

Melodic Latin phrases from a male falsetto echoed throughout the sanctuary, and Robert watched his godson, Samuel Napier, lead a priest, three other altar boys and an altar girl down the center aisle.

Samuel, draped in a white satin vestment, along with the other altar adolescents, looked deadly serious holding an elaborate silver and gold cross stretched out in front of him toward the sky. They marched toward the altar at a pace more fit for a funeral procession than a spiritual celebration.

One look at Samuel and Robert was sure that he had grown more than the inch and a half Donovan mentioned. The dirty-brown haired boy's shoulders were starting to broaden, and Robert could already imagine the ten year old birthday boy playing linebacker or center field.

After readings from the book of Isaiah, and several more from Matthew, John and Luke, Robert listened to the priest, Father Charles Tolbert, launch into an additional series of chants, and a sleeping pill of a sermon that Robert vaguely surmised as an exultation to pray for one's enemies and those that hate you. The need to yawn was almost more than he could bear, and water welled up in his eyes as he fought back the urge.

Samuel and one of the other altar boys, a portly, jovial kid with fiery red hair, freckles and friendly eyes, set up the altar for communion. When Samuel turned to resume his position on the far left of the altar, Robert noticed that he flinched slightly as he passed Father Tolbert. *Must be a little nervous,* thought Robert, remembering Alison's earlier comment that it was Samuel's first time setting the communion table. After communion, more prayer, benediction, and then dismissal, Samuel, cross held high, led the evangelical parade back down the aisle and disappeared through ivory painted, gold encrusted double doors. Ten

minutes later, Robert milled around outside in front of the Church with most of the congregation, watching them chat, laugh, and wish each other well.

Chicago's summer season, in full motion, sported a dark overcast sky, blowing crisp air, but not too cold. The notorious wind, for which the city was well-known, toyed with parishioners' hats and coats for sport, all subtle precursors to the harsh winter that always followed four or five months later.

Robert watched Donavon and Alison work the crowd like seasoned veterans. Alison flashed a smile that could disarm the most hardened heart, and Donavon, standing slightly behind her, put on a stellar performance worthy of an Oscar. It was like watching a President and the *first husband* campaign.

"Uncle Robert! Uncle Robert!" yelled Samuel.

Robert looked over his shoulder and spied his godson in full sprint, arms pumping, face bright and excited. A foot or two away, Samuel leapt through the air into Robert's arms and wrapped his legs around him, almost sending his godfather backwards to the ground.

"Well hello, birthday boy! I'm happy to see you too!"

Samuel thanked Robert but didn't release his grip. When Robert finally pried him loose and lowered him to the ground, he took a step back.

"Let's have a look at you," he said, hands on his chin, as if inspecting every inch of the boy.

"I've grown two whole inches," said Samuel, beaming with pride.

"I see that," said Robert. "You'll tower over me soon."

At this, Samuel's smile broadened and his back straightened. He took Robert's hand and led him over to his mother and father.

"Well, I see you've found your favorite playmate," said Alison, kissing her son on the cheek.

"Yes," added Donavon. "Now we won't get an ounce of sleep over the next few days."

"Oh, like you won't enjoy it yourself," chided Alison. "I'll have to find a place to stay for the next two days, the way you three carry on."

"We're not that bad," Robert joked, knowing that they were.

When he visited Samuel, the kid inside of him shook loose, and he loved it. It was like reclaiming something he'd lost in his own youth, the day his father was murdered.

"Where's Aunt Nikki?" asked Samuel.

"She's going to meet us at the restaurant," answered Robert. "She said to tell you she wouldn't miss your birthday for the world."

Nikki Thorne, Robert's partner and best friend, was a Baptist, as much as he was a Catholic. Thorne passed on morning mass, opting instead to visit an old friend, which Robert knew without asking meant a visit to Nelson Reynolds, a detective on Chicago's police force, and an old flame.

"I'm starving," said Donavon. "Let's head for Spraggia."

Spraggia was Robert's favorite Italian restaurant. A choice he knew Samuel made with him in mind. "I'm with that," he answered, smiling at Samuel. "We'll eat, and then presents."

Samuel's face beamed, and he bounced around like he was going to wet himself.

"Well, this must be the famous godfather I've heard so much about," a voice said behind them.

"Father Tolbert," said Alison, pulsating with charm and respect. "Allow me to introduce Mr. Robert Veil from our nation's capitol."

Robert shook the priest moist, clammy hand. The cleric greeted Donavon and gave Alison a hug. "Our little angel here did a great job today," said Father Tolbert, turning to Samuel, placing his hand on his shoulder.

"Thank you, Father," answered Samuel, eyes glued to his feet.

"Now, don't be so modest," said Father Tolbert. "I'll allow a little pride today, it's your birthday."

Everyone laughed, except Samuel, who seemed to force a smile.

"Thank you, Father."

"Thank you so much, Father, for taking an interest in Samuel. We're very grateful," said Alison.

"Not at all," said the priest. "He's an exceptional child. It's my pleasure."

They continued to banter and make small talk for several minutes, when a black Cadillac sedan swooped up to the curb. The driver, a broad

shouldered priest with a pit bull mug, hurried to the rear passenger door and snatched it open. A tall, lean, elderly gentleman unfolded out onto the sidewalk, draped in a blood red silk cape, wearing a black wool cassock trimmed in scarlet, and the air of Catholic royalty.

“Cardinal Polletto,” Father Tolbert gushed. “I wasn’t expecting you for another hour or so,” he continued, kissing the elder priest’s hand.

“Yes, I know,” answered the Cardinal. “I left St. Francis as soon as mass was over. I wanted to make sure you and I had plenty of time to spend together.”

Father Tolbert introduced everyone to Cardinal Poletto, the Archbishop of Chicago. Donovan fell just short of kissing his hand, and Alison bowed and curtsied as though she’d just met the Pope himself. The episode made Robert feel a bit out of place. He had no intention of bowing or kissing anybody’s hand. Instead, he opted for a firm, respectful handshake.

“And who’s this little fellow?” asked Cardinal Polletto, leaning down to Samuel.

Pressed up against his mother, Samuel eased forward and introduced himself. Father Tolbert added a few compliments on Samuel’s performance as altar boy. Samuel looked relieved when the two men turned their attention elsewhere.

Cardinal Polletto and Father Tolbert excused themselves and disappeared inside the Church. Robert and the others hustled to Donovan’s Lincoln Town car, and headed for Spraggia’s.

“So, have you caught any bad guys lately?” asked Samuel, bouncing in his seat. “Do you have your gun on you? Can I see it? Do you think I can be a bounty hunter when I grow up?”

“No bounty hunting for you,” Alison scolded, smirking.

Since leaving the CIA, Robert and Nikki had opened their own firm and chased down high-level criminals all over the world. Samuel loved to hear the details of their exploits. Stories about terrorists they’d captured, serial killers they hunted down, and exotic places they traveled to all over the world. Most of the details he gave Samuel were fabricated, since the majority of the cases they worked were highly confidential, for

which they were sometimes paid millions of dollars for their efforts, by governments, and the wealthy.

"I left my gun with Aunt Nikki today," said Robert. "That's not the type of thing you should wear in church. And your mother's right, I see medical school in your future."

"Not a chance," said Samuel. "I want to come work with you and Aunt Nikki. We can be a team."

Donovan looked back at them in the rearview mirror. Robert saw a big smile on his face. Despite all they'd seen working for the government, intelligence was in Donovan's blood, and a son in the family business was just fine with him. Donovan even wore the bullet in his hip as a badge of honor.

"You looked a little nervous up at the altar today," said Robert, changing the subject. "I thought you were gonna choke."

"Me choke? Never," answered Samuel. "Just a little game-time jitters. I get the same way before a big game in little league."

"I understand," said Robert, kissing Samuel on top of his head. "I get the same way from time to time."

Samuel smiled and laid his head in Robert's lap, who stroked his hair and smiled.

Donovan stopped to make a left turn into the restaurant parking lot. An SUV in front of them made a sudden stop. Donovan hit the brakes. Bam! Another SUV plowed into them from behind. Robert's head jerked backwards and snapped forward. The Lincoln lunged into the SUV in front of them. The airbags exploded into Donovan and Alison's faces. Robert covered Samuel as best he could.

"Is everybody okay?" asked Robert, heart and adrenaline pumping.

"Out of the car, hands up!" a ski masked man shouted, waving an Uzi machine gun.

Robert reached for his gun. *Damn, I left my gun with Thorne!* He counted four men in total, two from each vehicle. One of the men pulled open Robert's door and snatched Samuel outside.

"Not my son!" shouted Alison.

Donovan jumped out, cursing. Robert slid out, an Uzi trained at his head. He caught a familiar image running fast in their direction, about fifty yards away. *Thorne!*

Out of the alley across the street from Spraggia's, another SUV sped toward them and screeched to a halt. Three of the men holding them at gunpoint scrambled to the vehicle behind them, with Samuel kicking and screaming. Alison took a step, but the forth gunmen fired into the car, sending everyone to the ground, except Robert. Four people jumped out of the SUV that came from the alley, wearing black ski masks, armed with machine guns.

“Save the boy!” one of them shouted.

Robert felt the hard end of an Uzi on the back of his head and fell to the pavement. He heard footsteps, more gunfire, and Thorne's unmistakable bark. He raised his head and saw the four figures from the alley run back to their vehicle and take off after the kidnappers who'd sped off with Samuel. Robert heard the distinct baritone of a man's voice shout orders he couldn't make out, then lowered his head to the pavement, and blacked out.

3

Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.”

“How long has it been since your last confession?”

“About a week, Father.”

“Go on, my son.”

Cardinal Giafranco Polletto rested comfortably against a high-back leather chair in the den at his forty-one acre estate in Yorkville, Illinois, an hour and a half outside of downtown Chicago. He pretended to pay close attention to Father Tolbert, whose chair sat back to back with his, as the priest droned on about drinking too much wine and lies he’d told.

“Go on, my son,” the cardinal entreated, stroking his chin, eyes closed, his mind on other matters.

“And I’ve sinned again against a child,” said Father Tolbert, reluctance in his tone.

Cardinal Polletto’s eyes opened. “Go on, my son.”

For twenty minutes, Father Tolbert, snorting and crying, confessed to having sex with several young boys, including Samuel Napier, whom the cardinal had met earlier. The cardinal asked the priest to elaborate about Samuel. He listened to the pathetic cleric confess misguided love for a child, and smiled. “Your sins are great, my son,” he said, “but fortunately, the forgiveness of our Lord is greater.”

The cardinal launched into a litany of prayer and Latin chants, asking God to grant forgiveness to a soul he knew would fill hell, along with his own. They finished, turned their chairs facing each other, and the cardinal poured two glasses of red wine from a crystal carafe on the small round marble table next to them.

“I’m afraid I have some disturbing news,” said the cardinal, taking a long sip of wine.

Father Tolbert’s hands quivered, spilling wine on his pants and the Persian carpet, a gift from the Prime Minister of Egypt. “News?” he asked.

“Yes,” Cardinal Polletto continued. “The boy you *love* so much has been taken into custody by my people. As I explained to you a few months ago, he’s important to our cause.”

“Taken in? You mean kidnapped?”

“Let’s say, forcefully recruited,” said Cardinal Polletto, pouring himself another glass. “It’s the best thing for The Order, and for you.”

Father Tolbert stood. “You didn’t say anything about a kidnapping,” he fired, his fear morphing into anger.

“I didn’t have to say anything about it,” snapped the cardinal. “Just be glad we haven’t snatched *you* up. Now sit.”

Slowly, Father Tolbert lowered himself to his seat. “What are you going to do with him?”

The cardinal took a deep breath. “Don’t worry yourself about it,” he said. “The boy’s safe, and he’ll stay that way. Let’s focus our attention on you.”

“I don’t want to talk about me. Whatever I’ve done, whatever you think of me, please don’t punish the boy for it.”

You imbecile, do you really believe this is all about you? “Now, Father Tolbert, you know you’re our first and most important concern. We take care of our own. Relax and leave it to my people. You’re in good hands.”

Father Tolbert’s face turned purple-red, his eyes bulged, and veins crisscrossed his forehead. “No!” he shouted, flinging his glass against the wall.

The door to the den flung open, and Father Ortega Alamino, the pit bull chauffeur, rushed inside. Cardinal Polletto motioned that everything was okay, and Father Ortega hesitantly closed the door behind him. Father Tolbert collapsed in his chair, head in hands, and burst into tears.

Cardinal Polletto finished his wine, and carefully placed the empty glass on the table. He watched with contempt, as Father Tolbert fell just short of a full breakdown, revolted by the blubbing priest’s weakness. The cardinal walked over and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“There, there,” he said, insincere and condescending, “I promise you things will come together for the good, and they will.”

Father Tolbert looked up, his eyes wet, red, and puffy, and his nose running. Saliva dripped off his chin. “I’ve got to atone for the things I’ve done. I’ve got to make it right,” he sniveled.

Cardinal Polletto snatched Father Tolbert to his feet. “Get a hold of yourself,” he growled through gritted teeth, shaking the priest with the force of a much younger man.

Father Tolbert snatched loose. “No,” he growled, stepping back. “I’m the monster, not Samuel. Why are you hurting the boy? I’m the one who should die.”

“Nobody’s going to die,” said the cardinal, with all the comfort of a grandfather. “I have plans for you that you know nothing about, very important plans, plans that involve Samuel. Now, let’s sit and talk.”

“I’m going to the police,” shot Father Tolbert. “I’m going to turn myself in. I can’t live like this anymore.”

Cardinal Polletto sprang forward and slapped the priest to the floor. The cardinal leered down with rage and fire in his eyes. He hoped that he could calm Father Tolbert down, and was sorry he allowed the situation to spiral so far out of his grasp. He needed Samuel, and the kidnapping would put enough pressure on his plans without Father Tolbert doing something rash. The feeble cleric would be done away with in time, but for now, he needed him alive.

“Get to your feet,” he ordered. Father Tolbert, dazed, pulled himself up on the side of the cardinal’s dark mahogany desk. The high-priest tossed him a handkerchief. “You’re not going to say a thing. Go home and pack only what you need for the next few weeks. I’ll make sure you get the rest later.”

Father Tolbert’s eyes, confused and inquisitive, asked where he was going.

Cardinal Polletto flashed a dangerous smile. “I’m sending you to Rome.”

4

Just after midnight, under a moonless sky filled with black ominous clouds, Father Ortega pulled up to Assumption Church, but didn't bother to open Father Tolbert's door. Nor did he offer his farewells. Dejected and sullen, the priest stepped out into the night chill, barely noticing the light mist that showed up as soon as his feet touched the pavement, and lurched towards his residence in back of the church.

"Good evening and goodnight," he said to Sister Isabella Cacciavillian, a Spanish nun there on temporary assignment. She was a self-proclaimed night owl who almost never seemed to sleep. He considered turning back to apologize for his rudeness, but didn't have the energy. Each step a burden, he dragged his feet along the marble corridor as though ten pounds of cement filled his black sole shoes.

Father Tolbert opened the door to his small apartment-like living quarters and felt his way through a tiny, sparsely decorated living room, to the bedroom in the back, like a blind man in familiar surroundings, not wanting to illuminate his despair. He plopped down on the full size bed, which was more a crime scene than a place of rest, and wallowed in the blackness of his soul. Ten minutes later, two soft-white bulbs on each side of the headboard bathed the room in foggy light, casting murky shadows that loitered around the room like vagabonds up to no good.

Two large, worn suitcases took Father Tolbert's place on the bed. Sniffing and wiping his nose, he tossed the items he deemed necessary for two weeks survival into each case. His thoughts turned to Samuel, and his fear for the boy gave way to lust and longing. He closed his eyes tight to fight off images of the boy in his embrace. *Hopeless*. He resumed packing, hands quivering so violently he could barely fold his clothes and place them in the suitcase. *No, fight back! Fight dammit!* His hands relaxed, but just as suddenly, the shaking returned. He fell to his knees and clasped his hands together, searching for the strength to ask God for forgiveness, but unable to find the words. *Call the police. Turn yourself in. Aton*e.

Father Tolbert picked up the phone and hit "9". Cardinal Polletto's voice pierced through his mind. *Put that fucking phone down!* Father

Tolbert hit the number “1” knowing he wouldn’t go through with it, and dropped the phone on the floor. He scrambled to his feet, slipped on a pair jeans and a sweatshirt, snatched an overcoat from the rack next to the door, a brown London Fog, a gift from a wealthy patron looking for special prayer, and hit the streets for a walk. Self-prescribed therapy that often helped quell the pain.

The blanket of mist that greeted him earlier was now a light drizzle. Collar up, he took his regular route, head down, the rain blending with his tears, his groans lost in the nearly barren, moonless night. *I can control this. I can stop. I have to fight it. I have to fight.*

A mile and a half from the church he turned right on Columbus Drive then left on Grand. *Cardinal Polletto is right. He’s always right. Rome is the perfect place right now. I’ve never even seen the Vatican. There I’ll be able to draw strength.* Father Tolbert, hands in his pockets, mixed in with the night shift crowd of drug dealers and buyers, the homeless, the lost, and those who simply wanted to remain anonymous. A sharp spark hit the sky, and nature’s faucet turned to full.

Father Tolbert crossed Grand in a light trot and stopped in front of a dilapidated brick apartment building, eyes focused on a third floor window, one of the few not shattered. His chest heaved in and out. He hustled inside, nearly tripping over an old woman wrapped in all she owned, the streetlight glimmering off the blade gripped tight in her fist. He excused himself and bounded up three flights of stairs, hopping over bodies, some sleep, some high, along the way, stopping in front of a beaten wooden door with 316 painted neatly on front. *I can stop. I can stop.*

The door opened before he could knock.

“I saw you from the window,” said a soft voice from inside. “Come in.”

Father Tolbert hesitated and took a step back. A soft, smooth hand pulled him inside the damp, murky, barely lit room. A lone mattress, surrounded by crates and boxes, posed as a furniture ensemble.

“Over here by the light,” the voice continued, the hand gripping his tighter. “It’ll be fifty dollars, same as usual.”

Father Tolbert lumbered along in a stupor, fighting the urge to stay. Then Alex, a twelve-year-old runaway, fell to his knees and took the priest inside his mouth, and Father Tolbert surrendered.

Yes, Rome, that's where I'll do it. I'll atone for my sins and end this nightmare. Hell is waiting for me anyway. I'll end my life at the Vatican.

5

Thrbbing and tender, the knot on the back of Robert's head pulsated in concert with his heartbeat, but he barely noticed.

Thorne pressed a fresh ice pack to the contusion. "I leave your ass for a couple of hours and look what happens." Thorne, tall, lean, with milk chocolate skin and piercing brown eyes, shook her head in disgust.

Robert jerked the ice pack out of her hand and stomped over to the bedroom window of the Napier's guesthouse. The night rain left a cloudless morning blue sky, and the estate grounds buzzed with activity, as FBI agents and Chicago detectives filed in and out of the large Tudor mansion five hundred feet away. Robert replayed the details of the kidnapping over in his head just as he explained to the authorities.

It was a well-planned ambush to the letter. The assailants waited for the perfect spot, just before they reached the restaurant parking lot. Two SUV's, toting machine gun wielding assholes, surrounded them within seconds, and dragged Samuel from the car. Then, an oddity occurred, another SUV showed up, apparently coming to their aid.

Robert shut his eyes tight and struggled to conjure up more details, but only saw masked faces, although the distinct voice of a tall statuesque man who'd come to help, rang clearly in his ears. The voice, a thick baritone, distinct and commanding, was one he'd never forget, but he chose to leave the detail out of his recounting to the agents and detectives who questioned him. In his three year experience as a bounty hunter, he knew you always held something back from the police until you knew exactly who was on the team, and who on the team was a fuck up.

"What do you think they'll ask for?" interrupted Thorne, easing up behind him.

Truth was Robert didn't have the slightest idea. Donovan had been out of commission at the CIA for over ten years, and even if he hadn't, it was highly unusual for someone to target a child as retaliation. If they wanted to hurt Donovan, they could've killed him right there.

"Hopefully, it's just money," said Robert. "I'm sure they know about Alison's wealth. Maybe it's just a shakedown."

“Let’s hope so,” said Thorne, heading for the bathroom. “That’ll mean we can get this over quickly. Give’em the money and catch their sorry asses later.”

Thorne shut the bathroom door hard behind her. Robert plopped down on the white Indian embroidered couch, hoping the entire episode was just about money. It would end quickly, and they would help the FBI track down those behind it. If they found them before the authorities did, they’d dish out a little justice of their own before turning the kidnapers over to them.

Robert recalled the first time he laid eyes on his godson. Donovan and Alison had brought Samuel home from the adoption agency wrapped in a navy blue and gold blanket from Donovan and Robert’s alma mater, the University of Michigan. Robert fell in love with the child in an instant, and with no children of his own, considered the boy as *his* too.

Thorne marched out of the bathroom as the phone rang. Robert answered. It was FBI agent-in-charge, Ken Baxter. He asked Robert to come back to the main house for a few more questions.

Inside, the main house was crowded, but not noisy. Agents and detectives searched the house for clues, while others simply stood guard. Robert and Thorne were directed to the family room, where they saw Donovan on one side, with four agents huddled around him asking questions. Alison sat to the left side, sprawled out on a thick black leather couch, a compress on her forehead, tears streaming down her face.

“Over here, Mr. Veil,” Agent Baxter called to their right.

Agent Baxter, a portly handsome man, in a dark blue suit and red paisley bow tie, waved them over to the bar where he sat sipping what looked like club soda with a twist of lime. He thanked Robert for coming over so quickly and greeted Thorne, who gave him a nod. She went over to Alison, sat down, and stroked the distraught mother’s hand.

“We’ve cleared you and your partner, Mr. Veil,” said Agent Baxter.

“Oh?”

“Yes,” the agent continued. “You’re not a suspect. You’re free to go.”

Robert sat down on the stool next to the agent. “Thank you for clearing us, but we’re not going anywhere. We want to help.”

Agent Baxter took a long sip of his drink, sat the glass down then stood. "I understand how close you are to the boy, but you'll only get in the way."

"You're right. He's like a son to me, and I'm not exactly new at this. We have resources that might help," said Robert.

"I know who you and your partner are. I know your reputation, but please go back to Washington D.C., and if our seventy-five years of FBI experience fail, we'll give you a holler." Agent Baxter walked away before Robert could respond.

Thorne stepped up beside him. "What gives?"

"We're cleared as suspects, but the FBI wants us out of town," said Robert.

"And?"

"Call Evelyn back at the office, and tell her to put a hold on all of our cases until further notice. We're not going any fucking where."

Thorne smiled. "Damn right." She pulled out her cell phone and stepped outside.

Robert sat down next to Alison, who seemed to be resting more comfortably. Donovan, finished with the platoon of agents around him, limped over.

"How are you holding up?" asked Robert, standing to give his friend a hug.

"As best I can," said Donavon. "I'll feel better when we hear something."

"What do the suits think?"

"That it's just money, which means we should get a note or a call soon."

Robert was aware that most kidnapping requests for money came within twenty-four hours. Every hour after that was not a good sign.

"Donovan, Thorne and I want to join the search. See what we can work up," said Robert.

Alison stirred and sat up. The compress fell in her lap, eyes swollen, red, and pouring water. "Haven't you done enough?" she snorted.

"Enough? What do you mean?" asked Robert, taken aback.

"What have you brought to our house?" she continued, through the tears.

Stunned, Robert considered for the first time the possibility someone in *his* past or present was responsible for taking Samuel. He and Thorne had put away some pretty despicable characters over the years, inside the CIA and on their own, some international terrorist and kidnappers, others, serial killers and crime lords.

“You’re just upset,” said Thorne, moving closer to Alison. “We’d never do anything to...”

“How do you know?” Alison bellowed. “How do you know this isn’t because of you and Robert?”

Robert fidgeted. *Fact is, we don’t know.* He cleared his throat. “We can’t be one hundred percent, but I doubt this has anything to do with any of our cases.”

Everyone in the room soaked in uncomfortable silence. Only Alison’s snorting and crying were audible. Robert took her by both arms and stared into her eyes. “Thorne and I intend to do whatever we can to get Samuel back safely. You have my promise.”

“I don’t want your fucking promise,” Alison snapped, snatching out of his grasp. “I want you out of here now!” Robert opened his mouth to speak. “Robert, if you care about Samuel you’ll leave us alone!” Alison screamed, collapsing on the couch in a frantic heap.

Donavon, in tears, sat down next to his wife and stroked her hair.

Robert searched for the words, but none came.

“Just go,” said Donavon, never looking Robert’s way. “I’ll call you later.

Robert’s eyes filled with tears, his heart with anger, not at Alison, she was doing what any distraught mother would do. He boiled over at the men who’d put them in such a horrible situation. A hand on his shoulder gave him a start, and Thorne pulled him from the room. Outside, Robert wiped the moisture from his eyes and pounded his fist on the hood of Thorne’s rental, a black Monte Carlo, and kicked a deep dent in the front bumper.

“Get in the car and let’s get out of here,” Thorne ordered, ignoring the damage. Robert leaned back against the hood, grinding his teeth, arms folded tight across his chest. “Okay, you let me know when you’re ready,” she said. She slid in on the passenger side and dialed her cell phone.

Robert fumed at the thought of not joining the search for Samuel, a boy he loved as his own. He considered Alison's tirade, searching his memory for a name or face, any case that could've spilled over and resulted in an attack on an innocent ten year old boy, but nothing came to mind. The Monte Carlo's horn intruded his thoughts. Thorne motioned, *let's go!*

"So, where shall we start?" she asked, as he slid inside.

"Start?" he asked.

"Yes," she continued. "You don't really believe I think we're going to leave, do you? Alison's just upset. So am I, but I'm a hunter, she's not. And fuck the FBI."

Robert eyed his partner and friend since the age of thirteen, and took a deep cleansing breath. "The church, they had to start trailing us from the church. So let's start at the Assumption of Our Lady."

6

Monday morning, Chicago traffic nauseated its drivers like most in the fraternity of nationwide commuters, but Thorne managed the labyrinth, exercising more patience than usual. No cursing, middle fingers, or threats. Robert appreciated the ninety minutes of silence, and rested back against the seat, eyes closed.

Thorne parked a block away from the church, which was in full swing as Monday morning mass let out, and nuns and parishioners went on their way. Robert and Thorne approached two of the nuns, asked for directions to Father Tolbert, and were guided to a small office building at the far end of a large courtyard, in the center of the church grounds. Inside the building, up two flights, they searched the sparsely lit corridor for office 2B, and found Father Charles Tolbert's name stenciled on the opaque glass panel of the office door. A droopy, round-faced woman, wearing a faded blue dress, greeted them. Her thick, black-rimmed glasses made her look more owl than human.

Robert asked to speak with Father Tolbert, and after a five second phone call, the owl asked if he and Thorne would have a seat. An hour and five apologies later, Thorne looked close to cursing, and Robert wasn't far behind. When the owl, Miss Culbreath, told them that someone would be with them *in just a few minutes*, Robert looked to see if Thorne was reaching for her gun. A door in back of the office opened.

"Mr. Veil, Miss Thorne. I'm Father Pearson. Please follow me."

They followed the six foot priest through the door and down a hall more brightly lit than the rest of the building. Both sides of the walls were adorned with what looked like every Pope since the beginning of the church, culminating with an impressive oil painting of the apostle Peter. Father Pearson opened the door to a very large, but modestly appointed office, where the distinguished looking cleric, Cardinal Polletto, whom Robert had met the day before, rose, and extended his hand.

"It's nice meeting you again, Mr. Veil, and a pleasure making your acquaintance, Miss Thorne. I'm Cardinal Giafranco Polletto," he

continued, waving Father Pearson out of the room. He offered them seats and sat down behind the desk.

“We want to speak with Father Tolbert,” said Robert, more abruptly than he intended. “Will he be joining us?”

“My apologies, but Father Tolbert is indisposed at the moment. Is there something I can help you with?”

Robert bit his tongue. They’d waited over an hour. “I’m sure the Church is aware of what happened to Samuel Napier yesterday after service.”

“Yes, the kidnapping, a tragedy. We’re on round the clock prayer,” said the cardinal, his face etched with concern. “Is there anything else we can do to help?”

“That’s why we waited for over an hour,” said Thorne. “Since Samuel was an altar boy here, we figured whoever snatched him knew it, and were waiting after church. Maybe somebody here saw or heard something?”

The cardinal stroked his chin. “I’m sorry, I haven’t heard anything. But I’ll make further inquiries, and let the authorities know if we come up with anything useful. We’ve already questioned our people once.”

“We’d appreciate it if you gave us a call if you find anything,” said Robert, scribbling down his cell phone number, handing it to Cardinal Polletto.

The cardinal leaned forward and clasped his hands on the desk. “Forgive me, but what authority do you have? That is, other than *concern* for the boy.”

“Samuel’s my godson, and...”

“That hardly qualifies you as law enforcement.”

“We’re more than qualified,” shot Thorne, her eyes burning red. “In fact, we’ve successfully tracked down several kidnapped victims, and more than our share of kidnappers. We used to work for the government, and we’ve been successful on our own for quite some time.”

“Excellent,” said the cardinal. “Then I’m sure you’re working with the FBI, and have the Napier’s blessing.”

“We have a long standing relationship with the FBI, and I’ve known Donavon Napier for over two decades,” shot Robert.

Cardinal Polletto's eyes shifted from Robert to Thorne, and back. "You'll forgive my trepidation. The Church has strict rules when it comes to these matters. I hope you understand."

This is bullshit, thought Robert. *That's what I understand*. "Thank you, Cardinal. We understand just fine." Robert forced a smile, his best facade. "Is there a time available for us to come back and interview Father Tolbert? He worked directly with Samuel most of the time, so if anybody has seen anything, it would be him."

"I agree," said Cardinal Polletto. "He was the first person I spoke to about it."

"Is there a chance *we* can talk to him? We don't doubt you, Cardinal, we just want to be thorough."

"I'd love nothing short of that, but you see it's impossible at this time."

"Impossible?" asked Robert.

"Yes. Father Tolbert was reassigned yesterday, and has left Chicago on special assignment."

Robert exploded out of his chair. Thorne grabbed his arm. "You could've told us that at the beginning," he growled.

Cardinal Polletto looked taken aback. "I'm sorry, but the affairs of the Church are not always public business. I didn't think it necessary until now."

Robert, his chest heaving, gathered himself as best he could. "Fine, we understand, but it's important that we talk to him anyway. Just tell us where he is, and we'll go to him."

"Rome."

"Excuse me?" said Thorne.

The cardinal leaned back in his chair. "Father Tolbert is on special assignment at the Vatican. An assignment that will keep him occupied for at least the next two to three months. The nature of which will render him unavailable to you or anyone else I'm afraid."

Robert couldn't believe what he was hearing, and apparently from the scowl on her face, neither could Thorne. The cardinal stared at them for a moment, then stood. The office door opened, and a stout, muscular priest walked inside.

“I’m afraid I don’t have anymore time today,” added Cardinal Polletto, blunt and firm, making his way to the door. “But like I promised, if anything comes up, you’ll be the first I call.” He stopped at the door and turned to them. “I’m sorry about young Samuel’s misfortune. We’ll help in any way we can. Feel free to call again if you need anything. Father Ortega, please show them the way out.”

The bulky priest, Father Ortega, looked more wrestler-like, than cleric. Robert guessed his arms must have been at least eighteen inches. He escorted them to the street, and without so much as a nod, walked back inside the church, slamming the door behind him. They headed for Thorne’s car.

“What the hell is going on?” asked Robert. “They act like they’re the ones who took Samuel.”

“No shit,” said Thorne. “But you know how the Catholic Church operates. They don’t get involved unless it’s one of their own, and getting information out of them is like squeezing blood from a penny.”

“It’s a child for Christ’s sake!” Robert bellowed, stopping next to the Monte Carlo. “You’d think they’d do everything they could.” He leaned on the car and tried to gather his thoughts.

“What about Father Tolbert?” asked Thorne. “He’s still numero uno on the list that we should talk to.”

“Yeah, but unless we’re going to Italy, we’d better think up something else. We’ll leave Father Tolbert to the FBI for now. Let them hassle with the Vatican.”

Robert looked at his watch, his heart hanging in his chest like a paperweight. Time ticked away for Samuel, so they couldn’t worry about the cardinal, Father Tolbert, or the Vatican. They needed a solid lead.

“Let’s split up,” said Robert. “I’ll rent a car, go to Samuel’s school, and talk to his teachers, maybe a few of his classmates. You contact your boyfriend.” Thorne’s face twisted. “I’m sorry, your *friend*, Detective Reynolds. Find out if the police or FBI has anything we can use. Let’s talk around noon, and take it from there.”

“Got it,” said Thorne.

Robert and Thorne sped away. Father Ortega, who’d been watching them the whole time, observed silently from the bushes a half a block behind them as they got in the car and drove away.

7

Cold and scared, Samuel sat, knees to chest, rocking back and forth in a musty wooden crate. Despite the darkness, he pressed his eyes shut tight, and struggled to conjure up the faces of his parents and godfather. But as quickly as they came, the mental photographs in his head dissipated like a rising vapor.

A sudden series of bumps jarred Samuel from his daydream nightmare. He was sure the wooden box that housed him was on an airplane in the sky. He had felt the takeoff and heard the engines roar. He guessed they'd been in the air for almost an hour, maybe longer.

More turbulence, and this time Samuel pitched forward against the crate, head first, bumping his chin. He heard chatter in the cabin, and counted four voices, three males, one female. None of them spoke English, and he couldn't place the language. It sounded French, but he wasn't sure. Time edged along, as did the mental torture. Samuel whimpered, then cried. The chatter outside turned to whispers.

Moments later, the crate cracked open and light stampeded inside, needling his eyes, leaving him momentarily blind. The cold nudge of what he knew to be a gun under his chin, and the firm bark of a language foreign, entreated him to stifle his breakdown and choke back his sniffles.

Samuel's vision cleared, but his eyes ached. He crawled out of the crate and looked around. He was definitely inside an airplane, but not like the planes he and his parents flew in while on vacation. This plane looked more like one of the cool private jets he'd watched on MTV *Cribs*, and could've belonged to P-Diddy or Jay-Z.

"Over here," called a soft, female voice. Samuel, awestruck by his surroundings, focused on the four individuals in the cabin for the first time, and was stunned. "You'll be more comfortable on the couch," the woman told him. "And there are a few rules you need to obey." Samuel, trying to make sense of the scene before him, was unable to move. "Its okay, Samuel," the woman continued, "please have a seat."

Samuel, his feet feeling about twenty pounds each, lumbered over and practically fell down in the deep, cushioned tan-green leather chair.

“Here, drink this.” The woman handed him a mug with a mountain of whipped cream on top. “This will warm you up, and make you feel more comfortable. I have to attend to a matter in the forward cabin. When I return, you and I will have our little talk.”

Samuel held the cup. It took everything he could muster to keep from dropping it on the deep tan carpet. Confused, he looked up at the smiling angelic face, but couldn’t make sense of it. His captures were three priests and a nun.

“My name is Sister Maria Bravo. Drink your cocoa, I’ll be back in a moment.”

Father Tolbert rested back, eyes closed, as the Vatican’s Gulfstream G550 cruised to, then leveled off at forty thousand feet. Two Kettle One martinis into his flight to Rome, and the torment that had been a part of his life since high school, seemed to temporarily evaporate.

“Excuse me, Father, is there anything else I can get for you?”

Father Tolbert lifted his eyelids. Sister Maria Bravo, one of Cardinal Polletto’s assistants, a broad smile on her angelic face, leaned over and covered him with an extra dark crimson wool blanket.

“No thank you, Sister, everything is fine.”

“Good. Dinner will be served in a few hours. Until then, there are appetizers on the counter in the galley, and of course, the bar is fully stocked. If you need anything else, press the button on your chair and I’ll be happy to serve you.”

Father Tolbert said thank you, and watched the always gracious nun disappear through a door of the cabin. No doubt to get some much deserved rest herself.

He closed his eyes. The vodka took over. Father Tolbert thought of Samuel, and drifted off to a place somewhere in the clouds.

8

Samuel barely tasted the hot cocoa, even though he'd drained the mug by more than half. The three priests sitting with him didn't speak, but each shot him an occasional glare, as if to let him know they'd just as soon slit his throat as say hello. One in particular, a neckless, red-faced linebacker, with the largest hands Samuel had ever seen, clinched his fists every time their eyes met. Each time, Samuel wanted to piss his pants.

The door opened. Sister Maria Bravo slid back inside and snatched off her habit, shaking her silky black hair down past her shoulders. The three priests snapped to attention. She whispered something to them, but didn't so much as look Samuel's way.

Five minutes later, the whispering stopped. Sister Bravo, the three black suits in tow, walked over and sat down next to him. The holy trio stood behind her, stone-faced and silent. Samuel tried to swallow, but his throat felt like sandpaper. His hands quivered, splattering cocoa on his pants.

"There are a few important rules you must abide by while in our care," Sister Bravo said, a smile on her face. "But first, let me introduce the others." Samuel raised his eyes without fully lifting his head. "This is Father Matthew Clancy."

The stoic menace plastered on the slender, sandy haired cleric, turned hospitable with a smile. "Please to make your acquaintance," said the priest, in a light British accent.

Next, Sister Bravo introduced Father Theodore Murphy, whose face softened too, with a wide show of teeth. Samuel noticed for the first time, Father Murphy's light green eyes, which framed an almost serene countenance. The priest didn't utter a word, but Samuel felt a chill hit his spine, and the hair on the back of his head bristled as Father Murphy's smile turned fiendish.

Samuel turned his head to the last of the three, the linebacker in black, who made him the most nervous. "I'm Father Adolfo Sin," he said, his accent heavy German. "If you try to escape, I'm the one who'll catch and kill you."

Father Sin's words took a moment to register. Samuel's moist brow confirmed that he believed every word.

"I'm sure that won't be necessary," said Sister Bravo.

She motioned for the priests to leave, and each adjourned to a different part of the cabin. Fathers Murphy and Clancy leaned back in two billowy leather chairs, and closed their eyes. Father Sin leaned back in his, and continued to stare.

Sister Bravo took a deep breath. "Don't mind him. He's a teddy bear once you get to know him."

You mean a grizzly bear, thought Samuel.

Sister Bravo laughed as though she could read his mind. "Now, as I said, let's get an understanding of what's expected of you." Her smile receded to a slight upturn of the corners of her mouth. She was beautiful, more striking than any women Samuel had ever seen. He sat transfixed. "We'll treat you with the same respect you give us," she continued. "You'll always, and I mean *always*, do what you're told. We're not keen on repeating ourselves. Do you understand?" Samuel nodded yes, more out of fear than agreement. "Never speak to anybody outside the four of us, unless we give permission," she continued. "And don't take anything from anyone unless it's first handed to us."

Samuel again acknowledged that he understood. Sister Bravo's accommodating manner helped him relax. His hands ceased to quiver, but his stomach rumbled with hunger. Sister Bravo opened a cardboard box next to the couch and pulled out a bundle of clothes, including jeans, a navy polo shirt, new white tennis shoes and socks.

"There's a bathroom over there," she said, pointing to a narrow wood-grained door a few feet away. "Go inside and put these on. You'll find them a perfect fit."

Samuel took the pile of clothes and set it on his lap. He bit his tongue, then looked up at the nun. "Why am I here? What did I do?" His bottom lip trembled. His eyes watered. "I want to go home."

Sister Bravo stroked his face with the back of her hand, and wiped the tears from his cheeks with a white lace handkerchief. Her eyes locked on his, saucers of apology and concern. "I'm afraid those questions will have to wait," she said. "All you need to know now is that you're safe with us as long as you do as we say."

“But if I’ve done something wrong, I’m sorry,” he said, feeling frantic. “I, I, just don’t un-un-derstand. Just tell me what I did wrong. Please, just tell me.”

Sister Bravo pulled him close, and he laid his head on her lap. “I’m sorry things are so unclear right now, but it’ll all make sense very soon,” she said, mussing up his hair.

“But I want to go home,” Samuel continued. He raised his head; Sister Bravo’s face a blur through his tears. “Why won’t you let me go home?” The tears fell and his sight cleared.

Sister Bravo’s kind disposition had diminished, her smile replaced with the cold indifference Samuel remembered from the nuns at his school when they’d had enough of him playing the prankster.

“Enough of this, Samuel, you’re going to do everything we tell you, and that’s all you need to know for now. Stop crying, and go change into the clothes.”

Samuel didn’t move. He wanted to, but it had become clear that whatever was happening, it didn’t include him returning to his parents, and the thought of never seeing them again left him paralyzed. A hard slap snapped him out of the trance. A stinging sensation on the right side of his face turned numb, but he didn’t feel pain, he got angry. He looked up at Sister Bravo, now towering over him.

“I want to go home! When are you going to let me talk to my mother and father!” he bellowed, through clenched teeth.

SLAP!

Father Sin stood. The other priests awakened, but remained seated.

“You’re never going to see them again! Happy! Now go put on the clothes,” Sister Bravo snapped.

“Fuck you! Go to hell,” Samuel yelled back.

SLAP! SLAP!

“The clothes, now!”

SLAP!

“No!”

Sister Bravo snatched Samuel off the couch and shook him violently. SLAP! SLAP! SLAP! “Now go put the fucking clothes on, or I’ll turn this over to Father Sin.”

Father Sin smiled, right fist clenched, punching his other hand.

Blood oozed from Samuel's nose. He let it fall. He wanted to cry out. The pain was unbearable, but he fought the urge to wince. He snatched up the clothes and stormed off to the tiny bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

"A strong little fucker," he heard Father Sin say. They all laughed.

Samuel leaned against the small, stainless steel basin, his bravery defeated. Anxiety gripping his stomach. He swallowed hard, the saltiness of his blood and tears gagging him, so he abruptly turned to the toilet, fell to his knees and threw up. Back on his feet, he wiped his eyes and mouth with his shirtsleeve, then ripped the once neat, now blood stained oxford shirt off, sending pearl white buttons ricocheting off the walls.

Foggy lighting couldn't help soften the frightened boy that stared back from the mirror. Swollen and red, the right side of his face, puffy and bruised, complimented his ear, now half a size larger. He ran cold water and splashed it liberally over his head and face. Samuel slowly stood up straight and stared in the mirror, struggling to conjure up his parents' faces. His legs weak, he wobbled over to the toilet and plopped down, head in his hands.

"I want to go home," he whimpered softly, wondering if God could hear him. He gathered himself as best he could, kicked off his shoes, and removed his khaki pants, socks and underwear.

"*I'm coming for you,*" he heard a familiar voice whisper in his head. It was his godfather, Uncle Robert.

Yes, Uncle Robert and Aunt Thorne, they'll come get me. I know they will.

Encouraged, Samuel knelt down and prayed, asking God to help him. The longer he prayed, the stronger he felt.

"Hurry up in there," Father Sin's grizzly voice growled.

Samuel stood. "I'm almost finished," he said, mustering as much strength as he could, not wanting to appear defeated. He heard Father Sin give a huff and stomp away.

Despite the pain searing his face, he felt better. There were people looking for him, people who loved him, and would die for him. He quickly put on the clothes, dried his hair and face, stopping to gaze at the smile plastered on the now not-so-cute boy looking back. He'd do what he thought his godfather would do. *Play it cool. Watch and wait.* He'd

find a way to help whoever was searching for him, and if he got an opening, he'd run away.

An almost sinister calm fell over him. He opened the bathroom door and stepped out into the cabin, where Sister Bravo and Father Sin were standing and waiting as the others slept. Samuel sat down on the couch and picked up his mug.

“Can I please have some more?” he asked, subdued and cool. “And may I have something to eat?”

Sister Bravo walked over and kissed his cheek. “Forgive me for hitting you,” she said, taking his cup.

Samuel smiled. Father Sin didn't.

2

Halfway to Lake Forest, a small suburb, thirty-one miles outside of Chicago, Robert took several measured breaths and flexed his hands out of nervousness. Freeway signs and highway shrubbery a blur, he gritted his teeth and suppressed the primal urge to bellow at the top of his lungs.

Samuel's voice played in his head. "*Uncle Robert, how come you don't have any children?*"

"I have a son."

Samuel's eyes widened. "Where is he?"

Robert smiled. "I'm looking at him."

The rented, black, two-ton Explorer sped down Interstate 94 like a guided missile, weaving in and out of traffic, Robert barely aware of others on the road. For the first time since he and Thorne opened shop as guns-for-hire, the pangs of victim, not savior, filled his gut like hot coals, scorching his soul. More than he cared to remember, he'd sat in living rooms and offices across the globe, watching husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, lament feverishly to the point of collapse over a loved one. But now, his usually well-weaved nerves felt weak, unsteady and unraveled.

Get it together. You've done this before, and you've never lost one yet. Samuel won't be the first.

Slowly, Robert's pulse eased back to normal, his shoulder muscles and jaw relaxed. Two miles from St. Paul Catholic, the elementary school Samuel attended, he gathered himself, his surroundings a clearer presence. He heard the wind whistle through a crevice in the passenger door and bang against the windows. The partly cloudy sky cast a soft light on the surrounding area, much brighter than the veil of darkness his mood blanketed everything with earlier. The artificial scent of strawberries, from an air freshener the rental car clerk gave him, reemerged in his nostrils, signaling the near full return of self-control.

He found a jazz station on the radio at FM 89.3, Northwestern University's station, and recalled the letters he and Samuel often wrote each other. Pen pals since the boy could scribble in crayon. The information Samuel had shared with Robert were no longer simply cute ramblings of an adolescent pre-teen, but lifelines, strands of potential

clues that could save the boy's life. Samuel had written about three individuals most often over the last year. Ms. Salomon, his fifth grade teacher, a woman Robert was sure Samuel had a crush on, and his two best friends, Paul Chambers and Carla Bryant. Robert couldn't remember a letter that didn't mention the three. Maybe one of them noticed something strange or out of place. In his experience, sometimes the smallest, seemingly insignificant detail could solve the unsolvable.

Just a year earlier, Robert and Thorne had been hired by the Wellingtons, a powerful family whose wealth was built on four generations of insurance industry profits. They commissioned them to find the murderer who beat their seventeen year old daughter, Amy, to death on the grounds of the Wellington estate in Westport, Connecticut. Police and federal agents were baffled, and on the advice of a mutual associate, Amy's father, Nathaniel Wellington, offered Robert and Thorne five hundred thousand dollars to track down the killer.

One of the items listed in the mounds of evidence compiled by the authorities, and obtained in confidence by Mr. Wellington for their effort, was a dime size stain of butter pecan ice cream. Two months later, while questioning Briana Payne, one of Amy's close friends, Robert noticed three empty Butter Pecan Hägan Daas containers in Briana's trashcan. The stain revealed Briana's favorite flavor, and set off an avalanche that locked Amy's jealous friend away for the rest of her life.

Robert parked in St. Paul Catholic Elementary visitor parking lot. Fifteen minutes later, under the guise of a federal agent, an illegal move Robert only resorted to in dire circumstances, sat in a plain, compact office with a large picture of the Pope on the wall, waiting to question Ms. Salomon, Carla and Paul. The portly, red-faced principal, Father Frank Gakowski, was hesitant initially, but finally agreed after Robert insisted that they not waste time that could save Samuel's life.

Eyes closed, Robert took several deep breaths. Samuel, his patented full-face smile floating clear in Robert's mind, slowly faded away, then dissolved. Robert struggled to regain the image, but the doorknob to the office door clicked, snapping him out of his trance. A slender, strawberry blond woman, with sparkling green eyes entered, with two nervous munchkins hiding behind her. Robert stood and introduced himself, taking note of Ms. Salomon's soft, well-manicured hands and sweet

apple scented perfume. *Yeah, I'm sure Samuel has a crush on you.* The two imps behind her stuck their heads out and stared. Ms. Salomon reached back and gently encouraged them out front.

"Now, this handsome young man must be Paul Chambers," said Robert, as friendly as he possibly could.

Paul stuck his chubby hands in his pockets and stared at his shoes. "Yes," he mumbled, sneaking another glimpse of Robert, then abruptly looking back down.

"And you are?" asked Robert.

"My name is Carla, Carla Bryant," said the bright-eyed, dark haired little girl Samuel described in his letters as *pushy, but nice*. "I know you," she continued. "You're Samuel's godfather, the bounty hunter."

Robert smiled. "Something like that," he answered. "Let's all have a seat."

Ms. Salomon left to get an extra chair. Carla and Paul plopped down on a small burgundy loveseat that looked as though it had seen its share of parent-teacher conferences, students, and no doubt, more than a few napping teachers. Ms. Salomon returned and they huddled together, Robert's chair pressed back against the wall.

"Ms. Salomon, I'm here to find out if there's any information you, Carla or Paul can provide, that will assist us in finding Samuel. It could be anything. A stranger outside the school, a car you noticed, anything," said Robert.

"This is my first year here at St. Paul," she said, hurt and strain replacing her smile. "I haven't noticed anything I would deem out of place or strange. I guess I can give it some thought, but I'm afraid in that area, I won't be of much help."

Robert had been hopeful that Ms. Salomon would have something useful to add, but his real targets were now squirming and fidgeting on the couch in front of him. "What about you two? Have you noticed anything or anyone strange around Samuel over the last few weeks?"

Both children looked at Ms. Salomon. "It's okay," she told them. "If there's anything you think might help find Samuel, tell Mr. Veil."

"Do you think Samuel's okay?" asked Paul sheepish and unsure.

"I'm sure he's fine," answered Robert. "There are a lot of people working on getting him back, but we need your help."

“Have you talked to him?” asked Carla.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Then how do you know he’s okay?”

Robert forced a smile. *Smart girl.* “There are no guarantees, but if we think the best and stay positive, we have a better chance of finding him quickly. And right now, Samuel needs our positive thoughts and prayers.”

Ms. Salomon’s eyes said *I’m impressed.* Carla sat back, arms across her chest, eyes glued to Robert’s, looking less than convinced.

Robert asked again if they’d noticed anything out of the ordinary. Both kids shook their heads no, but Paul rocked back and forth on the edge of the couch, eyes shifting from Robert to Ms. Salomon and back.

“Is there something you’d like to say, Paul?” Ms. Salomon finally asked. “Don’t be afraid, Mr. Veil is here to help.”

Paul looked at Carla, who quickly turned her eyes away. Robert took a slow imperceptible breath, and leaned back.

“I guess Samuel’s pretty close to you guys. He writes to me all the time, and almost always mentions your names,” said Robert.

“We’re best friends,” said Paul, sitting up straight.

“Yes,” added Carla, “we’re the three musketeers.”

Robert smiled. “Do musketeers share secrets?”

“Sure,” said Paul. “Musketeers always trust each other.”

“Did Samuel share anything with you that might help us find out where he is, or who took him?”

Paul’s eyes immediately fell to the floor. “He...there...is something.”

“We promised we wouldn’t say anything,” shot Carla. “Samuel made us promise.”

A surge bolted through Robert’s chest. He wanted to grab and shake it out of them. He took another deep breath. “I’m sure he’d want you to tell me,” he said, now leaning forward. “What is it?”

Paul and Carla stared at each other.

Ms. Salomon moved to the edge of her seat. “It’s okay. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Carla bit her bottom lip. Tears rolled down Paul's cheeks. He wiped his shirtsleeve across his face. Carla dropped her head into her hands, crying. "He told us not to tell. We promised," she whispered.

Ms. Salomon's forehead wrinkled with confusion. The door to the office sprang opened. Father Gakowski entered with two large security guards behind him, growling scowls on their faces.

"I've just gotten off the phone with the Archdiocese, and I've alerted the police. Mr. Veil, I'm afraid you'll have to leave immediately," demanded Father Gakowski.

Robert jumped to his feet. "But the kids, they know something! We need to find out what they know!"

The two security guards snatched out their batons and stepped forward.

"Ms. Salomon, take Carla and Paul out of the room," ordered the priest.

The teacher gathered both children, her eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry we couldn't help you, Mr. Veil," she said.

"Us too," said Carla, struggling to look strong.

"Yeah," added Paul. "We hope you find Samuel okay."

Paul burst into tears and ran out of the room. Carla and Ms. Salomon followed right behind him, tears running down their cheeks too. When the door closed, Father Gakowski moved face-to-face with Robert.

"You lied, Mr. Veil. You're not with the FBI, or any other agency. Cardinal Polletto's people said you were there this morning, and were told all we know."

"Those children know more," Robert fumed. "You heard them."

"I'll inform the proper authorities," said Father Gakowski, opening the door. "Gentlemen, walk Mr. Veil to his car."

Robert felt the handle of his nine-millimeter press against his stomach. He relaxed, pushed past the guards, and stormed out of the building. Teeth grinding, he rumbled back down Interstate 94, blind with rage. Five miles down the highway, he abruptly snatched the wheel to the right, swerved off the freeway and skidded to a stop on the side of the road, car horns honking, and middle fingers up in his direction.

Paul and Carla wanted to tell me something. Something Samuel didn't want anybody else to know.

Robert considered going to the Feds to get a court order, but knew his hunch wasn't enough to get a judge to do battle with the Archdiocese, who obviously had something to hide. Besides, Robert was sure Cardinal Polletto, or whoever was pulling the strings, would see to it that neither child would be available for questioning after today. It was a long shot, but he'd run it by Thorne and Detective Reynolds anyway.

The cobalt blue numbers on the dashboard clock beamed 10:00 a.m. A few more hours and Samuel would be gone for over forty-eight hours. A near death sentence, unless the kidnappers made contact soon. Robert eased back onto the highway and headed for the Napier's to have a talk with Donovan, and find out if the kidnappers had sent any word.

Head throbbing, heart pounding, Robert lowered the windows and let cool air blow through. *Hold on Samuel, I'm coming.*

10

Cardinal Polletto stepped out of his black Cadillac onto busy Superior Avenue, in front of the eight-story building that housed the Archdiocese of Chicago. As expected, he'd been summoned to account for the sudden reassignment of Father Tolbert, and use of the Vatican's private jet. As Archbishop, it was well within his right to make use of church resources and transfer personnel, but even *he* was required to go through channels.

Cardinal Maximilian, in Chicago on special assignment from the Holy See, to evaluate and audit the diocese, asked if he would come in and explain the urgent need to usurp protocol. Justifying his decisions irritated Cardinal Polletto, unless it came directly from the Vatican. "*I assure you it did,*" Cardinal Maximilian had told him, smug and self-assured.

Cardinal Polletto strode through the brightly lit lobby, pious, chin high, nodding to visitors, well-wishers and staff, who bowed and greeted him as though he were the Holy Father himself. A ritual he thoroughly enjoyed.

"Good Morning, Your Eminence," said Father Solomon Fox, Cardinal Maximilian's assistant, appearing at the cardinal's side, as though out of thin air.

Cardinal Polletto greeted the stone-faced New Yorker with a broad smile and a pat on the back. "I trust the Lord is treating you well this morning, Father," he said.

"Indeed he is, sir. Thank you." Father Fox chiseled an uncomfortable smile on his cold, rocky countenance. "Cardinal Maximilian is waiting for you on the fifth floor. He sent me to ride up with you."

Aggravated, Cardinal Polletto shot the priest a quick glare out the corner of his eye. "How thoughtful, Cardinal Maximilian is always quite the gentleman."

The elevator door opened on the fifth floor. An instant wave of simultaneous adulation and greeting rang out in chorus. Cardinal Polletto met each salutation with a humble nod and wave.

Father Fox led him to the large conference room and opened the door. Inside, sitting at the head of a long, ebony Gabon conference table with a black Italian marble top was Cardinal James Francis Maximilian. Cardinal Maximilian, the first African-American to ascend so high in the Roman Catholic Church, stood, draped from head to toe in blood red. Shoulders back, head held high, he almost seemed to glide over to Cardinal Polletto, hand extended. When Cardinal Polletto took his hand, Cardinal Maximilian bowed his head in a submissive pose, a move Cardinal Polletto knew to be more show than substance.

“Thank you for coming down on such short notice,” said Cardinal Maximilian. “I know your schedule is a hectic one.”

“That it is,” answered Cardinal Polletto, taking a seat. “But one must always understand accountability.”

Cardinal Maximilian smiled. After a few minutes of feigned pleasantries and light gossip, Cardinal Maximilian cleared his throat. “I understand Father Tolbert has been reassigned.”

“Correct. He’s going to intern at the Vatican Archives, a rare opportunity with a short shelf life, as you are aware. Someone was needed immediately, and he was given an immediate clearance at my request.”

Cardinal Maximilian sat unmoved. Cardinal Polletto, prepared for the question, had his operatives at the Vatican Archives and Swiss Guard ready to confirm his cover story.

“Why Father Tolbert?” asked Cardinal Maximilian. “What basis did you use to select him?”

“Father Tolbert has shown intense interest in church history and artifacts over the years. He’s approached me several times, inquiring about a chance to serve there, and has made several applications to do so. He has an undergraduate degree in Library Science, so I made overtures on his behalf, and praise God an opening finally became available and they called me first.” Cardinal Maximilian stroked his chin. “Certainly, you must agree that such diligence and desire to serve must be rewarded,” added Cardinal Polletto.

Cardinal Maximilian smiled. “Certainly,” he said. “It was just a bit unusual for things to move so quickly without proper notification.”

“My apologies for not calling you in the wee hours of the morning, I assumed it would be more prudent to inform you this morning.”

“Yet morning came, and not a word.”

Cardinal Polletto put his hands together as if to pray. He gave a solemn nod. “Again, my apologies.”

Cardinal Maximilian flipped open a file folder. “More disturbing than Father Tolbert’s sudden departure, is his mode of transportation. The Vatican jet?”

Cardinal Polletto sat back. “As I’m sure you’re aware, the jet was used to transport a group of wealthy European dignitaries here to the states at the Holy Father’s request. I understand they made quite a healthy contribution to several of the Pontiff’s favorite causes.”

“And that figures into Father Tolbert using it how?” asked Cardinal Maximilian.

Cardinal Polletto smiled. “The plane was pre-scheduled to return to Rome. Why let it go to waste?”

“How convenient.”

“You know our Lord, Cardinal, ever ready to meet our needs.”

Cardinal Maximilian continued to turn the pages in the folder. He stopped, picked up a page, then lifted his eyes. “I’m sure you’re aware of the complaints we’ve received about Father Tolbert.”

“Oh, complaints?” asked Cardinal Polletto.

“These are challenging times for the Church,” said Cardinal Maximilian. “The scandals concerning our children and their safety in the hands of Catholic clergy are extremely sensitive. Father Tolbert has been the focus of rumblings for the past year.”

“The molestation of children I take very seriously,” Cardinal Polletto lied. “I too have heard the rumors, and looked into them very carefully. So far, I’ve found them to be nothing more than dead end gossip.”

“If you’ve made a formal inquiry, why haven’t you filed an official report?”

“Official reports tend to get leaked to the press, draw useless, and might I say unfair accusations to the innocent. I see no need to stir up fodder for an already voracious press, and those who hate the Church.”

“I’m mindful of your stern determination to protect the Church,” said Cardinal Maximilian. “In that, you’re not alone, but we must be careful

not to seem eager to hide backsliders and transgressors, especially potential pedophiles. It's a mistake far too many have made at a devastating price."

"True. The world is never ready to accept our view of forgiveness and repentance."

Cardinal Maximilian closed the folder. "It seems many of our brothers in service are more prone to forgiveness, than repenting."

Cardinal Polletto leaned forward. "Satan is ever diligent, but we mustn't allow him to change the precepts outlined by God and the Church, must we? If so, who would we trust?"

"Even so, the violation of children cannot be tolerated, and we can no longer look the other way," added Cardinal Maximilian, fists clinched.

"Certainly not, but let us be mindful that there is no hierarchy of sin. If we toss out a priest for one thing, why not for another...theft, lies, deception? We're all guilty, Cardinal. Sin is sin."

Cardinal Maximilian's eyes turned red and the muscles in his jaw flexed. "Well, I guess this is a debate for another time."

"Anytime," Cardinal Polletto said, wanting to gloat. "It's been a pleasure, Cardinal Maximilian, as always."

"Not that I want to dwell on only bad news this morning, Cardinal, but have you heard anything new concerning the kidnapped boy from Father Tolbert's parish, Samuel Napier?"

Cardinal Polletto gave a deep sigh. "Yes," he said, "young Samuel. Unfortunately, I haven't heard a thing. I understand the police and FBI have yet to receive any word from the kidnappers, a grave misfortune."

"We'll all stay in constant prayer," said Cardinal Maximilian. "Let's hope the family hears something soon."

"Yes," said Cardinal Polletto, "let's continue to pray."

"I do have one concern," said Cardinal Maximilian, measuring his words. "Since young Samuel was an altar boy under Father Tolbert, I'm sure the FBI will want to question him at some point."

Cardinal Polletto sat up straight. "The thought crossed my mind," he said. "In fact, the boy's godfather has already made an inquiry."

"Even so, my concern is with the authorities. We should be prepared to make Father Tolbert available if asked."

“I understand and share your concern, Cardinal. But unless we believe Father Tolbert was somehow involved, I don’t think the Church should go out of its way. If asked, a phone conversation should suffice.”

Cardinal Maximilian rocked back and forth in his chair, all the time, his penetrating eyes never moving from Cardinal Polletto. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask that you send for Father Tolbert, Cardinal Polletto. Despite your inquiry into the rumors surrounding him, and my concurrence that we should only make him available to the authorities if asked, I want to question him myself. I’ll phone the Vatican Archives and have them hold his position. That’s only fair.”

Cardinal Polletto smiled and stood. “As you wish, Cardinal. I’ll see to it myself,” he said, as they said their goodbyes.

Cardinal Polletto rode up to his top floor office alone. Eyes closed, he fought to steady his nerves, leaning against the elevator’s back wall. Cardinal Maximilian’s request that he bring back Father Tolbert was impossible if he wanted to keep his plans hidden and moving forward. If he had his way, Father Tolbert would never return to the States. The priest’s uncontrollable urge for children had been useful, but was now an inconvenience. The rumors Cardinal Maximilian spoke of were far more than true. In fact, they were the crumbs of something far more pervasive. A well-orchestrated effort, and if Cardinal Polletto had his way, would significantly cripple and destroy the Church.

I must keep Father Tolbert in Rome. By the time the world discovers who Samuel Napier really is, it’ll be too late.

The elevator door opened. Cardinal Polletto, his anxiety now abated, was met by his assistant, Father Gerald Volken.

“I need you to get Bishop Niccolo at the Vatican Archives on the phone immediately,” he told the boyish-faced thirty-five year old.

“Yes, Cardinal, right away. I’ve placed your itinerary on your desk, including a list of people you need to call today and their phone numbers. There’s one at the top of the list that requires your immediate attention,” said Father Volken, following the cardinal into his office.

Cardinal Polletto picked up the list of scheduled phone calls. At the top it read: Call Chicago office, FBI, Agent Baxter, and included a phone number and extension.

Cardinal Polletto looked out over Chicago through his large, pane glass window. “Get me Bishop Niccolo at the Vatican as I requested, immediately.”

12

Robert parked at the curb across the street from the Napier's estate. Except for two unmarked federal sedans out front, and a black SUV with dark tinted windows in the circular driveway, things looked much quieter than the day before. Gone were the black and whites, flashing lights, heavy police presence, television trucks and reporters.

Robert sat a few minutes to calm himself, then got out and walked through the gate entrance, making a beeline for the front door. He was only a few feet away from the house when the front door opened, and an FBI lumberjack, wearing a dark blue suit, emerged and blocked his path.

"May I help you, sir?" the agent asked.

Robert didn't like the idea of having to account for his presence at Donovan's house, but suppressed his emotions, not wanting to upset Alison further by causing a scene. He explained the reason for his visit, that he was a close friend of Donovan's, hoping the agent would speak to his friend, not Alison.

"You're the boy's godfather, correct?" asked the agent, more polite than Robert anticipated. Robert nodded. The agent's eyes softened. "One moment, Mr. Veil. Please stay here, I'll see what I can do."

Robert said thanks, and a few minutes later, Donovan appeared at the side of the house. "Robert, follow me around back." Robert opened his mouth to speak, but Donovan held up a hand, and motioned for him to remain quiet.

Donovan's limp looked more pronounced. Dark circles outlined his now sunken eyes, and salt-and-pepper stubble crusted his leathery, basset hound face. Once they reached the guesthouse, Donovan went straight to the couch in the living room and collapsed into the Indian embroidery, exhausted. Robert had never seen his friend so distraught, not even when their lives were on the line out in the field when they worked for the CIA. Robert sat down, but only stared in silence, giving Donovan a chance to gather himself. After a little more than five minutes, the beaten down father sat up and wiped his eyes. Robert did the same.

"I'm sorry, but I haven't slept much," said Donovan. "Alison's out cold right now, thanks to Dr. Vicodin."

“Looks like you should swallow a few yourself,” said Robert, knowing it would take a cocked pistol to the head to get so much as an aspirin down Donovan’s throat.

Donovan stretched. “Don’t think I haven’t considered it. This is more brutal than you know.”

Robert cleared his throat. “Donovan, have they...have they called, made contact?”

“No, nothing,” he answered, rubbing his eyes. “It’s got us twisted in knots. If the bastards would just tell us what they want, anything, it doesn’t matter. Nothing would be too much.”

A jarring bolt zipped down Robert’s spine, but he held fast. “The boys at Quantico have any ideas? It’s what we pay them for.”

“No,” said Donovan, struggling to his feet. “They’re as much in the dark as we are.”

Donovan walked to the front window, leaned forward until his forehead touched it, and closed his eyes, his breath morphing into a deep fog on the glass.

Robert eased up behind his friend. “Thorne and I have been trying to chase down leads of our own.” Donovan straightened up and turned around. “I know you and Alison asked us to stay out of it,” Robert continued. “But did you really think we would? He’s as much of a son to me as he is to you.”

Donovan forced a smile, which looked out of place with the swollen sacks under his eyes, and heavily wrinkled brow. “I know you mean well, but I have to ask you and Thorne to stand down.”

The words took Robert aback. “Obviously there’s something going on I don’t know about. Now, you know me. You know what I can do. Why won’t you let me help?”

Donovan’s eyes widened. He gritted his teeth, made a fist, and lightly tapped it against Robert’s chest. Catching himself, Donovan relaxed and went back to the couch. Robert sat down next to him.

“I went by Samuel’s school today,” said Robert. “I talked to several of his friends. When I asked them if there was anything going on with Samuel, anything out of place, they both broke down in tears.”

Donovan furrowed his brow. “What did they say was wrong?”

“I didn’t get a chance to finish questioning them. I was escorted out before I could find out.”

“Who were the children you spoke with?” Robert gave him Paul and Carla’s names. Donovan looked even more puzzled. “They’re Samuel’s best friends. They didn’t mention anything when the FBI talked to them.”

“The FBI?” asked Robert, surprised.

“Yes. A couple of agents went to their houses to see if they noticed anything out of place over the last couple of weeks. They spoke to several of Samuel’s teachers and the school staff.”

Strange, why didn’t they tell me? Robert clenched his fists, but resisted banging them on the coffee table. “Donovan, what the hell is going on?”

“I wish I knew,” he answered. “That doesn’t make any sense to me.”

“I mean, what’s going on with Samuel that you’re not telling me?”

Donovan hesitated. “I can’t say.”

“You mean you won’t say.”

“It’s for Samuel’s protection, and probably has nothing to do with the kidnapping.”

“Probably?” Robert bit his tongue. “Does the FBI know?”

Donovan squinted, as though measuring his words. “No, they don’t.”

Robert sprang to his feet. “Goddamnit, I don’t get this! Samuel’s out there, stolen from us by God only knows who, and you’re holding back!”

“I know what’s at stake more than you! Don’t lecture me about my son,” Donovan yelled. In a huff he pushed himself up and headed for the door.

Robert grabbed his arm. “Tell me.”

Donovan’s chest heaved up and down, his eyes empty and black.

“Not yet. Not now.”

Robert leaned in close to Donovan’s face. “I’m going to find out anyway, and I won’t stop looking for Samuel.”

Donovan pushed Robert’s arm away and limped outside toward the house. Robert saw Alison looking down from an upstairs window. She closed the curtains when she saw him.

Donovan turned. “Stay out of it, Robert. Please.”

Robert opened his mouth to speak, but his friend waved goodbye, then disappeared inside the house.

12

On the road back to Chicago, Robert called Thorne to find out if she'd had more success than him. He had tracked her down at Detective Reynolds apartment. His conversation with Donovan was a draining dead-end, and he needed good news.

"I haven't found out much," she told him. "But we should discuss this in person, not on the cell phone." Robert agreed, hung up, and headed for Chicago's south side.

Fifteen minutes later, he spotted a light brown sedan tailing him. The car looked like a standard government issue. *Why tail me? You could've questioned me at the Napier's.*

Robert increased his speed to nearly ninety miles an hour. The sedan followed, but just enough to keep him in sight. Five miles down the freeway, Robert slowed down to fifty and made a sudden exit off I-94 at Illinois Route 60/Townline Road. The car stayed right on his tail, a red police light now flashing from the dashboard. Robert made a right turn onto Route 60/Townline Road, which was lightly trafficked, and kept going. The sedan fired up its siren. Robert pulled into a busy gas station and jumped out, hand on his gun. Two men exited the sedan.

On the passenger side, a tall, thick shouldered, African-American stared at him like a pit bull. The other, a half bald waif of a WASP, with a nearly finished cigarette hanging from his lips, Robert recognized. He was Assistant Director of Field Operations, Glenn Thompson, CIA.

"I knew you'd pick us up right away," said Thompson, taking a long last drag and tossing the butt on the asphalt. "We were going to wait until you reached the city before we stopped you; thought you'd be less likely to shoot us in a crowd." He laughed, marched over and stuck out his hand. Robert shook it, looking over at the stone-faced black man, who still hadn't said a word. "Allow me to introduce Special Agent Kirk Maxwell. He's here from D.C., and specializes in finding missing persons."

Agent Maxwell walked over and shook Robert's hand, but remained stoic.

“You’re here because of Samuel?” asked Robert.

“Yes,” said Thompson. “Thought we’d lend a helping hand to Donovan, he’s still family.”

“Since when do retired agents rate a visit from an assistant director? Even in a case like this.”

“Since the Director himself ordered it,” answered Thompson. “It seems as though he’s taken a personal interest in helping find Samuel.”

Bullshit, thought Robert. *You guys don’t give a shit about anybody who’s not important to you.* “Well, we can certainly use all the help we can get,” said Robert, taking another look at Agent Maxwell, who was now leaning back against the hood of the sedan. “You know anything I haven’t already heard?”

“I’m not sure. How much do you know?” asked Thompson.

Robert measured both men. *Something big is going on. The same something Donovan is keeping from me.* “Samuel’s gone, and nobody’s heard a peep from the kidnapers. I’ve scrounged around a bit, but haven’t come up with a thing.”

The two men looked at each other.

“What about at the school?” asked Agent Maxwell, his voice calm and smooth. “Find out anything important from the kids or staff?”

Robert decided he wouldn’t mention the breakdown of Samuel’s two best friends. “No, nothing,” he said. “It was a dead end.”

“So, what’s your next move?” chimed Thompson. “Any way we can be of assistance?”

“Yes,” said Robert. “You can start by telling me the reason you’re really out here. I know you guys. I used to be on the team, remember? Now, why the sudden intense interest in Samuel Napier?”

Agent Maxwell took a step toward Robert. “We could tell you, but then again, like you said you’re *not* one of us.”

Robert smiled at the rookie’s mistake. *So, there is something you guys want.*

“Stand down, Agent Maxwell. Wait for me in the car,” ordered Thompson, pulling a pack of Camels from his inside pocket. Agent Maxwell, not happy, slid inside the sedan and slammed the door. “Let’s walk,” said Thompson, brushing by Robert, a freshly lit cigarette in his mouth.

Just beyond the gas station was a small park, empty, except for a few joggers and a homeless man carrying two large plastic bags on his shoulders. Thompson stopped at a severely chipped, green wooden bench and sat. Robert eased down next to him, his scowl and wrinkled forehead demanding answers.

"I can't tell you much," said Thompson. "In fact, we don't know much."

"Then tell me why the CIA is interested in a little boy's kidnapping? And don't feed me the bullshit about *caring for Donavon*."

The silence lasted a second too long, and Robert knew he wouldn't get the answer he was looking for.

"You know as well as I do that information is handed out on a need to know basis," said Thompson.

Need to know. You mean, go fuck yourself. "Donovan says there's something special about Samuel," Robert lied. "Do you think that's why they took him?"

Robert watched his fabrication worm its way through Thompson's mind. The Assistant Director, his reputation built on calculating intuition, seemed to suppress a smile. "And exactly what is this *special thing* Donavon shared with you?"

"Something valuable enough to put the boy's life in danger," answered Robert. "Any idea who's behind this?"

Thompson continued to measure Robert. "None at this time. We were hoping you'd picked up their scent."

"No such luck. If I knew where the bastards were, I wouldn't be here bullshitting with you."

Thompson smiled and lit another cigarette off the one he'd just finished. "If you do find them, we'd appreciate a phone call. We'll provide any assistance you ask for, including intelligence, hardware, money. It's your call. Name your price."

Robert, off the bench before he knew it, grabbed Thompson by the collar. "Price! There's no price you could pay for this, asshole! He's my godson, not a bounty!"

Thompson continued to smile, the cigarette tucked in the corner of his mouth. Two cold taps on the nap of his neck, and Robert turned his head.

“Let the director go,” said Agent Maxwell, his .357 automatic pointed at Robert’s right eye socket.

Robert didn’t let go right away. He wanted to shake Thompson till his brain scrambled. Agent Maxwell cocked the hammer on his weapon. Robert let Thompson go and took a step back. When Agent Maxwell checked to see if his boss was okay, Robert grabbed the agent’s wrist, and spun clockwise, twisting the gun out of the agent’s grasp and flipped him over his shoulder. Agent Maxwell let out a grunt as he pounded down, back first, to the ground. Robert fired a shot in the dirt just past the agent’s head.

“You pull a gun on me, use it,” he snarled.

“I won’t forget,” said Agent Maxwell. “You can believe it.”

Thompson, seated again on the bench, lit another smoke, took a deep drag, leaned back and blew a hazy cloud into the air. He looked down at the two, amused. “Please let him up, Mr. Veil.”

Robert stared at the agent, his forearm pressed hard against Maxwell’s throat. But it wasn’t the FBI agent he saw on the ground, it was one of the masked men who kidnapped his godson. Robert hit Agent Maxwell on the temple with the butt of the gun, knocking him out cold. Then he tossed the weapon to Thompson, who fumbled it, losing his Camel in the process, sending orange ash sparkling in the air.

“That was uncalled for,” raged Thompson, standing.

“So is all this crap you’re trying to hand me,” fired Robert. “And until the CIA learns to share, don’t call on me again.”

“You’re one of us,” growled Thompson. “You know how this is played. Help us with anything you learn, and I’ll do the same. You have my word. I’ll let you in on everything when you find the boy.”

Agent Maxwell, groggy, tried to stand, but collapsed back to the ground, hands on his head. Robert headed back to his vehicle, ignoring Thompson’s calls.

Back in the Explorer, Robert gripped the steering wheel tight. *Why is Samuel drawing attention from the CIA?* He racked his brain, but no scenario that fit made any sense. He started the engine and hit the highway. He dialed his office in Washington D.C. on his cell. Evelyn Hollis, their office manager, picked up.

“Evie, it’s me. I want you to do a full background work-up on Samuel. Go back as far as you can, and list every name you can find.”

Evelyn grilled him, and he brought her up to date as much as he could over the phone. She hung up with promises to move as quickly as possible. Robert dialed Thorne, who picked up on the first ring.

“I have news, Robert. Come to Detective Reynolds apartment. It doesn’t look good,” said Thorne.

13

Robert sped into Chicago and headed for South Shore, where Detective Reynolds owned a condominium. Forty-five minutes past noon, most of the city's faithful went about their daily routine with systematic ease. City street crews directed traffic around pylons, while they repaired chuckholes in the asphalt, and scheduled maintenance before a hard winter took its toll. Hustlers hawked their wares, some legit, most illegal, all under the occasional watchful eyes of Chicago's patrolling finest.

Detective Reynolds, a twenty year police veteran, was somewhat of a legend on the streets of Chicago. Tales of his exploits were many, however, one story stood out as Robert's favorite.

Late one Friday night, back when the detective was still a uniform patrolman, he and his partner were cruising through one of the seedier sections of the city's South Side, when an explosion in a house the next street over rocked the neighborhood. Reynolds and his partner were the first to arrive on the scene and found an old, beaten down house quickly being gobbled up in flames.

"My babies, my babies!" a distraught mother in a nightgown bellowed, running up to the car. "My son and daughter are up there! Help them, please!"

"How old are they?" Reynolds asked, calm and controlled.

"Six and eight," she screamed.

"What are their names?"

"Carl and Kendra," the mother told him, collapsing to the ground.

Detective Reynolds' partner called for backup and the Fire Department. Reynolds looked up at the flames filling the second floor, and without hesitation, rushed inside and bolted up the stairs, fire crackling all around, screaming the children's names. He found both kids unconscious on the floor in their bedroom, the exit blocked by the raging inferno. Witnesses outside said they heard a loud crash, looked up, and saw Detective Reynolds falling toward them with Carl and Kendra under each arm. He landed hard on the grassless lawn, breaking his right leg in

two places, but saving the children, who suffered a few bruises and were treated for smoke inhalation, but otherwise were okay.

When Detective Reynolds returned to work he received the highest honors the police department and the City of Chicago could bestow, not to mention, street credibility any officer would dream of, and the nickname of a comic book superhero with the persona of a bat.

As with many women, Thorne kept the intimate details of her love life guarded, but in all the years Robert had known her, no man could ever boast the impact Detective Reynolds had on her. Where most of Thorne's relationships lasted six, nine months at the most, the detective had managed to survive close to three years, and Robert wasn't surprised when she accepted the detective's proposal of marriage. Thorne was the happiest Robert had ever seen her, and he was glad she found someone to share her life with.

However, a month before they all flew to Martha's Vineyard for a small ceremony, the whole thing was suddenly called off. Thorne spent a week at Robert's place moping. He didn't press her, and she never said a word about why the wedding was canceled. Thorne eventually shook it off and remained close friends with Detective Reynolds. They even took trips together on occasion, but the subject of marriage never came up again.

Robert drove into the underground garage of the detective's complex and parked. Shadowy and dark, the drab concrete felt more like a tomb, adding to Robert's already foreboding sense of dread. He strode out of the elevator on the tenth floor and knocked on the white and gold trim door, numbered ten-twelve. Thorne snatched open the door, all smiles, and gave Robert a long, tight hug, as though she knew it was just the medicine he needed.

Detective Reynolds, six-three, muscle plastered, with flawless, midnight black skin, emerged from the kitchen hand extended, and offered Robert his sympathy concerning Samuel. Words Robert found comforting.

Robert plopped down on the sofa and filled them in on his encounters with Samuel's friends at school, his conversation with Donavon, and his clash with Glenn Thompson and the CIA.

“What the hell does Thompson and the CIA want with Samuel?” asked Thorne, forehead wrinkled, eyes tight.

“Exactly,” exclaimed Robert. “The whole thing smells. Evelyn is looking into Samuel’s history; as far back as she can go.”

“Maybe they’re just watching out for one of their own. A former ‘Company’ man,” said Detective Reynolds.

“Not a chance,” said Thorne, beating Robert to it. “These guys don’t take a shit unless there’s something in it for them.”

Robert agreed, shaking his head. “I wish the assholes who snatched Samuel would make contact, send a note, or something. At least we’d know he’s alive. Maybe even pick up their trail.”

Thorne and Detective Reynolds looked at each other, then at Robert. “There is a note,” the detective finally said. “The FBI received it this morning.”

Robert’s heart pounded. “But I talked to Donovan earlier, he didn’t mention a thing.”

Thorne slid down next to Robert. “He knows, Donovan was there when it arrived Federal Express from a dead end address in Kansas City. The Feds read it, and then asked everyone to leave.”

“Yes,” added Reynolds. “And when they let us back inside, everyone acted as if the note didn’t exist. I have an FBI contact, who says Donovan and his wife were briefed, but everyone else is being kept out of the loop. When I asked about the Fed Ex package, they said, and I quote, *what Fed Ex package?*” Robert collapsed back into the deep blue leather couch.

Thorne put a hand on his knee. “Partner, I’m afraid it gets worse,” she said.

Robert snapped up, eyes on the two of them. *Worse! How?* No one spoke. Detective Reynolds shifted his eyes away from Robert’s. Thorne stood firm, her gaze never leaving his. Robert stood. “Well, is somebody going to tell me, or do I have to read your minds?”

Thorne took a deep breath. “It concerns Father Tolbert.”

“Yes,” said Detective Reynolds. “We’ve been getting complaints for the last six months, accusations that he’s been molesting children in the Church. A few have mentioned Samuel as a possible victim, but nothing’s been confirmed.”

The pressure started in the back of Robert's head and stabbed at his brain. It moved just behind his eyes, pulsating in his sinuses. "Are you saying Samuel was being molested?"

"It's a possibility," said Thorne, as gently as possible. "Nothing has been confirmed, they're only suspicions."

Robert sat back down and rocked back and forth. "I don't believe it," he said, through gritted teeth. "Not Samuel."

Thorne massaged the back of his neck. "Easy partner, it's just something in the wind. Let's not bust a vessel right now."

Detective Reynolds went to the kitchen and returned with a glass of cold water. Robert drained it and shook off any notion of Samuel being molested.

"We should have another conversation with Cardinal Polletto," said Thorne. "If rumors are floating around about molested children, he already knows about it."

"It doesn't mean he knows anything about Samuel," said Detective Reynolds. "And remember, they'll do anything to protect the Church. You know how these guys operate."

"You're right," said Thorne. "But on the off chance Father Tolbert has hurt Samuel, he may have noticed something strange or out of place, something that may lead us to the kidnappers."

Robert pounded his fist in the palm of his hand. "Let's go see the cardinal right now. It's all we have until we find out what the note says."

Thorne and the detective agreed. She disappeared to a back room and returned with her jacket. Detective Reynolds gave her an extended hug.

"You coming with us?" Thorne asked Reynolds.

"No," answered the detective. "I have to hit the office and clean up a few reports."

Thorne laid a long deep kiss on Detective Reynolds. "Be here when I get back."

The detective smiled. "You've got the key. It's your house."

In the hallway Robert asked if wedding bells were again a possibility.

"We've agreed that I'll be the one to propose this time," she said, a slight smile etched on her face. "Right now, I'm just not ready."

Robert wanted to ask more questions, but Thorne's eyes said, *save it for another time.*

In the parking deck, five feet from Robert's vehicle, six masked figures, two with shotguns, surrounded them. Robert reached for his 9mm.

"Please don't do that, Mr. Veil, we're only here to speak with you. We mean you no harm," said one of the men.

Robert recognized the voice. *It's the group who tried to save Samuel.* "Where's Samuel?"

"Unfortunately, we haven't a clue at the moment," said the man.

"Then who the hell are you?" asked Thorne, tickling the shaft of the Mosberg pistol grip shotgun dangling from her shoulder.

"You mean, who in heaven," said the man, removing his ski mask. "My name is Cardinal James Francis Maximilian, and we are Il Martello di Dio, The Hammer of God."

14

Samuel finished off the last of two roast beef sandwiches, potato chips, dill pickles, and his second can of orange soda, pushed back his cushiony chair, propped his feet up on the cushion and closed his eyes. More hungry than he realized, Samuel felt like he could've eaten two more sandwiches, but didn't ask. He didn't want to be so stuffed that he couldn't run away if he got the chance. He had no idea where they were headed or when they would land. He guessed they'd been flying for over five hours, maybe seven, but he wasn't sure.

The plane suddenly shook and rocked violently. Samuel looked around the cabin. Sister Bravo and the others were asleep, and except for Father Murphy, who slightly lifted his head then let it fall back in his chair, nobody moved. With nothing to do and nowhere to go, Samuel fell back down in his chair and let his heavy lids fall, drifting off into a deep sleep.

"Samuel, wake up, it's time."

Samuel opened his eyes, sleep blurring his vision. The soft purr of the plane's jet engines ceased. Samuel reached out and gave his mother, Alison Napier, a hug.

"We've missed you so much," she said, stroking his hair.

"I've missed you too," he told her, eyes wet.

Samuel tried to express how much he missed her, but the words didn't come. He hugged her tighter, determined not to let go. He looked up at his mother's face through blurry eyes, water streaming down his cheeks. His vision cleared. The purr of the engines returned. Samuel awakened.

"We're landing," Sister Bravo told him, looking down. "It's time to get back in the box."

Samuel, confused, looked up, searching for his mother's face.

Sister Bravo shook him firmly. "I said get back in the box."

Clarity rushed in, dousing Samuel like ice water. His senses returned. *I can't get back in the crate. I'll never get away.* His hands quivered. He stared at the crate, watching Father Sin open one side and holding it for him to crawl inside.

“It’ll only be for a short time,” Sister Bravo told him, reading his thoughts.

“I promise I’ll do everything you say,” said Samuel, jumping to his feet. “Please, don’t make me get back in the box. I’ll be good, I swear.”

Sister Bravo smiled, her eyes suspicious. “Why should we trust you? Only hours ago, you were defiant and cursing.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I didn’t understand. It won’t happen again.”

“Nein,” snapped Father Sin, his German accent thick, commanding. “Get back in the box.”

“Yes,” added Father Murphy. “It’s the safest way.”

Samuel looked back and forth between both priests and took a step toward the box. Urine, a small blot spreading into a large one, soaked his trousers, and a quiver that started with his hands, turned into an all-out, all-over quake.

“Wait,” said Sister Bravo. She walked in front of Samuel. “Okay,” she said, her face still not fully convinced. “You’ll walk through customs with Fathers Sin and Murphy, but if you so much as cough wrong, we’ll kill you. Understood?”

Samuel nodded his head, calm and relieved.

“Get his papers,” she told Father Murphy, walking to a small suitcase, removing a fresh pair of blue jeans. “Go to the bathroom and put these on,” she continued. “And hurry up, we’ll be landing soon.”

Samuel scurried off to the bathroom. Once inside, his shaking stopped. He looked down at the piss-stained trousers, smiled, then looked in the mirror. The two cans of orange soda showed up just in time, a crowning touch to his begging. He changed quickly, took several deep breaths and braced himself. He exited the bathroom with a false submissive gratefulness on his face.

Just one chance. Just one.

15

Samuel fidgeted in his aisle seat, wishing he were next to a window as the plane angled downward. Sister Bravo and the two priests broke off their whisper filled conversation they were holding on the far side of the cabin and buckled up in their seats. Samuel took a couple of deep, imperceptible breathes to relax, trying not to look too calm. He scanned the cabin. Father Sin's glare bored a hole right through Samuel's forehead. It made him uncomfortable, and he avoided direct eye contact. Father Murphy stared out of the window, humming a choppy tune Samuel didn't recognize, and Sister Bravo thumbed through a thick manila folder, reading a file, her dark silky hair back up in her habit.

Samuel heard the plane's landing gear unfold and lock into place. He remembered a similar sound on the much larger jets he flew in when he went on trips with his parents. Joyous moments that meant Disneyland or Six Flags were just around the corner, or that a long, boring flight to some place his mother thought would be educational had just started, or mercifully come to an end. This time though, a large stone, the size of a pit from a just eaten peach, was imbedded in the bottom of his stomach like a small boulder.

Twenty minutes later, the plane touched down, and not long after, glided to a stop. Everybody unbuckled and stood. Samuel stayed in front of his seat and watched the others scramble around the cabin, gathering their things in organized chaos. Sister Bravo shoved a purple backpack in Samuel's face.

"It's filled with extra clothing," she told him. "You need to know in case customs check. Here's your passport."

Samuel opened it, and immediately recognized the photo he took the year before at St. Paul Elementary, during the annual picture day held at most schools. He remembered that his mother chose Package A, which provided enough wallet photos for half of Chicago. Sister Bravo took back the passport.

"Your name is Samuel Peterson," she told him. Samuel repeated the name. "You're an orphan," she continued. "That's all you need to know. Fathers Sin and Murphy will walk you inside and answer any other

questions. I'll be along later." She handed the passport to Father Sin and abruptly disappeared through the door that led to the front of the plane. Samuel looked over at Father Sin.

"Let's go," the priest grumbled. "And remember your place."

Father Sin's face softened as much as Samuel imagined it probably could, and he extended his massive hand to the ten year old, whose tiny fingers disappeared in the giant's grip. They walked to the far rear of the plane, Father Murphy right behind them. The back door opened, and a short flight of stairs rolled into place. Father Sin led the way down into a large airplane hanger, where they were greeted by two men in matching dark-brown shirts and pants, with patches of a jet similar to the one they flew in on pasted on the right side of their chests, with the words *Ciampino Aero Jet* above the patch.

Fathers Sin and Murphy kissed the men on both sides of their cheeks and greeted them in a language Samuel still couldn't place. Samuel looked back at the plane for any sign of Sister Bravo, who was nowhere in sight. He did notice a large symbol on the tail of the plane. A gold crown with two majestic keys crossed under it, all laid on top of a deep orange shield. Samuel recalled seeing the symbol before at church in Father Tolbert's office, but couldn't remember what it meant.

Fathers Sin and Murphy and the two airport workers laughed and talked in a language Samuel now guessed to be Italian or French. They ended the brief conversation, and the airport workers moved the stairs from the back door to the front, as a shiny black Mercedes Benz eased inside the hanger and stopped in front of them. The driver popped the trunk, and the two airport workers loaded the bags. Father Murphy sat up front with the driver. Samuel slid in back with Father Sin. He made a mental note of the time from a digital clock with bright green numbers on the dashboard...7:00 *p.m.* The driver pulled out of the hanger, past a group of planes similar to the one they flew in on, minus the symbol on the tail Samuel still couldn't place.

Outside, the sun had all but vanished, leaving the airport bathed in the light dust of evening, that moment between sunset and night. The airport was much smaller than Chicago O'Hare, or any of the airports Samuel remembered. He spotted several planes with names he

recognized; American Airlines, United, Continental, the sight of which made him long for home even more.

The car abruptly stopped at a small terminal and Samuel heard the trunk pop. Father Murphy and the driver gathered the bags, while Father Sin and Samuel stood by the car. The evening air was crisp, but not too cold, and Samuel welcomed it as it lightly caressed his face.

“Remember,” Father Sin hissed, “I’ll do the talking.”

Samuel nodded his consent and followed the priest inside the terminal, which looked more like the lobby of his father’s country club than an airport terminal. Thick tan carpet cushioned their feet, and artwork like he’d seen during field trips to the Chicago Art Museum lined the walls. An emotionless uniformed man stood behind a wooden counter, another waited at a table just a few feet away. A sign hung over each station that read *Customs*. Another sign over the counter read *Welcome to Italy*.

Father Sin led the way to the front counter, greeted the customs agent, and handed over three passports. Father Murphy stood next to him with the bags. The agent eyed them carefully, thumbed through the passports, occasionally looking up to scan the three of them. The agent said something to Father Sin, who managed to somehow transform himself into a model of patience and piety, an image that made him even more frightening. He smiled, pointed to Samuel, and said something to the agent that caused him to respond, “I see, I see,” in a thick, Italian accent. The agent smiled at Samuel, handed the passports back to Father Sin, and pointed them in the direction of the customs agent waiting a few feet away.

“Anything to declare?” asked the customs agent, in much better English.

“No, nothing,” answered Father Sin, with a broad smile.

Father Murphy placed their bags on the table.

“No, Father, that won’t be necessary,” the agent told him, waving them through.

“Grazie, grazie,” gushed Father Sin, grabbing Samuel’s hand, pulling him toward the exit.

Samuel considered making his stand right there at customs, but feared he might not be able to get the agent to understand. He had to wait until he had a greater advantage.

Outside, the black Mercedes was waiting at the curb. Father Murphy tossed the bags in the trunk and resumed his seat up front with the driver. Father Sin pushed Samuel in the back seat and the car sped away. The Mercedes pulled out of the airport area past a sign that read *Roma Ciampino Airport onto Via Appia Nuova Road*. Samuel watched rural Italy pass by, most of it green flat land and rolling hills. The longer Samuel watched unfamiliar landmarks zip by, he realized just how far he was from home, and the sickness in his stomach bubbled. *You'll never see your mother and father ever again*, he heard Sister Bravo's voice sneer. Samuel gritted his teeth. *No, I won't accept that! Never!*

"Sit back and relax," Father Sin told him, with icy stillness. "It won't take long for us to reach our destination."

"Where are we going?" asked Samuel, trying to sound more curious than nosey.

"Never you mind," snapped the priest. "Just mind yourself and stay quiet."

Samuel continued to gaze out the window, wondering how anyone would figure out he was halfway around the world. He tried to think of a reason a nun and priests would want to take him from home, but couldn't. The deeper his confusion, the angrier he felt. An odd, unfamiliar sensation came over him. A feeling of control and momentary strength he couldn't explain. He shook it off, and twenty minutes later, they passed a city sign Samuel could read. *We're in Rome!*

The streets of Rome reminded him of any other city, but much more. There was an air about it that felt different, but Samuel couldn't put a finger on why. It looked modern, but also looked and felt older, like the Rome he had studied in history class back at school.

They drove around a big circle crowded with cars, which Samuel guessed to be the middle of the city. His eyes took in as much as possible, not that it did him any good. As fast as he memorized landmarks and street signs, the images faded from his memory.

The car pulled out of the circle, down a dimly lit street, drove three blocks, and stopped in a busy section of the city, lined with small

restaurants and cafés. Samuel thought he heard jazz music. Boring sounds his father and Uncle Robert loved to listen to for hours. The music came from a café a few feet from the car. Samuel memorized its name, *Galaassia*. He repeated the name in his head and looked for an address, but saw none.

A large bus pulled in front of them and stopped. Samuel's heart pumped hard as he watched a load of Americans exit the bus and spread out along the street, laughing and pointing, snapping pictures and joking around. Samuel slowly looked over at Father Sin, who paid little attention to the American tourists. The priest talked to the driver and Father Murphy in Italian, then pulled out a cell phone and dialed. A few grunts later, he hung up.

"Sister Bravo is on her way," stated Father Murphy.

The bus drove away, the Americans, parceled out amongst the eateries and coffee houses, were nowhere to be found, although seeing them seemed to renew Samuel's sense of hope. He looked down at the door handle then back up at Father Sin.

"Any chance we'll get something to eat soon?" he asked.

"You ate enough for two on the plane," said Father Sin, not looking at him, scanning the area.

"I know, but I'm still hungry."

Father Murphy and the driver laughed. Father Sin continued to ignore him. Samuel looked down at the door handle again, certain that it was locked. He wanted to check it to make sure, but couldn't find an opening. He looked around the street then leaned back and closed his eyes. If Father Sin or one of the others looked down at him, he wanted to appear still under their control. Samuel opened his eyes. Father Sin looked over momentarily then turned his attention back to the crowded street. Samuel peeked at the lock again, slid his hand to it, and fingered the handle.

Another black Mercedes swooped in front of them and parked.

"It's Sister Bravo," said Father Sin, now looking at Samuel. "Slide over to the middle and make room."

Samuel braced himself and leaned toward the middle of the seat. The driver hit the locks. Samuel grabbed the handle and slammed his

shoulder hard against the door. It crashed open and he fell to the ground. A car screeched to a halt a foot from his head.

“Get him! Get him!” Father Sin screamed.

Samuel jumped to his feet and ran into the crowd on the opposite side of the street. He heard Father Sin’s voice fade the farther he ran. The crowd parted, making a way for him, some cursing in Italian, others in broken English. Samuel didn’t care, he was free.

16

Dead asleep, Father Tolbert lay caught up in a dream he'd have to confess as soon as he reached the Vatican. A boy, close to Samuel's age, sat on his knee staring up at him, sad and confused. The boy looked oddly familiar, but the priest couldn't place him.

"Who are you?" Father Tolbert asked the boy, who was now close to tears.

"I'm you," the boy stammered.

"Me, what nonsense is this? What's your name?"

"What's your name?"

"I won't ask you again! What is your name?"

"Charles," cried the boy. "Charles Tolbert!"

Father Tolbert knocked the boy off his leg and jumped back, horrified. The longer he stared at the child, the more frightened he became. The boy just stared at him, an evil scowl on his face.

"You can't have me, you know. You'll never have me," said young Charles. Then he slowly turned, walked into a heavy bank of fog, and disappeared. Father Tolbert stood there shaking.

A firm hand rattled his shoulder, and Father Tolbert opened his eyes, gasping for air, face drenched with sweat. *Sister Bravo*.

"Sorry to startle you, Father, but we've arrived," she said.

The fog lifted. Father Tolbert nodded, and on second thought, banished any notion of confessing to anyone but Cardinal Polletto.

Sister Bravo removed the wrinkled blanket covering him and began gathering his things. Father Tolbert stretched, folded his seat forward and stood.

"Thank you, Sister. How soon will the car get here?"

"Fifteen minutes at the most."

The priest grunted. He wanted to get settled in quickly, anxious to set his demise in motion, to end his life and pain. He looked out the window and saw a black Mercedes pull away.

"A car just left," he said, irritated.

"Yes," said Sister Bravo. "The car had mechanical problems. They're sending another one right away."

Father Tolbert thought he saw passengers in the back seat of the Benz, but the tinted windows and distance made him think his eyes were playing tricks on him. *Why would there be anybody in the car anyhow?*

Sister Bravo soon had all of his things gathered and another Mercedes, an exact duplicate of the previous car, met them next to the plane. The driver quickly loaded their luggage and drove them past the private terminal for VIP passengers, to the overcrowded customs area in the main terminal.

“Why are we going to the main terminal?” asked Father Tolbert.

“I was informed that the private terminal is closed until further notice,” said Sister Bravo. “But they promised to process us through as quickly as possible.”

Father Tolbert, antagonized and anxious, stared out at the planes landing and taxiing to a stop. He wrung his hands, sweat still beading up on his brow, and took several deep breaths.

Inside, the main terminal looked like a cattle ranch, with travelers packed in long lines at every station. Clouds of cigarette smoke hung in the air like lost spirits, barely masking the mustiness set in the clothes of travelers who’d suffered through long flights crowded in coach.

“I’ll check and see where we’re supposed to be, Father. Stay in this line. I’ll be right back,” said Sister Bravo.

She disappeared into the crowd, leaving Father Tolbert in dismay. *This is not like her. She’s usually on top of these details.* Father Tolbert shrugged it off, chalking the out of ordinary delay up to divine providence. Twenty minutes later, the priest stood only a few people from the front of the line, and Sister Bravo, extremely apologetic, reappeared.

“Please, Father, come with me. They’ve just now made room for us in a private office,” she said.

Father Tolbert looked ahead. Only one person, an elderly woman, was in front of him. “We’re almost at the front. Let’s wait here.”

“But, Father, they’ve made arrangements.”

The customs agent waved the elderly woman to the counter.

“I’m waiting right here,” said Father Tolbert. “Get your passport out and let’s be done with it.”

Sister Bravo pushed her bags forward after the old woman finished, showed the clerk her passport then rolled the luggage to the inspection station, with Father Tolbert right behind her. The nun lifted her suitcase to put it on the table. The latch popped open, and the entire contents spilled out all over the tiled floor.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Father, I’m so sorry,” cried Sister Bravo, blushing as she quickly gathered up her things.

Exasperated, he reluctantly bent down to help her. “Don’t worry, Sister, it was an accident. It seems it’s just not our day.”

Father Tolbert and Sister Bravo scooped up her belongings, and spent ten minutes having customs look through their suitcases, before finally loading up and heading down Via Appia Antica Road, toward Rome. Sister Bravo used the car cell phone to let the Vatican know they were running late. Father Tolbert, satisfied that they would finally arrive soon, leaned back and rested his eyes. He heard the nun hang up the phone.

“Cardinal Polletto left a message, asking me to run a special errand for him. There’s a car waiting for me downtown.”

Father Tolbert continued to relax. “We must do what we must do.”

“You’ve not been to Rome lately?” asked Sister Bravo, after a few minutes silence.

“Not in a long while,” said Father Tolbert, his eyes still closed. “But I plan to make the most of my time here.”

“You’re fortunate that Cardinal Polletto could get you such an assignment on such short notice. To work in the Vatican Archives is a real honor.”

Yes, if you consider hiding out an honor. “Thank you, Sister, that it is.”

The car slid into downtown Rome. Father Tolbert sat up and looked out at the hustling, busy streets, taking in the unique flavor of one of the world’s oldest cities. He marveled at the sight of ancient ruins and marble columns, standing beside office complexes, luxurious villas, and modern apartment buildings on noisy boulevards. Father Tolbert pressed his face against the glass. The duality between the past and present left him astounded.

The driver navigated the downtown streets with an ease of the familiar. They traveled down the narrow and busy Via del Corso and went north from the Piazza Venezia, past the Piazza Colonna to the heart of the city.

“The other car is just up ahead,” said the driver, swerving in front of a parked Benz, identical to their own.

“I’ll see you at the Vatican,” said Sister Bravo. “The driver will tend to my things.”

Father Tolbert heard shouting and a commotion behind them. The driver and Sister Bravo bolted from the car. Father Tolbert turned and saw several men, including the driver, run into a crowd gathered on the other side of the street, with Sister Bravo in tow. Confused, Father Tolbert jumped out and headed in that direction.

The driver quickly ran toward him, waving him back to the car. “Sister Bravo says that we should continue on to the Vatican,” he told the priest.

“What’s all the fuss about?” asked Father Tolbert.

“Nothing to worry yourself about, Father. We should go on to the Vatican. She’ll catch up with us later.”

“But we shouldn’t leave her stranded,” Father Tolbert pressed.

The driver, dark and robust, with long thick fingers scowled. “We should leave immediately,” he growled.

Father Tolbert felt a shiver. The driver’s face said it was not a request. y slid back inside the back seat, perspiration pouring down his forehead into his eyes. He pulled his already wet handkerchief from his inside jacket pocket and wiped his drenched face. He continued to look back, but there was still no sign of Sister Bravo.

The engine revved and the driver sped off, sending nonchalant patrons crossing the street, diving for cover.

17

Samuel bolted down the sidewalk, arms and legs pumping like mini pistons, his jaw as tight as a pit bull. Everything around him zipped by in a blur. He crashed into several angry Italians, including, to his chagrin, an old woman, probably somebody's grandmother, fell hard to the pavement, chest-first. Then he sprang to his feet and kept running, with no idea where he was or where he was going. Terrified, he looked back. Nobody was chasing him.

Legs aching, needles prickling his lungs, he slowed down to a trot, then a fast walk, constantly glancing back over his shoulder. Samuel squinted through the sweat searing his eyes, but there were no galloping hooves or cursing priests rocketing in his direction. Five blocks later, he leaned up against the brick wall of an old antique shop, breathing hard, heart pounding, and his legs rubber. Eyes glued down the street, he was ready to take off at the first sight of Father Sin's gargoyle mug, but the faces that stared back at him flashed only mild interest and curiosity, not the intent to kill.

Samuel stomped his feet hard on the concrete to fend off the numbness in his legs, a trick he learned during cold winters in Chicago. He pressed his face against an antique shop window, but only old furniture, dusty lamps, and an assortment of dull, lifeless figurines, the kind you might find on many grandmothers' mantles, stared back, sparking not a single bit of interest. His stomach tightened. *I want to go home.*

He looked around the dimly lit, nearly barren, street lined with small shops and stores all closed for the night, and felt a wave of anxiety wash over him. He sobbed. *I'm lost.* He steadied his breathing, lungs grateful for the rest, took another long look down the street, and then headed in the opposite direction at a brisk pace.

"Excuse me, can you help me? I'm lost," Samuel pleaded to an old man toting two brown paper sacks.

The old man reminded him of the cartoon character he'd seen on old cartoon reruns on Nickelodeon, *Mr. Magoo*, with his big bulbous head, thick glasses, and total confusion. The old man gave an indifferent huff,

humped his shoulders and kept walking, mumbling under his breath in Italian.

Samuel spotted a young couple walking toward him, arm in arm, and stepped in front of them. “P-P-Please, I’m lost,” he stammered, his eyes filled with tears. “Can you help me?”

The young man, a Brad Pitt clone, pulled out several coins and dropped them in Samuel’s palm. His girlfriend, apparently moved by his generosity, kissed and hugged every inch of his face. The young lovers crossed the street, lips locked tight, as though the ten year old was never there.

The darkness brought a stiff, cold breeze that cut through Samuel to the bone. He continued down the street, hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched forward for warmth. Most of the buildings he passed were empty. The longer he walked, the more the area took on the ambiance of a cheap horror film. Samuel forced himself to think, *what should I do?* He looked around for a policeman, a taxi driver, anyone who looked official, but saw nobody. *Think! Think!* Samuel stopped. *Of course, the Embassy! The U.S. Embassy!*

He spotted a woman, who looked to be about his mother’s age, walking across the street in the opposite direction. He ran over to her, shaking, nervous. “Please, I’m looking for the U.S. Embassy. Can you help me?” he frantically asked.

The woman, tall with long reddish hair, and a mosey nose, furrowed her brow. “Excuse me?” she asked.

“The Embassy,” said Samuel, struggling not to scream. “I need to get to the U.S. Embassy.”

“I no understand,” said the woman, confused. “What’s Embebe?”

“No, Em-ba-see,” he repeated, tears streaming down his cheeks. “American’s Embassy.”

The woman ran a hand back through her long, silky vines. Finally, a look of recollection lit up her face. “Oh, American’s, Em-baa-see.”

Samuel, encouraged, wiped his face on his shirtsleeve. “Yes,” he said. “I need to get there. Can you help?”

The woman, now happy she could be of assistance, pointed down an alley to a well-lit street about fifteen hundred feet on the other side.

“American Embassy on Vittorio Veneto.”

Samuel slowly repeated the street named. “Vi-tor-ia Ven-e-to.” He said his thanks and gave her, to her astonishment, a tight, extended hug, then sprinted across the street into the alley, a smile chiseled on his face. He wondered what his parents would say to him. What he would say when he talked to them. The pain in his legs disappeared. His head cleared, which made him run faster. *I’m going home!*

A sudden slap burned across Samuel’s face. He saw a spark of light, flew backwards up off his feet, and crashed to the ground, hitting the back of his head on the pavement.

“What are you doing in my alley?” a voice demanded in broken English. “You don’t have permission to be here.”

Samuel dazed, his head pounding, tried to shake it off, and wobbled to his feet amid scattered laughter. When his vision cleared, he saw four boys, two who looked to be around his age, and two older, standing in front of him.

“I said, what are you doing in my alley?” repeated a skinny kid with dark hair and a handsome face. He appeared to be the oldest.

Samuel continued to shake his head, trying to rid himself of the ringing in his ears. “What, huh?”

The skinny kid moved closer. “You’re trespassing. You’re not supposed to be here,” he repeated in Italian.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand,” said Samuel. “I don’t speak Italian.”

The boy turned to the others. “Americano, a fucking Americano.” He looked back at Samuel. “My name is Carlo,” he said, in butchered English. “What are you doing in my alley?”

Samuel, his heart a bass drum, bent over to catch his breath. “I’m lost, and I’m trying to get to the American Embassy. Please help me.”

Carlo, his green eyes pools of fierce deceit, pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket, put it between his lips, but didn’t light up. “Why should we help you? What’s in it for us?”

Nervous, Samuel stood up straight and examined each boy closely. They looked like hardened criminals to him, and even if he were at full-strength, he knew he couldn’t take them all at once. Two of the boys circled around to his rear.

“I don’t have anything,” Samuel told them through gritted teeth. “I just want to get to the Embassy.”

Carlo signaled to one of the boys behind Samuel, who proceeded to rifle through his pockets. He found the money the young couple gave him earlier. Smiling at his apparent discovery, the black-toothed boy with a pug nose handed the money to Carlo, who examined it, then stared hard at Samuel.

“What is this?” asked Carlo.

“I forgot about that. A man gave it to me earlier.”

Carlo slapped Samuel back to the ground. “Bastardo!”

Samuel, flat on his back, closed his eyes tight and balled up his fists, teeth grinding. Tired, frustration turned to anger. He pushed himself up so fast, and with such force, the boys all jumped several steps back. “Leave me alone,” he bellowed, meaning every word of it.

“Look, its John Wayne,” scoffed Carlo, laughing. “Bang, bang, he’s going to get us all.”

The boys all laughed, several grabbing their sides. Samuel fists tightened. He rushed Carlo, growling like a mad dog, tackled the older boy, and wailed on his face with everything he had left. The others, momentarily stunned, snapped out of it and jumped Samuel, pulling him off their leader. They tossed him to the concrete, pounding and kicking his face and body.

“Stop!” ordered Carlo, now on his feet, wiping his bloody nose.

“Hold him up.”

The boys lifted up Samuel, battered and beaten. They had to hold him up to keep him from toppling over. Carlo pulled a knife from his sock.

“So, Mr. John Wayne, let’s see how you like the blade.”

Samuel struggled to break free, but with each strain and pull his energy drained away. Carlo stepped forward. Samuel lifted his head, snot running from his nose, face blazed over with rage, and with all his strength, smashed his foot into Carlo’s groin. The Italian boy dropped the knife, curled over, and crashed back to the ground. The others loosened their grip. Samuel broke free and ran. He heard fast footsteps behind him but didn’t turn around. The closer he got to the street, the harder he pressed. Ten feet from his goal, two strong arms wrapped around his waist and snatched him to the ground.

Samuel rolled over onto his back and looked up at a chubby, round-faced boy with bushy brown hair and elephant ears. He wanted to fight back, but could barely breathe because of the boy's full weight pressing down on his chest. Samuel turned his head. Down the alley, he watched Carlo, assisted by the others, limp toward him, demon possessed. The fat kid on top of him picked up a fist-sized rock and raised it over Samuel's head.

"Close your eyes American cowboy," he said.

Samuel relaxed, resigned to his fate. Tears swelled from under his eyelids and he cried like a newborn. Suddenly, the weight lifted off of him, and he heard the sound of a grainy Italian voice, screaming and yelling in Italian. Barely able to move, Samuel peered down the alley and saw all of the boys running in the other direction. Samuel rested his head back on the asphalt. When he looked up, he saw the face of a large man with a scraggly salt and pepper beard and a long ponytail.

"Get up, my friend," said the man, reaching down and lifting Samuel with little effort. "What are you doing here this time of night?"

Samuel, exhausted and confused, could barely speak.

"I'm...trying...to...get home," he finally stammered, exasperated. "I need...to get to...the American...Em...bassy." He bent over. His head and the alley swirled all around, and then his legs gave away. The giant caught Samuel and lifted him up like a new bride.

"No, no, my friend, Luciano will take you home where you can rest. We'll deal with your problems tomorrow."

Samuel wanted to protest, but didn't have the strength. Luciano's kind eyes told him he was in good hands for the moment, so Samuel let his body go limp, and collapsed into a deep sleep.

18

Cardinal Polletto sat behind his immaculate glass-top desk, phone glued to his ear, sipping a Brazilian espresso. He'd just finished thanking Bishop Niccolo at the Vatican Archives for overriding Cardinal Maximilian's request that Father Tolbert be brought back to Chicago for questioning. The bishop told Cardinal Maximilian that he didn't have a ready replacement, and that he was already shorthanded. The cardinal didn't put up much fuss. Maintaining the precious heirlooms and artifacts in the archives was a priority at the Holy See, so Cardinal Maximilian agreed to conduct any needed interviews over the phone via conference calls.

However, as Cardinal Polletto listened to the bad news being reported to him by Sister Bravo, the temporary victory evaporated, and the knot in his stomach cramped.

"How? When?" asked Cardinal Polletto, his voice stern and angry, fist wrapped tight around the secure satellite phone.

"We've been looking for over an hour," answered Sister Bravo, cool and steady. "He jumped out of a parked car and ran into a crowd, but we'll find him. I have a team on it."

"How many?"

"Sin, Murphy, and two others. They're scouring the streets in plainclothes, around the clock."

"It's not enough. Put everybody on the streets. Make it an all out effort. I want him found quickly."

Sister Bravo cleared her throat. "We should keep the effort small, but deliberate. I want him found too, and I take full responsibility for losing him in the first place, but we don't want to attract unwanted attention."

"If he's not found quickly, and the Americans get hold of him, what kind of attention do you think that will attract?"

"I understand, Cardinal. I was just thinking that he's in Rome, and knows no one. We have the advantage."

"Sooner or later somebody will point him to, or take him to the American Embassy. So I don't think our advantage will last very long."

Sister Bravo fell silent. After a few seconds, she cleared her throat again. “You’re right. I’ll add a few more bodies on the street, but I still think a full scale effort is too dangerous.”

Cardinal Polletto leaned back and rubbed his eyes. “Very well,” he finally said. “But remember, Rome can be dangerous, even for those who know the streets. If something should happen to Samuel, we’ll pay the price.”

“Forgive me, Cardinal, but if Samuel Napier is who you say he is, nothing will happen to him.”

Cardinal Polletto smiled. *True, very true.* “You’re correct, Sister, but that won’t stop him from falling into the wrong hands. Contact Captain Merced at the Vatican Secret Service, and have him put two men loyal to us on it quietly.”

“Very well, Cardinal. But there is one other matter.”

“Yes.”

“If we don’t find the boy within the next twelve hours, I must notify the tribunal at The Order. He’s my responsibility, and I won’t burn for this without them knowing.”

The cardinal stroked his chin. “Very well, twelve hours, then we’ll notify the tribunal, but not before.”

The line went dead. Cardinal Polletto stumbled over to a locked cabinet, opened it, poured himself a glass of wine and sat back down. He drained one glass, then another. *Stupid, stupid fools! How could they lose the boy?*

The last thing Cardinal Polletto wanted was to irritate the tribunal at The Order of Asmodeus. For centuries, The Order had worked every angle to torment The Church, watching and waiting for the opportunity to deliver the death blow. With that day in sight, he had managed to fumble The Order’s golden opportunity, a mistake that would certainly not go unpunished. Even he, leader of The Order, was not above its precepts, and his enemies on the tribunal wouldn’t hesitate to take his head.

The cardinal agreed with Sister Bravo on one point. Samuel Napier was no ordinary boy, and any fear of his untimely demise was unfounded. The setback, although catastrophic, couldn’t stop the boy’s destiny. However, *his* destiny was another story. He paced the room. *I*

need to act. I need to do something. A Machiavellian smile crept across his face.

He rushed to his desk and rifled through his drawers until he found an old, torn address book, its pages stained from age, and located names he hadn't called on in years. He hesitated, rocking back and forth in the chair. *If The Order finds out Samuel's gone, I'll be killed. I must get him back.*

He stared down at names of men and women loyal to him, but not The Order. Using outsiders was frowned upon, but this was no ordinary predicament. He had to find the boy, and his old friends in Rome were the best in the business.

Cardinal Polletto dialed the leader of the group. A gruff, male voice answered.

"It's me," said Cardinal Polletto.

"Ahhh, Your Eminence," said a voice on the other end. "So nice to hear from you, it's been a long time. We've been waiting for your call."

Cardinal Polletto sat up straight. "Oh?"

"Yes, we understand you've lost a little boy."

19

A light rain burst into a torrential shower, as Robert trailed a black Ford Excursion with dark tinted windows through the wet Chicago streets. Cardinal Maximilian had refused to talk to Robert and Thorne in the parking deck under Detective Reynolds' apartment building, so they agreed to follow them to a more secure location.

"This keeps getting weirder by the second," said Thorne, loading extra shells into her shotgun. "Are you sure these are the guys who tried to help save Samuel?"

Robert wasn't sure about the others, but recognized Cardinal Maximilian's distinct voice. "I'm sure," he answered. "The cardinal was definitely there, so he knows something."

"I've never known priests to carry Mac-10's and shotguns. They look more like mercenaries."

"Well, I plan to get answers. Right now, they're the best lead we've got."

Thorne checked the clip in her Glock 20 10mm automatic.

Robert looked over at her. "Think we'll need all of that?" he asked.

"A girl's got to be ready when she goes out. Besides, like I said, they're priests carrying shotguns. At this point, anything's possible."

The SUV rolled south down Halsted to 49th Street, made a left, and parked in front of a large dilapidated warehouse on Wallace. The area, formally home to the stockyards that made Chicago's meat industry famous, was now called Back of the Yards, and most of the old meat and slaughterhouses were a long gone memory.

One of Cardinal Maximilian's people jumped out and disappeared inside the condemned, windowless tomb. A few moments later, a signal from the front door said it was safe for everyone to come inside.

The warehouse reminded Robert of several he'd held similar meetings in around the world. Most notably, a haunting structure in Frankfurt, Germany, where he and Thorne ended up shooting it out with a group of pissed-off Nazis dealing black market munitions to the Middle East. They barely made it out alive.

Robert followed Cardinal Maximilian in silence. Thorne brought up the rear behind the five others, whose faces remained hidden behind ski

masks. The warehouse, cold, rank and wet, held nothing more than a few rows of rusted shelving and stacks of rotted wooden pallets. Even in the shadows, Robert spied several rats the size of big cats scurrying overhead along the steel beamed rafters. They reached a far corner and stopped. One of the cardinal's people turned on a fluorescent lantern and sat it on a stack of wooden crates. Thorne moved to the right side of the group, expressionless, both hands on the pistol grip, her eyes coolly scanning back and forth.

"So, Mr. Veil, tell us how much you know so far?" asked Cardinal Maximilian.

"Let's see, my godson's been kidnapped. One of my oldest friends doesn't want me involved, and somehow the Church has a hand in it," he responded.

Cardinal Maximilian took a deep breath. "I was hoping to hear more about what you've learned so far."

Robert stared hard at the cardinal. "Forgive me, but I still don't know who you are. You say you're a priest?"

Cardinal Maximilian looked over at his compatriots, then back at Robert and Thorne. "Yes, I'm a cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church."

"Since when do clerics run around in ski masks carrying guns?"

"Since 1853," said Cardinal Maximilian. "Of course, the weapons of choice have changed, but our mandate remains the same."

Thorne took a step forward. "Mandate?"

The cardinal placed his hands behind his back and paced, deep in thought. After a moment, he lifted his head. "Before I explain, allow me to introduce you to my people." The four men and one woman stood erect at Cardinal Maximilian's words. "First, there's Sister Isabella Cacciavillian."

One of the five, carrying a shoulder strapped Uzi, stepped forward and removed her ski mask. A dark haired, no nonsense woman with cat-like gray eyes, smiled and shook out her hair. "Ciao! It's a blessing to meet you. Please call me Sister Isabella."

The nun bowed her head, smiled at Thorne, then stepped back in line with the others. Her posture, head high, standing tall, reminded Robert of his partner. He sensed a power behind Sister Isabella's gentile manner and mesmerizing Italian accent.

The next in the group slowly walked over to Robert, one hand extended, the other removing his mask. The gentle, smiling face of a handsome Chinese man with shoulder length jet-black hair lit up the warehouse.

“I am Father Shan Rui Kong,” he said, head bowing slightly, eyes never leaving Robert’s. The priest’s smile widened. He grasped Robert’s hand gently with both of his, bowed again, this time his eyes to the ground, then turned to Thorne and did the same.

The next in line rushed forward and snatched off his mask so fast, Robert thought Thorne might shoot him. But one look at the toothy grin of Father Nicholas O’Conner and Robert knew they were in no danger at all. The priest introduced himself, and gave Robert a strong hug. Father O’Conner’s salt and pepper hair and beard beamed an almost grandfatherly look, but the rock hard muscles Robert noticed during the hug told a much different story.

Next, the smallest of the group, Monsignor Fernandes Falco removed his mask and stepped forward, his hard, chiseled face and pronounced features more monster than man. He shook Robert’s hand without a word, glared at Thorne then resumed his place.

Finally, Bishop Nicholas Lantern, young, handsome and obviously athletic, greeted both Robert and Thorne with a hint of disdain. He barely made eye contact, and abruptly rejoined his comrades, jaws clinched, eyes narrow.

Cardinal Maximilian cleared his throat, as though trying to sway attention away from the young cleric. “And of course, I’ve already introduced myself.”

“Cardinal James Francis Maximilian,” repeated Thorne, sarcastically and smiling. “We remember.”

“Feel free to call me Cardinal Max, except in public,” the cardinal said jokingly. “And you are Miss Nikki Thorne.” He walked over to Thorne, hands behind his back. “Your mother was murdered when you were fourteen. Your father raised you and your brother, and you had a twin brother who died at birth. You and Mr. Veil have been friends since thirteen, served in the Marines and CIA together. No kids or pets.”

Thorne’s eyes never left the cardinal’s. “Nice,” she said, through a slight admiring smile. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” added the cardinal, looking around at the others. “We understand what happened to you years ago, and want you to know you stay in our prayers. God has forgiven you and Mr. Veil.”

The hair on Robert’s head bristled. Thorne, visibly shaken, let the pistol grip swing from her shoulder.

The cardinal gave a reassuring smile. “I understand why you two are so close. It’s nice to have good friends.”

Up until that point, Robert was sure nobody knew about the situation Cardinal Maximilian spoke of, a secret that bound Robert and Thorne together, forever.

Thorne gathered herself and held her head high. She continued to gaze hard at Cardinal Maximilian in silence.

“But that’s a matter for a different time,” the cardinal continued, turning toward Robert. “Now, let me tell you about Il Martello di Dio, and The Order of Asmodeus.”

20

“In 1853, Pope Pius IX had a vision,” said Cardinal Maximilian. “A band of demons, lead by Satan’s chief, Asmodeus, set out to destroy the Church from within. Pope Pius’ written account, sealed in a safe inside the Pontiff’s office to this very day, details the satanic treachery planned against the Church, and the Lord’s mandate that a group of God’s willing servants be assembled to battle The Order.”

“That’s what they’re called?” asked Robert.

“Officially, they refer to themselves as The Order of Asmodeus,” said the cardinal. “We call them The Order.”

Robert walked closer to the cardinal. “You say they’re trying to destroy the Church from the inside?”

“Yes,” said Cardinal Maximilian. “They have an extensive network of priests and nuns throughout the Church worldwide. That’s their mandate. They corrode from within, like a cancer.”

“If you know this, then why not kick them out?” asked Thorne.

Cardinal Maximilian walked over to Thorne. “They’re very good at staying hidden. It’s hard to know who’s who, so rooting them out hasn’t been easy.”

The cardinal took a deep breath, rubbed his eyes, and lost his balance. Immediately, Bishop Lantern and Monsignor Falco assembled crates so he could sit down.

“Forgive me, it’s been quite a long week,” gasped the cardinal.

Thorne leaned her shotgun up against some boxes, produced an unopened bottle of water from her coat pocket and handed it to the cardinal.

“Thank you, my child,” said Cardinal Maximilian.

Thorne nodded, retrieved the shotgun and resumed her position.

“The Order’s biggest campaign over the years has recently resulted in its most penetrating damage here in the States,” Cardinal Maximilian continued.

“You mean the child molestation?” asked Robert.

“Yes.”

“Forgive me, Cardinal, but are you trying to get me to believe The Order is responsible for all the pedophiles in the Church?”

“No,” said the cardinal. “I’m saying one of their tactics is to look for weaknesses and play on them. They instigate, prod and persuade, trying to develop anything to damage our reputation and credibility.”

“That sounds like an excuse,” said Thorne. “I don’t buy it.”

“Look, we’re primarily to blame,” snapped the cardinal, then catching himself. “I’m only saying that once The Order found an opening, they worked overtime to make sure the cancer spread.”

“Is that why the Church is working so hard to hide evidence and a guilty priest?” fired Robert. “It looks like a classic case of cover-up, and nobody’s taking the blame.”

Cardinal Maximilian bristled. “No doubt you understand a great many things, Mr. Veil, but ours is a very old system of laws and practices. We must handle things in a manner that will leave the Church whole, or our enemies, including The Order, have won.”

Robert looked at the ground and shook his head. “Why the weapons? Despite the threat, it seems out of place.”

“That’s understandable,” said Father Kong. “But, in fact, it’s very necessary. When this battle first started, it was more a search and find operation. Then, when Il Martello di Dio came close to rooting out The Order in the early 1900’s, priests turned up dead. Shot, stabbed and hung. After that, in 1925, Pope Pius XI made two changes. First, he allowed nuns to join, and two, he sanctioned the use of weapons outside of Rome, and even then only in extreme cases, where loss of life would be detrimental to our cause.”

“Why the use of women so late?” asked Thorne.

“The Holy Fathers sought to protect us from harm,” said Sister Isabella. “But when it became apparent that the sisters could provide greater stealth and information, we gratefully answered the Lord’s call.”

“How large is your group?” asked Robert.

“Our numbers are classified,” answered Cardinal Maximilian. “But our network is large and far reaching. The others are presently on assignments around the world, including Rome. One of us always stays at the Vatican on the staff of the Holy See, in case of dire emergencies.”

The more Robert heard the more unbelievable it sounded. His time in the CIA taught him just how powerful and penetrating the Catholic

Churches reach was in the world, but this stretch shocked him to his core.

“Okay, let’s say I believe you,” said Robert. “Now, what does this have to do with Samuel?”

Cardinal Maximilian stood. “Here, take a seat, my son.”

Robert, anxious, shifted from side to side. “Thank you, but I’d like to stand.”

The cardinal stared for a moment then sat back down. “How much do you know about Samuel’s life before he came to the Napiers?”

Robert hadn’t heard from Evie yet on her investigation into Samuel’s brief existence before the adoption. “Not much,” he answered. “I never really thought to ask Donovan about it.”

The cardinal cleared his throat. “Well, we’ve been aware of Samuel’s existence since before he was born.”

“And what does that mean?” shot Thorne.

“It means Samuel’s birth was well thought out,” the cardinal answered. “Nothing was left to chance, every detail was accounted for.”

“So, he was the product of family planning?” quipped Robert. “Why would that make him a target for kidnappers?”

“We believe The Order took Samuel,” said Cardinal Maximilian.

“To get what?” asked Robert, impatiently. “Certainly, if they are who you say they are, money is the least of their problems.”

“It’s not what they can get, but who they believe Samuel is that’s the cause for the boy’s misfortune.”

Robert closed his eyes. “Who do they believe he is?”

The cardinal walked over to Robert, placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, calm and compassionate. “They believe Samuel Napier is the Anti-Christ.”

Robert’s eyes popped open and he rocked back. “The what?”

“They believe Samuel is the one spoken of in the Book of Revelation. The one who has come to destroy mankind,” stated the cardinal, stern and serious.

Robert shook his head in disbelief, not fully able to accept the cardinal’s words. A tingle shot down his spine, his face beaded with sweat, his chest heaving. “You believe that?” he finally asked.

The cardinal looked over at his people, then back at Robert. “We’re not sure.”

“This is crazy,” chimed Thorne. “What would give anyone the idea that the ten year old boy we’ve know since he was a baby is the Devil?”

“The Anti-Christ,” the cardinal corrected, “not the Devil.”

“Whatever,” shot Thorne. “The point is if they believe that nonsense, then they have a reason.”

Cardinal Maximilian walked away from the group until he reached a distance that gave him a full view of everyone. “Samuel was commissioned by The Order fifteen years ago. Korean scientists, under the close supervision of German doctors, worked for five years bringing him about.”

Robert clenched his fists. “Bring him about?”

“Yes,” said the cardinal. “Samuel Napier is the world’s first cloned human being. The CIA stole him as an infant and hid him with Donavon Napier. Now, it seems The Order has taken its property back.”

Robert rushed toward the cardinal, but the others, including Thorne, held him back.

“It’s a lie!” shouted Robert. “I don’t believe it!”

“Let him go,” ordered the cardinal, waving the others away. The cardinal’s people immediately let go, but stayed close by. Thorne stepped to the side. “We’re not saying we believe Samuel is the Anti-Christ,” said Cardinal Maximilian, with conviction. “But when man tries to do what only God can, in this case, create life, then all manner of evil is possible.”

Robert fell to one knee, breathing hard. Father Kong took a step toward him, but Cardinal Maximilian motioned for him to stop. He played the cardinal’s words over in his head, but couldn’t make sense of it. *Samuel, a clone, that’s what Donovan is keeping from me?* He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up. Thorne stared down at him.

“Get up, partner. We’ve got a boy to find,” she said.

Robert stood, his face drenched in sweat, his body aching with anger. “Cardinal, do you have any idea where they’re holding Samuel?”

Cardinal Maximilian rubbed his chin. “We have our suspicions, but nothing we’ve been able to confirm.”

“Then let’s have your best guess,” said Thorne, through gritted teeth.

“Before I answer, there are three other things,” said Cardinal Maximilian.

Robert braced himself. *What more can the day bring?*

“First, I’m asking you and your partner to keep our existence a secret. That you not reveal our identities under any circumstances,” said the cardinal.

“And if we refuse?” asked Thorne.

“We would vigorously deny everything to the general public, but The Order would know who we are, and that would serve no one,” answered the cardinal.

Robert folded his arms across his chest. “Done. What else?”

“We suspect that Cardinal Giafranco Polletto is somehow involved,” said the cardinal, heavy-hearted. “To what extent, we don’t know, but his movements of late have been suspicious.”

Robert shook his head. *I knew it.* “Can you be more specific?”

“Not at this time.”

“Why don’t you question him, or bring him in?” asked Thorne.

“Cardinal Polletto is a very powerful, influential, and a highly respected member of the Church hierarchy. I won’t accuse him without proof, however difficult he might be to work with. It wouldn’t be the first time someone acted suspicious, but it turned out to be nothing.”

Robert didn’t buy it. *You told us for a reason, Cardinal.* “And the other thing?”

Sullen, Cardinal Maximilian cleared his throat. “I’m afraid we have deep suspicions that your godson, Samuel, has been the victim of molestation at the hands of Father Tolbert for at least the last year, maybe longer. I’m sorry.”

Robert quivered and shook. Again, he fell, this time on both knees, leaned over on both hands, dizzy with anger.

Thorne, her eyes filled with rage, approached the cardinal. “Where’s Samuel?”

“We think they’ve taken him to Rome.”

Robert leaned back, eyes toward heaven, face contorted with fury. He pulled both 9mm’s, screamed, and fired into the ceiling.

21

The sound and smell of frying sausage and eggs elbowed its way into Samuel's senses, coaxing the semi-conscious boy awake. He sat up quickly, eyes closed, wincing from the numbing aches in his shoulders, face and neck. The tantalizing aroma faded, replaced by a severe pounding in his head, and throbbing pain in every muscle in his body. Samuel groaned, and fought the urge to cry.

"Ahhhh, little one, you're finally awake," said a barely familiar Italian voice. "And just in time."

Samuel took a deep breath and slowly opened his eyes. Even his eyelids hurt. The light in the room was dim, but still more than his corneas were prepared to withstand, and the rush of light increased his headache and set his eyes a flood.

"I thought you'd never wake up," said the man, who Samuel finally recognized from the alley.

"Where am I?" asked Samuel, groggy, grouchy, wiping away the tears.

"You're in the home of Luciano Delphi, as my guest."

Samuel shook off the fog and sat up further. The headache softened, his vision adjusted, and he scanned the small, sparsely furnished apartment with bare walls, except for a crucifix, what looked like a photo of Luciano's family, and a picture of the Pope. He slid down off the tattered, brown plaid couch, but shooting pains and cramps in his legs sent his head swimming and he flopped back down.

"How long have I been here?" Samuel groaned, looking out the front window at what appeared to be a clear afternoon sky.

"Close to two days," Luciano chuckled. "I was getting afraid you might never wake up. You woke up several times screaming, but fell back to sleep each time. That fight in the alley must have really shaken you up."

Samuel remembered the fight, which was the reason his muscles ached and throbbed so badly. He thought he was going to die right there in the alley, when Luciano mercifully showed up and saved his life.

Luciano placed a plate of Italian sausage and eggs on a small wicker table with matching chairs. "Come, my friend, sit and eat."

Samuel ignored the pain and quickly took a seat in front of the steaming plate. Luciano laughed and mussed up Samuel's hair. "Tell Luciano your name."

"Samuel, Samuel Napier."

Luciano boomed again with laughter. "I like it. It's a fine name for a fine boy."

Hunger replaced the pain in Samuel's legs, as he stared at the steaming plate like he hadn't seen food in six months. Luciano sat across from Samuel, the food on his own plate twice that of the starving ten year old. Samuel snatched up his fork, saliva swelling behind his lips.

Luciano tapped the table with his sausage-like fingers. "Mind your manners, little one. First, let's give God His due."

Samuel slowly, reluctantly, put his fork back down and bowed his head. He listened as Luciano prayed, but for the first time in his life, he didn't feel God's presence. He felt far away, he felt betrayed.

"Amen," finished Luciano.

Without saying a word, Samuel shoveled eggs and sausage into his mouth like a mad dog, gagging several times. He finished so fast he looked up at Luciano, ashamed. But the Italian just laughed, prepared another plate, poured Samuel a large glass of orange juice and resumed his seat.

"Slow down little one. We have plenty."

This time Samuel took his time, but as he ate, a thought hit him. "Do you have a phone?" he asked, anxiously.

"Sorry, Samuel, but alas, Luciano has no phone. I make most of my calls at the phone center in the middle of town. Most people around here do."

Disappointed, Samuel chewed slower, but soon brightened and felt encouraged. Although he was still far away from home, he had managed to escape his captures, and couldn't help but feel relieved that soon he'd be back home.

"I have to get to the American Embassy," he told Luciano, eggs falling out of his mouth.

"So you told me back in the alley," said Luciano. "Tell me, what's going on?"

Samuel washed down his breakfast with a long drink of juice, rested back in the wicker chair, and told the Italian everything, beginning to end. He stopped several times to wet his dry throat, but covered each detail to the obvious chagrin of Luciano, who interrupted along the way with verbal Italian bursts that Samuel was sure amounted to total amazement.

“But why would priests and nuns do such a thing?” Luciano ranted. “Why?”

“I’ve been trying to figure that out for myself,” said Samuel. “All I know is that I have to go to the Embassy, so I can get home.”

Luciano stroked his beard, stood and paced the room, finally resting a hard gaze on Samuel that sent a shiver through his tiny body. “This is very serious, Samuel. To lie on the holy ones of the Church is blasphemy.”

Samuel’s eyes welled up. His lip quivered. “I’m not lying, I swear it.”

Luciano’s face softened. “If what you say is true, little one, then you are still in grave danger. Whoever took you is still looking for you.”

A sudden knock at the door startled Samuel. Luciano opened it, and a beautiful olive skinned woman strolled inside, all smiles and kisses for Luciano. “I see our little guest is bright-eyed and awake,” she said, walking over and giving Samuel soft wet kisses on each cheek.

“This is Dianora, a good friend, who volunteered to watch over you while I ran errands several times. She took good care of you.”

Samuel thanked Dianora, unable to take his eyes off her. The dress she wore clung close to her body, accenting every curve. Braless, he could make out her thick dark nipples, which caused a twitch between his legs.

“Our little friend’s name is Samuel, and he has quite a story to tell,” said Luciano. “We must get him to the American Embassy later tonight.”

“Tonight,” chimed Samuel. “Why not right now, right away?”

“Because the people looking for you will have the Embassy watched. It’ll be much safer and easier to get you there under the cover of darkness.”

It made sense to Samuel, but all the same, he wanted to get it over with. He wanted to go home.

“Listen to Luciano,” said Dianora, her eyes sultry, penetrating. “He won’t lead you wrong.”

Samuel resigned himself to waiting and turned his attention back to the plate in front of him, while Luciano and Dianora stepped outside to talk. A few minutes later, Luciano came back inside alone.

“Dianora will drive us to the Embassy later tonight. We’ll hide you on the floor in back of the car and rush you inside,” said Luciano.

Samuel could barely swallow his last bite. He jumped from his seat and rushed over to Luciano, crashing into the husky Italian, almost knocking him down. Tears filled Samuel’s eyes and he cried. “Thank you,” he said, sniffing. “Thank you very much.”

“Now, now, little one,” said Luciano, his own voice raspy. “We’ll have none of that. Get cleaned up. We don’t want to take you home dirty, now do we?”

Samuel finally let Luciano go and wiped his eyes. The Italian pointed him to the bedroom. “There are clean towels on the bed in my room, and the bathroom’s down the hall. I’ll clean the kitchen, and then we can play checkers and chess while we wait.”

Samuel, excited, skipped down the hall. He found the towels on the bed as Luciano instructed, and noticed a group of pictures on the nightstand. One was a photo of a much younger Luciano, standing next to a gray haired woman Samuel guessed to be his mother. Samuel smiled. *Soon, I’ll be home with my mom.*

Samuel turned to head for the bathroom and glanced out the window. His eyes fell on a sight that sent his knees shaking. Sister Bravo and Father Sin exited a black Mercedes across the street, and were headed toward Luciano’s building.

22

Warm urine ran down Samuel's right leg into his sneakers, and formed a puddle on the dingy blue carpet in Luciano's bedroom. This time it wasn't an act. He dropped the towel and slowly edged backwards away from the window, Sister Bravo and the demon priest still in sight.

"Hurry, little one," called Luciano. "The checker board is getting cold."

Samuel, shaking and numb, tried to answer but the words drifted off in whispers. He cleared his throat, tears running down his cheeks. "Just a second," he managed to eek out, now sitting on the edge of the bed. He stared down at the carpet in a daze. *Why is this happening? Why?* He jumped to his feet. *Luciano betrayed me!* The thought quelled his shaking and sent his teeth grinding. *I'm not going back! I'm not!* He eased toward the window.

The nun and priest climbed the stairs, headed for the second floor apartment, hell-born scowls on their contorted faces. No doubt Father Sin caught it good for letting Samuel get away, and the ten year old was not about to stick around for the punishment.

Samuel slipped out the door, tiptoed down the hall and ducked into the bathroom. He sat down on the toilet, closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. A strong rap on the door startled him out of his momentary meditation and he eased up, stood on the commode, and pushed open the cloudy glass window. Two floors down, he saw an empty yard, except for bare hedges, barren rose bushes, and a half grass, mostly dirt, lawn. He couldn't find anything to land on, and nothing to hang from. No balcony, no fire escape, nothing. He got down off the toilet and pressed his ear against the door.

"What boy?" he heard Luciano exclaim. "There's no boy here, only Luciano!"

"Then you must be expecting someone," answered Sister Bravo. "I see the checker board is set up."

"Yes," said the Italian. "I'm expecting company."

Samuel heard the thud of Father Sin's hooves across the floor. "There are two plates in the sink, Sister," Father Sin quipped.

“I entertained last night,” Luciano lied quickly. “There’s no sin in being a slob.”

“Then you won’t mind if we have a look around,” Father Sin growled.

“No,” snapped Luciano, “I want both of you to leave immediately!”

Samuel heard a crash, a groan, and the sound of checkers being knocked to the floor. He cracked open the door and saw Luciano pinned to the floor, Father Sin on top, slapping him in the face. Sister Bravo eerily slithered into view, staring right at Samuel.

A sinister smile broke out on Sister Bravo’s face. “Father, he’s in the bathroom,” she said.

Father Sin stopped grappling, turned toward Samuel, and gave a fiendish smile. He punched Luciano hard in the face.

“Run Samuel!” his Italian friend screamed, biting the priest hard on the arm.

Father Sin grabbed his forearm. “Arrrrhhh, damn you!”

Samuel slammed the door and locked it. A loud thud and the sound of heavy footsteps coming toward the bathroom sent him flying through the window.

Feet dangling, grip weak, Samuel hung suspended two stories from the ground, teeth chattering. A loud crash of splintering wood almost caused him to let go, as the metal creases from the windowpane cut into his hands. He looked up and saw Father Sin edging toward him.

“Don’t do anything else foolish, boy. We don’t want to hurt you,” said Father Sin.

Samuel, angered by such obvious bullshit, felt enraged, empowered. “Go to hell!” he spewed through gritted teeth, and let go.

Samuel’s body seemed to hang suspended in the air, defying nature. Father Sin lunged for him, but missed. Samuel watched the priest rise into the air as he fell away and crashed hard to the ground.

23

Dazed and groggy, Samuel propped himself up on his elbows and stared up through blurred vision, barely able to see Father Sin hanging out of Luciano's bathroom window. A brisk shake of his head and his eyesight cleared. When he looked up again, the priest was gone. Panicked, Samuel rolled over, pushed himself up and ran down the street in front of the building.

"Samuel, stop!" he heard Sister Bravo yell. "Stop right now!"

Adrenaline filled Samuel's veins, numbing the pain in his muscles. The longer he ran, the stronger he felt.

Quiet and near desolate, the neighborhood Luciano lived in was lined with small apartment buildings, villas, and a few single-family houses, all surrounded by lush green countryside and endless rolling hills. Nobody seemed to pay much attention as Samuel barreled along the stony sidewalk like a tiny race car, toward a destination unknown, weaving in and out of a sparse scattering of pedestrians along the way.

Samuel heard the screech of tires in the distance, looked back, but saw nothing. He made a right and ran down a steep, narrow street, past a block of old buildings that reminded him of something he'd seen in history books back at school. He ducked inside the courtyard of a small villa and stooped down behind a chipped white wooden fence. The angry growl of a car engine, and high-pitched whine of rubber fighting to hold the road, sent Samuel lower to the ground. He peeked through the slats in the fence and watched Sister Bravo and Father Sin speed by, screeching around another corner and disappear.

Breathing hard, heart pounding, Samuel smiled. He sat back against the fence and reveled in his minor victory. An hour passed before he peeked out at the quiet street and eased the gate open, listening closely for the sound of approaching footsteps or vehicles. He calmed down and his vitals fell back to normal. He took a long look around at his surroundings. The town was made up of a series of green hills with houses planted all around. From where he stood he could look down over the rooftops of buildings similar to those he saw in Luciano's neighborhood. *Luciano, I hope you're okay.*

Wherever he was, Samuel knew it wasn't Rome. The town was much slower and quieter than the city he witnessed the day before. On the other side of town lay an endless horizon of green hills splattered with small white and yellow cottages. It struck Samuel that it was the type of scene his father and mother would have enjoyed.

Downhill, in the center of the area, Samuel saw a cluster of buildings and activity that led him to believe it was the main part of town. Carefully checking over his shoulder, he eased down the hill, ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble.

The center of town was a vibrant mix of small shops, cafes and restaurants, all surrounded by freshly painted stone buildings washed over in bright yellows, greens and white. Samuel slowly navigated his way through a mix of camera toting tourists and locals, all crowded in what he heard his mother once refer to back home as a farmer's market.

Old men hawked fresh fish and meat, the most beautiful vegetables Samuel had ever seen, and oranges so orange, and apples so green and red, they didn't seem real. One of the old men smiled at him and handed him a large orange, which Samuel thankfully peeled and inhaled in record time. Near the end of the marketplace, he passed a small newsstand filled with magazines and newspapers, all written in Italian. He picked up a paper. Next to the word *Citta*, which he quickly figured out to mean *city*, was the word *Fascati*.

Samuel pointed to the word. "Fas-ca-ti, city," he said to the crusty, bushy bearded man drilling a hole in Samuel's head with a harsh glare.

"Si," the man hissed. "Fascati."

Samuel's smile was not returned. The old man's eyes narrowed and gave the universal mandate, *buy or move on*. Samuel had no idea how far he was from Rome and The American Embassy, but an idea surfaced in his mind, *the police*. He looked around for a police officer to plead his case. If nothing else, he'd get a trip to the police station, where someone would figure out what to do with a distraught ten year old kidnapped American boy.

"Samuel," a female voice called out. Samuel froze, his eyes darting back and forth, looking for a lane to run through. "Samuel, it's me, Dianora."

He turned around and saw the beautiful woman who caused his boyhood to tingle back at Luciano's apartment. She was behind the wheel of a tiny, beat up red car, with an old man in the passenger seat. Dianora waved him over. He hesitated. He'd been chased, slapped and beaten, and wasn't about to get more of the same. *What choice do I have? I have nowhere else to go.*

He inched toward the car, his head on a swivel, scanning the area for any sign of Father Sin or Sister Bravo. When he reached the car, Dianora's smile and the old man's basset hound eyes put him at ease.

"What are you doing down here alone?" Dianora asked.

Samuel wasn't sure how much he should tell and decided to feel them out. "Is this your father?" he asked, forcing a smile.

"Such a smart boy," the old man said, sitting up to get a better look at Samuel. He had crooked yellow teeth, and a brown cap pulled down over his forehead.

"Yes," said Dianora, "this is my father, Rinaldo."

"Hello, little one," said Rinaldo, stretching his boney hand out toward Samuel.

Samuel shook his hand, the gentle grandfatherly grip making him more comfortable and at ease.

"Where's Luciano?" asked Dianora, her face full and bright.

"He's back at the apartment," said Samuel. "I'm going to the American Embassy in Rome."

Dianora and her father gave each other curious looks.

"And how do you propose to get there?" asked Rinaldo. "Surely you don't plan to walk 30km."

Samuel, not adept at the metric system, had no idea how far 30km was, but it sounded far. Dianora smiled, her father nodded. "Get in," she said, "we'll take you there."

The old man opened his door and pulled down his seat. Samuel, exhausted, climbed in back and the car sputtered to full speed, barely missing a tourist or two as they sped out of the small town. Samuel looked back and watched Fascati fade away, all the time thinking of Luciano.

The old man turned toward him. "You are an American," he said, his English surprisingly clear.

“Yes,” answered Samuel. He stopped and thought about his next words. He didn’t know who to trust, but felt he didn’t have a choice. He told them everything, just as he had told Luciano, except he added the confrontation back at his Italian friend’s apartment.

Dianora and Rinaldo launched into a splattering of Italian, both their faces red, eyes welled-up with tears.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you there,” said Dianora, glancing back at him, water pooling in her hypnotic eyes. “We’ll do what we can.”

“Don’t you have a friend who works at the Embassy?” asked Rinaldo. “The young American who fancies you.”

“Yes,” said Dianora. “Charles Rainge. He’s a teacher there at the American School.”

“Good,” said her father. “Call and have him meet us there.”

Dianora rifled through her purse, almost veering off the road several times, and eventually came up with her cell phone.

While she talked to Charles Rainge, Rinaldo looked back at Samuel and wiped his eyes. “I’m sorry for you,” he said. “I know what it’s like to be taken from home. When I was a boy, not much older than you, both my parents were killed by bandits. They left me for dead, but I survived. It will do my heart good to see you get home.”

“It’s arranged,” said Dianora, hanging up the phone. “I didn’t give him details, but he’s going to meet us there just the same. He said for us to park in the lot across the street. He’ll be waiting. You better stay low on the floor,” she told Samuel. “Whoever’s looking for you will surely be close to the Embassy and stationed around Rome.”

Samuel slid down to the floor, excited to be so close to getting home. He closed his eyes and saw his parents’ faces, smiling, welcoming him home. He saw himself jumping up into his godfather’s arms and hugging his Aunt Nikki. Forty-five minutes later, the bumping stopped and the car came to a halt.

“We’re here,” said Dianora, exasperation in her voice. “But I don’t see Charles.”

“Patience, my child, patience,” said Rinaldo.

Samuel eased up and peeked out the window. Across the street, he saw a white, three-story building surrounded by a black metal fence. Burgundy shutters hung next to each window, and he saw a sight that

made his heart pound with excitement, two U.S. Marines at the gate, and a sign that read U.S. EMBASSY. He sat back down on the floor and smiled so hard he felt his face stretch.

"There he is," said Dianora. "I'll go wave him over." She leaned over the front seat and gave Samuel a hug and kiss. She smelled sweet and her breasts felt like pillows. Samuel wasn't sure he wanted to let go, but he did, and Dianora got out of the car.

"Here," said the old man, handing Samuel a bar of chocolate. "Remember me."

Samuel took the candy, his eyes watery. "I will," he said, "forever."

"Ah, here we go," said the old man, stepping outside and folding back the seat.

Samuel sat up, but a hard punch in the chest sent him back to the floor. He felt the tight grip of a heavy hand around his neck. Father Sin stared down at him and pressed the tip of a gun to Samuel's head.

"One word, just one," Father Sin growled, snatching him out of the car.

Samuel glared at Dianora and Rinaldo, the old man's grandfatherly countenance replaced with a sinister smile. Dianora nonchalantly watched over the area as she puffed on a cigarette. Sister Bravo opened the back door to the Mercedes, looking genuinely relieved to see him.

"Get in," she ordered. "Now!"

Samuel stopped at the door and stared hard at Rinaldo.

"Remember me," the old man said fiendishly.

Samuel stared hard at the old man. "I will," he said, through gritted teeth. He jumped inside the car, grabbed the handle and slammed the door. Sister Bravo and the others stood, mouths open.

Samuel flailed about in the backseat, then stopped, exhausted, and listened intently to the conversation outside.

"Inform the cardinal that we put the boy back in your hands," said Rinaldo. "He'll be pleased."

"Thank you for your assistance," gushed Sister Bravo. "I'm sure you'll be amply rewarded."

"What about Luciano?" asked Dianora.

"He's in the trunk," answered Father Sin, cold and matter-of-factly. "He is no more."

24

Robert and Thorne sat outside the Napier's house in silence, and had barely spoken a word since leaving Cardinal Maximilian and the rest of Il Martello di Dio back at the warehouse. The sun had set, and soon the entire area was blanketed in darkness. Hidden from view in the shadows, Robert and Thorne continued to wait.

"Are we going inside?" Thorne finally asked.

"No," answered Robert, his blood still boiling. "Let's just sit here and wait. There are too many ears inside. I want to talk to Donovan alone."

Thorne rolled down her window halfway, leaned her seat back and closed her eyes. Robert, still off kilter from the cardinal's revelations, rubbed his neck, trying to ease the tension, without much success. Samuel's kidnapping stabbed at him, but the notion that his godson, *his son* as far as he was concerned, was a clone, the Anti-Christ no less, was more than he could accept. He had every intention of, not only getting Samuel back, but getting to the bottom of the madness that ripped away at his insides.

Cardinal Maximilian offered to assist any effort they put forth in Rome, a favor Robert planned to accept as soon as he finished with Donovan. He wanted to verify whether or not Samuel was a creation of science. After that, he and Thorne would go to Rome, find Samuel and bring him back to Chicago, or lose their lives trying.

A midnight blue Cadillac rolled down the driveway, made a right and eased down the street. Robert saw Donovan behind the wheel, alone.

"He's on the move," said Robert, pulling out and following, careful not to follow too close. Donovan had been out of the game for a while, but was still sharper than most pedestrians.

Thorne cracked open her eyes. "Let me know when he stops," she said, crossing her arms and shutting her eyes again.

Ten minutes later, Donovan pulled into the parking lot of a Dominick's Supermarket, parked and went inside the store.

Thorne snapped up and raised her seat. "Let's go,"

"No," said Robert. "We'll catch him on the way out."

Thorne rested back, her eyes roving the near empty lot. Robert kept his eyes riveted on the market's front entrance. Twenty minutes later, Donovan reappeared and spotted them as he left the market. They both exited and met him at his car.

"I thought I told you I didn't want to see you," said Donovan, perturbed.

"Listen, we need to talk, not later, but now," said Robert, struggling to keep his temper in check. "We have a few questions, and then we'll leave."

Donovan brushed by Robert and opened the trunk. "I'm not answering any of your questions. Please, just leave."

Robert saw Thorne's face twist, and pulled her back. He grabbed Donovan by the shoulder and spun him around, his own anger simmering just below the surface.

"Dammit, Donovan, we know! We know who Samuel is, what he is, so stop playing games!" snapped Robert.

Donovan snatched away from Robert's grip. "I don't know what you're talking about! Just stay out of it, Robert! You're going to get him killed!"

"By who?" snapped Thorne. "Who'll kill him because we know?"

Donovan, veins crossing his forehead, eyes wide, began to shake as though he were having a stroke. "I can't," he cried.

Robert relaxed and motioned for Thorne to do the same. "We know Samuel's a clone," he said.

Donovan's eyes filled with tears. His body stopped shaking, and he relaxed up against the car and sobbed.

Robert put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "It's okay, we understand."

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you," said Donovan. "The boys at Langley thought it might put Samuel at greater risk if the world found out. Can you imagine?"

Thorne found a tissue in her jacket pocket and handed it to Donovan. "You know we wouldn't do anything to hurt Samuel," she said. "We love him as much as you do."

"I know," answered Donovan, gathering himself. "But put yourself in my shoes. What would you do?"

Robert took a deep breath. "Then its true?"

"Yes," said Donovan. "Samuel's the world's first human clone."

Robert steadied himself. "How? Why?"

"First, tell me how you found out," said Donovan.

Robert pondered. He had given an oath to Cardinal Maximilian that he'd keep Il Martello di Dio a secret, an important promise if he expected help in finding Samuel. He put a hand on each of Donovan's shoulders.

"If I could, my friend, I'd tell you, but that's not possible right now. I gave my assurance to someone who can help find Samuel, so you'll have to trust me."

Donovan stared into Robert's eyes, then looked over at Thorne.

"We've known each other for a long time. I trust you."

Robert smiled. "Tell us how you came to get Samuel from the CIA."

Donovan looked down at his feet, then back up at them. "Ten years ago, the CIA contacted me and asked if I'd be interested in adopting a baby, a boy. Of course I asked a lot of questions, but was told very little. They said Samuel was healthy and normal, but that it was important they keep him in a regular family setting. They told me he'd develop abnormal intelligence as he got older, and when he turned eighteen they'd come take him away."

"And none of this struck you as odd?" asked Robert.

"Of course it did," said Donovan. "But we're talking about the CIA, strange goes with the lay of the land. Besides, Alison and I had been trying to have a child since we married, and the doctors said we probably wouldn't be able to. So she was an easy sale on the idea."

"She knew the government was involved?" asked Thorne.

"No, I just told her I had a line on a baby boy and she took it from there. It all looked legit as far as she was concerned."

Robert stroked his chin. "And they didn't give you anymore detail than that?"

"They monitored Samuel's progress in school, met with me every other month and asked simple questions, nothing deep, and I'm sure we were being monitored."

"When did they tell you he was a clone?" asked Thorne.

“Just about a year ago,” said Donovan. “They stepped up their visits, asked more questions, and followed us around from time to time. I asked them what the hell was going on. They said Samuel might be in danger.”

“Did they say from who?” asked Robert.

“No, but they told me they might have to take Samuel away, which floored me. He’s our son now, and I just can’t imagine not having him in our lives. Not to mention how it would devastate Alison.”

Neither can I, thought Robert, looking over at Thorne. He knew she was thinking the same thing.

“I wanted to tell you,” said Donovan. “But Langley said no. I argued that you two would do the best job of keeping Samuel safe, but they wouldn’t budge. In fact, they were more than angry when I chose you as godparents.”

Robert paced back and forth. “How much does Alison know?”

“Nothing, that was part of the bargain, she’s completely in the dark.”

A car screeched into the parking lot. All three of them reached for their weapons, but the car parked and a group of teenagers jumped out, obviously high, laughing and carousing, stumbling their way inside the store.

Donovan looked around the parking lot. Robert and Thorne followed his lead. “We better go. We’ve already taken a big chance talking here,” he said.

“You’re right, but I watched carefully,” said Robert. “We weren’t tailed, but let’s go anyway. We’ll follow you back to the house.”

They got in their cars and Robert trailed Donovan’s Cadillac, lying back far enough to spy out anyone who might be following.

“What’d you make of it?” asked Thorne, checking her shotgun.

“I think it’s just what Cardinal Maximilian told us. The Order thinks Samuel’s the Anti-Christ, and is going to do who knows what to him. We’ve got to get to Rome and find him as soon as possible.”

“Good. How much should I tell Nelson?”

“As much as you feel is necessary,” he told her. “I’ll leave it up to you.”

A black SUV passed Robert and slid in-between them and Donovan. Robert checked his mirror and tried to pass on the left, but the SUV swerved to block him. “It’s a trap,” he barked, and swerved to the other

side, but was blocked again. He looked up ahead. Donovan must've seen the commotion, because he sped through the intersection.

It happened fast. Two mega ton tow trucks slammed into each side of the Cadillac, backed up and rammed it several more times. The SUV slammed on its brakes and Robert swerved off the road to avoid it. The tow trucks made a last slam into the already demolished car and sped off, the SUV not far behind. Robert floored the gas pedal and screeched up next to the rubble. Donovan was nowhere in sight. Robert and Thorne jumped out and examined the wreckage.

"Donovan! Donovan!" screamed Robert, pulling on the metal where the driver side door used to be.

Thorne checked the other side, screaming their friend's name at the top of her lungs. Robert dialed 911 on his secure cell phone, rattled off their location, hung up, and managed to pry the mangled wreckage loose enough to see inside. Donovan, his body twisted and covered with blood, looked lifeless. Robert stretched his hand inside and pressed his fingers to Donovan's blood drenched neck. Stunned, he looked up at Thorne.

"He's dead."

25

"I'm glad to hear you have Samuel back in your hands," Cardinal Polletto told Sister Bravo, the phone pressed to his ear. "Give Rinaldo and Dianora my best, and see that they get one hundred thousand dollars for their troubles."

"There was a casualty," Sister Bravo informed him. "A body is in need of disposal. It couldn't be helped."

Cardinal Polletto pondered for a moment. "Give them one hundred fifty thousand instead, and tell them to make sure the body is never found." Sister Bravo gave her assurances. Cardinal Polletto hung up without a goodbye, relieved.

Samuel was back in their custody, faster than he had expected, but he wasn't really surprised. Rinaldo did a lot of work for him in the past, and the old man always prided himself on having the tightest network of ears on the street. Barely a fart happened in Rome and he didn't get wind of it right away.

Cardinal Polletto poured himself a small brandy, downed it, then stared up at his bedroom door on the second floor, and smiled. The phone rang.

"It's done," a gruff voice said on the other end.

"Good," the cardinal told Father Ortega. "Get back here as soon as it's convenient." Click. Another brandy, this one larger, and Cardinal Polletto felt himself fully relax. He turned out the light in his den and climbed the stairs to his room, the brandy taking more control, warmth blanketing his body.

Inside his bedroom, a woman, the object of his desire for the past three years, lay naked on top of the covers. Her breasts showed very little sign of her forty plus years, all natural, which he examined himself many times.

The cardinal sat down next to her. She tried to speak, but he placed a finger to her lips, and kissed her deeply. He placed a hand on her thigh and felt the dewy wetness that moistened her skin. She moaned at his touch, and his hardness pressed against his clothing, tight and firm. Her mouth, warm and soft like cotton, slid down to his ear lobe and gently sucked and kissed. This time *he* moaned.

A heavy-handed knock on the door snapped them out of the momentary foray into carnal bliss.

“Yes,” the cardinal said firmly.

“It’s me,” said Father Ortega. “I just wanted you to know that I’m back.”

“Good,” the cardinal answered. “I’ll speak with you later.”

He heard Father Ortega’s bedroom door close and turned his attention back to his mistress.

“I don’t think he likes me,” she said.

“True,” said Cardinal Polletto, “but he doesn’t like anyone.”

They laughed. He stood and peeled away his clothing. His body long, withered from the years, was still firm in the right place. He gently pushed her back and hovered over her body, kissing her breasts and stomach. She took his manhood in both hands, and stroked it like a fine antique, which made him purr. She knew exactly what he liked.

“Now, be a good boy and give mommy what she wants,” she asked, sly and sultry.

“I’m not ready,” he told her, more an order than an answer.

She slapped him hard and fast across his face. “I said give to me now!”

Rage swelled in the cardinal. “I recommend you not do that again,” he said, through gritted teeth.

This time the slap cupped his ear, which popped at impact. Tears welled-up in his eyes. His bottom lip quivered.

“Don’t make me ask again,” she sneered, in complete command.

The cardinal struggled to regain control, his member harder, and opened his mouth to speak. This time, she dug her fingers into his back, and he plunged inside her, whimpering like a child.

“That’s it,” she said, as he pumped. “Harder!” she ordered, digging her nails deeper into his back.

“Ahhhh!” he cried out. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

His pleading and full surrender seemed only to egg her on. She cursed in his ear, calling him names born from the pit of hell. He bit his lip, about to cum. She sensed it and ordered him not to.

“I can’t hold it!” he shouted.

“I’ll beat your ass if you do,” she answered, slapping him again.

The cardinal heard faint pounding. He couldn't hold it and came hard, tears running down his cheeks, and snot running from his nose. She laughed, and on cue, both of them drenched in sweat, quaked in a simultaneous orgasm.

The pounding grew louder.

"Your Eminence," called Father Ortega, "someone's at the door."

"Who is it?" he gasped.

"It's Robert Veil and his partner."

Cardinal Polletto caught his breath. "You better get dressed," he told Alison Napier, who already had half her clothes on.

"I can't let them find me here," she said, panicked. "If Donovan gets wind, I..."

The cardinal walked over and stared her in the eye. "Donovan is dead," he told her.

Alison swallowed hard. "How? When?"

"Tonight," he told her, "right before I came upstairs."

Alison's hands shook as she tried to fasten the buttons on her blouse. He took both her hands.

"We talked about this," he said. "I told you it might be necessary."

"I know, but it's still a shock. I thought you'd warn me before you killed him."

Cardinal Polletto wiped her eyes and kissed her forehead. "Does it really matter?" He smiled, stroking her cheek. "One day I'll be Pope, and you'll be Queen. Let's keep our eyes on the goal, on us."

Alison stood up straight, renewed, buttoned her blouse and gathered her things. "What about Robert and Thorne?"

The cardinal opened the bedroom door, still nude. "Tell Mr. Veil I'm unavailable," he told Father Ortega, who didn't seem the slightest bit startled by Cardinal Polletto in the buff. "Mrs. Napier's car is in the garage in back, so we're safe. Inform them that I'm in prayer, and that I'll receive them in the morning." The priest nodded and left. Cardinal Polletto closed the door.

Alison checked her cell phone, which had been on silent. "They've been trying to reach me," she said, frantic.

He stroked her hair. “Don’t worry.” He took her phone and battered it on the dresser, breaking it in pieces. “Tell them you lost it. We’ll come up with the rest of the story.”

Alison smiled, walked over and kissed him. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he lied. “We’ll be together forever.”

Alison beamed

Cardinal Polletto led her to the bed and they sat. “Now here’s what I want you to do.”

26

Robert and Thorne's recollection of the accident, at least what they agreed to tell police, changed. The new version involved two vehicles, one a Ford Excursion, the other a two-ton Silverado. They decided that the authorities would only get in the way, and that finding Donovan's killers was best left up to them. So they sent the police in another direction.

"Both trucks hit Donavon simultaneously and left the scene in a hurry, with damage to their front ends," Robert told them. "And no, we didn't get a license plate number."

"The truck was red, the Excursion black," Thorne added. "It happened so fast we didn't get a look at the drivers."

The police eyed them with suspicion. Robert didn't give a shit.

The paramedics pronounced Donovan dead at the scene, an easy task. His body was so twisted and mangled, it looked more like butcher shop leftovers than human remains. When they pulled him out, every cop and paramedic winced.

Robert laid the blame for his friend's death at the feet of The Order, but didn't rule out the CIA. Samuel, if not the Anti-Christ, was at a minimum the greatest scientific achievement in history, and worth a government treasury to anyone holding him. Robert didn't care how he came into the world, he wanted him back. And the storm brewing in his gut said he'd do anything, kill anyone, and cross any line to bring him home.

After the police finished with them at the scene, Robert and Thorne went by Cardinal Polletto's home to question him. Robert had his suspicions about the cardinal after he had intentionally shuttled Father Tolbert out of town suspiciously, a hunch confirmed by Cardinal Maximilian. Now, they stood outside listening to Father Ortega feed them bullshit about why Cardinal Polletto couldn't see them. Robert fumed as the rotund priest eased the door closed and turned off the overhead light.

"We'll see him later," said Thorne. "He's not going anywhere."

Robert barely heard his partner; seething because Cardinal Polletto had not seen them, and frustrated that they hadn't been able to reach

Alison at the house or on her cell phone. The FBI and police didn't have a clue as to her whereabouts either. Robert imagined the worst. They decided to go to Alison's house when a call came in from the police station.

"We need you to come in and finish your statement," said the detective. "Tonight."

"We've given you all we have," Robert snapped.

"Then we'll have you picked up," the detective told him, with a hint of *it's your ass not mine* in his voice.

Robert swung through the station, where he and Thorne spent an hour repeating their story. Detective Reynolds showed up and sat in, easing the tension in the room.

"They found Mrs. Napier," Detective Reynolds told the other detective. "She's at home. Apparently she lost her cell phone. They told her what happened. She's devastated." His eyes fell on Robert and Thorne, the true object of his announcement. Robert asked if there was anything else they could help with. "Not at this time, but don't go far," the detective said, stroking his chin. Robert and Thorne abruptly stood and headed for the door. "Yes, we'll be in touch," he added, a smile barely detectable.

"You do that," answered Thorne. "I'll be waiting." Her smile was obvious.

The other detective's head went back and forth on a swivel, confused.

Robert sped through Chicago, ignoring the rules of the road. Twenty-five minutes later, he pounded on the Napier's front door, which opened abruptly.

"We're here to see Alison Napier," he told a crew cut wearing FBI agent with black bulldog eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Veil, but as you can imagine, she's pretty torn up, and doesn't want to see anyone," the agent told them.

"We're family," snapped Thorne. "So move your ass back, before I do it for you."

Another agent, listening from across the room, stepped to the door. "Miss, he said no visitors. Now move off the steps and try again in the morning."

Robert pushed past the two, Thorne right behind him.

The crew cut agent grabbed Robert, the other Thorne.

“Stop!” ordered Agent Baxter, as two more agents rushed to the aid of their partners, both of whom were now flat on their backs staring up at the ceiling. Robert and Thorne braced themselves to give the next two agents more of the same.

“I said enough!” Agent Baxter shouted again, walking up face-to-face with Robert.

The front hallway filled up with additional agents and police officers, who rushed in from outside. Robert also spotted a few individuals he pegged as Intelligence Agents, posing as FBI. In back of the crowd a tall black man smiled. It was Agent Maxwell, who Robert had met during his impromptu meeting with Director Thompson. The CIA agent backed away from the crowd and disappeared.

Angry, Agent Baxter pointed at Robert and Thorne. “In the den, now!”

Robert, hot and frothing at the mouth, stomped toward the den. Thorne followed, looking back at the agents rubbing their jaws. She winked and blew them a kiss.

“What the hell do you two think you’re doing, attacking federal agents? I could have you both thrown in jail!” Agent Baxter yelled.

“Throw away,” sneered Robert. “We’re tired of fucking around with government bullshit on this case. We want to know what’s going on, or you can kiss our ass.”

“You don’t have any authority here,” shot the agent.

“Donovan Napier’s dead,” Thorne fired back. “That’s all the authority we need.”

Agent Baxter took a few steps back, head down. When he looked up, his eyes were still red, but his face calm. “There’s not much I can tell you. I have my orders. I will say that this is the strangest kidnapping I’ve ever worked, and I’ve seen more than a few.”

Robert relaxed. “How so?”

Baxter took a deep breath. “First, we can’t find a motive. Usually, there’s a ransom demand of some kind.”

“So, there hasn’t been a demand?” asked Thorne.

“Not quite, but we did receive a note Fed Ex’d from a dead end address.”

Robert sat down on one of the burgundy Rockefeller leather chairs and crossed his legs. “What did they ask for?”

“Nothing,” answered Agent Baxter, a sullen look on his face. “They said we should stop looking for Samuel. That we’ll never see him again, and if we keep looking, it could cost the boy his life.”

“Then obviously they took him for some other reason,” said Thorne. “Any ideas?”

“You tell me,” said Agent Baxter. “I’m sure you spotted The Company boys and girls outside. I’d bet my house they know more than they’ve shared.”

Robert and Thorne’s eyes met. “That’s not unusual,” said Thorne. “They’re not big on sharing.”

Agent Baxter eyed them suspiciously, as if he were aware they knew more. “How about you two? Want to tell us your angle on this?”

“We’re as baffled as you are,” said Robert, hesitant and shaken. His eyes dropped to the floor. “And now, Donavon’s death has added to the weight.”

Agent Baxter sat down in the chair across from Robert. “That’s another thing. I talked to the police about the accident, and it just doesn’t jive. What’s going on?”

“It’s just as we told them,” said Thorne. “A freak accident.”

“But we know that kind of shit just doesn’t happen,” said Agent Baxter. “Together with the kidnapping, it adds up to something major and I know you know what. So, please spare me the bullshit. You and Donovan go way back in the CIA, we know that.”

Robert stared Agent Baxter in the eyes, but could only see the faces of Donovan and Samuel. He wanted to tell Agent Baxter more, but again remembered his promise to Cardinal Maximilian.

“It’s just as we said, nothing more or less,” said Robert.

Exasperated, Agent Baxter leaned back in the chair and rubbed his eyes. “Okay,” he said. “But don’t expect help from me if you need it. The door’s closed until you decide to let us in on what you know.”

“We still want to see Alison,” said Robert.

“She doesn’t want to see anyone, and that’s final.”

Robert opened his mouth to speak, but the door to the den opened. Alison, sullen, eyes red, walked inside, two agents behind her, tissue in her hand. Robert jumped to his feet and quickly moved to her side, and put an arm around her shoulder.

“Alison, I’m so sorry. I really am.”

Alison’s eyes welled up and she bit her bottom lip. “Thank you, Robert,” she finally eked out. “I know how close you two were.”

Robert led Alison to the chair he’d been sitting in and knelt by her side. “Is there anything I can do? Anything? Just name it.”

Alison forced a smile, and looked up at Agent Baxter. “Can you give us a few minutes? I’d like to talk to Robert and Thorne alone.”

Agent Baxter, obviously not pleased, signaled for his men to leave. “Not a problem,” he told Alison, through a forced smile. “We’ll be outside if you need us.”

Robert moved to the chair across from Alison. Thorne sat next to her on the arm of the chair.

“You holding up okay, honey?” asked Thorne, rubbing Alison’s shoulder, stroking her hair.

“Barely,” Alison whispered. “I can’t believe I’ve lost both of them.” She covered her face with both hands and cried.

Robert’s eyes watered, his breath shortened, and his fists clenched tight. He looked up at his partner, who showed no emotion, only concern.

“We’re here for you,” said Thorne. “And we’re doing everything we can to find Samuel.”

Alison blew her nose. “What am I going to do? Without Donovan, I’m lost.” She broke back down and cried again. “First my baby, now my husband. Lord, please help me.”

Thorne knelt down and hugged Alison. Robert wanted to kill somebody for all the pain and loss, and knew before it was all over, he would.

It took awhile for Alison to calm down. Robert paced the room while Thorne consoled her. When it seemed she’d gathered herself, Robert sat back down. “Alison, is there anything you can tell us that will help us find Samuel? Anything you’ve heard from the FBI, something Donovan may have shared?”

Alison stared out the window. “We received a note saying we’d never see Samuel again,” she said, choking, coughing.

Thorne went to get her a glass of water from a pitcher on the table.

“Agent Baxter told us,” said Robert, walking over to comfort her.

“Did he tell you the paper the note was written on came from Italy?”

Robert hesitated. “No, he didn’t mention that.”

Alison glanced back at the den door, as though making sure no one was listening. “They said the paper blend was consistent with a type manufactured overseas, specifically in several factories outside Rome, but that doesn’t mean Samuel’s there. They said it could mean whoever took him somehow got paper made there.” She lowered her head and rubbed her forehead. “I don’t know what it means.”

Robert looked over at Thorne. *It means a trip to Rome.* “Don’t worry,” he told her, “we’re in this with you. We’ll find Samuel. I promise.”

Alison smiled. “I trust you, Robert. I know you will. So did Donovan, but for some reason he didn’t want you involved.”

Robert considered telling her that Samuel was cloned, but thought better of it. “That’s all in the past now. Let’s move on from here.”

Thorne returned with the glass of water. “We’ve got company,” she said, looking back toward the door. Cardinal Polletto and Father Ortega walked inside.

“Alison, my child,” gushed the cardinal, “I rushed over as soon as I heard.” He hurried over to Alison and gave her an extended hug.

Alison broke down again, this time harder, asking why she’d been hit with so heavy a burden, over and over again.

The cardinal stroked her hair. “There, there, my child, don’t worry, God is with us. He’ll sustain you.”

Robert seethed. He saw Thorne clench her fists. Father Ortega watched them closely. Robert thought he detected a faint smile on the thick-necked priest’s lips, which raised his temperature further.

Cardinal Polletto walked over and put a hand on Robert’s shoulder. “I know Donovan was a very close friend of yours, Mr. Veil, and I understand the tragic loss of such friendship. Please accept my heartfelt condolences, and please know the Church is here for you.”

With every inch in him, Robert suppressed his need to snap the cardinal's neck. "Thank you, Your Eminence. Your concern is appreciated."

Cardinal Polletto looked over at Thorne, opened his mouth, but thought better of it, obviously reading the warning in her eyes.

Alison stood. "Thank you all so much. This has been more than I can bear. It's good to have friends who..." Her eyes rolled upward.

Robert ran over in time to catch her limp body, carried her over to the couch, and gently laid her down. Frantic, the cardinal rushed over to help. Father Ortega stayed in place, observing.

"I'll get a cold towel," said Thorne. When she opened the door, Agent Baxter and two agents rushed inside.

"Is she okay?" asked Agent Baxter, genuinely concerned.

"It's the stress," answered Robert. "She fainted, and I think she's dehydrated."

Thorne returned quickly with a fresh pitcher of water and a wet towel. Robert gently placed the folded towel on her forehead, and after a few minutes, Alison regained consciousness.

"What happened?"

"You passed out, my child," said Cardinal Polletto. "But everything's going to be okay. Father Ortega, call Doctor Bennings and tell him to come over. Make sure he knows it's for me."

Father Ortega immediately pulled out a cell phone and dialed.

"That's not necessary," said Alison. "I'm okay."

"Better safe than regretful," said the cardinal.

"I just need to get to my own bed," said Alison, her voice cracking.

"Dr. Bennings is on her way," said Father Ortega.

Cardinal Polletto smiled. "Good, then let's get Lady Napier to her room, where she can rest."

Robert helped Alison to her feet. Father Ortega lent a shoulder. Agent Baxter moved Robert away and took her other arm. Alison began to cry again.

"I think she needs her rest," said Cardinal Polletto, watching Alison disappear out the door. "We'll keep you informed, and let you know if there are any changes or developments."

Robert walked over to the cardinal, stopping closer than what would be considered respectful. “We stopped by your house after the accident.”

“Yes, I know,” answered Cardinal Polletto. “I was in prayer, moved to pray actually. Who knew a friend was near death as I talked with God. It’s always a mystery how He works.”

Robert took a step closer and peered into the cardinal’s eyes. “Thank you for everything you’ve done here, Cardinal. It won’t be forgotten.”

Robert marched out of the room and stormed outside. Thorne slammed the door behind them. They jumped in the car and sped away, Thorne behind the wheel.

“We’re being followed,” said Thorne, turning at the first corner she came to, gunning the engine.

Robert pulled his gun. “Let them catch up,” he said. “Slow down enough for me to hop out.”

Thorne took the next left, increased her speed, then abruptly slowed down. The car behind them jammed on the brakes. Robert rolled out low to the ground and came up pointing his gun at the driver’s head. *Father Kong*.

Robert holstered his weapon. The priest jumped out and ran over. Thorne got out and joined them.

“Sorry I startled you,” said Father Kong. “Cardinal Maximilian wants you to come to the airport immediately. You leave for Rome, tonight.”

27

Father Tolbert rolled a standard gray, two-tier cart, down a long, cold hallway in the Vatican Library, under the effervescent glow of ultra-soft fluorescent lights. The cart didn't carry nineteen-inch televisions, DVD players, videotape players or overhead projectors that the children pushed at several middle schools he headed in Boston and Cleveland. The cart he pushed contained soft brushes, opaline powder for cleaning delicate paintings, a low suction water vacuum for drawing mold out of the air, and a broad array of additional tools of the trade for cleaning precious Vatican treasures, including cotton gloves, acid-free, lignin-free folders and tissue, buffered boxes and folders that contained alkaline reserves for storage of severely degraded manuscripts and Mylar envelopes.

His assignment, one he found especially gratifying, was to help prepare rare manuscripts, Vatican heirlooms, artifacts, and selected frescoes and artwork from the Renaissance, for a Library of Congress exhibit in Washington D.C. He'd been charged with cleaning picture frames, vacuum containers, and packing crates which would house delicate antique pieces worth hundreds of millions of dollars, including an exquisite print of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, Henry VIII's love letters to Anne Boleyn, Latin and Greek copies of Homer's *Iliad*, the first Latin translation of the complete corpus of treatise ascribed to Hippocrates, and so many more he could barely contain himself.

Father Tolbert opened the door to a living room sized, dust-free storage closet, and parked the cart in a reserved space near the back wall. He'd been working since five a.m., and eagerly completed his six hour stint. Monsignor Roberto Baggio, overseeing the exhibit, didn't allow shifts of more than six hours, with ten minute breaks per hour, to ensure that mistakes were kept to a minimum.

Father Tolbert changed clothes in a basement locker room, dropped off his overalls and smock for laundering, spent thirty minutes in prayer in a small chamber for that purpose, and headed outside to take in the splendor and opulence of Vatican City, and look for a place to take his life.

Working in the Vatican Library, a dream Father Tolbert never thought he'd realize, even with a Master's Degree in Library Science from Northwestern University, gave him a temporary sense of ease and comfort that dissipated the moment he left the building. He counted it as a small victory to be so close to the historic remnants of the Renaissance, and the voluminous records of church progression and history. His past applications for a menial clerk position hadn't amounted to so much as an honorable mention to the highbrow intellectuals who seemed to cherish the priceless treasures of the Vatican Archives more than the saints. For five years, steadfast and determined, he had applied for a foot in the door, and each time the rejection slips arrived in record time, as if they knew his application were coming and their response, sealed and stamped, had only needed to be dropped in the mail.

Standing outside the library, Father Tolbert closed his eyes and momentarily soaked up the warmth of the noonday sun. The controlled environment inside the library, with its low humidity and dim lighting, was like working in a tomb, and the first moments outside a rebirth.

He mounted the bicycle loaned to him by Father Marcus Johns, now away on an extended assignment in Kenya, and headed toward his first and favorite stop, *Giardina del Vaticano*, The Vatican Gardens.

Father Tolbert absorbed the power and majesty that penetrated everything in Vatican City, from the architecture to the art, an intriguing mix of modern and Renaissance flavors that toyed with his senses, catapulting his to a bygone era, but constantly reminding him of the present, and more importantly, his task at hand, death.

He guided his bike down Via Centrale del Bosco to the Vatican Radio Administration building, parked his bike and walked across the street to the Old Gardens. Nestled behind the spectacular landmark dome of *San Pietro in Montorio*, St. Peter's Basilica, the garden grounds were once the location of Nero's circus, where early Christians were martyred and St. Peter was crucified, upside down.

Of all the gardens, which covered forty acres, including a formal Italian garden, a French garden filled with the most stunning flowers in the world, and a romantic replica of English landscape, Father Tolbert's favorite was Campo Santo Teutonico, a walled enclosure just south of St. Peter's Basilica. The garden, enclosed by a two-story, cantaloupe colored

stucco wall, boasted a phenomenal horticultural delight of Canary Island palms, cedar of Lebanon, blooming oleander, and bay laurel.

Thronged of tourists poured into the Vatican each year to take in the Holy See's majesty, including the Vatican Gardens, but only dignitaries and VIPs were allowed into Campo Santo Teutonico. Father Tolbert knelt down under a sign that read, Teutons in pace, *Germans in peace*, and said a brief prayer. Inside, he found a spot on the ground and sat where earth, believed to be brought from Golgotha by St. Helena, was spread to unite the blood of Jesus with that which was shed by thousands of proto-martyrs, the first to die during the persecutions of Nero.

Sitting there, on holy ground, Father Tolbert fought the contradicting forces that tortured in his soul. Being in the holy city energized his spirit, but the yearning of his flesh suppressed his attempts to rebound from the carnal degradation that enticed him to desire young boys.

Alone in the garden, Father Tolbert begged God for relief. Instead, his mind wandered as it often did, to thoughts of Samuel. He remembered how comforting it felt to love the boy. How he connected with his own lost childhood by blending himself with a child. Decadent nourishment he craved and needed to stay alive. Something the world would never accept.

Father Tolbert collapsed face first in the dirt, clawing the earth. "Lord, please, forgive me! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" He cried and begged like an injured child for almost thirty minutes.

"Father, are you okay?" asked Geert Bauer, a small framed German gardener, one of thirty who tended to the gardens. He hurried over and helped the priest to his feet.

Father Tolbert leaned on the gardener for balance, head and heart pounding hard. "I'm fine, Heir Bauer. Just a little overwhelmed in prayer."

Geert led Father Tolbert to a beige stone bench, eased him down and gazed upon the priest with compassionate eyes. "That must be some burden, Father. If you need an extra set of knees to help shoulder the burden, I'm here for you."

Father Tolbert took a handkerchief from his pocket and cleaned his face, eyes puffy, nose running. "I'll be fine. I just need a minute to gather myself."

Geert offered to fetch a glass of cold water, and a car to take Father Tolbert back to his quarters, but the priest declined, gave his thanks, and minutes later, sat alone once again. He looked around the garden and took in the serene quiet. He pictured himself hanging dead from one of the trees. *A fitting end.* But the thought of taking his life on ground sanctified by the same earth on which Christ died made him feel even more ashamed. He walked out of the garden, left the bicycle, and lumbered, head down, hands in his pockets, toward the most likely place on his list of choices to end his miserable life, the Sistine Chapel.

Father Tolbert dragged himself past tourists, Vatican staff, and fellow clergy, barely acknowledging those who spoke, not making eye contact with anyone. He looked up and took in the omnipresent dome of St. Peter's Basilica, which hovered over the entire city like a holy sentry standing guard over all of Christendom. When he reached the Monument to St. Peter, northeast of the Sistine Chapel, he saw a sight that caused his palms to dampen, and his heart to lust. He saw twin boys, South American, age eight or nine he guessed, fidgeting uncomfortably while their father tried unsuccessfully to get them to stand still long enough to take a picture in front of the monument. Both boys shared the handsome features of their father. Ruddy, sun ripened skin, thick black hair and wide smiles. The scene coaxed a smile from the priest and raised his spirits. Watching the father and sons, playful and full of life, made him long for a family he never knew.

"I wish that were me," he whispered, jealous, envious of the innocent. He walked over to the trio. "Maybe I can be of some assistance," he said, smiling broadly.

"Oh, thank you, padre," gushed the boys' father, bowing as though he were meeting the Holy Father himself.

"I'm Father Tolbert," he said, gazing down at the twins, both now standing at attention. "You have two fine boys."

"Thank you, Father. My name's Carlos Mercado, and these are my sons, Joseph and Raphael. We're visiting from Brazil."

The boys beamed at the priest as he mussed up their hair. "Welcome to Vatican City, and they're strong looking lads, handsome, and they look alike."

Both boys burst into laughter. "We're twins, padre."

“Well, what’d you know, you are. I must need glasses.”

The boys continued to laugh as their father beamed, chest out.

“Here, let me take a picture of the three of you,” said Father Tolbert, grabbing the camera from Carlos’ hand, who bowed his head in effusive thanks, almost knocking over Raphael as he backed up.

Carlos positioned Joseph and Raphael on each side of him, and the three smiled wide and bright. Father Tolbert counted three and snapped two shots. Carlos told the boys to stay in their places, and begged Father Tolbert to take a picture with the boys. The priest told them no, that he had to move along, but Carlos insisted, and the boys begged in unison.

“Pleeeeeease!”

Father Tolbert walked in between the boys, struggling to suppress the surge now bolting through his body. Joseph and Raphael each clung to a leg, and their touch, soft and gentle, made the priest tingle with lust. He looked down at the twins.

“Now, let’s have a big smile,”

Both boys smiled wider than they had standing next to their father, who was now fighting back tears. He snapped several shots, then ran forward and shook Father Tolbert’s hand profusely.

“Thank you, padre, thank you. You’re truly a blessing. Since their mother passed away six months ago, we haven’t had many happy days, but today you’ve blessed us,” said Carlos.

A knife couldn’t have cut through Father Tolbert any cleaner or deeper. He thanked Carlos and the boys, and abruptly walked away. He looked back at the three, who waived enthusiastically, bidding him well. He was more determined to end the life he knew he didn’t deserve.

Built during the time of Pope Sixtus IV, between 1475 and 1483, the Sistine Chapel stood effulgent as the Vatican’s crowning glory. Approaching the ordinary looking, rectangular brown stone chapel gave Father Tolbert a rush, each step an inch closer to the gallows, he, the self-executioner.

Inside, he immediately fell into a trance. The sight of exquisite and overwhelming splendor set a charge in his bosom, and confirmed his choice. He fought to control his breathing and dabbed his forehead dry, not wanting to attract attention, or somehow give away the cesspool of emotions swirling inside.

Although the outside held no serious architectural distinction, except that the building was constructed in the exact dimensions of the Temple of Solomon as described in the Old Testament, the interior could make a blind man weep, and the power of the artists who gave birth to the frescoes, tapestries and paintings swelled inside the chamber, pulsating, rich in the Holy Spirit.

The chapel, closed to all except private tours for the day, was empty except for another priest and two gentlemen, who Father Tolbert guessed from the way they were dressed, hailed from India. He ignored them and honed his attention on the painter Botticelli's fresco that adorned the wall to his left, depicting the Life of Moses. On the wall to his right the Life of Christ.

Father Tolbert marveled at the mastery of the paintings on each wall, not only for their artistic value, but for their political statement of the times. Sixtus IV, desiring not only to show the correspondence between the Old and New Testaments, employed a precisely conceived program to illustrate through the entire cycle, the legitimacy of his papal authority, running from Moses via Christ, to Peter, whose ultimate authority, conferred by Christ, finds its continuation in the Popes. The perfect blend of creative and political genius.

The Indians and their guide nodded to Father Tolbert on their way out. He acknowledged them with a slight tilt of his head, and continued on to the back wall where the altar fresco, painted by Pietro Perugino, depicted the Virgin of the Assumption, to whom the chapel was dedicated. Father Tolbert stood, hands behind his back, tears welled-up in his eyes, and silently begged that the cup of his destruction pass. He stood ramrod still, waiting for the answer. *Did God not say of His children, whosoever shall harm one of His little ones, that it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea?* Silence echoed through the chapel of Father Tolbert's mind. *Yes, I've hurt children. I deserve to drown, but I want to live. But I can't stop myself. I've tried, Lord, You know I have.*

Tears streamed down the priest's cheeks. His knees went weak and he struggled to keep his balance. He looked up at Michelangelo's three year odyssey on the ceiling, barely able to make out the jaw dropping frescoes that seemed suspended from heaven. Father Tolbert's vision

cleared. He took in the beauty of Isaiah, David and Goliath, Zechariah, the power of The Separation of Light and Darkness, the Creation of the Sun, Moon and Plants, and the centerpiece of the artist's grand inspiration, the Creation of Adam.

Father Tolbert dropped to his knees. *If I could just have forgiveness, I might be able to get through this.* He felt a sudden, renewed vigor and surge of strength course through his bones, and for the first time in years, felt something he could build on. Small as it was, it was there. He stood with a sense of determination. *I can beat this, I know I can.*

He strode toward the exit, but with each step, his resolve seeped away. Thoughts of Samuel crowded his head. He felt unsteady. Images of the South American twin boys and their gentle touch squirmed and worked its way into his psyche. He labored to breath and burst from the building, sucking in air by the bucket. He quickly put distance between himself and the chapel, and didn't look back. He didn't need to. He'd decided.

Loneliness crept in. Father Tolbert needed the closeness, the innocence only a child could give him. Something he never had as a young boy. He went to his room and changed pants, having soiled himself with urine.

He then hit the door, flagged down a taxi, and headed out on the hunt for a new love in Rome.

28

Father Tolbert exited the taxi on Via Condotti, and joined the mix of tourists and locals taking in the Roman favorite pastime of *passaggiatta*, strolling along the streets people watching and window shopping.

Via Condotti, busy, but not too crowded, boasted many of the city's most fashionable shops and boutiques. Father Tolbert checked his watch. It was just after lunch, the most important meal in Rome. Most of the shops were closed, and locals who still followed Roman lore, were deep into siesta.

Father Tolbert, hands in his pockets, fingered the rubber ball and hard candy he'd brought with him as bait. He scanned the crowd, nodding with feigned benevolence to each passerby who acknowledged his black suit and white collar, paying particular attention to each adult accompanied by children. Most of the kids he saw were far too young for his taste, although the bright faces and big smiles of even the little ones increased his desire and anticipation. He'd been without a lover longer than he thought he could handle, due mostly to Samuel's abduction, but mostly because of his trip to Rome. He had no real connections in the city, at least not on its darker side, a disadvantage he planned to change soon.

An hour into his search, with no opportunities at hand, Father Tolbert caught another taxi to the open air market near the center of town. Filled with fresh fruit and flower stands, butchers and fresh fish, the market was fairly busy for a Roman afternoon. The priest stopped at a fruit stand and picked out a large red apple. The owner, a short, stout woman with large forearms, refused to let him pay.

"Grazie, grazie," said Father Tolbert, thanking her. "Bless you."

The woman, near toothless, smiled and offered him more fruit, but he graciously declined and continued his search, taking note of each young boy as he strolled through the food-filled menagerie eating the apple.

Father Tolbert knew he could easily meet his needs in the red light district, but young male prostitutes provided only temporary satisfaction, and couldn't give him the closeness, the tenderness of a child turned his way.

He dropped his half eaten apple on the ground. His jaw fell, his eyes widened. *My God, it's him! Samuel!* Standing fifty feet from him, dressed in a soiled white apron and black cap was Samuel. The priest's legs went weak, but he managed to take a few steps toward the fish stand where Samuel was working. He tried to get the boy's attention, but each time he made eye contact, Samuel turned away and continued to help a dark-skinned man with serious eyes and no nonsense jaw at the fish stand.

"Eduardo," the man called, without looking at the boy.

"Si, Papa?" the boy answered.

"Get Signore Ugo ten fresh eel, rapidamente!"

"Si, Papa, rapidamente!"

"Eduardo?" Father Tolbert whispered. *It's not him. It's not my Samuel.*

Father Tolbert eased closer to the fish stand, keeping an eye on the thick necked Italian, who he assumed to be Eduardo's father, but continued to focus heavily on the boy who could've passed for Samuel's twin.

"Posso esserte utile desidera, Padre?" asked the thick Italian. "May I help you, Father?"

"No thank you. Just looking, Signore."

"Ahhhh, Americano!" the man answered, his heavy demeanor transforming to one of delight.

"Yes," said Father Tolbert. "I'm an American. Please excuse me my Italian is not so good."

"Don't worry, Father, we speak some English. It means money around here."

Both men laughed, as Eduardo appeared from behind a drape with a fresh box of eel.

"And who is this fine lad?" asked the priest.

"Please, excuse Padre. My name is Armanno DiRisio, because my father and my father's father were soldiers. I, sir, am not. And this is my son, Eduardo, because one day he will be a very rich man."

Eduardo gave a wide smile. "Si, Papa, very rich."

Father Tolbert introduced himself. *Amazing, if I didn't know it couldn't be true, I'd swear this was my Samuel.* Awestruck, he had to

work not to stare at the boy too long or hard, not wanting his attraction conspicuous.

“Eduardo, give me the eel, and keep Father Tolbert company while I take care of Signore Ugo.”

Eduardo handed his father the box. The priest took a piece of candy from his pocket, knelt down and handed it to the boy. Eduardo thanked him, and pulled off his cap to reveal thick locks of jet-black hair, unlike Samuel’s dirty brown, but sported the same soft blue eyes. The longer Father Tolbert looked, the more enchanted he became. If he couldn’t have Samuel, this replacement would do.

“You’re a very handsome boy, Eduardo,” beamed the priest.

“Thank you, Father. Papa says I’m smart too,” said Eduardo, slipping the lemon-lime candy in his mouth, smiling.

Father Tolbert glanced over at Armanno, who finished his business with Mr. Ugo, and was attending to the next customer, an old woman wearing a black scarf and gray shawl, who couldn’t seem to make up her mind.

The priest reached in his pocket. “Do you like sports?” he asked Eduardo, gripping the rubber sphere.

“Si, Padre, I like baseball, but Papa says football is the game I should play.”

Father Tolbert knew Eduardo was referring to the game of soccer, and smiled at the opportunity. He put a finger to his lips and motioned for Eduardo to keep quiet. He slipped the ball from his pocket to the boy. Eduardo’s eyes widened, his face brightened.

“I like baseball too,” said Father Tolbert. “We can play catch sometimes, but let’s keep the ball our secret.”

Father Tolbert looked over at Eduardo’s father, who was still consumed with the old woman. He smiled at the boy. Eduardo laughed. The priest put the boy’s hat back on his head, whispered in Eduardo’s ear that he had a baseball glove he could have, and would get it to him soon.

Eduardo gave Father Tolbert a hug. The priest folded another piece of hard candy, cherry this time, in the boy’s hand and kissed him on the forehead. Armanno finally finished with the old woman. Father Tolbert stood.

“Signore DiRisio, you have a fine son,” he said, walking over and shaking the elder DiRisio’s hand.

“Thank you, Padre,” said Armanno, proud, his barrel chest out.

“I think he’d make a fine altar boy at the Vatican,” said Father Tolbert, looking over at the boy.

Armanno’s face froze in shock. “My boy at il Vaticano?”

“Well, we can at least start the process,” said Father Tolbert. “I’ll need to spend time interviewing him. Preparing him before any formal application can be made.”

“Yes, of course,” beamed Armanno. “Just tell us what to do, and where to be.”

Father Tolbert took down their information and gave them his. He shook Armanno’s hand, said goodbye to Eduardo, and gave the boy a wink.

“Dio la benedica!” cried Armanno, waving as the priest walked away.

“Yes,” mused Father Tolbert, “God bless you too.”

29

Samuel dangled his arms out the window, four stories above ground, in the tower of a brown brick medieval building that reminded him of the old castles in the Robin Hood books he enjoyed reading at school. He didn't know exactly where he was, because Father Sin had covered his head with a hood on the way there.

When they arrived he could tell they were close to the water from the sound of waves crashing when they exited the car, and the odors that came with fish and algae. As far as he could tell, he'd been at the castle for three days.

He leaned out the window as far as he could, but only saw water stretched out to the horizon on his left and right. As far as he knew, they were in the middle of the ocean on some small island, a thought that left him feeling depressed and hopeless. The nearest landing below was solid rock, inviting only if suicide was the order of the day.

Damp and rank, the room at the top of tower was barren except for a small cot, a beaten down couch with its stuffing protruding from holes splattered all over it, a rickety wooden chair, and a small table with a single large candle next to a large pitcher of ice water. A fireplace roared and crackled, the one item Samuel was happy to see. *Without it I'd freeze at night.*

He flopped down on the cot, which sent a cloud of dust bunnies into the air, and tried to organize his thoughts. He squeezed his eyes tight and cursed under his breath, imagining Luciano dead in the trunk of the Mercedes, his body now who knows where.

Samuel sat up on the side of the bed, arms on his knees, his brief depression mixed with anger. *They need me, but for what? Why haven't they killed me? If they were going to I'd be dead already.* He walked back over to the small square window and stared out at the endless body of water. *For some reason they need me. I don't know why, and don't care. I'm going to push until I find out why they took me.* He planned to be more aggressive. *If they were going to hurt me, they would've after I ran away.*

The more he thought about having been caught, the more upset he got, especially when he remembered Dianora and her father, Rinaldo,

who made a fool out of him, preventing him from getting to the U.S. Embassy. For the first time in his life, he understood why some people killed.

Samuel poured himself a glass of cold water and plopped down on the couch, which to his surprise launched less dust than the bed. He sat there, wondering what he should do next. Since he figured they wouldn't kill him, he decided to be more demanding, and press and push for more information. Wear them down the way only a kid could. Afterwards, he'd plan his next escape, but carefully this time. First, he had to find out where he was and get them to let him outside. The drive they took to the castle wasn't long, so he knew he was still near Rome.

The idea of battle, of having some kind of plan encouraged Samuel. The stronger he felt, the hungrier he got.

"I'm hungry, when can I get something to eat?" he bellowed, banging and kicking the weathered wooden door.

Nobody answered, but fifteen minutes later, he heard keys rattle and the door unlock. Sister Bravo walked inside, carrying a tray of hot food and a newspaper. She ignored him and sat it down on the table.

"I'll thank you not to bang on the door," she finally said.

"Then don't take so long with the food next time," he snapped, eyes tight, brow furrowed.

Sister Bravo quickly crossed the room, hand raised, ready to strike. Samuel stood firm. She hesitated, then lowered her hand. "You can't manipulate me," she said. "Eat your food. I'll pick up the tray in an hour."

"Good, because I have a few questions," said Samuel, forcefully.

Sister Bravo slowly sat down on the cot. "Fire away," she sneered.

"Why am I here?"

Sister Bravo carefully pondered. "Because you're very valuable," she answered. .

"How so...I mean, how much have you asked for?"

"This isn't about money."

Samuel's face twisted. "Then what?"

"I can't say at this time, but when instructed to do so, you'll know right away."

Samuel's mind raced. *This has something to do with the CIA and my dad's work. I know it!* "How soon will that be?"

"In due time. Anything else?"

"Where are we, and what is this place?"

Again, Sister Bravo mulled over her answer. Samuel could almost see the wheels turning. "You're in Torre Astura Tower, in the city of Nettuna. It's a small castle fort, very secluded, very quiet."

"So, we're still close to Rome?"

Impatient, Sister Bravo stood. "Enough questions. I've already told you more than I should have."

Samuel jumped to his feet, determined and angry. "I want to talk to my mother and father!"

"That's not possible."

"Why not? They don't know where I am. I just want to tell them I'm okay."

Sister Bravo bristled. "No! And don't ask again!"

Samuel rushed toward the nun, open hand held high, ready to strike. Sister Bravo took a step back. Samuel saw a flash of fear streak across her face. He stopped short of her, and slowly lowered his hand, a strange burst of power radiated all over him. Anger mixed with strength.

"When my father gets hold of you, you all will be sorry," he said.

Sister Bravo regained her composure. "Now that I *guarantee* won't happen." Samuel looked up at her, curious. She handed him the newspaper. "Your father's dead."

He unfolded the paper. Bewildered, he stared down at a photo of his mother, dressed in black, following a coffin down the familiar stairs of the Assumption of Our Lady Church. The headline read, *Father of Kidnapped Boy Killed in Tragic Crash*. Reality crept in. Samuel wobbled and swayed, tears burst from his eyes and dropped on the paper.

"This... is a fake," he sniffled.

"Don't be dismayed," said Sister Bravo. "He's only your earthly father. You have another who'll take much better care of you from here on out."

Samuel didn't understand her words, didn't know what she was referring to, and didn't care. *My father's dead*. He hobbled over to the bed and collapsed.

Sister Bravo walked to the door. “Sorry I had to bring you such bad news.”

Samuel looked up. Sister Bravo wore a faint smile. “I thought priests and nuns did God’s work,” he said, sniffing.

“This *is* God’s work,” she answered, closing the door behind her.

Samuel fell back on the bed and cried. Twenty minutes passed before he sat up, wiped his face and stared down at the picture. Seeing his mother gave him relief, but didn’t stop the ache in his stomach. He ran his fingers down the page across her face, wondering how she was holding up with the two men of the house gone. The thought of her loneliness hurt him all the more.

He went back to the window and stared out at the sea. *I have to get hold of myself. I have to think.* His mind raced. *I have to get away. I have to escape again.* He decided he wouldn’t disrupt things after all. Instead, he’d play along and act as though he’d been broken, that the news of his father’s death made him more cooperative. He’d watch, wait, and at the right time, run away, for good this time, live or die.

Samuel looked down at the paper again. Something caught his eye. He looked closely at the faces of the pallbearers. Most of them were family and friends he recognized, but he was still confused.

“Where’s Uncle Robert and Aunt Nikki?”

30

Robert and Thorne sat quietly in the dark, waiting. Sister Isabella and Father Kong ushered them inside the room and departed, but were not far away.

Reeling from Donovan's death, Robert managed to pull himself together during the flight to Rome. He'd lost his godson, one of his best friends, and learned that Samuel was the product of cloning, commissioned by a rouge sect inside the Roman Catholic Church that considered Samuel the Bible defined character known to the world as the Anti-Christ.

Robert drank half a bottle of Old Forrester during the flight over, and the high-octane bourbon whiskey went a long way toward calming his nerves. Now, sitting there in the dark, he suppressed his emotions, allowing only a controlled anger to fester, ready to do whatever was necessary to get his godson back.

He squinted, barely able to see Thorne sitting on the other side of the room. She loved Samuel as much as he did, and he knew she'd go to hell with him to find the boy and take him home.

He heard stirring outside the room, and trained his attention on the direction of the door. He heard a key slide into place. The door opened, and a sliver of light sliced through the darkness. Robert saw Thorne clearly, now on her feet, standing directly behind the shadow draped figure, who fumbled for the light switch.

"Excuse me, Father," said Robert, startling the man.

"Who's there?" called the priest, a nervous surprise in his voice. A ceiling light cast a bright white light across the room. Thorne pushed the door shut. Father Tolbert stood shaking. "Who are you? Why are you hiding in my room?" he asked.

Robert, both hands on his knees, fought back the urge to spring forward and pummel the man to death. "We've met before, Father Tolbert, in Chicago."

"And that gives you the right to trespass and invade my privacy? Who let you in?"

Thorne grabbed Father Tolbert by the shoulder. "Have a seat. We need to ask you a few questions."

Father Tolbert winced. Thorne practically dragged him to the bed, forced him down, and took her seat on the other side of the room, facing Robert.

“My name is Robert Veil, Father. This is my partner, Nikki Thorne. I met you at Assumption of Our Lady the day Samuel Napier was kidnapped. I’m his godfather.”

A flash of recognition splashed across Father Tolbert’s face. “I see. I remember.”

Robert studied the priest closely, as did Thorne. “We’re here because Samuel’s still missing, and we have reason to believe he’s in Rome.”

Father Tolbert swallowed hard and cleared his throat. “I’m sorry to hear Samuel’s still missing. He’s a wonderful boy, but what makes you think I know anything about the kidnapping?”

Robert felt himself tense up, but forced a smile. “It’s not that, Father, we’re just following up on every lead possible. I understand you left Chicago before anybody could talk to you.”

“That’s true. My assignment at the Vatican Library came through at the last minute.” He looked back at Thorne. “But the diocese has my information, so the authorities can contact me anytime.”

Thorne remained stoic, poker faced. “Did you notice anything out of the ordinary the day Samuel was abducted?”

“No, nothing,” answered the priest, sweat beading up on his forehead. “It was a normal Sunday, nothing out of place.”

“How close were you to Samuel?” asked Robert.

Father Tolbert squirmed. “Samuel’s been an altar boy for almost a year. Before that, I put him through training.”

“So you were close?” asked Robert.

“You could say that. We had a good friendship.”

Robert felt the 9mm Father Kong provided, since he couldn’t bring his own through customs, press against his side. *I should plug you here and now.* “Samuel looked a bit uncomfortable during mass that day,” he said.

“That’s nothing unusual,” said the priest. “We all get nervous. It’s normal.”

Robert remembered how confident Samuel could be, and his phone conversations with him about being an altar boy. "It's a cinch, Uncle Robert! No problem at all!" Samuel had told him.

Father Tolbert cleared his throat again. "Now, you say Samuel may be here in Rome?"

"That's what our sources tell us," said Robert.

Father Tolbert looked back and forth between Robert and Thorne. "Why would someone bring him here?"

"That's a question we're trying to answer," said Robert, boring a hole in the priest's forehead. "Got any ideas?"

"Why would I? I told you, I don't know anything about it."

Robert, his patience thinning, stood, hands in his pockets, and paced back and forth in front of the priest. "Are you familiar with the stories, Father Tolbert?"

"Stories?" asked the priest.

"Yes, you know. Catholic priests, molestation."

The perspiration beading Father Tolbert's face streamed down his cheeks. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. "Of course I'm familiar with the stories, who isn't. It's a shame, an embarrassment to the Church. Why do you ask?"

"Because we've heard rumors," snapped Robert, unable to contain himself. Before he realized it, he towered over Father Tolbert, fists clenched. "Rumors you're a child molester! That you molested my godson!"

Horror on his face, Father Tolbert recoiled. "I've done no such thing!" he bellowed.

Thorne grabbed Robert and pulled him back. "Pray to God that you haven't, or I'll send you to hell," she growled.

"Get out of my room!" yelled Father Tolbert. "Get out!"

"What did you do to my boy?" snarled Robert, foaming at the mouth.

"Robert, stop, let's go," barked Thorne, now in front of him, pushing him back. "This isn't the time. We have to find Samuel. We'll deal with this asshole later."

Robert understood, but didn't care. He wanted to beat Father Tolbert to within an inch of his life. Thorne grabbed him by the collar and stared into his eyes.

“Let’s go,” she said again.

Robert eased back, but pointed his finger at the priest. “If I find out its true, I’ll be back to kill you.”

Father Tolbert stood, tears in his eyes. “Get out and don’t dare come back! I didn’t do it,” he cried. “Now, please, leave me alone!”

Robert snapped around and opened the door. A large priest, wide and muscular, stood outside the door. He looked past Robert and Thorne at Father Tolbert. “Is everything okay, Father?” he asked.

Robert didn’t wait to hear the answer. He and Thorne left the building and jumped in back of a waiting car. Father Kong and Sister Isabella, both in street clothes, looked back at them.

“How did it go?” asked Sister Isabella.

Robert looked out at Vatican City. “Let’s go,” he said. “Father Tolbert’s still alive, for now.”

31

Everyone at the diocese had gone home for the night. Only a small cleaning crew milled about the building, tending to overflowing wastepaper baskets, carpets that needed vacuuming, and wood that longed to be polished. Alone in his office, Cardinal Polletto contemplated the final preparations to ensure Samuel's authenticity as The Order's savior, known to most of the ecumenical world as the Anti-Christ, a term the cardinal detested.

Following in footsteps of those who led The Order before him, Cardinal Polletto had kept a keen eye out for any world development, scientific or otherwise, that would pave the way for the birth of the son of the King of Tyrus. Since the formation of The Order of Asmodeus, a fervent search for the one who would rule the earth had proved itself an arduous task, with a number of children being put through a ritual designed to substantiate them as The Order's king.

To be judged as the one foretold in The Order's ancient writings, the first, and most important, test was a death challenge no child had ever lived through. Since 1853, when The Order came into being, the ritual had been executed twenty-five times. Each time they were left empty handed.

On the day of the ritual, every member of The Order would assemble at a designated location somewhere in Italy. The children being tested, gathered up from around the world, would be bound, gagged and laid inside small, black coffins. After a brief ceremony and the blood sacrifice of the child's host, each child would be dumped into the sea. The Chosen One would survive unscathed. If more than one survived, they would be taken to a secure location for further observation and training. When the child they were looking for separated himself, he would be crowned king, and the remaining children, along with every member of The Order, would serve him with unquestioned allegiance.

The Order hadn't performed the ritual for almost two decades, when cloning and genetic engineering made a giant leap with the birth of Dolly, the first cloned sheep, in Australia. Not long after that, Cardinal Polletto was bathed in a vision, and knew the time had come. Their God, their savior, had made a way.

The cardinal petitioned The Order's ruling counsel to allow him to commission the first cloned human being, and bring into the world the one they had awaited for generations. The petition was unanimously accepted, and after numerous false starts and failures, four of the most renowned genetic scientists in the world created the impossible in a hidden compound just below the Himalayas; a human clone, and quite possibly, a leader who would forever change the world.

Cardinal Polletto leaned back and closed his eyes, remembering the day he came to The Order as a young, disillusioned priest back in Italy. Four decades earlier, he'd trusted his childhood mentor and family priest, Father Orland Cipriani, back at Our Lady of Bracciano in Bracciano, Italy, where he grew up. The rugged, handsome, compassionate priest fascinated a young impressionably Giovanni Sarto Jonas, Cardinal Polletto's given name, with stories of world travel and adventure. Cardinal Polletto, who worked the fishing boats with his father catching eels in Lago di Bracciano, for which the town was named, could think of nothing else but serving the Church as Father Cipriani did, and spent every waking moment planning his move into the priesthood.

Against his father's wishes, but to the delight of his mother, with whom he shared a deep affection for the Holy See, Cardinal Polletto set off for college to study philosophy and Latin in Milano. He received the tonsure, a partially shaved head, a patch on the crown, from then a promoted Bishop Cipriani, and a scholarship to the Diocese of Treviso in the seminary of Padua, where he finished his classical, philosophical and theological studies with distinction.

Soon after he finished school, Cardinal Polletto, now ordained, served as Chaplain at a small parish just outside Sardinia for nine years, having assumed most of the functions of parish priest, as the pastor was old and an invalid. Cardinal Polletto spent much of his time studying canon law, and quickly ascended to the office of Bishop, with his mentor now carrying the crown Cardinal Cipriani.

During those days, Cardinal Polletto's closest friend was his younger sister, Rosa, with whom he shared and confided everything. Their love for one another was without question the deepest a brother and sister could share, and he would've gladly given his life for her without

question. Through his many trials while ascending the priesthood, Rosa stood behind him as a strong driving force, encouraging and supportive.

Then Rosa came to him pregnant. Cardinal Polletto was quick to forgive and support. For months he kept her hidden in Nettuna, a small village outside of Rome, where he was then stationed. Rosa didn't offer, and he never asked about the father. After the baby was born, she confessed to him that the father of the son she'd brought into the world was, to his dismay, Cardinal Cipriani.

Devastated, Cardinal Polletto confronted his mentor, but Cardinal Cipriani denied everything, and threatened to kill off the young bishop's career if he pursued the matter any further. Young Cardinal Polletto shook with anger, not only at the words, but also at Cardinal Cipriani's demeanor. His words threatened the young cleric's career, and his eyes promised an end to his life. Cardinal Polletto told the story to Rosa.

The next day when he came to call on her, only the child remained. Rosa was dead. Word came later that she had thrown herself from a cliff. Rosa's death was ruled a tragic accident. Cardinal Polletto sought remedy from inside the Vatican, but Cardinal Cipriani had covered his tracks. As far as the Church was concerned, there was no baby, no evidence, and a ruling that deemed Rosa's death was an accident, so they saw no crime.

Cardinal Polletto decided to protect his family's reputation, and kept the child a secret, hiding it with a family loyal to him, his last act of genuine kindness.

For months, Cardinal Polletto isolated himself from everyone and started drinking, his hate for the Church and God smoldering into all out disdain. He had decided to resign from the Church, when members of The Order of Asmodeus revealed themselves, providing him a new purpose for his life; the destruction of the Roman Catholic Church from within.

In him, The Order acquired a willing, more than capable servant. As his first order of business, Cardinal Polletto pretended to forgive Cardinal Cipriani, then choked the life from him in a Roman alley, and tossed his body from the same cliff at Janiculum Hill, from which his sister had jumped.

Cardinal Polletto stared out at Chicago's night lights, busy, full of life. The phone rang.

"Hello, it's Father Sin."

The cardinal checked his watch. The call was expected, an update on Samuel, but wasn't due for another thirty minutes. Father Sin informed him that Samuel remained secure in Nettuna inside Torre Astura Tower, but Cardinal Polletto was not pleased to hear that Sister Bravo had told the boy about his father's death.

"How did he take it?" asked the cardinal.

"It's hard to tell with this boy," answered Father Sin. "He's learned to mask his emotions, but I'm sure it hit him hard."

"Watch him closely. We don't want to lose him again."

"Yes, Your Eminence."

"Is everything prepared for the ritual?"

"Almost," answered Father Sin. "All of the male children you asked us to retrieve are on their way to Rome, twenty-five in total, as requested."

"Good. Hold them in pairs at separate locations. In three weeks I'll be in Rome, and we can complete the ceremony." Father Sin acknowledged the order, but Cardinal Polletto sensed he had something more to add. "Is there anything else, Father? You seem a bit hesitant."

"I am a bit anxious," said the priest. "We have a new development. Robert Veil and his partner are here in Rome. They questioned Father Tolbert."

Cardinal Polletto sat silent. *They're getting too close.* "Did he tell them anything?"

"He says he didn't, but he was so shaken I'm sure they're on to him. We should rid ourselves of him right away."

"No," snapped the cardinal, "he's a part of the plan. We'll take care of him later."

"How should we proceed with Veil and his partner? Would you like us to tail them?"

"Yes, find them but don't just watch them."

"Your Excellency?" asked Father Sin.

The cardinal looked out over the city. "Kill them."

"Yes, Your Excellency. I'll see to it myself."

“That’s not wise,” said Cardinal Polletto. “We can’t risk exposure. Use Rinaldo and Dianora, they’ll know what to do.”

Father Sin again acknowledged the orders, but the cardinal could tell he was not happy. Cardinal Polletto sensed a presence in the room and turned around. *Cardinal Maximilian.*

The pecan skinned cardinal stood in the doorway, his knuckles elevated as if he were about to knock. “Cardinal Polletto, I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were on the phone. It’s important,” said Cardinal Maximilian.

Cardinal Polletto said goodbye to Father Sin and abruptly hung up. *How long has he been standing there? What did he hear?* He forced a smile. “No problem at all, James. Please, have a seat. What is this emergency?”

Cardinal Maximilian, calm, watched Cardinal Polletto intently. “I’ve just spoken to Bishop Prego.”

“The Pope’s secretary?”

“Yes, and the Holy Father wants us in Rome as soon as possible. We’re to leave as soon as we can make arrangements to cover ourselves here.”

Cardinal Polletto didn’t like what he heard. “And what is the purpose for this meeting?”

“The Pope would like a group of us to meet and discuss the molestation charges rampaging across the United States. He wants us to come up with a plan of action. That’s all I was told.”

“Just the two of us?” asked Cardinal Polletto.

“No, there will be others, including Boston and New York cardinals, and a group of cardinals from several foreign countries. They can offer us advice on how they handle this issue.”

Cardinal Polletto stood. “Well, then let’s not waste a minute,” he said. “I’ll make preparations right away.”

“Good,” said Cardinal Maximilian. “And please let Father Tolbert know that I’ll want speak to him while I’m in Rome, if there’s time.”

Cardinal Polletto hesitated. “Certainly,” he finally answered. “Anything else?”

Cardinal Maximilian walked to the door and turned. “Nothing I can think of, but if something comes up, you’ll be the first to know.” He smiled and closed the door softly.

Cardinal Polletto pounded his fist on the desk, picked up the phone and dialed. Sister Bravo answered. He filled her in on the details. “We’ll have to move things up,” he told her. “Get the other children to Rome right away.” He hung up without notice and dialed another number. This time, Alison Napier answered. “I’m leaving for Rome,” he said. “I want you to go to Florence and wait for my call.”

“What will I tell the FBI?” she asked.

“Tell them you need to recuperate. I’m sure everybody will understand. They can contact you if anything develops.” *Which it won’t.* Alison agreed to be there.

The cardinal gathered his things and headed for the elevator. Cardinal Maximilian had caught him off guard. A meeting at the Vatican, however discreet, would attract attention he didn’t need. *We’re close to our greatest triumph, and I’m not about to let it slip away, even if I have to kill them all.*

32

Robert barely noticed the picturesque countryside pass by as Father Kong snaked upward to Castelnuovo di Porto, a medieval hill-top village, 28 kilometers north of Rome.

Father Kong navigated the dark cobblestone streets quickly, and parked alongside a large villa overlooking the legendary Sabine Hills, barely visible in the darkness. Inside, were two additional members of Il Martello di Dio, Bishop Giovanni Ruini, tall and slender, with a wise face and stern, sharp eyes, and Father Sergio Sabastani, short and stout, with the worst teeth Robert had ever seen.

“Ciao,” said Thorne, greeting and hugging Ruini and Sabastani. “Piacchio, e un piacere conoscerla.”

Both men smiled. “And we’re pleased to meet you too,” answered Bishop Ruini. “Please, have a seat.”

Robert greeted both men and sat down next to Thorne. Father Kong and Sister Isabella greeted their comrades as though they hadn’t seen each other in a long while. The display of affection reminded Robert of his relationship with Thorne and Donovan.

Father Sabastani brought tea and rolls from the kitchen. Sister Isabella and Thorne went outside to check the grounds around the villa to make sure they were completely alone, while Father Kong filled in Cardinal Maximilian via satellite phone. Robert sat drinking his tea, trying to control his festering hate and anger.

Confronting Father Tolbert confirmed his fear that Samuel had been molested. The priest’s frantic, weak denial, smoldered with guilt, had pushed Robert to the brink of murder. If Thorne hadn’t been there, Father Tolbert would be in hell, and Robert sitting in a Roman prison.

Robert was sure Father Tolbert had no idea where Samuel was hidden, or he’d be sitting in front of them with two broken knees. Father Kong said they had several strong leads, but was ordered by Cardinal Maximilian to hold off until their present meeting.

Everyone gathered in the living room. Father Sabastani turned down the already low lights and sat on the floor. “We believe we know where they’re holding the boy,” he said, flatly.

Robert’s heart almost tore through his chest. “Where is he?”

“We’ve spotted several suspected members of The Order in Rome over the past few days,” said Bishop Ruini. “We followed them, and both eventually ended up in Netunna, a small fishing village not far from the city.”

Robert stood. “Then what are we waiting for?”

“Please, Mr. Veil, sit down and allow us to finish,” Father Kong said, calmly.

Robert stayed on his feet, all eyes on him. “No, we don’t have time to waste. We should get Samuel tonight.”

“That’s not feasible,” said Father Kong. “We haven’t confirmed it yet.”

“Then let’s verify and move in,” said Robert.

Thorne pulled at Robert’s jacket. “Sit down,” she said, firm and commanding. “Let’s hear what they have to say. If it doesn’t make sense, we’ll go get him ourselves.”

Robert slowly eased down to his seat, but the tension remained thick.

“Even though we’ve spotted suspected members of The Order, we haven’t seen any sign of Samuel,” said Sister Isabella. “If they have him, he’s probably in the tower at Torre Astura. It’s the only logical place to keep the boy secure from prying eyes. But it won’t be easy to approach the castle without being seen. It’s an old sea fort, with one road across a small bridge. Most of it is surrounded by open sea.”

“Yes,” added Bishop Ruini. “And we should have proof before we make an attempt to enter. If Samuel’s not there and we expose ourselves, they’ll move him someplace where we’ll never find him.”

“It makes sense,” said Thorne, looking over at Robert. “Let’s stake out the tower and get visual confirmation.” She placed a hand on his shoulder. “No one blames you for being anxious, partner. Lord knows I want him back too, but let’s move carefully and make sure we get him back alive.”

Robert took a deep breath and apologized to the group. “Who are the members of The Order you’ve been following?”

“Sister Maria Bravo and Father Theodore Murphy,” said Bishop Ruini. “We’ve been tracking them for eighteen months. They’re both on special assignment to Cardinal Polletto.”

Robert pressed back into the couch, thumping his thighs. “So, where do we go from here?”

Father Kong finished his tea. “First, we set up a rotation in Nettuna, around the clock.”

“No problem,” said Father Sebastani. “The others will be here by tomorrow night.”

Thorne cleared her throat. “The others?”

“Yes,” answered Sister Isabella. “Cardinal Maximilian has ordered all members of our group to Rome.”

Bishop Ruini turned to Father Kong. “We should tail Father Sin,” he said, with trepidation. The room fell silent.

“Who’s Father Sin?” Thorne finally asked.

“The thick shouldered priest you met leaving Father Tolbert’s room,” answered Father Sebastani.

Robert was so angry when he left Father Tolbert’s room, he barely remembered the man. “I gather he’s a member of The Order also?”

“Without a doubt,” said Father Kong. “He’s known as The Order’s death angel.”

Thorne’s eyes narrowed.

“Death angel?” asked Robert.

Father Kong looked at the others. “He’s their head of security, and an assassin.”

Robert looked over at Thorne, then back at the others. “If you know this, why is he still alive?”

“We haven’t been able to implicate him enough to get him arrested,” said Father Sebastani.

“Arrested?” shot Thorne. “How about a good ole fashion bullet to the brain?”

The three priests and nun sat quietly. Father Kong finally stood, walked over, and stopped in front of Robert and Thorne. “Because *he’s* an assassin, a murderer we are not.”

Robert eased to the edge of the couch. “Neither are we. But people will die if they get in my way. I swear it.”

“We understand that, Mr. Veil,” said Bishop Ruini. “We don’t approve, but do understand. Lord willing, we can get Samuel back without loss of life.”

Thorne cleared her throat. "I noticed none of you are carrying weapons."

Father Kong stepped back. "We're not allowed to carry weapons in Italy, especially in Vatican City or Rome. It would make it too easy for us to be discovered."

Robert laughed. "Then how are we going to defend ourselves?" Thorne shook her head.

"The Order's under the same constraints as we are," said Sister Isabella. "But they will reach out to less than honorable Italian forces to do their dirty work. An advantage we lack."

"Great," chimed Robert, "the mafia. So we're grossly outgunned?"

"No," answered Father Sebastani. "Greater are they who are with us, than those who are with them. God will make a way. You'll see."

"What makes you so sure?" asked Robert.

"Because, without faith, it's impossible to please God," said Father Kong. "In the end, you have to believe."

"I believe," said Thorne. "But I won't give up my gun. In fact, I'd appreciate it if one of you would commandeer a shotgun for me, preferably a sawed-off."

The clerics looked at each other. "That we can do," Father Kong finally said.

Robert stood. "Let's get started."

"As soon as the others arrive, and Cardinal Maximilian gives the final order," said Sister Isabella. "He'll be here tomorrow night. So will Cardinal Polletto."

"You'll stay here tonight," said Bishop Ruini. "I've prepared your rooms."

They all hugged, bound by the same purpose, finding Samuel and stopping The Order of Asmodeus.

Bishop Ruini prayed. "Lord, give us wisdom and strength, and keep Samuel safe and secure."

An hour later, alone, staring at the high ceiling, Robert tossed, turned, and kneaded his pillow. He closed his eyes and prayed. He was close to getting his godson back. He thought of Donovan. Robert's eyes watered, but he fought them back. *Not now. Not yet.* He turned over and

let his eyelids fall. He dreamed that Samuel was back in his arms, and
The Order of Asmodeus burning in hell.

33

Inside the Church of St. Stephen, just east behind St. Paul's Basilica, Father Tolbert, hands behind his back, paced impatiently in front of the altar, checking his watch every five minutes. *They're late. Maybe they're not coming.* He walked to the chapel doors and peeked outside several times, deathly afraid Robert Veil and his partner had followed him, hopeful that Eduardo and his father would arrive soon.

Robert Veil had rattled him to his core. First, by showing up in Rome looking for Samuel, and second, by uncovering his secret; his dreadful desire for children. Shocked and startled, the priest had almost confessed and accepted his fate. However, cowardice overtook him and the truth remained hidden, locked behind his deceitful lips.

Knees weak, Father Tolbert sat down on the altar steps, barely able to stay upright. For what seemed like an eternity, a battle, a struggle, raged inside him, a compulsive hunger to touch childlike innocence, which in his youth went wanting. He tried to fight it off through counseling and prayer, but time and again, he met only defeat.

His earliest recollection of the struggle came a year before he finished his seminary. Before that, up until the age of fourteen, he grew up alone in a small Italian village, a bastard nobody wanted, or paid much attention to, except for a compassionate young priest on the rise, Giafranco Polletto.

When Father Tolbert turned six years old, Cardinal Polletto had gently informed him that his mother died at childbirth, and that his father had abandoned him and was nowhere to be found. Cardinal Polletto, his only friend, shifted him from family to family, and did his best to make sure he was well taken care of and safe.

However, having a busy grown-up as his only friend plunged Father Tolbert into bouts of deep depression. A fate he faced alone. He didn't make friends easily, and when he eventually did, he was yanked to another family, in another town. Then Cardinal Polletto was transferred from Rome to Chicago, and Father Tolbert was placed with the Antonini's, another family beholden to the cardinal in Brooklyn, New York.

Father Tolbert enjoyed New York City and adjusted quickly, only to find himself in Chicago less than a year later. Not long after the move, Cardinal Polletto, then a bishop, continued to look after Father Tolbert closely, seeing the troubled youth through high school and college at Northwestern University. Father Tolbert became a loner, and although he was considered to be very handsome, most girls showed very little tolerance for his introverted personality, heavy drinking and drug use.

After college, Father Tolbert drifted from job to job, but nothing satisfied him. His only avenue of true comfort came from attending mass, and the counseling sessions organized by Cardinal Polletto at St. Thomas Cathedral, where Father Tolbert was always at ease and trouble free. He took his comfort in the Church as a sign, and with the help of Cardinal Polletto, enrolled in the seminary to become a catholic priest. Comfortable during his time at the seminary, Father Tolbert made a few real friends, and thought he'd found his place in the world.

Then, a year before graduating, while on assignment at St. Thomas Elementary School, he became enamored with and molested his first child, Cedric Benson, an enthusiastic boy, friendly and eager to please, who eventually grew up, floated in and out of jail, and hung himself in a rundown motel in Los Angeles. Slowly, Father Tolbert fell into a pattern too satisfying to stop, and like a drug, his appetite for child innocence increased, consuming him inside out, and hurting child after child along the way.

Father Tolbert checked his watch again. Eduardo's father, Armanno, had promised to have Eduardo at the chapel by ten o'clock. They were forty-five minutes late. At eleven-fifteen, the doors to the Church eased open, and Father Wex Angler, young and studious, also on temporary assignment to the Vatican Archives from a parish in Australia, slid inside, searching the shadows of the sanctuary, illuminated only by the sunlight gleaming through the beautiful stained glass frescoes. Father Tolbert called out, and the young priest's trademark enthusiasm immediately filled up the building.

"I've been searching all over for you," said Father Angler. "There's a young boy and his father waiting for you in your room. They showed up an hour ago and said they had an appointment with you. We searched all over. Thankfully I found you here."

“Thank you, Father. I appreciate your effort. We were supposed to meet here, but I guess they misunderstood,” said Father Tolbert.

“I left them alone in your room. I hope that’s not a problem.”

“Not at all,” said Father Tolbert, gathering his things. “I’m sure they appreciate the hospitality you’ve shown them.”

Father Angler’s smile widened and he bent over slightly, hands together. “Thank you, Father,” he said, effusive with delight. “You’re too kind.”

After three minutes of convincing, Father Angler finally accepted that Father Tolbert didn’t need help carrying his things back to the room. The eager to please priest finally bounded off, no doubt searching for his next good deed.

Father Angler’s enthusiasm left Father Tolbert embarrassed, ashamed and envious. He could barely remember his own zeal for the Church, excitement and energy now buried deep in a trash dump of unforgivable sin.

Father Tolbert reached his room and stood outside, hands on the doorknob. He closed his eyes, took a deep nostril breath, and went inside.

“Father, we’re so sorry,” said Armanno, running over. He grabbed Father Tolbert’s hand and kissed it. “Please forgive our stupidity. I thought you meant for us to meet you here.”

Father Tolbert accepted the fish trader’s apology and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Its okay, it’s an understandable misunderstanding.” He winked at Eduardo sitting on the edge of his bed, smiling.

Armanno pulled a dingy handkerchief from his inside jacket pocket and dabbed at his sweaty face. “If today is not a good day, we can come back tomorrow.”

“Nonsense,” said Father Tolbert, walking over to Eduardo. “Hello, young man. How are we today?”

Eduardo’s smile threatened to crack his face wide open. “I’m fine, Father.”

Father Tolbert fought back his urge to run the back of his hand down Eduardo’s cheek. He turned to Armanno. “This might be a blessing in disguise. Instead of a long drawn out affair, I’ll spend an hour or so with Eduardo, asking him a few questions. You come back in an hour or so, and we’ll schedule something more formal for next week.”

Armanno looked over at his son then back at Father Tolbert. "That will be fine, but shouldn't I stay. I'd like to see what we're getting ourselves into."

Father Tolbert laughed. "I understand, my friend, but Eduardo will have to do much of this without his papa watching over him. He's a fine boy, and I'm sure you've taught him well. He'll be fine."

"He's very rarely been out of my sight since his mother died giving birth to him." Armanno beamed. "But as you wish, Father. We trust you very much. I'll take a walk around Il Vaticano and come back in an hour."

Father Tolbert gave a bow. "Perfect," he exclaimed. "Let's get started."

Armanno walked over to Eduardo and knelt. "Be good and do just as Father Tolbert tells you. I'll be back soon." He gave his son a hug and left the room.

When Father Tolbert turned around, Eduardo's smile was gone, replaced by a look of trepidation. The priest took a handful of candy, chocolates this time, sat them on the bed in front of the boy and pulled up a chair. "Help yourself," he said, grabbing several pieces himself, and stuffing them in his mouth. "They're good," he mumbled, through a full mouth.

Eduardo laughed, grabbed two pieces, and did the same. They stuffed chocolate in their mouths until it was gone. Father Tolbert went to the bathroom, got a washcloth and cleaned Eduardo's face.

"That was fun," said Eduardo. "Thank you, Father."

"You're welcome, my son. Now, tell me, how's that rubber ball I gave you? Putting it to good use I hope."

Eduardo reached in his pocket and removed the ball. "I take it everywhere," he said. "I'm getting good at catching it."

"Great," beamed Father Tolbert. "We'll have to play sometimes." He got up, went to the closet and returned with a blue plastic bat and small baseball glove. He gave them to Eduardo, whose mouth opened wide in astonishment.

"Wow!" said Eduardo, so excited he almost fell off of the bed. Father Tolbert caught him and helped him back up. "Grazie, tante grazie!" He jumped up and gave the priest a hug.

Father Tolbert laughed and closed his eyes. “Prego,” he told Eduardo. “You’re very welcome.”

The priest put his nose to the boy’s hair and took a long whiff, rubbing his cheek to Eduardo’s, then pushed away, his breathing heavy, heart pounding, member hardening. Eduardo, oblivious to anything but his new toys, sat back down tossing the ball up into the air and catching it with the glove.

Father Tolbert sat back down. “Wouldn’t it be nice to do this all the time?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Eduardo, tossing the ball higher. “Could we?”

“Yes,” said the priest. “But it would have to be our little secret. Grown-ups don’t always understand.”

Eduardo continued to play. “Yes, Father, anything you say.”

Father Tolbert sat back and watched Eduardo, enjoying his playfulness as though it were a snort of cocaine or a hit off the crack pipe. The longer he watched, the further he was sucked into the boy’s innocence, and the more excited he became. After a while, he didn’t see Eduardo, he saw Samuel, which only increased his excitement. It took every bit of his will not to throw himself at the boy. *Not now. It’s too early. Be patient.* A knock at the door slapped Father Tolbert lucid. He sprang from his chair and grabbed the glove and bat.

“We’ll keep these in my closet,” he whispered. “Just a second,” he called out, putting the toys away. He smoothed out his hair, and opened the door. Cardinal Polletto, Father Ortega, Armanno, and another little boy stared back at him. Father Tolbert fell back against a table, knocking the lamp to the ground. “Cardinal Polletto, I didn’t know you were coming,” gushed Father Tolbert. He bent over, effusive, sweating, and kissed the cardinal’s hand.

“Hello, Father. I wanted my visit to be a surprise,” said Cardinal Polletto.

Father Tolbert stepped back, startled. He scanned the faces looking back at him. Nobody smiled. He took a closer look at the little boy. His mouth fell open. He was the spitting image of Samuel too. He looked back at Eduardo, then at Cardinal Polletto.

“Please,” said the cardinal, walking into the room, “may we come inside?”

“Papa,” cried Eduardo. He jumped off the bed, ran to Armanno and jumped into his arms.

Father Tolbert continued to examine the two children who looked like Samuel’s twins. Cardinal Polletto smiled. “Look familiar?” he asked.

“They look like Samuel,” Father Tolbert stammered. “What’s going on?”

“All in due time,” answered the cardinal. “But please,” Cardinal Polletto motioned for the two children to come over, “this is Felipe, you’ve already met Eduardo. Children, I’d like you to meet your father, Charles Tolbert.”

34

Cardinal Polletto watched Father Tolbert's eyes dance, as his words sank in deep.

"Their father?" the stunned priest mumbled. "What are you talking about?"

Cardinal Polletto sat down on the bed. "Leave us alone," he told Armano and Father Ortega. "And take the children."

The two children stood motionless, their eyes fixed tight on Father Tolbert, their little faces etched with confusion. Armano took both by the hand, smiling as Father Tolbert continued to sway off kilter, his eyes darting around the room in wonder.

"We'll wait for you in the car," said Father Ortega, looking over at Father Tolbert, meanness swelling in his eyes.

"That'll be fine," said the cardinal. "I won't be very long."

Everyone herded out of the room, the children still staring at Father Tolbert, then at each other, mouths open. The door shut, the sound reverberating with a bang off the walls. Cardinal Polletto and Father Tolbert stared at each other, silent.

"Please, have a seat," the cardinal finally said, motioning the distraught priest toward the bed.

Father Tolbert bumped into a lamp stand on his way over to the bed, and plopped down. Cardinal Polletto gave him the once over. *You fool. You very necessary fool.* "So, how have you been holding up? Are the urges as strong as ever, or have you managed to keep control?"

"Don't toy with me," cried Father Tolbert, shaking. "Why did you tell those children I'm their father?"

Cardinal Polletto smiled. "Because you are," he said.

"But, I don't understand. That's impossible," said Father Tolbert, confused.

Cardinal Polletto watched Father Tolbert's confusion grow. "How much of your childhood do you remember?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

Father Tolbert had grown up alone, teased and made fun of as a boy, ignored most of his adult life. Cardinal Polletto had tried to place him

with good families, but nobody would agree to keep him permanently. So, the weak man sitting before him had developed into a pedophile.

“I try not to remember,” said Father Tolbert. “As you know, my childhood wasn’t pleasant.”

“I know,” said the cardinal. “After your mother died, I tried to make things normal. Please forgive me for my failure.”

“Oh no,” said Father Tolbert. “You did the best you could, protecting me all these years. It’s more than I deserve. But I still don’t understand about the children.”

Cardinal Polletto sat forward. “Father Tolbert, I’ve waited a long time for the right time to tell you this, but you and I are more than colleagues. You’re my sister’s first and only child. We’re family.”

Father Tolbert’s eyes widened. Gasps of air puffed out of his lips. “All these years,” he stammered, “you told me I had no relatives, no family.”

“It was for the best at the time,” said Cardinal Polletto. “The circumstances surrounding my sister’s death were tenuous at best. I didn’t have a choice if I wanted to keep you safe.”

“But, you’ve lied to me all these years.”

“For the greater good, Father, a good you’ll soon witness for yourself.”

“How could you look at me all these years, knowing what I’ve gone through, what I’ve become, and not say anything?”

“And where do you think you’d be right now? Certainly not here, a priest working at the Vatican,” said Cardinal Polletto.

“I’d have a family! A life, a normal childhood!” screamed Father Tolbert.

“Calm yourself,” the cardinal said, forcefully. “There would’ve been no normal childhood for you.”

Father Tolbert broke down and cried. “I don’t understand.” He wiped the tears from his eyes. “What about my father?”

Cardinal Polletto stared at Father Tolbert, angry, seething, remembering the betrayal. “Your father’s dead.”

Father Tolbert adjusted himself on the bed and leered at the cardinal with meanness and smoldering hate in his eyes. Something Cardinal Polletto had never seen in him.

“Who was he?” demanded Father Tolbert.

“A member of the Church hierarchy. A cardinal here in Rome.”

Cardinal Polletto watched Father Tolbert’s surge of strength cave.

“How did he die?”

“Cancer,” the cardinal lied, with little emotion. “While you were an infant.”

Father Tolbert’s head dropped. “Did he know about me?”

“Yes, but he denied you were his. That’s why your mother, my sister, killed herself.” Father Tolbert’s head snapped up. “Yes,” the cardinal continued. “I tried to get him to take responsibility but he refused, so I stepped in and took care of you myself.”

Father Tolbert slowly stood, confusion draping his already weathered face. “Why did you say those children are mine?”

Cardinal Polletto stroked his chin, and considered just how much he should reveal. He decided to tell it all. “Because eleven years ago, during your back surgery, I gave the order to have your DNA harvested.” Father Tolbert collapsed back down to the bed and sat frozen in a shroud of disbelief. “The Order commissioned scientists from Germany, Japan and South Africa, to engineer the first cloned human being. We believe the process has yielded our leader, the true savior of the world.”

Father Tolbert’s eyes watered. “And those children are the result?”

“Yes,” said the cardinal, standing. “They’re triplets.”

“But they’re only two of them.”

As soon as he uttered the words, Cardinal Polletto saw illumination crush down on Father Tolbert. He walked over, sat down next to the priest and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Samuel is the third,” he said.

Father Tolbert sprang to his feet. “No, that can’t be true!”

“Please sit down,” Cardinal Polletto ordered.

Father Tolbert, frothing at the mouth, crashed backwards against a chest-of-drawers, knocking everything on it to the floor.

“Father, calm yourself and sit down,” Cardinal Polletto ordered.

“Now!”

Father Tolbert, eyes glassed over with confusion and horror, looked down, opened the top drawer and removed a revolver. He pointed it at Cardinal Polletto, who stood and slowly backed away. “It’s your fault!” he bellowed. “You did this!”

“Put that gun down,” snapped Cardinal Polletto, pointing his long bony finger at the priest. “Soon, you’ll have everything you’ve ever wanted. Don’t fuck it up!”

“I’ve done things! Terrible things!”

“And God has forgiven you. Believe me, you’ll be rewarded for your struggles.”

Father Tolbert’s eyes reddened, his face contorted with rage. He pulled back the hammer on the gun and straightened his aim at the cardinal. “Please forgive me,” he whispered.

The door exploded into splinters as Father Ortega crashed inside. Father Tolbert closed his eyes and fired.

35

The morning air, crisp with the aroma of seawater, fish and algae, assaulted Samuel's nostrils and coaxed him out of sleep. His body felt numb and tired. He'd spent most of the night tossing, turning and crying. Frustrated and despondent, he laid there sprawled out on his cot, staring at the water stained ceiling, wishing he were home.

News that his father had been killed in a car crash left him devastated. The Chicago Sun Times given to him by Sister Bravo said his father was injured beyond recognition, and had to be officially identified using dental records. The article also stated that Samuel's godfather, Robert Veil, and his Aunt Nikki, who were present at the scene, were unable to ID the drivers or get the license plate numbers of the vehicles. *Beyond recognition*. Samuel closed his eyes and conjured up his father's image, unable to imagine not being able to recognize a man he loved and admired.

Lethargic, his head spinning, Samuel rolled over and let his arm dangle over the side of the bed. *No one knows I'm here. Nobody knows I'm in Rome*. The sound of the sea splashing against the castle lulled Samuel him into a soothing twilight sleep, welcome after a fitful night of unrest.

Four hours later, he awakened to find lunch waiting for him on the table, and the newspaper article gone. *Fine with me, I was tired of looking at it anyway*. He stood, stretched, massaged his thighs, and lumbered over to the chipped gray chair and let his body fall hard down on the aged wood. He sat there and stared at his food for five minutes. A tuna fish sandwich on his mother's favorite, a croissant, a bowl of mixed fruit, and a welcome can of cola.

Samuel bit into the sandwich, barely able to taste it, and then washed down the mass, now stuck in his throat, with a swallow of cola, the caffeine and sugar giving him a jolt strong enough to slowly entice him out of his funk. With each bite and swig, his thoughts became more lucid, and by the end of the meal he felt more like himself. When Father Clancy came in to retrieve the tray, Samuel asked and received another can of soda. This time he sipped it slowly, savoring the refreshing burn in his throat, relishing the speck of the familiar.

Samuel looked around the room, which seemed to be closing in on him a little more each day. He went over to the window, leaned out, and sucked in air. The small square, his only entrée to the outside world, had lost its soothing effect, and the expansive green lawn of water only teased and prodded his desire to escape. He often imagined himself on a boat floating away, sailing all the way back to Chicago, where everyone would applaud his return. Even his father would be there, alive, the whole episode of his death a cruel joke.

I have to get them to let me outside. As soon as that thought hit, Samuel knew his past escape attempts would make it near impossible, but he had to try or lose his mind. He knocked on the door for several minutes. Nobody answered. He knocked again, this time harder.

Father Clancy snatched the door open. "Yes."

"I'd like to speak with Sister Bravo, please," said Samuel, mustering his best sad, broken expression.

"What do you want? I'll tell her."

Samuel looked up, his eyes pleading. "It would be best if I spoke with her directly," he continued, careful not to sound defiant or insulting.

Father Clancy's eyes narrowed. He glared at Samuel sideways, then slammed the door. For thirty minutes, Samuel dangled outside and gazed at his small portrait of the sea, then abruptly turned back inside when he heard approaching steps. A set of hard soled shoes stopped at the door. Sister Bravo stepped inside.

"You wanted to see me. Well, I'm here. What is it?" she asked.

Samuel ambled over, head down, and stopped just short of the nun. "I, I'm, I need some air," he mumbled, not looking up.

"So, look out the window."

"I have been, but I need to get out and walk around."

"Not a chance," said Sister Bravo, laughing. "You'll just try and run away again."

Although escape was the first thing on Samuel's mind, tired and claustrophobic, he also wanted out of the damp, depressing cell, to walk around with the sun on his face. "I'm sorry," he pleaded. "It won't happen again, I promise. I just want to go outside, that's all. Please, I feel like I'm going crazy."

Sister Bravo smirked. “Well, go crazy then. I don’t care.” She turned to leave.

Samuel dove at her feet and held on tight. “Please, I’m sorry! I promise I’ll do what you say! My father’s dead! I’m all alone! Don’t leave me!”

Sister Bravo shook him off. Samuel slid back into a corner, hugging himself, shaking. Sister Bravo just stared, suspicious and scowling. Samuel dropped his head and cried. He heard the door close and looked up. She was gone. He continued to snivel and cry for a half hour then laid down on the cot, not sure his act was having the desired effect. The door opened, and Sister Bravo entered with Father Clancy in tow. Samuel sat up. The nun and priest glared.

“One hour a day, two on Sundays,” Sister Bravo finally said. “But this time, you run, you die. I swear it.”

Samuel crawled off the bed, ran over and hugged Sister Bravo, clinging to her like a cub, eyes squeezed together tight. “I won’t run,” he lied, sniffing, knowing he was going to give it one last try.

36

Robert, Thorne and Sister Isabella observed Torre Astura castle from a heavily wooded area two hundred and fifty yards away. Late in the evening, a light mist eased across the water around the castle, and a crisp breeze rattled the trees and brush.

Robert, on his stomach between the two women, adjusted his binoculars and closely examined the castle structure and the area around it. Torre Astura was a much smaller version of the medieval edifices Robert toured in other European cities and towns, including the magnificent German castles along the Rhine. Although the sandstone building he now scanned up and down, was no less an unapproachable fortress. A tall tower, about five stories high, stood like a giant in the middle of the castle, with no windows facing the woods.

Robert counted five small windows along the front of the castle, which was two and a half stories high, with one large wooden door at the entrance. A large courtyard, about fifty square yards, sat in front of the building, all separated by a narrow stone bridge about fifteen hundred feet long.

In front of the courtyard, a much smaller two story stone building sat in between the woods and the castle, fifty yards away. A dirt road, the only entrance and exit by land, ran along the woods and curved toward the castle. On the left side of the road was a small reef of jagged rocks and open water; on the other side high grass and brush.

“We know several of The Order’s people are holed up inside,” whispered Sister Isabella. “But there’s been no sign of Samuel at all.”

“They’re keeping him deep undercover,” said Robert. “But it’s so secluded out here, you’d think they’d at least let him out for air.”

“Or maybe he’s not here at all,” said Thorne.

Robert didn’t answer. He wanted very much to believe Samuel was only two hundred fifty yards away, and dismissed any other notion or thought. His heart quickened when he saw the castle front door swing open.

Two priests walked outside and lit up cigarettes. After a few moments, a nun, with one of the most alluring faces Robert had ever seen, joined the two and lit up a smoke of her own. Robert examined

each face, watching as they talked and laughed, offering no hint of the evil Cardinal Maximilian spoke of. Instead, they seemed quite normal, a trio like those he'd observed a thousand times in more than a few places around the world. However, Robert didn't dismiss the cardinal's words of warning. He'd seen childlike pleading turn on a dime, becoming dark and lecherous, menacing and deadly. If they truly held Samuel in the fortress, he'd treat them like the worst criminals he'd ever known, and if needed, he'd kill every one of them.

"I'm going to move a little closer," said Thorne. "See if there's another way inside."

"I'll go with you," shot Robert.

"No," said Thorne gently. "Wait here and see if you can spot Samuel. You have a better angle and view from here."

Sister Isabella agreed. Robert gritted his teeth and stared his partner in the eye. "Alright," he finally conceded, "I'll continue to look from here."

Thorne blew him a kiss.

The three of them were draped head to toe in army camouflage fatigues that mixed in with the greenery, beige dirt and foliage around the castle. The mist just off the lake had grown thick and was almost on shore. Soon, their visibility would be next to nothing, and they'd be done for the night.

Thorne slithered toward the bush, moving herself forward on her elbows and knees. Robert monitored her movement, while Sister Isabella kept an eye on the three clerics still smoking and in deep conversation.

Just as Thorne hit the bushes, Robert heard the low rev of multiple car engines coming their way. He looked toward Thorne, who now faced him. She signaled that she heard it too and disappeared into the tall grass. Robert and Sister Isabella followed suit, and backed further into the dense woods until they were sure it was impossible to see them from the road. The car engines grew louder. Soon, a dark green Audi, and a black, late modeled Mercedes zoomed by and headed toward the castle.

Robert and Sister Isabella resumed their position. There was no sign of Thorne.

The cars drove across the bridge and stopped directly in front of the castle. Four men exited the Audi toting machine guns. An old man,

accompanied by a beautiful woman who reminded Robert of Sophia Loren in her heyday, stepped out of the Mercedes and hugged the priests and nun like they were old friends. A single flash of light coming from the brush caught Robert's attention. He honed in on it with his binoculars, got the thumbs up from Thorne, and turned his attention back to the castle.

Robert watched as the old man and nun did most of the talking. The sun was almost down, and the mist had finally reached shore. Like eerie long fingers, it wrapped around the castle, seeped into the grass, and floated across the courtyard like in a Dracula movie. The old man kissed the nun, who turned and hugged the Sophia Loren lookalike, then they both climbed back in the Mercedes and drove off. This time, Robert and Sister Isabella didn't back up as far, wanting to get a look inside the car. The Mercedes drove by them at a much slower pace. The nun and priests went back inside the castle.

"I recognized the old man and his daughter," said Sister Isabella. "Rinaldo and Dianora Calabrese, they're mafia."

Robert watched as two of the four men they left behind took up positions in front of the castle. The other two slid back inside the Audi.

"I'm going out there with Thorne," said Robert.

"It's not safe to move right now. They have extra eyes. You might be seen," said Sister Isabella.

Robert ignored her and quickly crawled toward the grass. Just as he reached it, he ran into Thorne, who was on her way back.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" she asked.

"It's getting dark," he whispered. "I want one last look."

Thorne rolled her eyes and kept moving. Aided by the wind and mist, Robert continued through the grass, stopping just a few feet from the dirt road. The front door of the castle opened. The two armed guards carefully panned their eyes across the area. The two priests came back outside, but neither were laughing or talking as they had been earlier. The nun followed them outside. Robert's eyes focused. She was holding the hand of a little boy. *Samuel!*

Robert's first instinct was to charge out blazing, but a cooler head prevailed. *If I miss, they might kill him.* He wondered if Thorne and Sister Isabella could see the activity that was taking place. The sun was

now completely set, and the entire area blanketed in fog. The nun placed Samuel in the backseat of the Audi, and the priests slid in on each side of him.

The nun went back inside the castle as the car drove across the courtyard and parked halfway. As quickly as he could without being seen, Robert crawled toward them, staying low, grateful for the extra protection provided by the thickening fog. He stopped five feet from the edge of the grass, raised his head slightly, and saw Samuel, his face dreary and sad, walking around the courtyard, his hands in a blue windbreaker that didn't look like it was enough to keep him warm.

Robert wanted to cry out, reach out, but the two gunmen stuck close to Samuel's side, watching his every move. The two priests watched him closely too, but stayed next to the car and smoked.

The area was now completely dark. Robert moved in for a closer look, stopping just at the edge of the brush. One of the priests turned on the Audi's headlights, which sent him scrambling backwards. Samuel continued to pace back and forth, kicking rocks, stretching, but not doing much more.

"It's time to go back inside," one of the priests bellowed.

"But she said I could have an hour," pleaded Samuel.

So, he's out for an hour at a time. Good information.

"Okay, but we're going back inside in ten minutes," the priest added, impatiently.

Samuel said thank you and continued to walk the courtyard. Robert removed a small penlight from his jacket, and waited for an opening to signal Samuel.

"Time's up," the priest said, exactly ten minutes later. "Let's head back."

For a second, the two guards looked toward the car. Robert thought he saw Samuel look in his direction, so he flashed the light on and off one time. But as he did, Samuel looked away, and a sinking feeling hit Robert's gut. He missed, but at least he knew his godson was okay, and where he was being held.

"I'll be back, Samuel," he whispered. "Sit tight."

The two priests got back inside the car, one in the backseat, one behind the wheel, and drove back to the castle.

Robert eyed the two gunmen, who were headed in his direction. He eased back, chest pressed against the ground, listening closely as the guards' footsteps crunched gravel and dirt, inching closer to his hiding place. The wind kicked up hard and the fog grew even heavier, giving Robert the advantage. He continued to back up, head low, until he reached the end of the brush, stopping just above a small cliff of jagged rocks, a few feet from the sea. The two guards flipped on their flashlights.

"We'll check the area, then head inside for the night," said one guard.

"Fine with me, it's cold as hell out here. Besides, I could use a glass of wine and some food."

Good, they didn't see me. Robert held his position. The guards panned their lights back and forth, circling around on each side of him. They pointed the beams in his direction, but Robert knew the fog would reflect the light, making it difficult for them to see him from a distance.

The guards moved halfway through the brush. Robert crawled forward and passed between them, ten feet on each side. The guards examined the rocks and reef, then headed back toward the courtyard. Robert stayed low, motionless. He caught a whiff of tobacco as one of the guards lit up.

"Let's eat," said one of the guards. "Sister Bravo said the place is fully stocked. We'll check the grounds again at daybreak."

The guards reached the courtyard and made a beeline for the small two-story house, their flashlight beams bouncing along in front of them like fireflies. Robert rose to a low crouch and made good time back to Thorne and Sister Isabella, as the guards disappeared inside the house.

"That was mighty close, big boy," said Thorne. "We thought they had you. Thank goodness for the fog. What was the flash of light all about?"

Robert took a deep breath, as though he'd been holding it in for the past hour. "Did you see him?" he finally asked.

"See who?" asked Sister Isabella.

"Samuel."

Both women froze.

“I saw him,” Robert continued, still breathing hard. “He’s inside.” Thorne smiled.

Sister Isabella said a brief prayer. “Let’s get back to the house,” she said when she finished. “We’ll need a plan before we go in.”

Robert and Thorne agreed. The three of them stood and walked along the dirt road toward their car, which was covered with brush and tree limbs two miles away. They stayed just inside the wooded area out of sight, Sister Isabella and Thorne five feet ahead, Robert lagging behind, watching the castle get smaller. Robert stopped abruptly and called out to Thorne and Sister Isabella, who spun around.

The three of them stared in wonder as a ball of flames streaked from the backside of the castle, and disappeared into the lake.

37

To his surprise, Samuel, asleep on his cot, was shaken awake by Sister Bravo late in the evening, after a dinner of garlic drenched pasta, hard rolls, lemon ice cream and more soda, 7 Up this time.

“One hour outside,” she said plainly, tossing him a navy blue windbreaker.

Samuel didn’t debate. Tired of confinement in the tower bedroom, the chance to walk around in the open lifted his spirits. He slipped on the jacket, a genuine smile on his face, and grabbed the nun’s hand. She stared down at him, her eyes warning, *no foolishness*.

The hallway outside the bedroom was much darker than the bedroom, and Samuel gripped Sister Bravo’s hand tighter as she lead the way down a circular stone stairway. At the bottom, his eyes easily adjusted to the increase in light. It seemed that the entire castle was lit with either candles or very low watt bulbs, adding to the building’s dreary medieval atmosphere.

Careful not to be obvious, Samuel kept his head forward as Sister Bravo marched him through a large, windowless, sparsely furnished room with blank walls and a stone floor. The room was warm, much warmer than his, aided by the large fire he saw blazing in the fireplace. Off to the right, he caught a glimpse of what he guessed to be the kitchen, which looked more modern than the rest of what he’d seen. The ceiling was high, with thick dark wooden beams holding it in place. Samuel wondered where Sister Bravo and the two priests slept, but dared not turn his head and give himself away. *I’ll see more on my way back.*

They reached a gigantic wooden door. Sister Bravo leaned her shoulder into it and pushed. Outside, the answer to Samuel’s next question stood smoking cigarettes. Fathers Clancy and Murphy stamped out their smokes. The sun was nowhere in sight, and a light mist made the area around the castle look hazy and bleak. The wind cut through Samuel’s windbreaker, but he ignored it. He didn’t care. Each breath of air, however, tinged with algae and dead fish, soothed his spirit in a way he hadn’t experienced in a long time.

Samuel's head swiveled back and forth between four men he didn't recognize. They stared at him with hateful eyes, and each cradled a machine gun.

Sister Bravo smiled. "As you can see, we've taken extra precautions to keep you with us. I'll introduce you later, but for now know that they've been given permission to shoot you if you try to run."

Samuel swallowed. "I promise I won't run again," he said. "Thank you for letting me outside." He forced a smile.

"Come with us," said Father Clancy, taking his hand.

Two of the guards said something in Italian and followed them to a dark green car. Father Murphy put Samuel in the backseat and got in next to him. The two armed guards sat in the front seat. Sister Bravo watched as they backed out, turned around, and drove across a big yard, stopping near some tall grass and brush.

"We'll let you out here," Father Clancy told him. "Remember, the guards will be watching."

All of them exited the vehicle. It was almost completely dark outside, and the fog, which seemed to thicken by the minute, hampered Samuel's ability to examine the surrounding area. If it were not for the car headlights Father Murphy turned on, he wouldn't have been able to see much at all. Undaunted, head down, hands in his pockets, he made mental notes of as much of the scenery as he could without drawing attention. Samuel paced back and forth in front of the men, aware of the penetrating eyes and trigger fingers monitoring his every step.

The two priests lit up more cigarettes and stayed near the car, while the gun toting duo followed him a few feet from the thick garden of grass that looked like something out of a headless horseman story. Samuel looked up across the opposite side of the yard. He couldn't see the horizon, but knew from his tower bedroom view that the other side was a blanket of water. He noted a small house about half a football field from the castle, and beyond that, what looked like a wooded area. He looked up at one of the gunmen and smiled. The guard answered with a deep frown and grimace.

A stiff, hard wind sliced through the yard, causing Samuel to cringe inside the wafer thin windbreaker. He fought to keep himself from

shivering, not wanting to give the men guarding him a reason to end his brief, but valuable, sojourn outside.

“It’s time to go back inside,” called Father Murphy, the cold wind obviously getting the best of him.

Samuel reminded them of their deal.

“Okay,” answered Father Clancy, none too happy with the night chill himself. “But we’re going back inside in ten minutes.”

Samuel kicked at rocks and continued to pace. Ten minutes later, Father Clancy ordered him back to the car. The two armed guards smiled for the first time, and momentarily looked away. Samuel turned his head, then hesitated, a flash of light, quick but definite, caught his eye.

Someone’s out there!

The guards turned their attention back to him, and Samuel walked to the car and jumped in the backseat, head straight, heart pumping.

Someone’s out there in the grass! Someone who wants me to know they’re watching!

Father Murphy took the wheel and Father Clancy sat in back with Samuel. The two guards stayed out in the yard. He wanted desperately to look back, but didn’t dare. His mind raced as they rode back to the castle. *Who could it be? Who would hide there in the grass?* He wanted to believe that his godfather had come for him, but forced the thought away. *Maybe it’s the police, or someone from the U.S. Embassy.*

The car reached the castle. The entire area was now completely bathed in darkness, except for a small overhead light just above the front door. The three of them got out of the car. Samuel stole a quick glance back at the grassy area, nothing.

“Carlos and Michael are going to check the area and stay in the other house tonight,” Father Clancy told the two men guarding the castle. “You two will stay in the castle tonight and rotate with them each day.”

The guards nodded their heads in agreement. Samuel looked back one last time. He saw the beams of two flashlights heading toward the grass, and swallowed. *I have to let whoever’s out there know I saw their signal.*

Inside, Sister Bravo took him by the hand, and led him back toward the circular stairs.

“Can I use the bathroom?” he asked, twisting his face, his legs crossed. “I didn’t go before I went outside, now I need to use it bad.”

“Use the one upstairs,” said Sister Bravo.

Samuel continued to hop around. “I don’t think I can make it.”

Sister Bravo, impatient, pointed to a door next to the kitchen entrance. “Be quick about it,” she said.

Samuel thanked her and cut across the room quickly, his mind racing, sweat beading up on his face. His eyes flickered around the room as he walked, but nothing sparked in his mind. Inside the bathroom, he sat on the toilet, head in his hands, hoping the person hiding out in the grass wouldn’t be discovered by the guards.

He searched the small, blue concrete bathroom. Under the sink, he found an assortment of cleaning products, extra rolls of toilet paper, and a box of steel wool pads, similar to those he’d seen in the kitchen at home. He grabbed one of the steel wool pads and wrapped as much toilet paper around his hand as he felt he could hide, and stuffed them down the front and back of his pants. He flushed the toilet and washed his hands, aware that he was taking too much time.

When he opened the door, Sister Bravo was standing right outside. She leered down. “That took long enough,” she said.

“I was washing my hands,” he said, a big smile on his face. “Think I could have a can of coke before bed?”

“You just finished in the bathroom,” she answered. “I think you’ve had enough to drink.”

“I usually have two at dinner,” said Samuel, a hint of disappointment in his voice.

Sister Bravo took a deep breath. “Okay, but if you piss a river tonight you get to sleep in it, or on the floor.”

“I’m a big boy,” Samuel answered, meaning it. *I haven’t wet the bed since I was five years old, asshole.*

Sister Bravo went and got him the can of Coke, and then dropped him off in his room, with directions to turn out the lights within the half hour. Samuel thanked her again for letting him go outside and gave her a hug. When he stepped back, the nun’s face lit up with a smile.

“You’re very welcome,” she told him, and left the room.

Samuel sat down on the cot and waited several minutes, the steel wool irritating his crotch. When all was clear, he quickly opened the soda can and gladly drained every drop. His throat was dry from the tension.

He removed the wadded toilet paper and steel wool, and proceeded to bend the soda can back and forth until it cracked open. He stuffed the toilet paper and steel wool inside the can, grabbed the candle from the table and ran to the window. The sky was cloudy and black, but the wind had died down considerably. Samuel lit the paper and let the flames build until he could barely hold the can. He hurled it as far out over the water as he could, a tail of flames and sparkles streaking through the night, then quickly vanished into the water.

Samuel, his chest pounding, stood at the window, his hands and bottom lip quivering, his eyes welling up with tears. He hoped someone saw his signal, but even if they didn't he felt hopeful. He knelt down, not to pray, but out of exhaustion. His legs would no longer support him. He sat there for an hour, then crawled to his bed and passed out.

38

Solemn and pious, each cardinal and bishop summoned to Rome, to sit before the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF), slowly filed into the Palace of Holy Office, quiet and tense. Summoned by the Pope himself, they had gathered at the Holy See to discuss the rash exposure of child molestations sweeping the United States, devastating the Church's reputation and credibility around the world, costing millions of dollars in lost contributions and out of court settlements.

The CDF was the oldest, and most active, of the nine congregations of the Roman Catholic Church, that managed church affairs and oversaw the Roman Curia's operations.

From his studies of the Apostolic Constitution on Roman Curia, Cardinal Polletto recalled Article 48, which defined the duties of the CDF as a mandate to safeguard the doctrine of faith and morals throughout the world of Catholicism, and to defend the integrity of the faith, a broad directive that encompassed much.

Cardinal Polletto, draped in a new cardinal red vestment, wore his favorite twenty-two carat ring, with a blood red ruby surrounded by twenty half carat diamonds. He followed the stream of nervous, concerned holy men, feigning the same trepidation that was plastered on their faces, knowing full well that many of them had more interest in the Church's economic and political well-being, than for the injured children.

Cardinal Polletto gave pious nods and smiles to several men he counted in the service of The Order. He pretended to acknowledge several cardinals he knew would vigorously oppose his drive to destroy the Church if they knew his true intentions. He even tossed a smile and bow of his head to Cardinal Maximilian, the man he would destroy if given a speck of an opportunity.

Nobody in the chamber now taking their seat worried or gave him reason to fret. Especially since only forty-eight hours before, he'd stood with a chill running down his spine, as Father Tolbert pointed a loaded revolver at his head.

On the edge of a breakdown, Father Tolbert had pulled a gun after Cardinal Polletto told him that the two Samuel look-a-likes, Eduardo and

Felipe, as well as Samuel himself, were the priest's genetic clones. Father Tolbert took a shot at him, but the bullet whizzed by the cardinal's right ear and lodged in the wall. Father Ortega rushed inside and tackled Father Tolbert, knocking the gun from his grasp. Cardinal Polletto fumed, stomped forward, his hand drawn back to deliver a hard slap, but before he could, Father Tolbert collapsed and passed out cold.

Fortunately, Father Tolbert's living quarters were near empty, with most of the men living there at a special presentation at the Vatican Museum. Those who did hear it had probably dismissed it as something other than gunfire, because nobody came running or asked any questions.

Father Ortega quickly snatched up the gun and slipped it in his pocket. Cardinal Polletto removed the bullet from the wall with a knife and told Father Ortega to repair the wall himself. Father Ortega slapped Father Tolbert into a barely lucid state, then pulled him to his feet. Cardinal Polletto followed them to the car.

"Take him to Bracciano Castle until further notice. Sedate him," the cardinal ordered. "Keep him under until I arrive."

Everyone sat quietly as the ten cardinals, who were members of the CDF, Cardinal Angelo Ottaviani, and to Cardinal Polletto's dismay, Cardinal Maximilian, all took their seats up front behind a long sixteenth century gothic table on a riser above them.

Cardinal Polletto eased back in his chair and soaked in the scene, sizing up each cleric in the room. Ten bishops, five archbishops, and five additional cardinals had been ordered to Rome. Most of the bishops invited were executive committee members of the National Bishops Organizational Committee (NBOC) from the United States, who had recently adopted a policy recommending expulsion for any priest who molested a child. The policy was non-binding, without the approval of the Vatican, and the discussion and debate that was about to take place was the beginning of a process that would take years to complete.

The cardinals attending included Cardinals Polletto and Maximilian from the United States, Cardinal E'Tienne Rousseau from France, Cardinal Abubakar Osagiobare from Nigeria, and Cardinal Niklas Bauer from Germany.

Cardinal Polletto hadn't laid eyes on the men who ran the CDF, now glaring down at them from the stage, in more than a year. Five of them

were over the age of eighty, past the limit set by the Church to participate in a vote for a new Pope should the need arise, but every bit the influential force in Rome, with direct contact to the ear of those who mattered most at the Holy See.

When everyone was in place, Cardinal Angelo Ottaviani rose and thanked them for coming on such short notice, extended warm regards from the Holy Bishop of Rome, and turned the meeting over to Cardinal Maximilian. Cardinal Maximilian's piercing brown eyes softened as he stood, his face a pallet of sincerity. He asked everyone to stand and opened the meeting with a prayer. Cardinal Polletto let the corners of his mouth upturn slightly.

When he finished, Cardinal Maximilian remained standing as everyone else took their seats, and gave a brief summary of why they were assembled, as though common knowledge had slipped their ears.

"The credibility of the Church has taken a severe global beating," said Cardinal Maximilian. "I believe the edict passed by the NBOC is just the beginning. We should encourage a more thorough background investigation for all candidates of the priesthood, and close psychological analysis and treatment for any offender under our roof."

A buzz reverberated throughout the room, and several hands rose into the air.

Cardinal Maximilian pointed to a hand on the front row. "Bishop Wilmington."

Bishop Curtis Wilmington, studious, wise for his age, and overseer of the diocese in Dallas stood. "Thank you, Cardinal Maximilian. I wonder if adopting such an immediate, harsh policy is in concert with the Holy Scriptures."

"Certainly you're aware that the scriptures speak against such abominations as harming children," responded Cardinal Rousseau. "The Church can't be seen as condoning such behavior."

Amused, Cardinal Polletto bit his tongue, not wanting to chime in too early. Since initiating and carefully nurturing the public exposure of one of the Church's age old skeletons, priests and young boys, he'd found that the mire of debate and confrontation deepened if he just kept quiet and nudged it along at the opportune time.

“The Bible also speaks of forgiveness,” added Bishop Timothy Rogers of Philadelphia. “If second chances apply to parishioners, then why not to those who serve them?”

“Not to mention that canon law doesn’t allow for the random expulsion of priests,” droned Cardinal Bauer, in a heavy German accent. “For that, new laws must be structured, carefully studied and passed. Laws that will apply to the entire Church, not just our brethren in the States.”

The murmuring and loud whispering swelled. Cardinal Maximilian, gentle but firm, asked for quiet, which slowly returned. “I understand the need to maintain consistency in the Church precepts, but we can’t ignore the sexual violation of children.”

“We understand,” responded Cardinal Osagiobare, his baritone voice and distinct African accent booming, “but many sins plague us from hell. How does this outrank other pressing issues, such as homosexuality? Surely, one sin does not outrank another.”

Again, Cardinal Polletto smiled inside. He knew that Cardinal Osagiobare spoke of a faction of homosexual priests who called themselves Saint Sebastian’s Angels. Initially formed in the States, their numbers had grown substantially outside the U.S. in recent years.

“Maybe the strategy should lean more toward temporary censure, than outright expulsion? At least until we get a better handle on how to proceed,” Cardinal Polletto finally said.

“What do you mean?” asked the rotund African cleric.

“Instead of expulsion, they could be reassigned. Not allowed to preside over mass or serve in any capacity where children will be at risk.”

“That’s not new,” shot Cardinal Maximilian. “It’s been tried by many of the parishes. It makes us look as though we’re trying to hide the problem. Sweep it under the rug.”

“Exactly,” chimed Cardinal Rousseau. “We’ve tried psychological counseling, long leaves of absence, spent millions of dollars with very little success. We have to take more drastic measures.”

The room percolated and buzzed, as the men argued amongst themselves.

“Quiet, gentlemen, please,” begged Cardinal Maximilian.

“And just how will we confirm every accusation?” added Cardinal Polletto, as the noise died down. “Surely, you’ll launch a full investigation into each incident before stripping a priest of his duties. Or should we just hunt them down and burn them at the stake?”

Cardinal Polletto’s heavy-handed remark sent tension washing across the room like a tidal wave. Some stood, snapping at him face to face. Others rushed to his side and fervently argued in his defense. *Beautiful.*

Cardinal Maximilian banged his fist on the table and begged them to stay calm. “Your enthusiastic support of the brethren is noted,” he said, behind suspicious eyes. “Please, share with us the details of how you would handle a wayward priest under your watch,” he said to Cardinal Polletto.

Every head turned toward Cardinal Polletto. He stood, back erect, serious, scanning the room.

“It’s not my intention to insinuate that such a matter is simple,” he responded. “We should immediately censure any priest caught up in strong allegations, where confessions have been garnered or the evidence is obvious and overwhelming. But since canon law doesn’t allow for arbitrary discharge, we should reassign them, assess the case, and determine if the man can be rehabilitated.”

“And how do we handle the financial liability?” asked Cardinal Maximilian. “We’ve already paid millions because of the most egregious offenders. If we don’t put a halt to this soon, it’ll turn into an international money grab.”

“Even more of a reason not to be rash,” answered Cardinal Polletto. “If we’re too hasty to castigate and neuter our own, it’ll turn into a feeding frenzy.”

“And what would you call it now?” asked Cardinal Maximilian. “I doubt it can get any more ferocious than it is right now.”

“The media fervor will die down,” Cardinal Polletto offered. “They’ll move on to another hot topic soon, and then we’ll be able to handle this in a manner more in line with canon law. At a pace that will foster decisions best for everyone concerned.”

“What about the authorities?” inquired Cardinal Bauer. “They could go a long way in helping us sort out these affairs since our own manpower is short, or in most cases, non-existent.”

“And how far should we allow them into Church affairs?” asked Cardinal Polletto. “Certainly their interests don’t coincide with our own. We should employ private investigators we can control. I, for one, am not in favor of trusting outsiders, or throwing our brothers to the wolves.”

Cardinal Polletto watched the room sink into a morass of confusion and disillusionment, and took delight in seeing Cardinal Maximilian lose control of the gathering. He laughed inside as the chocolate skinned cleric begged for order he didn’t get. The discord and loss of harmony was just another in a long queue of well-spun arguments initiated at the behest of The Order, all designed to erode, disrupt and destroy.

Hedonism in the bowels of the Catholic Church was nothing new. Since the mandate that all who serve in the priesthood abstain from sex, and only marry the Church, the opportunity to capitalize on the natural fleshly desires that wage war against all but those who share the gift of celibacy with the Apostle Paul, was to Cardinal Polletto’s delight, plentiful.

A longtime, well-known, but only recently publicized concern of Church leaders, homosexuality and sexual perversion, had long been a battleground the Church hierarchy worked feverishly to veil from public eyes. News of these incidents slipped through occasionally, but were easily covered up and dismissed under the cover of secrecy, buried by the unmatched power and high-reaching influence of the Holy See.

But, as time edged forward, the perversions did not abate, they grew, even into the inner sanctum of the College of Cardinals, including pederasty and sodomy. In some cases, the escapades were so perverse, the Church fathers considered it an epidemic.

The Order of Asmodeus had never fully taken advantage of the Church’s obvious weakness, until Cardinal Polletto rose up through their ranks. The first stage was easy. Nurture and cultivate sexual degradation in the Church at every turn. The Order established a network that tracked each wayward priest and nun, cataloging every abortion, affair, drug user and apostate.

Cardinal Polletto watched The Order’s efforts burst forth within a wave of hedonistic fervor that rivaled Sodom and Gomorrah. Soon, the

campaign fed off of itself, and sent the inner sanctum at The Vatican into an all out panic.

The next move was to expose the turmoil to the public. Sensitive information was leaked, articles written, but nothing took hold or had the devastating impact they hoped. The Vatican, no doubt with the aid of the highly surreptitious Hammer of God, managed to quell most of the fires before they really got started, until Cardinal Polletto spotted a diabolically fiendish trend.

While analyzing reports that came in from around the United States, Cardinal Polletto noticed that the number of priests caught up in, or accused of, pedophilia in America had risen sharply since the beginning of The Order's campaign. It was the hook they'd been waiting for. Not even the upper echelon of Rome could hide decadence against children. It worked.

The Church fought back, hiding incidents, paying off victims, sending pedophilic men of the cloth to psychiatric institutions, all in an effort to kill any mounting public outcry. Each step of the way, the Il Martello di Dio did its best to find The Order and quail the effort, but to no avail. Once the press got wind of the magnitude of molestation in the Church, it grew into all-out chaos, threatening the foundation of the Church, and the moral high ground it pretended to possess.

Cardinal Maximilian was finally able to bring order to the dim, humid auditorium, but the debate continued to rage on for another hour. Cardinal Polletto sat quietly and watched the others try to navigate complicated and confusing canon law. Cardinal Maximilian looked dismayed up on stage, occasionally glaring in Cardinal Polletto's direction, discomfort and disappointment on his face as he shifted back and forth in his chair. Cardinal Polletto allowed a smile to creep on his thin lips. To his surprise, Cardinal Maximilian smiled back, then stood. As though it were a signal, the others fell silent.

"This has been a spirited debate," said Cardinal Maximilian, his voice steady, controlled. "But one we'll have to continue at our next meeting, ninety days from today. Notes from this meeting and an agenda for the next will be sent before that time so that our next discussion will be more productive."

Cardinal Polletto stifled the urge to laugh. *It's all too easy. Soon, with the help of the savior we've been prayerfully waiting for, the Church will give way to something new, something wonderful.*

“But before we take our leave,” Cardinal Maximilian continued, “I think it would be helpful if one of us would provide a specific example we can all follow as a case study of how to handle this situation.” He faced Cardinal Polletto, his eyes mischievous, penetrating. “Since Cardinal Polletto seems to have a strong handle on how we can turn around these brethren, I’d like him, with the permission of this counsel, to give us a brief explanation of how he’s dealing with the challenge of one of his own.”

Cardinal Polletto felt a sharp stab in his chest. His jaw tightened. His mouth felt dry.

“How is Father Tolbert?” asked Cardinal Maximilian, a faint smile on his lips. “Has he gotten better since his assignment here in Rome? I understand there’s been an incident.”

39

Cardinal Polletto gripped the arms of his chair tight, his face belying the rage boiling inside, as Cardinal Maximilian peered down from the stage like Moses from on high.

“Is there a problem, Cardinal Polletto?” asked Cardinal Maximilian.

Cardinal Polletto eased up from his seat, his eyes fixed on Cardinal Maximilian. “It’s no problem at all. I’m not sure about the *incident* you speak of, but as of today, Father Tolbert is doing fine.”

“Then you have a handle on his problem?” continued Cardinal Maximilian.

“I’m not sure there is a problem. A few scattered accusations have been made, but nothing has been substantiated.”

“And how do you plan to proceed? Are you launching an investigation?”

You pompous ass. “Until something more than rumors surface, why react? Nobody has come forward. We’d only look guilty.” The others in the room nodded their heads in agreement, like mindless sheep blindly following a wolf. “We’d do better to examine a situation further along than this one,” Cardinal Polletto added. Again, the others murmured their concurrence.

“If there’s nothing there,” said Cardinal Maximilian, “why then his sudden reassignment to Rome?”

Cardinal Polletto fumed. “As I’ve already informed you, Father Tolbert put in for the Vatican Archive assignment several times over the last five years. I thought it an opportune moment to let things die down in Chicago, and to give the poor man a chance to gather himself.”

Cardinal Maximilian leaned forward on the table. “And what of the kidnapped child, the altar boy, Samuel Napier? Any word?”

Inquisitive buzzing filled the room. Whispering, pointing, all eyes wide with questions.

“I’m afraid I’m out of the loop where that’s concerned,” Cardinal Polletto said, smooth and easy. “That’s a question best left to law enforcement, and I fail to see its relevance here.”

Cardinal Maximilian took a few more blind stabs, then turned the meeting back over to Cardinal Ottaviani, who said a brief prayer then

dismissed the meeting. Cardinal Maximilian made a quick exit. Cardinal Polletto lingered amongst the others making small talk, not wanting to further telegraph that something was askew.

Later, sitting back in the peanut butter leather of his black Mercedes, on loan from the Vatican carpool, Cardinal Polletto continued to simmer on a slow burn. His driver, Joseph, loyal to The Order, snaked the car out of Rome down Cassia Veientana Road toward Viterbo Road, and headed straight for Bracciano, thirty-three kilometers from Rome.

Cardinal Polletto leered out at the passing countryside, a testament to the serene, beautiful Italy so few were privileged to witness. He rolled down his window. A burst of earthen air, cultured and clean, filled his nostrils, soothing his emotions. It wasn't the exposure of Father Tolbert's sexual proclivities that vexed him, he had gladly watched more than a few of the holy drown. But the cardinal needed Father Tolbert, needed his blood and soul, and wouldn't allow anybody, especially Cardinal Maximilian, to cause a delay or derail his plans.

I understand there's been an incident. Cardinal Maximilian's words hung in the air like an ominous cloud. Cardinal Polletto long suspected Cardinal Maximilian of being more than a suffocating ecumenical asshole. He long suspected, but had never been able to confirm that Cardinal Maximilian worked for Il Martello di Dio. If his suspicions were true, then things had just gotten much worse, and The Order's time to act short.

He picked up the phone and dialed Father Ortega. "Have you learned anything more about our target?" he asked.

"Not yet, Your Excellency, but we're close," said Father Ortega.

"Stay on him, he could be the key we need to close the Hammer of God down. I'll be at the castle in a moment." Cardinal Polletto hung up, hoping the lead Father Ortega was investigating panned out. If so, their hand would become stronger overnight.

Night fell and blanketed the countryside as the Mercedes powered towards the small fishing village, Bracciano, its namesake castle towering magnificent in the distance, majestic royalty in a land of kingly monuments. As the car sped closer, the medieval majesty and architectural grandeur of the stunning feudal residence cast the perfect

commanding aura of military and civilian design, one of the most beautiful castles in Europe, powerful, yet enchanting.

In 1290, Bracciano Castle, along with other castles and villages in the area, became possessions of the Holy Spirit of Rome. Later, Bracciano was conquered by the Brenton clan, and became their general headquarters at the time of the struggle between Pope Urbano and the Anti-Pope, Clemente VII.

Around 1470, the old fortified building, which was the prefect seat, was enlarged on orders from Baron Napoleone Orsini, who at the time was one of the most powerful figures in Roman nobility. Under the patronage of the Orsini clan, the castle became a renaissance court, a haven for artists, as well as an envied venue for sumptuous parties and galas, phenomenal fireworks displays, and private receptions.

In 1696, the last of the Orsini's of Bracciano sold the castle to Livio Odescalchi, whose family still retained ownership, and were more than happy to shut it down for Bracciano's favorite son, Cardinal Polletto, one of their own. The cardinal promised that he would return it in the same condition. *It's the world that will be different*, he thought at the time.

Cardinal Polletto's driver wound the car along the dark snake-like road, Via Claudia, stopping at the castle entrance, at the base of the eastern tower. The entire building was under-lit with high watt lights from the ground up, and the four massive towers at each corner, along with the windows and ledges of the rooftops, were accented with white Christmas lights, giving the medieval colossus a festive, dominate air.

Up close, the years of wear, battles fought, and the elements of time, were much more evident on the castle's outer wall. Like many of Rome's ruins, the castle wore chips and cracks in its brick and stone with a historical pride that emanated culture and conquest. Cardinal Polletto stepped out of the car and took in the familiar surroundings, remembering the stories his parents shared with him about the battles fought at the castle, and its secrets passed down through generations, known only to those who grew up in the small village.

One of The Order's faithful, Bishop Giordano, met him as he walked up the long, steep walkway to the front door. "Good evening, Your Excellency," he gushed. "Things are proceeding as planned, and all preparations will be finished in less than a few weeks."

“We no longer have a few weeks,” shot Cardinal Polletto, continuing on through the front door.

“How much time do we have?” asked the bishop, following so close, he almost crashed into Cardinal Polletto when he made a sudden stop.

“Five days,” the cardinal answered. “Everyone will be here, so we can proceed at that time.”

“But why? We still need to gather up the children.”

Cardinal Polletto leaned close to the cleric. “The Hammer of God is on to us,” he whispered.

Bishop Giordano took a step back and covered his mouth. “Il Martello di Dio. But how do you know? How can you be sure?”

Cardinal Polletto stepped back. “Trust me, my friend, I’m very sure.”

“Then we must inform the others,” said Bishop Giordano, panic in his voice.

“We’ll do no such thing,” barked Cardinal Polletto, catching himself, looking around. “There’s no need to tell anyone,” he continued, in a much softer, more controlled tone. “I have it well under control. Have I ever failed?”

Bishop Giordano took a deep breath. “No, Your Excellency. The Order has prospered well under your leadership.” He eased closer to the cardinal. “But let’s hope your certainty is one hundred percent, or we’ll all pay a price I dare not contemplate.”

Cardinal Polletto smiled. “Where is our guest?”

“Father Ortega placed Father Tolbert in the room next to the Hall of Arms. We’ve kept him under as ordered, but he should be coming out of it soon.”

“Excellent,” beamed the cardinal. “I’ll look in on him myself. You may continue with your task.”

Cardinal Polletto didn’t wait around for a response. He climbed the wide circular stairway in the entry hall to the study and library known as Pope’s Hall, named after Pope Sixtus IV, who was a guest at the castle in 1481.

The third room Cardinal Polletto passed also took its name from an illustrious guest who lingered in Bracciano’s fortress for a time in 1900, King Umberto I.

After strolling past the Triptych Room and Pisanella's Hall, two of the most opulent of the castle's reception halls, Cardinal Polletto stopped at his favorite, the Hall of the Caesars.

Hands behind his back, the cardinal strolled past the white marble busts of each of the twelve Caesars, lined up along the wall like a jury of his peers, the power and energy of each surging through the room. He closed his eyes. *This is where I belong, a part of history.* Cardinal Polletto allowed himself a moment to admire the stunning frescoes suspended beautifully on the walls, painted by Antoniazza Romana, one of his favorites.

After the Hall of Isabella, the cardinal finally reached the Hall of Arms. It was well stocked with a vast collection of medieval arms, swords, sabers, medieval shields, helmets worn in battles to defend the castle, and full suits of armor donned by warriors of times past. The room wore the shroud of death with unimpeachable strength and honor.

Father Ortega opened the door to a small unobtrusive space just to the right of the Hall of Arms, looked out and nodded to Cardinal Polletto, who entered the sparsely furnished room and found Father Tolbert sitting up on the side of the bed, head in his hands. The priest looked up, eyes swollen and blood red.

"Why?" blubbered Father Tolbert. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"All in due time," the cardinal sneered. "For now, you'll have to stay calm and wait. All you need to know will be revealed soon, and you'll thank me that I made you a part of something earth shaking, a part of history."

"But how are those children mine? I still don't understand," said Father Tolbert.

Cardinal Polletto moved closer, and stood over the distraught priest. "It's simple really. Years ago while you were in the hospital for back surgery, The Order had your body cells harvested for the purpose of cloning a human being."

Father Tolbert's eyes widened. "What? How?"

"It's simple really," the cardinal continued. "The nucleus from your body cells were put into eggs from which the nucleus had been removed. The resulting entity developed into an embryo, and was placed in a woman's uterus and brought to term. How surprised we were when the

embryo spilt, and not only was one child reproduced, but five. Two died at birth, three lived. Your exact genetic duplicates, clones.”

Father Tolbert’s face twisted with anger. “You fucking bastard. Why me?”

“You were healthy. Fit for such an operation. I wanted to be the host myself, but my past health history with cancer made it impossible.”

“Who’s the mother?” Father Tolbert eked out, beginning to cry.

Cardinal Polletto smiled. “Someone equally healthy and strong,” he answered. He told Father Tolbert the mother’s name.

“Arrrrrrrh,” cried the priest. “You’ve used me all along! You fucking asshole! You’ve used me!”

“Calm down,” the cardinal snapped. “Without me, you would’ve gone to jail, or worst, been killed a long time ago. I saved you, protected you, as should a blood relative.”

“I don’t believe you! You’re lying!”

Cardinal Polletto slapped the priest hard. “You’re my nephew! Born of my sister here in Rome! Accept it!”

Father Tolbert sprang to his feet and lunged for Cardinal Polletto’s neck.

“Get the sedative!” screamed the cardinal. “Sedate him!”

Father Ortega rushed to the nightstand and grabbed a needle, already full of Midazolam, a powerful sedative, and rushed over to the struggling men.

“Hold him steady!” yelled Father Ortega.

Cardinal Polletto couldn’t answer. Every bit of strength he could muster was being used to keep the priest from choking him to death. Father Ortega pulled up Father Tolbert’s sleeve and aimed.

Father Tolbert let go of Cardinal Polletto and smashed Father Ortega in the face, sending blood flying from his nose. Father Ortega fell back and dropped the needle. Father Tolbert grabbed it and stabbed Cardinal Polletto in the neck.

The cardinal crashed against the nightstand, knocking over a water pitcher, then hit the floor. His vision blurred. *Can’t let him get away, he’ll ruin everything.* Cardinal Polletto struggled to stand. The room swayed back and forth. He dropped to his knees.

“Cardinal Polletto, are you alright?” he heard a distant voice ask.

“Don’t let him escape,” he managed to mumble.

The cardinal felt his body lighten. His breathing fell shallow. The twelve Caesars stood before him, their disapproval obvious. Then Cardinal Polletto blacked out.

40

Father Tolbert bolted from the room and stumbled down a long, dark hallway, bumping into walls and furniture, knocking down paintings, legs aching, nearly out of breath, his heart a sledgehammer banging against the inside of his chest. He tumbled down the circular stairway and rolled to the floor, startling Bishop Giordano. Father Tolbert jumped to his feet and ran for the door.

“Stop him! Don’t let him escape!” barked Father Ortega, running down the stairs, slipping down a few himself.

Bishop Giordano sprinted after Father Tolbert, caught him just outside the door, and wrapped him up with both arms from behind. The priest, possessed, anger overflowing, broke the bear hug and punched the bishop in the face, knocking him on his ass, as two men trailing Bishop Giordano dove for him and missed. Father Ortega hit the doorway.

The muscles in Father Tolbert’s legs tensed. He willed them to run and sprinted down the walkway, the pounding of Father Ortega’s size thirteen’s stomping right behind him.

The immediate area around the castle, illuminated by floodlights, offered no place to hide. Father Tolbert headed for the woods just off the lake, down a steep hill of stones. He jumped off the rocky cliff into the darkness, barely avoiding Father Ortega’s grasp.

Father Tolbert crashed to the ground below, chest first, knocking the wind out of his lungs. He laid there clawing the dirt, gasping for air road-blocked from his lungs. *Good, maybe this is death calling.* He relaxed and encouraged death to take him, but the barrier released, and oxygen stampeded into his lungs. His head pulsated and pounded. Water pooled up in his eyes as he gasped and sucked in buckets of air.

Lights beamed down from the top of the cliff, creating a kaleidoscope through the salty pools flooding his pupils. The tears fell away. Flashlight beams criss-crossed the area, then finally settled on him.

“There he is, I see him!” screamed an unfamiliar voice in Italian.

The lights started down the hill toward him. Father Tolbert inhaled deeply. A surge of crisp air helped clear his head. He forced himself to his feet and bolted for the dense woods behind him. Branches and brush

slapped his face, scratched his arms, and ripped at his clothing. Twenty minutes later, he stopped, sweat searing his eyes, and listened. Except for his heartbeat, and the wheeze of air from his lungs, all was quiet.

He bent over to throw up, but only dry heaved. A stabbing pain pierced his chest, his stomach knotted up and cramped. He gathered himself, stood, and leaned against a tree. He listened intently. The sound of twigs breaking crackled off in the distance. He quickly and quietly made his way toward the lake, where he could move faster along the shore.

When he reached the water, a full moon shimmered off it as though it were a sheet of mirrored glass. Father Tolbert spotted Bracciano Castle, now a half mile away. Trevigano, on the other side of the lake, stood sentry against the hills in back of the village, scattered lights visible in the hillside.

The crunching of brush and flickering flashlight beams moved closer. Father Tolbert ran along the shore, quickly putting distance between him and his pursuers, something he knew wouldn't last long. As soon as they picked up his trail, they'd close in fast.

Just as the thought streaked through his mind, Father Tolbert heard faint voices, looked back and saw two roving lights stopped on the shore. He increased his speed, pumping his arms and sore legs as hard as he could. The lights behind him quickly bounced in his direction.

"There he is!" one of the men shouted.

Father Tolbert tried to move faster, but couldn't. The lights closed in, and he could make out the forms of two shadowed bodies running hard after him. Panicked, he bumped into something hard and hit the ground, his face plowing into a mud puddle. The priest jumped to his feet and looked down. *A boat!*

Father Tolbert took a few steps back, sprinted forward, and pushed the rowboat out into the water. The two men chasing him were in full view, both lean and athletic. He jumped into the boat. They spotted him and dove into the water, splashing wildly, swimming after him.

Father Tolbert grabbed the oars and rowed, his arms straining, struggling at the unfamiliar effort. He spotted the flashlights, still in the swimmers' hands, bouncing up and down like fireflies, getting closer by the stroke, an eerie sight in the darkness.

Father Tolbert found a rhythm and pulled away. The flashlights disappeared and the boat rocked back and forth. One of the men pulled himself up on the side of the boat, with a knife in his teeth. He rolled over into the boat and snatched the blade from his mouth.

“Bastardo!” he bellowed. “Stop rowing or I’ll cut your throat!”

Father Tolbert stopped. The man took a step forward. His partner swam up to the other side of the boat.

“Turn around,” the man with the knife ordered. “I’m going to tie you up.”

The priest turned, grabbed one of the oars and swung it back at the knife wielding Italian, knocking him over the side, his partner going down with him. Both men tried to pull themselves up.

Father Tolbert, his eyes glazed over with fury, beat them over the head again and again, until both bodies floated out of sight, and disappeared into the night.

Distraught, Father Tolbert collapsed, completely drained. He sprawled out in the middle of the boat, breathing hard, staring at the stars; loathing what he’d become. *A menace to children, and now a murderer.*

The tiny dinghy drifted aimlessly in the darkness for nearly an hour before the priest mustered enough strength to raise himself up. The lights of Trevigano were few, but still visible from the middle of the lake. He grabbed the oars, one now blood soaked and severely cracked, and rowed toward Trevigano, the effort to reach shore twice as difficult as before. But the fear that once consumed him, was now replaced with a new determination to confess what he knew.

The longer he rowed, the greater his anger grew. *I’ll put a stop to Cardinal Polletto.*

Father Tolbert considered going straight to the Vatican hierarchy, but squashed the notion quickly. There was no way for him to know who at the Vatican worked for Cardinal Polletto and The Order. The cardinal’s people would be looking for him everywhere; at the Church and in Rome. *Who can I tell and not get caught?*

Less than a hundred yards from shore, he slowed down. *There is one person. I...I must contact Samuel’s godfather, Robert Veil.*

The boat reached land. Father Tolbert jumped into the water and pulled it all the way on shore, then looked out over the water. Quiet and still, Bracciano Lake was a blanket of serenity. No movement or sound except for the animal inhabitants in the woods, who chirped, hooted, and howled. *A stranger is in our midst.*

Feet as heavy as cinder blocks, Father Tolbert lumbered into the forest, dreading his decision to contact Robert Veil, knowing he'd have to confess his sins against Samuel, knowing it might cost him his life. *It doesn't matter, I'm ready to die.*

The trees separating Trevignano from the lake were not nearly as dense as those on the other side, and Father Tolbert, cold and shivering, quickly found himself on a pitch-black road lined with empty bars and restaurants, closed for the night.

Trevignano, small and picturesque, almost hidden on the northern shores of Lake Bracciano, lay on a cliff at the end of a small bay; the secondary crater of an ancient volcano. The priest headed south and stayed close to the trees, where he could hide quickly if needed. He knew he was about thirty to forty kilometers from Rome, a walk that would take him deep into the following evening, less if he kept a steady pace.

He passed the last home in the small village, a large villa imbedded in the cliff. There was nobody in sight. He crossed to the opposite side of the street, where the brush offered better cover. Bracciano castle drew closer as he walked. Nervous, he kept a close eye out for any sign of Cardinal Polletto's men. He was sure they wouldn't expect him to come back by the castle, but erred on the side of caution, and stayed poised for the unexpected.

Father Tolbert heard the low rumble of an automobile coming his way, from Trevignano. He looked back and spotted two bright eyes steaming down the road he was traveling, quickly rolling in his direction. He sprinted to the trees just off the lake. *If it's them, I'll swim for it. I'll have a better chance in the water.* The beams from the headlights caught him as he stepped in the woods. He stopped, hid behind a tree and stooped low. The car slowed to a near stop. Father Tolbert eased toward the water.

"Father," a voice called from the car, "do you need a ride?"

Father Tolbert's heart raced. He eased out of the brush toward the car. Inside was a man nearly sixty, with a full gray beard, wearing round spectacles, and a white yachting cap.

Father Tolbert leaned inside and smiled. "Hello, I'm Father Tolbert," he said, extending his hand. "How far are you going?"

"I'm Giovanni Telfair, and I'm on my way to Rome," the old man said.

"Giovanni, a gift from God. Well, you're just in time. I need a ride to Rome."

Giovanni unlocked the door to the old, red Fiat. Father Tolbert eased inside. The car sputtered, picked up speed and they sped off down the road, drawing closer to Bracciano Castle.

"So, what has you out in the middle of the night, Father, if I may ask?" asked Giovanni.

Father Tolbert froze, then recovered. "My car broke down back in Trevignano, so I left it there and decided to travel by foot at night until I could get a ride, and here you are."

"God does answer prayers," Giovanni laughed, then barked a smoker's cough and spat out the window.

The road they traveled curved and wound it's way so close to Bracciano Castle, Father Tolbert saw people moving about inside and out.

"She's still beautiful after all these years," said Giovanni, gazing at the castle, as if it were his lover. "I look at her and my heart still flutters."

Father Tolbert tensed up as the car hooked a curve a hundred feet from the castle. "I know what you mean," he answered, his brow wet. He bit his bottom lip as the fortress disappeared behind them.

Ten minutes later, with the castle hidden by the distance and darkness, Father Tolbert relaxed and eased his seat back.

"Go ahead and rest, Father, I'll wake you when we're almost in Rome."

Father Tolbert thanked his host, let his seat fall back further, shut his eyes, and turned his thoughts toward finding Robert Veil. A difficult task with a platoon of The Order's faithful sure to be searching for him in every quarter in Rome. *I can't walk around in these clothes. That's the*

first thing I'll change, along with my hair. I'll dye it another color, maybe blond. The more he planned, his confidence increased. *I can make this work if I can just find Samuel's godfather.*

His thoughts bounced around in his mind, keeping pace with the Fiat as it navigated the rough, rocky road. He considered going to the American Embassy, or maybe checking every hotel in Rome. He dismissed the Embassy, which left the hotels. There were so many, Father Tolbert didn't know where he'd start, but it was his best bet. He'd begin with the American hotels, then work his way around, changing his disguise every few days to make sure he wasn't discovered.

Father Tolbert smiled. For the first time in his life, he knew he was doing the right thing, and no matter what happened, he was going to see it through. With his plan in place, he relaxed and dozed off to sleep.

In his dreams, he saw Samuel, *his* son, along with Eduardo and Felipe. They held out their hands and bid him to come. Innocent. Inviting. He clenched his teeth. "No," he shouted, in his dreams, "stay away from me! Please, go back!" The three boys continued to smile and walk toward him. He screamed louder for them to stop, as his member began to tingle. "Please, stop, I don't want to..."

"Father, Father, wake up! You're having a bad dream," Giovanni cried, his voice distant and hazy.

A sudden bump jolted Father Tolbert awake and he snapped up.

"Asshole!" Giovanni shouted, looking in the rearview mirror.

Giovanni begged Father Tolbert's forgiveness. Another bump jerked them forward. Whoever was in the car behind them was honking their horn as though they wanted to pass. Father Tolbert squinted, but the dark and dust prevented him from making out the person driving. The car rammed them again.

Giovanni eased the car over. "Go on," he shouted, waving the car by, "pass us if it's that important to you!"

The car hit them again, harder, forcing Giovanni to wrestle with the wheel to keep them from crashing into the trees. The old man reached under his seat and pulled out a revolver. "I think he's a bandit," growled Giovanni, cocking back the hammer. "Get down, Father, I'm going to shoot!"

Father Tolbert crouched low, but kept his eyes on the car behind them. Giovanni pointed the gun out the window. The other driver sped up and tried to force them off the road. Giovanni dropped the gun on the floor and hit his brakes. The Fiat's brake lights were enough to illuminate the driver chasing them. *Father Sin!*

"Keep going," Father Tolbert bellowed, "I'll get the gun!"

Giovanni hit the accelerator. Father Tolbert snatched up the gun, rolled down his window, pointed and fired, sending Father Sin swerving back and forth, fishtailing off the road.

"We've lost him," said Giovanni, his voice cracking.

But as soon as the words left the bearded Italian's mouth, headlights zoomed up fast. This time, Father Sin hit them so hard, the back wheels of the Fiat lifted off the ground. Giovanni cursed. The car spun around, tossing Father Tolbert against the door. They flew off the side of the road, down a steep ravine, and crashed into a tree. Father Tolbert felt a bone numbing pain all over his body. His back felt like someone beat it with a baseball bat, and his head threatened to explode. He got his bearings and realized he was upside down.

"Giovanni," he gasped, "are you okay?" There was no answer. The priest righted himself and opened his door.

On the ground in front of him was the revolver. He picked it up. Father Tolbert looked back inside the car. The driver seat was empty. In the moonlight, he saw that the front windshield was bashed out, and spread out over the hood was Giovanni, his head a bloody mess; completely crushed, the white captain's hat covered with matted gray hair and thick, dark blood.

Father Tolbert checked for Giovanni's pulse, nothing. He said a prayer and pleaded with God for Giovanni's soul. *He's dead because of me.* He heard the crunch of leaves and brush, looked up the hill, and saw a flashlight beam, which fell on his face.

"Don't move!" shouted Father Sin.

A sharp pain needled Father Tolbert's legs, but he forced them to move, and ran deeper into the woods. He looked back, Father Sin was gaining and he couldn't run any faster. He closed his fists. His right hand was wrapped around something hard. *The gun!*

Father Tolbert stopped, turned and fired twice. The flashlight disappeared. He hobbled out of the woods onto a main road. He turned around, Father Sin was right behind him, mouth frothing, eyes blazing. Father Tolbert ran to the other side of the road into another wooded area. He leaned against a tree and peered out at Father Sin, who was crouched low, zig zagging across the street. Father Tolbert couldn't move. Father Sin drew closer. Father Tolbert grit his teeth, pointed the revolver and fired twice more, sweat burning his eyes, blurring his vision.

When his vision cleared, Father Sin lay face down on the side of the road. Father Tolbert waited, but Father Sin didn't move. He closed his eyes and begged God for forgiveness.

Father Tolbert waited for ten minutes. When nobody else showed up, he limped down the road, toward Rome.

41

Robert looked down from the countryside villa over Castelnuovo di Porta, the medieval hilltop village, where he and Thorne were staying as guests of Il Martello di Dio, the Hammer of God.

The lush green valley with its crisp, clean morning air, and soothing surroundings, were a far cry from the pollution filled congestion of Washington D.C., where Robert and Thorne lived and worked. Sister Isabella told him that the village hadn't changed much in a century, except for a few creature comforts like running water, electricity, and villas like theirs, with swimming pools and modern appliances.

A hawk swooped down out of the clouds and hovered over the treetops, effortless and smooth. Robert scanned the forest below, his mind on Samuel. He wondered if his godson was still safe, and if he knew that it had been his godfather signaling from the grass.

Two days had passed since Robert first saw Samuel up close. He wanted to rush in and take him back right away, but it was decided by their hosts that it was safer to keep their distance and not risk giving away their presence until a plan was in place. Robert disagreed, but outnumbered, including Thorne, agreed to abide by the decision to limit their observation to the woods, keeping a good distance from the castle where Samuel was being held captive.

It encouraged Robert to see Samuel walk the yard in front of the building the past two evenings. Both nights, Samuel edged close to grass where Robert had hidden the first night they spotted him. He wondered if his godson was looking for another sign, and what he felt when it didn't come.

"We'll get started in about five minutes," said a voice behind Robert.

Sister Isabella, her rich blue eyes as bright as her smile, handed him a cup of steaming coffee with milk and sugar, just as he liked it. "We're waiting for Bishop Ruini."

"Thank you, Sister," answered Robert, taking a small sip of the brew.

The nun offered to prepare Robert some breakfast, but he declined. He hadn't been able to eat much since spotting Samuel. Thorne had finally convinced him to eat dinner the night before, by threatening him with shotgun therapy, but this morning coffee was enough.

Robert followed Sister Isabella back to the living room. They'd been working twelve-hour shifts out in the woods, including all night the night before, and the nun worked in jeans and sweaters. Robert caught himself on more than one occasion admiring what God had given the strong, beautiful woman, but more than her beauty, it was her gentle strength that caught his attention. She always seemed to be thinking two steps ahead, a chess player ready to pounce.

But Robert snapped himself out of it. *She's a nun.* Besides, he had a girlfriend back in Washington, Fiona Patrick, a Supreme Court Justice no less. Although their relationship hit a snag right before he left for Chicago, he loved her, and hadn't even considered another woman since they became an item. He had saved her life while working another case, and in a way, she had saved his.

Bishop Ruini arrived and apologized for his lateness. On the off chance that he'd been followed, he took a long route to the villa, to make sure he wasn't tailed.

"Cardinal Maximilian will be here soon," the bishop told them. "He says he has important information he wants to discuss personally. I'm sure he'll be taking the long route too. He said we should go ahead and start without him."

Everyone gathered in the living room. Father Kong arrived from his shift at the castle. He assured Robert that he left two capable replacements in his place, to keep track of the comings and goings in and out of the castle.

Thorne sat down on the couch next to Robert, sporting black jeans and a matching long sleeve body shirt, similar to those football players wore under their equipment. The outfit left little to the imagination.

When he whispered, "Is that appropriate?" she leaned into his ear, and said, "*They're* nuns and priests, not me."

Father Kong started the meeting with a report that nothing had changed at the castle during the night, except for a new set of armed guards who replaced the others.

"It's been forty-eight hours," said Robert, finishing his cup of coffee. "I don't want to wait much longer. They could move Samuel at any time. We need to make preparations to get him, now."

“We understand,” answered Bishop Ruini. “We want to rescue him too, but caution is our ally. Our plan must be foolproof.”

“He’s right,” added Father Kong. “Remember, they’re armed. We want to avoid loss of life.”

“Then what do you propose?” asked Thorne.

“We might be able to snatch him when they bring him outside,” said Sister Isabella. “We know they let him out for an hour each evening. An assault from the tall grass might work.”

Robert was happy to hear someone had a real plan of action. He was beginning to worry that they might never move forward. “Sounds good,” he agreed. “We can catch them off-guard and keep casualties to a minimum.” The room fell quiet.

“It’s quite possible,” Father Kong finally said. “They usually bring him out late, so if we strike while it’s dark, just before they take his back inside, we’ll increase our chances tenfold.”

“So, when do make our move?” Robert asked.

“I figure a week, maybe ten days,” answered Father Kong.

“A week!” Robert exclaimed, jumping to his feet. “Anything could happen to Samuel in a week. We could be spotted and blow the whole operation. That’s unacceptable!”

“I have to agree,” added Thorne calmly. “Why so long?”

“We’ll probably only get one good chance to grab the boy. I want to make sure nothing is left to chance,” said Father Kong.

“Thorne and I are pros at this. We know what we’re doing. So let’s not waste time and get a plan down on paper. Or we’ll go without you,” said Robert.

“That wouldn’t be wise,” said Bishop Ruini. “You need us. You’re up against more than you know.”

“I beg your pardon, Bishop, we’ve been places and done things you’ll never be able imagine. So don’t tell me what we’re up against,” said Robert.

Again, the room fell silent. Thorne pulled Robert back down to the couch. “Certainly we can come up with a workable plan in the next few days,” she said.

“These are dark forces,” said Father Kong, in a hushed, reverent voice. “Much thought and prayer must be laid before we step into such a

spiritual battle. The Order believes they have the Anti-Christ, which means they'll do whatever they can to keep Samuel, and kill anyone who gets in the way."

"Forgive me, Father, but I don't give a damn if they bring the Devil himself. If I have to reach down in hell to get Samuel back, then so be it," said Robert.

"You may very well have to do that, Mr. Veil. And trust us, you'll need every prayer possible," said Father Kong.

A car pulled up outside, and minutes later, Cardinal Maximilian, flanked by two large men Robert had never met, entered, kissed each member of Il Martello di Dio on both cheeks, shook Robert and Thorne's hands, and sat down in the larger recliner in front of them.

Father Kong caught him up on their conversation. While he did, Robert saw the cardinal give Thorne's outfit the once over. He looked her in the eye, shook his head and smiled. Thorne nodded, but wore nervousness in her eyes Robert rarely saw. She had told him that she respected the cardinal, and the fact that he knew their secret and had kept it in confidence. Robert agreed. Cardinal Maximilian was a man of great integrity and resource. One of the few men in such a high position that he himself admired. He'd found that typically men of such stature only cared about themselves.

"We'll discuss a plan of action later," the cardinal finally said. "But first, let me bring you up to date on what I've learned."

Sister Isabella adjourned to the kitchen, came back with a tall glass of orange juice and handed it to the cardinal. He thanked her and downed half the glass.

"There was a shooting in Father Tolbert's room a few days ago," Cardinal Maximilian told them. "One of my associates hid inside a broom closet when he heard the shot, and saw Cardinal Polletto, Father Tolbert and Father Ortega leave not long after the gunfire. Father Ortega came back later and cleaned up the mess. Father Tolbert hasn't been seen since. Cardinal Polletto called in to the Vatican Archives, and told them he needed the priest for a special assignment, and hasn't been seen himself since."

Robert leaned forward. "So, then Cardinal Polletto is involved with The Order."

Cardinal Maximilian took a deep breath. “Yes, I’m afraid he is very much involved. I wasn’t one hundred percent sure until today.”

Robert clinched his fists and took a cleansing breath of his own. “So, what do you think this means?”

“I’m not sure,” answered the cardinal. “Father Tolbert may be having a breakdown. The combination of his sins against children, and the pressure of working under Cardinal Polletto may be getting to him. Your conscious can sometimes punish you better than man.”

Not if I get my hands on him, thought Robert. “If they’re back on their heels, then this may be the time to strike, while their minds are elsewhere,” he said.

Cardinal Maximilian looked around the room at his people, then let his eyes fall on Robert and Thorne. “We need to wait until Cardinal Polletto makes his move.”

“What move?” snapped Thorne. “Kill the boy?”

“No doubt Cardinal Polletto will try and verify if Samuel is the Anti-Christ. The Order will perform a ritual, a sacrifice to Asmodeus, in an attempt to find out if the boy is legitimately from the Dark One.”

“What kind of ritual?” asked Robert, his temper barely under control.

“We’re not sure,” Cardinal Maximilian responded sympathetically, noticing Robert’s anger. “Nobody outside of The Order has ever witnessed the ritual, but every member will be there. It’s a chance to set them back centuries.”

“I understand you have a cause to pursue,” said Robert, impatiently. “But Samuel isn’t bait, and I won’t let you put his life at risk.”

“We’re all putting our lives at risk,” said the cardinal, in an even softer tone. “There’s more at stake here than you know.”

“I know my godson is not the Anti-Christ,” Robert growled. “So let’s get him out of there, or I will.”

“If you try and go it alone, I’ll have your Visa revoked. You’ll be shipped out of Rome immediately, and we’ll take up the rescue without you.”

Robert’s muscles tensed. He pounded his fist down on the coffee table, shattering his cup. “I just want to get him out of there,” he snapped.

“You mean, get *them* out of there,” answered the cardinal.

“Them?” asked Thorne, sliding to the edge of the couch.

“Yes,” said Cardinal Maximilian, looking around at the curious faces of his own people. “There are two additional children at risk.”

Robert sat up straight. “Two more? How? When?”

“Apparently, Samuel has two brothers. They’re triplets.”

Everyone sat stunned. An audible gasp squeezed out from between Sister Isabella’s lips. Even the unshakable Father Kong had to lean up against the wall for support.

Robert looked around the room, his eyes settling on the cardinal.

“How do you know this?” he asked, stunned.

“How I know is of little importance. How we handle this matters greatly.”

“Are you sure, Your Eminence?” Sister Isabella asked, her hands together as if in prayer.

“I’m afraid so,” said the cardinal, staring directly at Robert. “When they cloned Samuel, the embryo must’ve split.”

Robert didn’t know what to think. “So, what does this do to our plans?”

“We must wait,” said the cardinal. “Like I said, more lives are at stake than just Samuel’s. We have to locate the other two boys and save them all.”

Robert, awash in emotion, stood, his eyes never leaving the cardinal’s, went to his room and slammed the door.

42

Robert leaned on the bedroom windowsill, fuming and frustrated. Cardinal Maximilian's revelation that Samuel had two identical brothers did nothing to quell his sense of urgency, but only increased his burning desire to rescue his godson right away. He understood the cardinal's position and reasoning. Il Martello di Dio was at war with The Order, but that wasn't his problem. The idea that Samuel was the Anti-Christ was ludicrous to him, no matter how the ten year old was conceived. Cloning or not.

He backed away from the window and sat down on the edge of the bed. The shooting in Father Tolbert's room perplexed him. Outside of suicide, he wondered what could've happened right there in Vatican City. The more he mulled it over, his anxiety increased. If gunplay was now a part of the equation, then the entire situation would spin out of control very quickly, and the sooner he had Samuel in his arms, the better. His gut told him something bigger than they anticipated was involved, and they had better get out soon.

Robert heard the bedroom door open. Thorne, a smirk on her face, eased inside, closed the door, and leaned back against it. "Tsk, tsk," she scolded, wagging her finger. "That was a bit rude, don't you think?"

"Fuck 'em," he fired back. "My only concern is Samuel. The rest is bullshit as far as I'm concerned."

Thorne sat down next to him, calm, her eyes sympathetic. "Cardinal Maximilian is right, you know. There's more at stake here. We should make sure we get all three boys. It's the right thing to do."

"The right thing to do is to get my godson, then blow this place as fast as we can," said Robert.

The softness on Thorne's face dissolved a bit. "You're upset, I understand, but you're being selfish, Robert. If something happened to those other two boys, Samuel's brothers no less, how will you live with yourself?"

Robert stood and walked back over to the window. He stared out for a moment at the lush valley and serene hills, then turned around, his eyes locked on his partner's. "I'm prepared to accept the consequences. I just want my boy back. I owe Donovan that much."

“You mean *our* boy, and we both owe Donovan. This isn’t just about you.”

“Then let’s cut the bull and go get him” snapped Robert, struggling to keep his voice low.

Thorne stood, her eyes stern. “What about Cardinal Maximilian?”

“What about him?”

“If not for him, we’d have no idea where to find Samuel. We owe him.”

Robert took a deep breath. “I understand, but I just don’t care.”

“What about Samuel?” shot Thorne. “They’re his brothers we’re talking about. What are you going to say to him if those boys die in The Order’s hands, and you could’ve saved them?”

Robert paced the floor, head down. After several minutes, he stopped and faced his partner. “Get in touch with our contacts here in Rome. We need a three-man rubber watercraft, with oars and a silent motor, grappling hooks, two fifty-foot sections of rope, climbing gear, night vision goggles, and 9mm’s with silencers and infrared scopes.”

Thorne just looked at him and shook her head. Robert moved close to her ear.

“Seventy-two hours,” he whispered. “I’ll give the cardinal’s people three days to find the other two boys. After that, you and I are going to approach the castle by water, scale the backside wall and get *our* boy back.”

Thorne smiled. “You a bad mutha, you know that? Agreed.”

“And this stays between us,” Robert added. Thorne nodded her consent.

There was a knock at the door. Father Kong apologized for the intrusion as he entered. “Cardinal Maximilian asked me to extend his apologies. He had to leave for the Vatican,” he said, his face serious and intense. “He also asked me to inform you of a new development.”

Robert’s eyebrows raised. *Now what?* “Oh?”

Father Kong stepped forward. “Alison Napier has just arrived in Rome.”

43

Sister Isabella drove Robert and Thorne into Rome, and dropped them in front of Trevi Fountain, in the middle of Rome's world-renowned historic center, and agreed to pick them up in two hours at the same spot.

The mid-morning crowd went about its business, as if strolling past some of the world's most entrancing monuments and artistic masterpieces were as common as passing the post office. Robert guessed that for those who lived here, that was the case. However, for he and Thorne the sight of the alluring Spanish Steps, the enchanting Trevi Fountain, and the awe-stirring Piazza Navona, it was a cultural rush they rarely experienced back in the states. Only the cloud of Samuel's abduction could taint the sights they both adored.

Several members of Il Martello di Dio had trailed Alison from the Leonardo da Vinci Airport to the Grand Hotel del la Minerve, a five star hotel in a seventeenth century building less than half a mile from where Sister Isabella left them. Alison had checked into one of the hotel's luxury suites on the top floor, alone. Robert guessed she was there, most likely, at the invitation of Cardinal Polletto, the man in which she now put her trust. Without Donovan or Samuel at her side, he fully understood, but wondered what the malevolent cardinal wanted with her. He had her son, and had killed her husband. Money was not a problem, Robert was sure Cardinal Polletto had access to untold riches. *Strange, very strange.*

Back in Chicago, Robert didn't dare burden Alison with his suspicions. She hadn't been very open to receiving their help, and Donavon's murder compounded matters. However, now that he'd found Samuel, and knew of Cardinal Polletto's plans, he had to at least tell Alison enough to keep her safe.

Robert and Thorne reached the Grand Hotel de la Minerve, its seventeenth century Victorian architecture every bit as stunning as the area around it. Inside, the lobby was exquisitely adorned in rich royal blue antique furniture, atop elegant Persian rugs and an ice white marble floor. They strode through the lobby without so much as a glance from the hotel staff, but Robert knew better. The appearance of discretion was

requisite at the finer hotels in Italy. But even though no direct stare was obvious, he knew that every detail of their arrival had been mentally catalogued, down to the time, and a full description of what they were wearing.

They caught the elevator to the fifth floor and located Alison's suite. Robert hesitated before knocking, wondering what reception they'd receive, and prepared himself for the worst. When Alison opened the door, her face exploded in a vibrant smile. She hugged them both and invited them inside. Her friendliness caught him off guard, but left him relieved that she was getting back to her old self.

Alison's suite was every bit as elegant and well-appointed as the rest of the hotel, complete with a white, gold-inlaid Victorian ceiling, full living room of antique furniture, and varied prints of Leonardo di Vinci, Raphael and Michael Angelo suspended on rich pink walls.

"We're surprised to see you here," offered Robert, resting back in the lime colored pastel armchair, legs crossed. "But I'm glad to see you with a smile back on your face."

"Cardinal Polletto thought it a good idea and invited me," answered Alison, her bright demeanor reminding Robert of the first time Donavon introduced them. "He said it wasn't right that I sit at home alone, and I agree. I feel much better."

"Good," said Thorne, looking comfortable lying back in the billowy cushioned couch. "Did the FBI give you a hard time?"

"They did at first," answered Alison, suddenly subdued. "With Samuel still lost, they thought it a good idea that I stay close, but Cardinal Polletto made some calls on my behalf, and they let up."

Robert seethed inside. He tried to put a finger on why Cardinal Polletto would involve Alison. The more he pondered, his desire to kill the cardinal increased.

"That was nice of him," said Robert. "Have you spoken with the cardinal since you arrived?"

"Not yet," she answered. "He left word that he might be tied up for a day or two, and that he'd catch up with me later, which is fine with me. I haven't been to Rome in a long time. I'll catch up on the sights and do a little shopping. Now, tell me, what are you two doing here, and how did you know where to find me?"

Robert had anticipated Alison's questions. "How much do you know about Cardinal Polletto?"

Alison looked confused. "Donovan and I met him years ago," she answered. "Father Tolbert introduced us the year after we adopted Samuel. Why?"

Thorne edged forward. "Honey, we're here following up a lead that Samuel's kidnappers are in Rome."

Alison's mouth opened, but she was unable to speak.

"We knew this would be a shock," Robert added. "But there's more."

Alison looked over at Robert in wonder. "More?" she asked.

"We have reason to believe Cardinal Polletto may be involved, or have knowledge of the kidnapping."

Alison snapped to her feet. "That's impossible! Why would he do such a thing?"

Thorne stood, walked over and put an arm around her. "We understand your hesitation," she said, calm and soothing. "But you know us, we take our job seriously, and this is Samuel we're talking about."

Alison shook her head. "I just can't believe it. Have you told the FBI?"

Thorne eased Alison back down in her chair, but remained at her side, a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Robert leaned forward. "We don't want to involve them," he answered. "If we do, we'll lose control. It'll become a circus and tip our hand."

Alison put her head in both hands and took a deep breath. When she emerged, both eyes were red and puffy. "What next?" she sniffled.

Robert cleared his throat. "Right now we're keeping a close watch on the kidnappers, waiting for them to move. When they do, we'll move in and take them down."

Alison began to shake. Thorne massaged her shoulders. "It's okay, honey, we're right here for you."

"What can I do to help?" Alison asked, tears cascading down her cheeks.

Robert knelt in front of her. “Just sit tight as though everything is the same. Don’t give any hint of what we told you to anyone, and we’ll bring Samuel home.”

Alison froze. “Bring him home? How can you be so sure?”

Robert smiled. “We’ve seen him. He looked okay.”

Alison leapt forward and wrapped her arms around Robert, almost knocking him over. “Thank you, Robert. Thank you.”

Robert hugged her tight. “It’s okay,” he said, his voice low, cracking. “We love Samuel, and we’ll do everything we can to get him back.”

“Hey, let me get some of that,” said Thorne, walking over. Alison hugged Thorne tight.

Robert gave a heavy sigh of relief, happy that Alison was back on their side. She let go of his partner and faced him.

“Forgive me for the way I acted back in Chicago,” said Alison, looking ashamed. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“It’s okay, we understand,” said Thorne. “You were under more pressure than anybody should have to handle.”

“Yes,” added Robert. “We never blamed you. You’re family.”

Alison eased down in the chair. “What do I say if Cardinal Polletto finds out you were here?”

“Tell him we’re here on another case,” said Robert. “If he wants to know more he can find us.”

“Yes,” added Thorne. “We’re ready for him.”

Alison shook her head again. “Cardinal Polletto? It’s still so hard to believe.”

“We’ve seen stranger things, trust us,” quipped Thorne. “You just make sure you call us if you see or hear anything suspicious.”

“Yes,” added Robert. “We don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Alison’s forehead wrinkled. “If Cardinal Polletto has Samuel, why would he invite me here?”

“He probably feels like he has more control over the situation if he can keep a better eye on you,” said Robert.

“Yes,” added Thorne. “If he meant to harm you, he would’ve done it in Chicago.”

“But why does he want Samuel?” asked Alison.

Robert looked over at Thorne, whose eyes said, *don’t you dare*.

“We don’t know,” Robert lied. “But it doesn’t matter, all we care about is getting him back.”

Fifteen minutes later, Robert and Thorne were on their way back to Trevi Fountain to be picked up by Sister Isabella. Alison watched them cross the courtyard from her window. Father Ortega exited the bathroom and slipped his .45 automatic back in its holster. He stood behind Alison, watched Robert and Thorne disappear around a corner, pulled out his cell phone, and dialed.

Robert and Thorne reached Trevi Fountain early, and waited, not noticing the thinning pale-skinned man behind them, sporting freshly cut blond hair. Collar up on his black leather jacket, Father Tolbert eyed them, working up his nerve. When he finally did, a car, driven by a serious-looking dark haired woman, who reminded him of Sister Isabella, quickly pulled up and swooped them away.

Father Tolbert had gotten wind of Alison Napier’s arrival. He too had a few connections in Rome. He staked out the hotel, knowing Samuel’s godfather would show eventually, and trailed them to Trevi Fountain after they left the hotel, but lost his nerve. Now, they were gone. He looked around and made sure he hadn’t been noticed. *I’ll make the rounds and watch the hotel until they show again.*

The priest wandered through the ancient streets, back to the small, hidden hotel where he felt safe.

44

Cardinal Polletto, sore from the tussle with Father Tolbert, rubbed the small of his back as he made his way out of Bracciano Castle's large, high-ceiling bedroom, where he'd been recuperating for the past few days. He walked down to the library, Pope's Hall, where he was greeted by low-level members of The Order, who avoided eye contact with him. He could hear and feel their whispers as he eased by. *He let Father Tolbert get away.*

The cardinal covered for Father Tolbert at the Vatican Archives, but soon, Cardinal Maximilian or others at the Vatican would become suspicious and start asking questions. Attention he did not need. But it wasn't the Vatican that worried him; his real concern came from The Order. He would be severely dealt with if Father Tolbert wasn't found. The priest was a very important part of the equation, and the ritual could not take place without him.

Two doors down from his bedroom, Father Sin, shot, but not dead, recuperated. Thankfully, the bullets hit the meaty parts of his right shoulder and left thigh, and passed in and out without breaking any bones. Unfortunately, it took over an hour to find him, and by then, he'd lost consciousness, and a lot of blood. The doctor who examined him, faithful to The Order, said the large, muscular priest would soon be up and around with sufficient bed rest. Cardinal Polletto practically had to threaten Father Sin to keep him in bed, to prevent him from going out to search for Father Tolbert.

Bishop Giordano had ordered their people to get rid of the old man's body they found next to a crashed car. Father Sin told them that the old man gave Father Tolbert a ride, and refused to pull over. Both cars and the body were weighted down and submerged in the middle of the lake. By the time anyone found them, it would be too late.

Inside Pope's Hall, Cardinal Polletto sat down behind a large, dark wooden desk and waited for his guests to arrive. He ordered two hirelings to bring a pitcher of water and a bottle of wine. They came back with the ice water and a bottle of Chateau Margaux, one of his favorites. He uncorked the bottle himself, a special pleasure he took delight in like a child unwrapping presents on Christmas morning. He closed his eyes

and sniffed the cork, the richness of the dark grape pleasantly assaulting his senses. He waved off everyone in the room and poured himself a glass. He didn't taste it right away as most did; the cork had told him everything. If the aroma was bad, so was the bottle, and he'd never let it touch his mouth.

Not long after he'd finished his first glass, Bishop Giordano entered with his guests, Rinaldo and Dianora.

"Hello, my friends," said the cardinal, walking around and giving them both big hugs.

Bishop Giordano backed out of the room as Rinaldo and Dianora sat down in front of the desk. Cardinal Polletto poured them both a glass of wine without asking, knowing they'd appreciate the finely aged grape. Rinaldo owned several vineyards in Italy, and as with most of her father's ventures, Dianora was closely involved, and as much an expert as the two of them.

"I'm glad you could come on such short notice," said the cardinal, taking his seat.

"For you, it's not a problem," said Rinaldo, his nose hovering above the wine goblet. "I hope the child is still secure."

"Yes, your men have done a great job guarding him. I appreciate your kindness," said the cardinal.

"It's the least we could do for one of father's oldest friends," said Dianora.

Cardinal Polletto let his eyes discretely wash over Rinaldo's buxom daughter. She reminded him of Sophia Loren in her younger days, and the cardinal wondered what his friend of fifty years would think if he knew he had already tasted her sweet nectar.

"Thank you for the compliment," he told her. "But I have another assignment for you. Several, in fact, that require the utmost discretion."

Rinaldo's face remained stoic. Dianora smiled.

"One of our priests, Father Charles Tolbert, is missing and must be located quickly." He handed pictures of the priest to each of them. "He may be injured, so I suggest you start at the hospitals and clinics."

Rinaldo pulled a set of wire-rim glasses from his inside jacket pocket and examined the photo. Dianora barely gave hers a glance and slid it inside her bra.

“And your second problem?” asked Rinaldo, his eyes still glued to the photo.

Cardinal Polletto stood, walked over to the door, checked the hallway, then closed and locked it shut. He resumed his seat. “The next issue at hand is quite a bit more sensitive, but very profitable.”

Rinaldo raised his head and gave a sinister smile. “Who do you want us to kill?”

Cardinal Polletto liked Rinaldo. The old man stayed a few moves ahead of the game, and had never let him down.

“His name’s Cardinal James Francis Maximilian.”

“Il Negro?” asked Rinaldo, stroking his chin. “He’s one of the Holy Father’s favorites. The Vatican will use all of its resources to find the killer.”

“Leave the Vatican to me. I understand there’s going to be a change soon, so name your price.”

The old man’s eyes darkened, his brow furrowed. “Five hundred thousand to find Father Tolbert, two million to eliminate the cardinal,” he said.

The price was more than Cardinal Polletto wanted to pay, but money was no object. Besides, he knew the risk Rinaldo would be taking. His entire operation would be eliminated if they were caught.

“Done,” the cardinal finally said. “If you need any of my people, they’re at your command.”

“How soon does this need to take place?” asked Dianora.

“I need Father Tolbert right away, today if possible. Once we have him, the other problem should be dealt with immediately. If possible, make it look like an accident.”

Rinaldo nodded. “If we can, we will. But to kill such a man, we may have to take what we can get.”

Cardinal Polletto understood. “I trust your judgment as always.”

Dianora leaned forward on the desk, her chest resting on the polished wood. “Then there’s only the matter of payment. One million now, wired to an account in the Isle of Man, the rest after we deliver.”

Cardinal Polletto thumped the table, staring at them both, but he didn’t have time to negotiate. “Done. Let’s get on with it.”

The three worked out several final details. When they finished, Cardinal Polletto walked them to their car, bid them both well, then headed for the area where the ritual would take place.

Outside, in the mid-morning sky, a splattering of billowy cotton ball clouds floated north with the strong wind. Cardinal Polletto, his crimson vestment flapping with each gust, pushed through to the north side of the castle, where construction of a small three level arena, flanked by stadium lighting, was nearly complete. The seating could comfortably hold the carefully chosen audience of just over a thousand supporters and members of The Order. While the second level, down seven stairs, would stage the ritual and seat The Order's counsel.

On the beach, guard posts had been set up to keep any noseey wanderers from walking up on the ritual, a precaution supported by two teams of Rinaldo's machine gun toting men spread out in the woods. Cardinal Polletto wasn't worried about the area west of the castle, because the lake stretched more than two miles to Trevignano.

The final level was a short step-down to a large wooden deck where the twenty-five children would be herded, along with Samuel and his two brothers. Just the thought sent Cardinal Polletto's heart fluttering.

The cardinal moved past the stadium seating and stepped down to the ritual stage. He looked out over the water and took in the spectacular scene. He imagined the triumph he'd feel when the birth of the world's most powerful figure since Christ, was acknowledged by his hand and ratified by the high-counsel of The Order. Cardinal Polletto would then be granted the responsibility of raising their newfound leader from pupil to world leader, and his place in history would be sealed forever.

Cardinal Polletto played the ritual over in his head. First, he'd lead a procession of followers and participants from the castle, in-between the standing crowd and down the short flight of stairs to the stage. Father Tolbert would be tied to a wide plank of wood; the twenty-five children tied up and gagged. Samuel, Eduardo and Felipe would each be brought out inside three black coffins, and lifted out onto the stage. Cardinal Polletto would then perform a *Black Mass* in the name of *their* father. After which, Father Tolbert would be presented to the audience as The Vessel, from whom the seed of The Order's new prince sprang forth. The

priest's blood would then be drained from his body until his death, his purpose fulfilled.

The final step of the ritual would, for Cardinal Polletto, be the most exciting. He'd step down to the final platform and bless each child, fifteen male, ten female, Samuel, and his two brothers. The cardinal would ask Asmodeus to reveal to them The One foretold in The Book of Revelation, then pull the lever which opens up a trap door, and all of the children would be plunged into the lake. The survivors would be pulled to shore. Those who managed to live out of the twenty-five would be raised as servants to the world's new lord. If Samuel lived, he would be raised as ruler of the world, raised at the Vatican, under Cardinal Polletto's tutelage.

The wind picked up a sharp chill, but the cardinal barely noticed. In a week's time he would be the Holy Father of the Roman Catholic Church, and the world would never be the same.

Someone cleared their throat behind him, snapping him out of the gratifying trance. It was Bishop Giordano. He stood there, mouth agape.

"Yes?" asked Cardinal Polletto.

"Cardinal, we've just received word from Father Ortega. He reports that Robert Veil and his partner just left Alison Napier's hotel. They know where we're keeping Samuel, and are going to try and rescue the child."

Cardinal Polletto was mildly impressed. "That can be handled. Tell Father Ortega to await my instructions."

"Yes, Cardinal, but there's more," said Bishop. Cardinal Polletto stared. His eyes gave the nervous bishop permission to continue. The bishop's hand quivered. "We've heard from The Black Pope. He's on his way to Bracciano. He'll be here any moment."

Cardinal Polletto's body stiffened. The Black Pope, the man who The Holy Father himself confessed his sins to, led a group more powerful than The Order of Asmodeus, and was head of The Order's counsel. Throughout history, the Black Pope had a hand in some of the world's most earth shattering events, giving final permission to bomb Hiroshima, and for President John F. Kennedy to be assassinated.

Cardinal Polletto took a deep breath to steady himself, placed a hand on Bishop Giordano's shoulder, then headed for the castle.

45

Cardinal Polletto sat alone in Caesars Hall, mustering his strength. He'd only met with the Black Pope on two other occasions. First, when he was chosen to head The Order's day to day operations, and last, just after Samuel was kidnapped by the CIA. Each time, the cardinal felt as though a part of his soul had been drained away. He was used to dealing with the world's most powerful men, many more than his equal. But he feared the Black Pope, a man who could end his life, or elevate him to head the Vatican, with barely a whisper.

The cardinal poured himself a glass of wine, but didn't immediately drink it. He held the glass up and watched the dull light from a yellow bulb, dance and sparkle inside the fermented grape. He wanted desperately to put the ritual behind him. Success meant his ascension to the office of Holy Pontiff, failure meant something worse than death, right before they took his life.

Cardinal Polletto finally took a long sip of wine, then another. He closed his eyes and let the alcohol coarse through his veins, soothing and comforting. His hands steadied with his resolve. When his eyes opened he felt stronger, self-assured.

Bishop Giordano entered, sweating profusely, wringing his hands. "Cardinal, he's here," he said.

Cardinal Polletto stood. "Good, I'll be right down."

Bishop Giordano shifted uncomfortably, shivering as though he'd just stepped out of the ice-cold lake. "I'm sorry, Cardinal, but he said for you to wait here. He'll be up just as soon as finishes a few phone calls from the car."

The cardinal resumed his seat. "Fine, bring up a bottle of Bordeaux, the Chateau Petrus."

The bishop left and returned in record time. He waited nervously while Cardinal Polletto opened the bottle to aerate the wine. "You may be excused," he finally told the bishop, after letting him stew.

Bishop Giordano bowed multiple times as he backed out of the room, effusive and obviously relieved. Cardinal Polletto sat for forty-five minutes before hearing someone slowly ascend the stairs. He stood behind the desk, hands behind his back.

From around the corner, an old man with deep set black eyes, silvery gray hair, a soothing, kind countenance, and grandfatherly smile, floated inside the room, two large, wide shouldered aides in tow. Cardinal Polletto quickly moved around the desk, fell to one knee, and kissed the large gold and black onyx ring on the Black Pope's left ring finger.

"Welcome, Your Eminence. It's an unexpected, but gracious privilege to have you honor us with your presence." Cardinal Polletto stayed on one knee until the Black Pope gave him permission to stand.

"Thank you, my son," said the Black Pope, stroking the cardinal's head as though he were a child. "Please, let a tired old man sit."

"Of course, my lord," the cardinal gushed, leading the old man to the seat behind the desk. "We're surprised to see you today," he said, pouring two glasses of wine. "If we'd known you were coming, we could have prepared a meal."

The Black Pope, draped in a fine black vestment, held the glass in the air, examined it closely, tested the wine's nose, then took a small sip. "Wonderful choice," he said, in a whispery tone. "I've heard tell that wine is a specialty of yours."

Cardinal Polletto gave his thanks and sat down in front of the desk. The Black Pope waved his aides out of the room. He took another sip of wine, this time a longer drink.

"I know this is a bit of a surprise," said the old man. "But I wanted to make sure everything is going smooth." He stared into Cardinal Polletto's eyes. "I hope this isn't an inconvenience."

"Not at all," answered the cardinal. "Everything is going as planned, and will be ready as scheduled."

The Black Pope took another drink, staring intently at Cardinal Polletto, as though reading his thoughts. "I trust precautions have been taken to ensure that young Samuel Napier will not escape again," he finally said.

The cardinal swallowed hard. "Yes, Your Eminence," he stuttered. "It was an unfortunate incident. It won't happen again."

Cardinal Polletto told the old man where Samuel was hidden, and explained the precautions taken to make sure the boy was secure, not mentioning that Samuel's location had been discovered. The longer he

explained, the cardinal got the feeling the old man already knew more than he'd let on.

"I see," the Black Pope said, resting back in the velvet of the high-back chair. "I'd like to meet with Father Tolbert before I leave. Is he available?"

Cardinal Polletto cleared his throat. A direct lie could end his life immediately. He forced a smile. "I'm afraid he's not available at the moment, Your Excellency. Maybe sometime later?"

The Black Pope placed both palms on the table and leaned forward. "Perhaps." He bored a hole right through the cardinal. The grandfatherly countenance was replaced with something sinister, something wicked. Then just as quickly, the kind face reemerged. "I understand the ritual area is almost complete."

Cardinal Polletto, relieved that the questioning ended quickly, stood. "Yes, it's almost completed. Shall I show it to you?"

The old man slowly rose, finished his glass of wine, then crept around the desk, hands behind his back, and headed for the door in silence. Cardinal Polletto finished his glass, wanting another, but followed the Black Pope outside. The old man's two heavyweight aides trailed them both.

Cardinal Polletto proudly showed the ritual stadium to the old man, proudly commenting on how fast his men had brought it together in a short amount of time. The Black Pope simply nodded here and there, but didn't utter a sound. When they reached the last platform, where the children would be herded and dumped into the lake, the old man faced Cardinal Polletto, and asked his men to leave them alone.

He stared at the cardinal for awhile, sizing him up. "You've come a long way, Cardinal Polletto, and many inside The Order are extremely proud of what you've accomplished."

"Thank you, Your Eminence."

The Black Pope moved closer. "This event is more important than anything, anyone, inside The Order will ever take up."

"I understand."

"To bring into the world the one foretold in scriptures is a monumental task that will change the world. A task you cannot fail."

Cardinal Polletto felt a swell of energy and strength. “I shall not fail, Your Eminence.”

The Black Pope leaned in close and slapped the cardinal hard across the face. “How can you be so sure?”

Cardinal Polletto rocked backwards, dizzy. The old man’s hand felt like granite.

The Black Pope raised his hand again. The cardinal winced, but this time the old man gently stroked the cardinal’s face. “This man, Robert Veil, and his partner, Nikki Thorne, are a problem, no?”

“A problem, yes, but one we can deal with. They won’t interrupt our plans.”

The old man smiled and backed away. “Good, good. And what are your plans for Alison Napier?”

The cardinal was not surprised to hear the question. The old man had ears everywhere. “Whatever do you mean, Your Eminence?”

“After the ritual, she’ll no longer be necessary.”

“But she could be of use while we raise the boy,” said the cardinal. “We should give it time. We can always get rid of her later.”

“I see,” sneered the old man. “You’ve become attached to the woman.”

“Not at all, I just think we’d be hasty to eliminate her too soon.” Cardinal Polletto felt exposed. He had grown attached to Alison, and wasn’t ready to kill her just yet.

“Nevertheless, you will dispose of her directly when the ritual is over. The longer she lives, the longer law enforcement agencies in the States will keep looking for Samuel. Close the loop, and finish her. That’s an order.”

The cardinal bowed his head, veins bulging in his neck, his face twisted. “As you wish,” he said.

The Black Pope put a gentle hand on the cardinal’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, my son, when this is over, you’ll head the Vatican, and be in complete charge of raising the boy. Removing the present Pope is no small reward for your success.”

Cardinal Polletto knew the old man spoke the truth. He was going to become the Holy Father, a prize he’d coveted since joining The Order. He fell to his knees and kissed the old man’s ring again.

“Forgive my hesitation. I was only thinking of myself,” said Cardinal Polletto.

The old man bid him to rise. “I understand. We all have much to learn.” They walked back to the castle and stood next to the old man’s car. “On the night of the ritual, I’ll be in the crowd,” the Black Pope told him.

“Yes, Your Excellency, we’ve prepared a place for you on stage.”

“Do nothing of the sort,” snapped the Black Pope. “My presence will be known only to a few.”

The cardinal bowed his head. “Will there be anything else, Your Eminence?”

The Black Pope leaned forward and whispered into Cardinal Polletto’s ear, then slid inside the shiny, black limousine and sped away. When it cleared the road and was out of sight, the cardinal fell to his knees and wept, as the old man’s description of his punishment and death if he failed rang in his ears and tortured his soul. The cardinal pounded the ground with both fists and clawed the earth until his fingers bled.

“Cardinal!” Bishop Giordano yelled. He grabbed the cardinal and helped him to his feet.

“We must not fail,” cried Cardinal Polletto, weeping. He shook loose from the bishop. The Black Pope knew everything, Samuel’s escape, the problems with Father Tolbert and Robert Veil.

Cardinal Polletto decided to get back in touch with Rinaldo and Dianora, and double their fee. He wanted Cardinal Maximilian, Robert Veil and Nikki Thorne dealt with immediately. He turned to Bishop Giordano.

“Call Father Ortega, I need him back here as soon as possible. Then contact Sister Bravo,” said Cardinal Polletto.

“Yes, Cardinal.”

“And here’s what I want her to do with Samuel and the other children.”

46

Cool air breezed in through Astura Torre's castle window. Samuel, tired of staring out at the sea, no matter how beautiful it looked, laid back on his cot and watched bundles of clouds float by the window, teasing him with their freedom. Three days had passed since the last time he'd been allowed outside, with no explanation. He complained to Father Murphy every time the priest came in to check on him or bring food, but was ignored.

Samuel sat up and finished a lukewarm, half-full glass of orange juice, leftover from breakfast. His thoughts turned toward Sister Bravo. Over the past three days, he hadn't seen or heard from her, and although he still considered her his enemy, not having her around made him nervous. It was a strange feeling. She was one of his captures, and had taken him from the only life he knew, but he missed her presence and had grown to depend on her for comfort and security. She made him feel safe when she was around.

He had almost asked Father Murphy of her whereabouts, but didn't utter a word, not wanting to show concern. But the longer she stayed away, the more fearful and alone he felt.

Lunch turned into dinner, and dinner to night. Samuel paced the room and eventually hung out of the window looking down at the now moonlit water again. The longer he looked, the closer the water seemed. He considered jumping, and pulled himself up further to make sure of the fit. He stared down at the wet, rippling water, and knew he'd never survive the jump, let alone swim away afterwards.

Multiple footsteps pounded the concrete stairs, slowly coming his way. Samuel jumped down, ran to the bed and sat against the wall, struggling to control his breathing, wiping sweat from his forehead with his shirt.

The door creaked open. Father Murphy backed inside, carrying the end of a large, brown leather traveling trunk. One of the goons who guarded him outside handled the other end. The other machine gun toting thugs carried in two more trunks and stood them upright. Everyone left

the room without giving Samuel so much as a glance, except Father Murphy, who smiled on his way out and left the door wide open.

Sister Bravo walked inside. Samuel felt a surge of relief and almost ran to her, but resisted. Sister Bravo's face said she'd read his mind, but she too kept her composure.

Samuel stood. "I haven't been allowed outside for three days," he said, mustering up his anger. "You promised."

Sister Bravo walked over and gently stroked his hair. "I'm sorry, my child, but it couldn't be helped."

Samuel looked up at her deceptive, angelic face. "I'm going crazy in here. It's not fair," he said.

The nun kissed his forehead then walked over to the first trunk. She unlocked the door and pulled it open. Samuel took a step forward in disbelief. A child, his age, with his face, stepped out of the trunk. Sister Bravo opened the next trunk, and another twin, this one with dark hair, stared back at him.

Samuel fell back against the bed and landed on his behind. "What?"

The two boys looked as confused as Samuel. They all looked up at Sister Bravo, bewildered.

"Samuel, this is Felipe and Eduardo. They're your brothers. Boys, this is Samuel," she said in French, then Italian.

Each boy gave a half-hearted wave, their faces pallets of fear and confusion, echoing Samuel's emotions. Sister Bravo herded the boys back into the trunks, then opened the third, which was empty.

"It's time to leave the castle," she said, firm and serious. "Get inside."

Ten minutes later, Samuel heard footsteps again, and his trunk lifted into the air. They carried him down the stairs and outside, then loaded him on a truck or in a van, he couldn't tell. He heard the other two trunks being loaded next to him. Doors slammed shut, the engine started and they drove away. They stopped abruptly, then kept going.

A few seconds later, gunshots rang out and he was tossed back and forth against the walls of the trunk. The engine growled louder and Samuel bounced up and down, hitting his head. There was more gunfire, then silence. Samuel thought he heard screaming in the distance, as the wind whistled his name. *Samuel!*

47

In pitch-black darkness, Robert and Thorne silently maneuvered the rubber watercraft across the lake toward Astura Torre castle with ease. The lightly clouded sky profiled a blanket of bright stars and bright moon, unimpeded by dull city lights as in Chicago or New York. Earlier, Thorne had asked to be dropped in the city to talk to one of her sources, so she could secure everything they needed. Father Kong and the others were less suspicious than they would've been if it had been Robert stepping out instead of her. She had secured all the equipment they needed to rescue Samuel. Two fifty foot sets of strong rope with grappling hooks, mountain climbing hooks and spikes, Mac-10 machine guns fitted with silencers, (they were out of 9mm's and .45's), and night-vision goggles.

Their plan, deceptively simple on paper, required a strong bit of luck. They had launched the raft a little more than a mile down the coastline from the castle, out in the lake about a mile and a half, where they wouldn't be seen. Thorne guided the boat slowly, and a half-mile away, Robert saw the shadowy, barely-lit castle. Although the engine was near silent, Robert signaled for Thorne to cut the motor and they rowed the last quarter mile. As they dug their oars into the lake, Robert wondered what Sister Isabella and the others would think when they discovered that they were gone.

Robert activated his night-vision goggles and scanned the coastline as they inched closer. Nothing. They reached the wall under the window where Robert had spotted what he was sure was Samuel's flaming signal. He turned off the goggles and grabbed the rope and grappling hook. Thorne followed his lead. Robert threw his first, caught the top of the wall, tested the rope, and started to climb, the machine gun swinging from his shoulder. A few seconds later, Thorne's hook found its mark and she pulled herself up right behind him. The closer they got to the top, the harder Robert's heart pounded. One peek down by one of The Order's people and they'd be finished before they got started.

They reached the top of the wall simultaneously and unhooked themselves. Robert checked around the corner to the left, Thorne, the

right, and gave each other the all clear. Up above about fifteen feet, the window emitted a dim light, but no sounds or voices. The wall, a maze of stony cracks and crevices, reminded Robert of the mountains he and Thorne climbed back in the States, only a bit more slippery.

“We’ll go up together,” Robert whispered. “When we reach the window, I’ll head inside first.”

Thorne nodded in agreement, then readied her weapons, the Mac-10, and her favorite, a Mosberg pistol grip pump shotgun.

They spread out to give each other room and started to climb. A few feet from the window, Robert heard faint voices and stopped, Thorne following suit. *If Samuel’s inside, he’s not alone.* They waited. Robert heard bumping and knocking, minutes later, silence fell, and they continued up the wall.

At the window, Robert pulled himself up on the ledge and peeked inside. The bedroom was empty, the door wide open, and the voices and stomping feet were headed downstairs. Robert climbed inside and stepped to the left, giving Thorne room to make it inside, his machine gun pointed at the open door.

They searched the room, but found nothing. Robert signaled his partner, and they edged toward the open door. At the bottom Robert heard the sound of men struggling, and cursing in Italian.

“They’re carrying something heavy,” whispered Thorne. “They said they’re heavy.”

“It could be the boys,” Robert whispered back. “Let’s go.”

They carefully worked their way downstairs to a large room with a cobble-stoned floor. It was empty, but the fireplace was blazing.

“They’re outside,” whispered Robert, tipping toward the front door.

A door slammed shut and an engine started. Robert and Thorne burst outside and spotted a van pulling away.

“Bastardo! Bastardo!” a male voice shouted to their right. “Shoot them!”

Robert and Thorne ducked to the left, firing at two men to their right who fired back. The van stopped momentarily then sped away. They both hit the ground and continued to fire. Down the road, Robert saw machine gun fire spray the wooded area where they had set up surveillance to watch the castle.

“Fuck this!” Robert heard Thorne shout.

She stood up and ran toward the two men, shooting and screaming something unintelligible. Moments later, both Italians were dead. Robert ran over to make sure his partner was okay, but should’ve known better. She stood over the bodies and kicked them both.

“They’re gone,” she said, matter-of-fact, emotionless.

Against the night, Thorne radiated a beauty few women could achieve. At her feet lay destruction not many men could fathom. Robert shook his head. No matter how many times he witnessed her power, it always amazed him.

“I saw them shoot into the woods,” Robert said. “We better check it out.”

They ran across the compound to the woods. Robert cursed under his breath, wishing he hadn’t listened to the others and rescued Samuel earlier. He tried to remember as many details about the van as possible. *Plain white van, late model, spare tire on the rack on the back door.*

48

Robert and Thorne reached the woods and found two bodies sprawled out in the brush, Sister Agnes Mary Paul and Father Thomas Raul, both Il Martello di Dio operatives.

They examined the bodies, searching for signs of life. Two packed cars sped up to the scene. Father Kong and Sister Isabella hoped out, ran over, and at the sight of their comrades, fell to their knees and assisted Robert and Thorne in trying to revive their friends, prayers spewing from their lips.

Ten minutes later, Robert and Thorne stood, watching Father Kong and the others work on the two for another five minutes. Exacerbated, Sister Isabella stormed over to Robert and Thorne.

“You lied to us! You promised not to try this without us! Now our friends are dead, and Samuel’s gone!” screamed Sister Isabella.

“It’s not our fault,” snapped Thorne. “They were moving Samuel when we got here. They stopped to shoot your people on the way out. They knew they were there. We’d been made.”

“Thorne’s right,” added Robert. “We shot two men up near the castle. You can check it out.”

Father Kong, listening, stood and walked over, his hands bloody. “What did the van look like?” he asked. Robert described as much as he could. Thorne added her piece.

Father Kong dialed his cell phone and put it out on their network. “If it shows, we’ll find it,” he said, calm and focused. He turned to the other six people who were standing near the two bodies, tears in their eyes, and directed them to search the castle and surrounding grounds. “Show us the men you killed,” said Father Kong.

The four quickly walked over to the bodies Thorne had laid out. Father Kong and Sister Isabella knelt, prayed for the two, then examined them closely.

“I think I recognize them,” said Father Kong. “They’re mafia, but I can’t place who they work for.”

Sister Isabella adjusted the bodies face up and took pictures with a digital camera. “I’ll run these through our database,” she said. “I’m sure

we'll get a hit. If we find out who they worked for, we might be able to pick up Samuel's trail."

The four of them went inside the castle to help the others search for clues. Robert went upstairs to search the bedroom. The room was plain, and reminded him of a medieval jail cell. The trashcan was filled with soda cans, potato chip bags and half eaten fruit. Robert turned over the mattress. Wedged in between the box springs he pulled out a piece of folded newspaper. It was the front page of the Chicago Tribune, showing a distraught Alison Napier walking behind Donovan's casket. A smile crept across Robert's face. *He's still alive.*

Screaming voices brought Robert out of his momentary bliss. He ran downstairs where Thorne met him.

"We have to get out!" she screamed. "The place is rigged with explosives!"

"Can we diffuse it?" he asked.

"No, I tried, it's too late!"

Everybody ran out of the castle and sprinted across the compound. They reached a safe distance near the woods, and turned. Nothing.

"I didn't see a timer," said Thorne. "It could go at anytime."

"We'll get to the city and notify the police anonymously," said Father Kong, breathing hard.

They loaded the bodies in the trunks, piled in the cars and headed down the road. Sister Isabella's cell phone rang. She put her head in her hands and cried out. "We'll be there right away," she said, hanging up. She faced Father Kong. "It's Cardinal Maximilian, he's been stabbed. It's a heart wound. He's in surgery at Salvador Mundi International Hospital. It doesn't look good."

Robert collapsed back into the car seat. Thorne's face twisted with anger. A massive explosion detonated behind them. Austr Torre castle was no more.

49

Father Kong slashed through the dark back roads of Italy like a seasoned pro. The car engine growled a warning to those ahead. *Get out of the way.* Nobody spoke as the car rumbled over dirt roads and asphalt.

Thirty minutes after the Astura Torre castle exploded, they roared into the bustling streets of Rome. Both cars reached the front of Salvador Mundi International Hospital, a six-story, tan brick building, crowded with reporters, Vatican clergy, the prayerful, and the curious.

Father Kong parked across the street, made a u-turn and eased through the driveway to the back of the main building. He ordered his people to wait in the car, while he, Robert, Thorne and Sister Isabella hurried to the fifth floor ICU ward, where a group of Vatican leaders, including Bishop Ruini, were gathered, some deep in discussion, others in prayer. The bishop spotted the four and motioned for them to follow him to an empty private room.

“The cardinal has a deep chest wound,” Bishop Ruini told them, closing the door. “The knife plunged into his chest and nicked his heart. He lost a lot of blood, so it’s touch and go.”

“How did it happen? Who did it?” asked Father Kong, anxiousness in his voice.

Bishop Ruini placed his hands behind his back, walked to the window, and stared down at the crowd below. “We’d just left a meeting in the Sistine Chapel. The cardinal spent the evening entertaining a group of English businesspeople, and we were on our way to see the Holy Father. Two men, both Italian, were waiting in the shadows outside.” The bishop turned to face them. “They stabbed our guard in the neck. I fought one of them and the cardinal took the other. I sustained cuts and bruises to my hands and arms.” He showed them his bandaged hands. “The cardinal hurt the other man badly, and, forgive me, but I think he broke the bastard’s arm. When the two ran away, I looked over and the cardinal was flat on his back, the knife protruding from his chest. I called out for the Swiss Guard, but by the time they reached us, the two men had sped away in a waiting car.”

“Sounds like a hit,” said Thorne. “But kind of sloppy. They could’ve just shot him.”

“Yes, but that would’ve attracted too much attention outdoors,” said Sister Isabella. “The Swiss Guard would’ve shut the place down.”

Bishop Ruini lowered his head and cried. Tears filled the eyes of Father Kong and Sister Isabella.

“It happened so fast,” stuttered the bishop. “I didn’t see it coming.”

“It’s not your fault,” said Thorne. “None of us would’ve seen it coming inside the Vatican. But we don’t have time to feel sorry for ourselves, we have to plan our next move.”

Sister Isabella wiped her face. “Thorne’s right. Everything that’s happened tonight signals a shift. The Order’s making their final move.”

Father Kong’s phone rang. The conversation was short. “We found the van. It’s empty, but our people are giving it a thorough examination for fingerprints and clues,” he told them.

Bishop Ruini walked over to Robert and stared him in the eye. “The cardinal asked me to tell you that you’re the heart of this effort now. He wants you to lead us the rest of the way. To find the boys, and stop The Order.”

Robert opened his mouth but the words wouldn’t come. The expressions on Father Kong and Sister Isabella’s faces said, *we’ll follow you into hell.*

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea,” answered Robert. “You’re trying to save the world, I just want my godson back.”

“The two may be the same thing,” said Father Kong.

“I’m not one of you. I’m not a believer,” said Robert.

“The cardinal senses something in you, and I agree,” said Sister Isabella. “This is a major turn for the world, and whether you like it or not, you’re God’s man for this moment in time.”

Robert felt a strong presence ease up beside him. It was Thorne. “We don’t have to believe what they do, Robert, but let’s do it, get our boy and get out of here,” she said.

Robert scanned their faces. “Okay, let’s do it. Bishop, stay here and keep us updated on the cardinal’s condition.” The bishop nodded and left the room. “Father Kong, I need you to supervise the examination of the van, and fill us in as soon as you find something. Ask around the area where the van was dumped, and see if you can dig up a witness. If they moved the kids, maybe somebody saw them.” Robert walked over to

Sister Isabella, who still looked a little shaken, struggling to hold back tears. “Come on now, Sister, we need you on top of your game,” he said, smiling.

Sister Isabella smiled back. “I’m ready,” she said.

“Good, I need you to run the pictures of the two men we killed down at the castle. If you get a hit, let us know who they work for right away.”

Sister Isabella nodded.

Robert’s cell phone rang. It was Alison Napier, near hysterical. “I saw the news report about the castle at Astura Torre. They said it was destroyed by a bomb blast. Is Samuel okay?”

“Samuel’s safe,” he told her. “They moved him before blowing up the place.” Robert reassured Alison then hung up. “Okay, let’s go to it.” The four of them left the room and headed for the elevators. “Thorne and I are going to check on Alison Napier,” said Robert. “We’ll meet you back at the villa in ninety minutes.”

Bishop Ruini rushed over as they boarded the elevator. “Cardinal Maximilian went into cardiac arrest,” he gasped, out of breath. “The surgery was a success, but he’s in a coma.”

The elevator doors closed. Robert kicked the wall hard. When they reached the bottom floor, he and Thorne went back to the cars to retrieve their weapons. Sister Isabella and Father Kong gave them both hugs.

“God be with both of you,” said Father Kong. “We’ll be praying.”

Thorne racked a shell in the Mosberg and smiled. “Amen.”

50

Father Tolbert, hands in his pockets, blended in with the crowd in front of the hospital, listening carefully for any bit of useful information. He gathered as much gossip as he dared, realizing he could be recognized at anytime, and eased away from the bustling press, curious onlookers, and fellow clergy. He crossed the street to where he could watch from a safe inconspicuous distance, backed into a small space between two buildings, and waited.

Almost a week had passed since he last saw Robert Veil and his partner at The Grand Hotel de Minerve, where he'd learned that Alison Napier was staying. The priest wondered how she fit into Cardinal Polletto's hands, and if she knew that her son, Samuel, was cloned. Father Tolbert liked Alison. She had always been nice to him, respectful. He wondered what she'd think when she learned he was Samuel's biological father, and a monster.

Father Tolbert had made sure he stayed out of sight, holing up in small, non-descript flophouse hotels in old Rome, where people saw everything, but minded their own business. The priest stayed off the streets during the day, and only went out for food and hair coloring at night. He frequented offbeat coffee shops and bars, where patrons shared the discreet talk of the town, but he heard nothing that would help his cause.

He was especially careful to suppress the sickness still burning in his soul, and avoided even eye contact with children who passed his way. The hunger called to him daily, but his new purpose, the destruction of The Order of Asmodeus, enabled him to keep control for the moment.

This morning, while sipping an espresso at a coffee shop not far from his hotel, Father Tolbert overheard the owner speak of the attack on Cardinal Maximilian, a man he feared, but who had always been kind to him. He couldn't account for his unease when it came to the cardinal, but his soul searching eyes seemed to pierce right through him, and Father Tolbert felt like the man could see his very soul.

He ran right over to the hospital, hoping that the incident would cause Samuel's godfather to show. He had no reason to suspect a connection, but it was all he had to go on at the time. Father Tolbert was

well aware of Cardinal Polletto's hatred for Cardinal Maximilian, which made him wonder if the attack was more than a simple robbery attempt, as many were calling it, or something more. An assassination.

More press, priests, nuns, and catholic faithful, gathered in front of the hospital. Father Tolbert carefully examined each new face, hoping, praying for a break. Then, two dusty, dark blue sedans stopped in front of the hospital. After a few minutes, the cars turned around and parked across the street, not far from where Father Tolbert was hiding. He backed up into the darkness, then slowly eased forward.

Sitting in the passenger seat of the first car was a man who looked like Robert Veil, but he wasn't sure. He slid back, then leaned forward again. In the backseat was a black woman, American, with an unforgettable face. *It's them!* Father Tolbert considered rushing over and knocking on the window, but didn't because there were others in the car.

After about two minutes, both cars pulled away and headed for the rear of the hospital. He quickly walked across the street and went to the back of the building on the opposite side, head low, eyes straight. When he reached the rear parking lot, he didn't look around, but kept moving, careful not to walk too fast. He stopped well out of the sight of the two sedans, now parked at the back entrance. He stooped low behind a tan Volvo and watched Robert Veil, his partner, an Asian priest he didn't recognize, and a woman he now recognized as Sister Isabella, who he knew well, rush inside the hospital.

Father Tolbert leaned back against the car behind him, keeping the back door and the two cars still parked there, in sight. The remaining men still left in the cars stepped out to smoke cigarettes, their weapons well in sight. They didn't look like clergy, but after what Father Tolbert had seen over the last month, he was ready to believe anything.

A light rain fell. The priest closed his eyes and let the mist caress his face. Almost an hour passed before Robert Veil and the others exited the hospital. Veil's partner, the black woman, snapped her head in Father Tolbert's direction, sending him to the wet asphalt. He eased his head up and watched Robert and Thorne hide weapons under their jackets and signal one of the waiting cabs.

The Asian priest and Sister Isabella jumped in separate cars and sped away. Father Tolbert quickly ran to one of the waiting taxis as Robert and Thorne pulled away.

“Follow them,” Father Tolbert ordered the driver, slamming the door, handing him a fifty-dollar bill. “And don’t let them get away.”

51

Ten minutes into the ride, Father Tolbert knew they were headed for Alison Napier's hotel. *Good, it's the perfect place.*

The night crowd had died down, and the taxis made good time. Father Tolbert had to warn his driver several times not to follow too close, and several more not to lose sight of the car. A block and a half from the hotel, he got out and walked, blindly bumping into several people along the way. A half block from the Minerve, he stopped to gather his confidence.

When he turned the corner, something hit him hard in the stomach. He keeled over and landed on his face. Dazed, he felt someone turn him over and bark loudly. Dizzy and struggling for breath, he couldn't make out a word. Finally, his watery eyes cleared. Robert and Thorne stared down at him, both with guns pointed at his head.

"Who the hell are you?" snapped Robert. "Why are you following us?"

The priest coughed hard and sucked in air, unable to get out the words.

"He tailed us from the hospital," said Thorne. "I spotted him in the parking lot before we left."

Robert shoved his machine gun against Father Tolbert's forehead. "I suggest you speak quickly, we're not in the mood this evening."

"My name is Father Charles Tolbert," the priest finally spewed. "I met you back in Chicago, with the Napiers."

Father Tolbert watched Robert's face go from bewilderment, to heated anger. He put his gun away.

"Why?" asked Robert. "Why did you hurt my godson?"

Father Tolbert couldn't find the words. He didn't have any that would suffice. Robert asked why over and over, his own eyes glassy, a tight grip around the priest's neck, banging Father Tolbert's head against the concrete.

"Bastard! You fucking bastard!" screamed Robert.

Thorne looked on, her own eyes red with hatred. After a moment, she reached down, grabbed her partner and pulled him off. "Robert, we need this asshole. Let him up."

Robert backed off, then lunged forward with a punch to the jaw as Father Tolbert tried to stand, knocking him back to the ground. Onlookers pointed and whispered, then pulled out their cell phones and dialed.

“We need to get away from here,” said Thorne, “before the cops show up.”

Robert snatched Father Tolbert up and they hurried away from the hotel, stopping near Trevi Fountain, where the priest plopped down on a bench. Thorne handed him a handkerchief.

“Why were following us?” she asked. “If you ask me, you should’ve stayed as far away from us as possible.”

Father Tolbert rested back and took a deep breath. “I had to find you. It’s important that we talk.”

“What could you possibly have to say to me that would keep me from putting a bullet in your head?” Robert growled.

“I don’t blame you for hating me,” answered the priest. “I deserve punishment, if not death. I’m ashamed of myself for what I did to children, and how I stained the Church.”

“It’s a little late for I’m sorry around here,” snapped Robert. “Why? Why Samuel? Why any child?”

The priest stared off into the night. “Nothing I tell you will be good enough, but I know how sick I am, and my sickness has never been dealt with, not by me, or the Church. They only swept me under the rug, moved me around. Many of them shared my struggles, some even encouraged me.”

Thorne stepped closer. “Like Cardinal Polletto?”

Father Tolbert perused both their faces. “He knew about my difficulties, but never raised a hand to stop me.”

“Why do you think he didn’t?” asked Thorne.

“I know now how evil Cardinal Polletto is, and that he’s been using me for his own purpose, for The Order.”

Both Robert and Thorne moved closer.

“You know about The Order?” asked Robert. “What can you tell us?”

“They’re very powerful,” answered Father Tolbert. “They used me to bring Samuel and his brothers into the world.”

Robert grabbed the priest and shook him hard. Thorne grabbed her partner and pushed him back. She turned toward Father Tolbert and took a knee. “How did they use you?” she asked.

Father Tolbert repeated the story Cardinal Polletto told him. That he was the father of the triplets. “The Order believes Samuel is the Anti-Christ, and intends to find out through a ritual to be performed in seventy-two hours.”

“Have you seen Samuel?” Thorne asked gently.

“No, but Cardinal Polletto introduced the other boys to me over a week ago. They could be anywhere right now. The Order will keep them hidden until the ceremony, but we have time.”

Thorne stood. “But you said we only have three days.”

“I know, but they can’t perform the ritual without me. That’s why I ran away and hid out. Without me, they can’t make a move.”

“We have to take him back to the villa,” Robert told Thorne. “Keep him hidden until we find Samuel and the others.”

“Thank you,” gushed Father Tolbert, crying. “I didn’t know where else to turn.”

Robert grabbed him again. “Listen, you asshole. God may forgive you, but I never will. If you live through this, you’re going to jail for the rest of your miserable life. And if they don’t put you away, I’ll kill you myself.” Robert slammed the priest down hard on the concrete bench.

Thorne looked at him with little pity. “Where is this ritual going to take place?”

Father Tolbert opened his mouth, but his words were drowned out by machine gunfire. Robert and Thorne spun around and fired back at six men running toward them. Father Tolbert dove under the bench, bullets whizzing past his head. Robert snatched him to his feet and shielded him from the gunfire. Thorne cursed as she shot back, killing two of the men.

“Let’s go!” Robert shouted, pushing the priest toward the darker side of the street.

Father Tolbert pumped his arms and legs as fast as he could, his lungs begging for more oxygen than he could provide. The gunfire continued. Two cars screeched to a stop, and more armed men jumped out and gave chase. Father Tolbert found his rhythm and ran harder, but

when he turned to see how far the men were he lost his footing and crashed to the ground.

“Get up!” screamed Robert, extending one hand, shooting with the other.

Father Tolbert jumped to his feet, but his ankle twisted and he crashed back down on the concrete.

Police cars flew up behind them. Father Tolbert felt a moment of relief, until the police pointed and fired at them. The men in front of them advanced. Robert sent two more to the ground. A bullet caught the priest in the leg.

“Robert, leave him!” screamed Thorne.

“No!”

“No, please,” bellowed Father Tolbert, “don’t let them get me!”

More cars showed up. More men. More guns. Robert and his partner bolted, and left Father Tolbert on the ground. Two men ran over and snatched the priest to his feet. One plunged a needle into his arm. Father Tolbert felt dizzy almost immediately and lost his balance. The other man taped his mouth and tied his hands. A car drove up and they tossed him in the trunk.

Father Tolbert kicked and twisted as best he could, but to no avail. He heard screaming and more gunfire as the car peeled away. With the small bit of strength he had remaining, he said a prayer for Robert Veil and Nikki Thorne.

52

Robert ran hard down a dark, narrow street, bullets cascading past his head like angry bees. Thorne, right at his side, turned around and dropped to one knee. On cue, Robert stood above her and both fired at the crowd, killing a few and wounding several.

“Break!” Robert yelled, and they both took off and bolted into an alley, a stampede of footsteps right behind them.

When they reached the middle of the alley, they each fell to one side. Robert saw at least eight armed men running hard. He signaled Thorne with a finger up. *Wait. Just a little closer.* “Now!” They pointed, fired, and sent several men to heaven or hell, and the others diving for cover. Those still alive shot back, but Robert and Thorne had the advantage and kept them pinned down.

“We can’t stay here!” shouted Robert, checking the alley for an exit. When he turned around, he spotted more men coming up behind them. Several stories up, fingers pointed down amid loud Italian chatter.

“Let’s get back out into the street!” screamed Thorne.

Robert reloaded. “Forward or back!”

Thorne reloaded. “To the front!”

On three, they both ran forward, bullets streaming past their heads, firing non-stop, screaming warriors, mowing down everybody in sight, as the men in front of them cried out in terror.

Robert picked up the rumble of car engines and sirens in the distance. “On my mark, let’s break to the right,” he told Thorne. “Three, two, one.” With one big hail of gunfire they sent a stream of bullets behind them and made a break down the right side of the street.

Halfway down two vehicles, one a police car, spun around the corner. Robert and Thorne kept advancing, firing, reloading, then firing some more. One of the cars swerved to avoid the gunfire, smashed into the side of a building and burst into flames.

A man leaned out of the police car, machine gun in hand. He fired a short burst, but Thorne was more accurate, killing the driver, who hit a parked car and launched his passenger, like a missile, through the windshield and a bakery’s front window.

Robert and Thorne kept running. The men behind them continued to chase. When Robert turned to fire, only three men remained. Thorne killed one, then another.

“Let’s go!” she yelled.

They turned a corner, the sound of more screeching tires and police sirens heading their way. Robert spotted an open door to an apartment building. “Thorne, over there!” he barked, pointing.

They both ran into the building and bounded up the stairs to the roof. They looked down. Five cars parked and more armed men hopped out, searching every crack and crevice. Robert tapped Thorne on the shoulder. They sprinted to the edge of the roof and jumped to the next building. Five buildings down, they reached the end of the block and hid in the stairwell, listening closely to the commotion on the street.

“We can’t go back out there right now,” whispered Robert. “We’ll have to stay here for the night.”

Thorne agreed.

Robert pulled out his cell phone, but hesitated at the sound of voices on a rooftop three buildings over. Both of them reloaded. Robert peeked out and watched three men coming their way.

“We could head downstairs,” whispered Thorne.

“No, not yet, they’ve probably got it covered,” said Robert.

The men reached the building next to theirs. He and Thorne readied for another fight. One of the men jumped over to their roof, machine gun ready, laser sight beaming. Robert pulled the door shut, and they waited. A loud voice called out in Italian.

“They’re pulling back,” whispered Thorne. “The real police are on their way.”

“Let’s stay put a little longer,” whispered Robert.

He dialed Father Kong and explained their situation. The priest suggested they sit tight for the night. “I’ll pick you up in the morning,” he said.

53

Wearied from the bumpy ride inside the large trunk, Samuel fell asleep an hour after leaving the castle, only to be awakened by a sudden stop, and the sound of rapid-fire Italian. He heard the vehicle doors slide open, and minutes later, he was slammed around and moved to another vehicle, this time flat on his back. Whatever he was being hauled in was speeding down a smooth road faster than before, but Samuel, knowing it was useless to fret, closed his eyes and drifted back off to sleep, the smell of his own sweat, and musk from the trunk filling his nostrils.

The sight of the two boys, his age, with his face, played over and over again in his dreams. Sister Bravo offered no information, but Samuel didn't dwell on it long, hoping he'd get an explanation soon, but not sure he wanted to hear it.

Being moved from the castle disturbed Samuel. He wondered if whoever was hiding in the grass knew he'd been carted away. Knowing that he might be close to being rescued had buoyed the ten year old, and renewed his strength. He wondered if the gunshots he heard on the way out meant somebody was trying to get to him, and if so, he hoped they'd keep looking.

The thought shook Samuel awake. *If nobody knows where I am, what am I suppose to do?* For the first time in weeks, his eyes welled up with tears, but he fought them back. *Whoever it was will keep looking. I know they will.*

He thought about his mother and wondered if she was okay. He gritted his teeth. *No, I won't give up! I won't let them break me!* A strange strength washed over him again. A sense that he would not, could not die.

After what seemed like hours, the vehicle stopped. Samuel heard doors open and shut, and the sound of hustling feet rushing his way. The trunk lifted in the air, followed by grunts and groans from men struggling with it. Samuel heard a door creak open.

"Upstairs," said an unfamiliar voice, "second floor, last room on the left."

Samuel immediately fell back against the back of the trunk as it tilted upward and he was hauled up some stairs. The trunk leveled off, but whoever handled the front end must have lost his grip, because it banged on the hard floor, and sent Samuel crashing face first.

“Pardon, pardon,” the man gushed through a crack in the side of the trunk.

“Watch what you’re doing,” Samuel ordered, not caring what happened.

They moved again, this time faster. Another door opened. The trunk eased down to the floor with a gentle thud, and shuffling feet scurried out of the room. Once again, all was quiet. Samuel sat knees to chest, and listened. The longer he sat, his patience thinned, and soon faded to nothing. He kicked hard at the trunk’s door. It didn’t budge, so he kicked harder. He heard the lock unlatch, but the door stayed shut. Angry, he pushed it open and stepped out, his legs knotted up and stiff.

Sister Bravo looked down at him, but Samuel wasn’t concerned. “I’m sorry you had to endure such a long, uncomfortable ride,” she said, wearing a genuine look of concern. “My apologies.”

The nun’s sudden change of attitude caught him off guard, but somehow Samuel felt it was the way things should be, and acknowledged her act of contrition with a slight tilt of his head. Sister Bravo unlocked the other two trunks, and Samuel’s lookalikes uneasily edged their way out, shaken and nervous. They stood in front of Sister Bravo, unsure of themselves.

“Where are we?” asked Samuel.

“You’re safe, my son. In a place made just for you and your brothers,” she said.

“What does that mean?”

“It means your journey is almost over, and all of your questions will be answered.”

Tired of riddles, Samuel walked over to Sister Bravo. “What’s the name of this place?” he asked forcefully. “I have a right to know.”

Sister Bravo’s eyes narrowed, but a smile crept on her lips. “This is Bracciano Castle,” she answered. “One of the oldest and most magnificent of its kind in all the world. It’s a place for royalty.”

“I don’t care about royalty. How long will we be here?”

“As I said, all questions will be answered soon. So, make yourself comfortable, you’ve had a long journey. Besides, don’t you want to make your brothers’ acquaintance?” Samuel looked around at the two, who stood ramrod still. “I’ll leave you three to get acquainted,” Sister Bravo told them, shutting the door as she left.

Samuel faced the two boys and looked them over. He remembered their names. The boy with the long black hair was Eduardo, the blond one, Felipe. He walked over to the two, mesmerized. Eduardo, mouth open, raised his right hand, touched Samuel’s face, and ran his fingers over his forehead, cheeks and mouth.

Samuel looked around the large room. It was much nicer than the one he’d been holed-up in for the last month, with three large beds, fancy curtains and rugs, and artwork that didn’t impress him, but looked old and expensive. He was sure someone, like his mother, would find the room a delight.

He turned back to his brothers. “Hello,” he said, extending his hand. “My name’s Samuel.” Both boys just stared back, confusion all over their faces. “Samuel Napier,” he continued. “I guess I’m your brother.”

“I’m Eduardo,” said the boy with the dark locks, in a very thick Italian accent. “He-llooo.” Eduardo’s English was broken, but adequate. He finally shook Samuel’s hand, looking relieved.

Felipe walked over to Samuel, smiled, gave him an extended hug, and kissed both his cheeks. “Bonjour, Samuel.”

“Bonjour,” Samuel answered, unsure of himself.

The three of them shuffled their feet, uncomfortable, silent. Samuel didn’t know what to say. He didn’t speak their language, nor they his, at least not very well, and he still couldn’t get over their resemblance. The longer he looked at them, the more amazed he became. Except for hair color and language, there was no difference at all.

Samuel nervously stared at his shoes. When he looked up, Eduardo and Felipe looked as though they were waiting for orders, their eyes fixed on him.

“Would you like to sit down?” asked Samuel, pointing to the floor.

“Sii-t, down?” stammered Eduardo.

“Yes,” answered Samuel, sitting on the floor, inviting them to do the same. “Have a seat.”

Eduardo slowly lowered himself to the floor. “Si, accomodarsi,” he said, smiling.

Felipe sat down quickly. “We, s’asseoir! Je comprendre!”

The boys looked at each other, then burst into laughter. Samuel felt better. The ice had been broken, and he appreciated not being alone.

For the next two hours, the boys worked hard to learn how to communicate with each other. Samuel was surprised at how much progress they made in a short period of time. The longer they talked, the more he trusted them, and hoped they felt the same way.

“Je suis affame,” said Felipe, rubbing his stomach.

“Yeah, I’m hungry too,” answered Samuel, his stomach growling on cue.

“Ask for food,” said Eduardo, proud of himself for pronouncing the English words.

“I’ll knock on the door and ask,” said Samuel, pointing. He rose, walked to the door and knocked hard. “We’re hungry,” he bellowed. “Can we get something to eat?”

He turned to Eduardo and Felipe and made a funny face that sent them laughing and rolling on the floor. Nobody answered. Samuel knocked again, this time harder. He turned to his brothers. The lock on the door unlatched, and he turned to face Sister Bravo, ready to bark out their order, but the twisted face staring down was not Sister Bravo, but Father Sin. “Why are you making so much noise?” he asked.

Samuel took several steps back, nervous, but not afraid. The same surge of energy he felt earlier returned. “We’re hungry, and we want something to eat.”

“Later, when the rest of us eat,” said Father Sin.

Samuel moved forward. “Now!”

Anger swelled up on the priest’s face. “Don’t make me beat you silly,” growled Father Sin. “You’ll wait with the rest of us.”

Samuel looked back at Eduardo and Felipe. Both boys were frozen with fear. Samuel turned his gaze back to Father Sin. “You won’t hurt me. You wouldn’t dare. Now, get us something to eat, or I’ll scream for Sister Bravo.” Father Sin rushed over, snatched Samuel off the ground and pulled him nose to nose. Samuel struggled to break free. “Put me down!” he demanded.

Father Sin shook Samuel so hard he thought his head was going to snap off. "I said wait!" the priest bellowed.

Samuel slapped at Father Sin's face, hitting him in the eyes and nose. The priest pulled back an open hand, ready to strike back, then hesitated. Samuel, filled with rage he'd never known, slapped Father Sin as hard as he could. The priest dropped him on the floor.

Eduardo and Felipe rushed to Samuel's side and helped him to his feet. Felipe pointed to Father Sin, a ghoulisn anger on his face. "Tes jours sont comptés," he said, angrily. "Your days are numbered."

Eduardo moved in front of them, ready to take on the gargantuan priest towering over them.

"We're hungry, and want something to eat," Samuel repeated, out of breath.

Father Sin stared at them, amused. He backed out of the room and slammed the door.

Felipe pointed at the door. "Meurtrier!"

Samuel didn't understand. Felipe kept pointing, and pulled him close.

"Murderer!"

Samuel walked over to the spot where they sat earlier and resumed his position, his eyes narrow, teeth grinding. His brothers sat down next to him.

I have to make us a team, so we can get out of here. He held up three fingers. "Three are better than one," said Samuel.

Eduardo and Felipe held up three fingers.

"Trois," said Felipe.

"Tre," repeated Eduardo.

"Good," said Samuel, smiling. "We're going to beat them."

The boys edged in closer together, to teach and learn.

54

Cardinal Polletto sliced through the throng of reporters and well-wishers outside the hospital, wearing a look of serious concern, ignoring questions and comments about Cardinal Maximilian's medical status.

He reached the intensive care unit, and gave two of his Vatican colleagues long hugs and kisses on each cheek before making his way to Cardinal Maximilian's bedside, whose fierce eyes and fiery aura had been replaced with the helplessness of a child. Tubes flowed in and out of the cleric, surrounded by more medical equipment and wires than Cardinal Polletto had ever seen. A large tube disappeared down Cardinal Maximilian's throat, and the black, glass enclosed ventilator pump worked hard to keep him alive.

"What's his prognosis?" Cardinal Polletto wondered out loud.

"He's been in a coma for almost twelve hours," a voice behind him answered.

Cardinal Polletto turned to find Bishop Giovanni Ruini, a stout, round-faced Italian, with a large bulbous nose, slightly kowtowing before him.

"His condition is touch and go for the next twenty-four hours, Your Eminence. If he hangs on until then, he'll be out of the woods," said Bishop Ruini.

Cardinal Polletto thanked the bishop, then turned back toward the man who'd given him more difficulties than he cared to think of, closed his eyes, and pretended to pray. *Twenty-four hours. You won't make it if I can help it.* When he finished, most everyone had left for the waiting room, except Bishop Ruini and a few Vatican aides.

Cardinal Polletto pulled the bishop aside. "Have the authorities caught the ones who did this?"

"They're still investigating, but it doesn't look good. It happened so fast, we didn't get many helpful details," said Bishop Ruini.

The cardinal put a comforting hand on the bishop's shoulder. "Nobody's blaming you for not remembering any details. We're just thankful you didn't get hurt."

"Thank you, Cardinal. I wish I could've done more."

"The Lord will prevail, Bishop. Just stay prayerful."

Relief spread across Bishop Ruini's face. "Is there anything else I can do for you, Cardinal?"

"Yes," said Cardinal Polletto. "I want you to keep me informed of any changes in Cardinal Maximilian's condition. If he wakes up, I want to know immediately."

"Most certainly, I plan to stay here around the clock."

Cardinal Polletto thanked the bishop for his diligence, then took another look at Cardinal Maximilian. "Has anyone given thought to the cardinal's security?"

"It hasn't been mentioned," the bishop responded. "Do you think it's necessary? I mean, do you think whoever did this will try again?"

"You can't be too sure," said Cardinal Polletto. "It's better to be safe."

Bishop Ruini stroked his chin. "I guess I could prevail upon the police to post someone, or call the Vatican Guard."

"I'd be happy to leave Father Ortega, my assistant, to help with any details. He has a special knack for security."

"I don't believe he'll be needed," said the bishop. "I can handle this myself."

The Vatican aides left the room. When it was clear that nobody was listening, Cardinal Polletto pulled the bishop close. "How much do Veil and his partner know?"

Bishop Ruini nervously rubbed his hands together. "Not much at this point, but soon they'll pull it all together. They know Samuel was being kept at the castle in Torre Astura, but have no idea where he is now."

"Good, then we have time."

"A little, they're working on the identities of the men they killed at the castle. That will lead them to Rinaldo and Dianora."

Cardinal Polletto looked around to make sure nobody was near the door. "Rinaldo and Dianora can take care of themselves. With Cardinal Maximilian out of action, things should slow down considerably."

"I'm afraid that won't be the case. The cardinal left instructions that the American, Robert Veil, should lead Il Martello di Dio in this matter, and as you know, he's very determined."

Cardinal Polletto thought in silence, his eyes fixed on the bishop's. "Fine, it means nothing. Everything is in place at Bracciano. By the time

he figures it out, it'll be over." The cardinal noticed hesitation in Bishop Ruini's eyes, weakness. "Is there something I'm missing?" he asked.

"No, Cardinal, I just...I," Bishop Ruini began to say.

Cardinal Polletto grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him closer. "Don't fold up on me now," he said, in a low growl. "This is not the time."

Father Ortega had overheard Bishop Ruini on a phone call at the Vatican not long after they arrived in Rome, discussing Samuel and his whereabouts. Cardinal Polletto finally confronted the bishop, and offered him a place in The Order's new kingdom, or death to him and everyone in his family.

Bishop Ruini's hands trembled, sweat beaded up on his forehead. Cardinal Polletto eased his grip. "There will be a place for you, a high place in my administration, but I need you to stand firm through this. We'll need leaders like you in The New Order."

A weak smile elbowed its way on the bishop's lips. "I understand. I'm fine."

Cardinal Polletto let go. "Good, then there's one last thing I need you to do."

Bishop Ruini gathered himself and stood up straight. The cardinal looked over at Cardinal Maximilian, then back at the bishop, whose face turned pale.

"But how?" he whispered, anxious, eyes wide. "I could never."

"I'd leave it to Father Ortega, but that would be too conspicuous." He leaned over to the bishop's ear. "It shouldn't take much. Use a pillow, he'll go peacefully."

Bishop Ruini fell back against the wall, flush, confused. Cardinal Polletto handed him a tissue from a box on a table next to the bed. The bishop, eyes filled with tears, tried to compose himself. "What if I get caught?" he asked.

Cardinal Polletto headed for the door, grabbed the handle and turned. "Don't." He opened the door. "Come, Bishop, let me buy you a cup of coffee. You look tired."

Bishop Ruini, sullen, head low, walked past the cardinal, avoiding the eyes of those watching.

The door closed. Cardinal Maximilian's eyes slowly opened.

55

Robert and Thorne spent the night in the stairwell, taking turns sleeping in two hour shifts. As far as they could tell, their pursuers left the area around four a.m. Father Kong and several other members of Il Martello di Dio, Robert hadn't met, arrived to pick them up just after sunrise. They rode back to the villa in silence, carefully watching the roads to make sure they weren't followed. When they reached the villa, he and Thorne explained the details of the shooting, including Father Tolbert's confession and abduction.

"He's involved more than we knew," said Father Kong. "Or else why would they make such a daring attempt to abduct him?"

Robert agreed, and cursed himself inside for not securing their best lead so far.

Sister Isabella brought Robert and Thorne hot tea and sweet rolls. The warmth and smell of hot bread felt particularly satisfying to Robert. He'd practically inhaled the lot. The nun smiled, and delivered him more.

"Any word on Cardinal Maximilian?" asked Robert.

"His condition is the same," said Sister Isabella. "Stable, but serious. Bishop Ruini will report back if there's any change."

"How about the van?" asked Robert, attacking the next roll.

"We canvassed the area, but nobody saw or heard a thing. We did pull fingerprints from the steering wheel, and picked up a few cigarette butts. Other than that, the van was clean."

"What about the license plates?" asked Thorne.

"Negative," answered Sister Isabella. "It came back registered in the name of a man who's deceased." Robert paced the room. "We did have some luck on the two men you killed at the castle," she said. "They both worked for a mafia family run by two locals here in Rome, Rinaldo and Dianora Calabrese."

"Can we approach them?" asked Robert. "I know they're working for The Order, but maybe money will loosen their tongues."

"Not these two," said Father Kong. "They take pride in loyalty. They won't talk to us for any price."

"Maybe money isn't the price we need to pay," said Thorne. "If we can get to them, we can make them talk."

“Getting to them won’t be easy,” said Father Kong. “They live in a heavily guarded compound about seventy-five kilometers outside of the city.”

“Good,” said Robert. “I suspect that the fingerprints in the van will come back to men who also work for them. If it does, that’s all we need to go on. We’ll lay out a plan to sneak inside the compound and have a talk with Rinaldo and Dianora.”

“I doubt that’ll happen without further bloodshed,” said Sister Isabella.

“Goes with the territory,” answered Thorne. “Right now, after what we went through last night, I’m up for a little payback.”

“Revenge is mine says the Lord,” said the nun.

“We’re instruments of God, Sister,” answered Thorne. “And if the good Lord is looking for revenge, I’m just the ticket He needs to do the deed.”

Sister Isabella looked Thorne in the eye. “I’ll continue to pray for you. I understand your anger, but you must give faith a chance.”

“Thanks, Sister. Just pray I shoot straight.”

Robert shot Thorne a hard look and cleared his throat. “Let’s stick to the task at hand. Sister, find out if they have a match on those fingerprints. Father Kong, I need everything you have on the compound, fast. We’re going inside tonight, just after nightfall. Post two people there to keep watch. Have them report back, and let us know if Rinaldo and Dianora are there, and if they notice anything suspicious.” Everybody snapped to their task. Robert pulled Thorne aside. “A little heavy handed, don’t you think?”

“Look whose talking. Not too long ago, I had to pull you back,” she said.

“I feel you, but let’s keep these people on our team.”

Thorne gave Robert a hard stare. “We almost got killed last night. I just don’t want any misunderstandings. You know me, if I have to die, it won’t be all by my lonesome.”

Robert smiled. “I wouldn’t expect anything less, just don’t take any of us with you.”

Thorne smiled back. “Keep your head low, and that won’t be a problem.” They both laughed.

Thorne went to help Sister Isabella. Robert, once again in his life, was glad Thorne was there with him, as she had always been. He pondered the glue that kept them together, a team, and the dark secret Cardinal Maximilian eluded to back in Chicago, the one important moment in both their lives, when Robert was there for her.

Twenty minutes later, Robert examined a hand drawn layout of the compound, and went over it with Father Kong. They estimated that twenty guards patrolled the area in and around it, with several more patrolling the heavily wooded area around it.

Initially, Robert suggested that they hire outside help. He had two six-man mercenary teams on standby, men he and Thorne had worked with in the past, people he knew he could trust. Father Kong and Sister Isabella objected, but Robert kept his men on standby, just in case.

“We’ll try to go in quietly,” said Robert. “Thorne and I will be armed, but I want everyone to carry tranquilizer dart guns. Thorne will get them from our people.”

“Good,” said Father Kong. “We’ll take out as many guards as possible without killing them. But how will we know where to find Rinaldo and Dianora once we’re inside? And what about the cameras and alarms? I’m sure their security system is top of the line.”

“With all those men, plus the house staff walking around, I bet most of the sensors and motion detectors will be down. Thorne can disarm the security system once we’re inside the compound, if necessary. We’ll spot as many cameras as we can before we go in, and deal with the rest as we go,” said Robert

Father Kong agreed.

“We’ve got a hit,” an excited Sister Isabella chimed in behind them. She laid out pictures of the two men killed at the castle on the table. “Both of them worked for Rinaldo and Dianora.”

Thorne eased up beside her. “Good job, Sister. That’s the last piece we needed.”

Robert leaned on the table, then looked up at the others. “Let’s do it.”

A priest walked in and whispered in Father Kong’s ear. The priest thanked him and faced everyone. “Bad news, the police have issued an all-points bulletin. You and Thorne are to be arrested for killing two

police officers. You're considered armed and dangerous terrorists," said Father Kong.

Robert shook his head in disgust. "Nothing we can do about it now. Let's get ready to go."

Everybody went to work. Robert stared out at the woods in the canyon below. He closed his eyes and prayed for Samuel, the Hammer of God, and himself.

56

Two cars, with four passengers each, including Robert, Thorne, Father Kong and Sister Isabella, glided through the dark back roads, passing a few cars along the way, with no police in sight. As a precaution, Robert and Thorne rode in separate cars, hunched down in the backseat, their heads covered. Everyone was clad in black from head to toe, including gloves and skullcaps.

Robert closed his eyes, as he always did right before a mission, and played the details over in his head. The compound sat on fifty-two acres, which was good news. They'd be able to enter at the far end of the complex without detection, and walk up to the main area; a walled off six acres, with another wall around the main house. If they avoided booby-traps and land sensors they'd avoid being announced too soon.

Their next potential hazard would be any roving security team on patrol, but with such a large area to cover, Robert thought the chance that they'd be discovered was small.

Robert had finally managed to convince Father Kong and Sister Isabella to let him bring in three of the men he had on standby, by telling them that if things got too heavy, they'd need back up. Despite their assurances of faith, they finally agreed.

Robert, Thorne and Sister Isabella would make the final approach inside the house. Father Kong, one of his people, and Robert's men, would post up just outside the wall around the house, and would be ready to rush in at Robert's signal. His men were directed to shoot only if necessary.

Father Kong turned onto a dark country road, lights off. Drove two miles, and eased to a stop next to some high brush and trees. From there, they hiked through the expansive acreage. Thorne walked the point, using a metal detector to pick up any sensors or traps. The rest of them followed in twos, with one of Robert's men covering the rear. From where they entered it was about four miles to the main wall, then half a mile to the wall around the main house.

They kept low in the brush and took their time, quietly navigating the tall grass, with only the moon lighting their way. The excursion reminded Robert of covert incursions they'd run everywhere from North

Korea to the Ukraine, and each step brought back the keenness of his senses and training. Adrenaline pumped into his veins, his heartbeat steady, controlled.

Thorne lifted her right hand in the air. Everybody came to a stop and dipped down lower in the grass. Three minutes passed without a sound. Thorne came back to Robert.

“We need to tighten up the line and keep it narrow right behind me,” she whispered. “I found a Bouncing Betty.”

Robert rallied everyone into a narrow formation. He’d seen the havoc a Bouncing Betty could do to a human being. When stepped on, it propelled itself upwards about waist-high and exploded, sending dense shrapnel buzz sawing through its victim, tearing their torso in half. The device was used heavily in Vietnam, when thousands of U.S. soldiers made its rude, deadly acquaintance.

Despite the threat, the team made it to the first wall, then moved to the wall just outside the main house without incident. Robert used night-vision goggles to scan the front gate and the area along the wall, searching for the right spot to enter. Armed sentries patrolled one thousand foot sections of the wall. All of them looked diligent, as though they’d been warned to keep an eye open for intruders.

To get over the wall without being seen, Robert estimated that they’d have to immobilize all three guards on one side of the wall, simultaneously. He dispatched Father Kong to the far end, Thorne to the middle, and he took the guard closest to him. Everyone used their radio headsets to signal that they were in position. Robert counted three. Each of them shot a tranquilizer dart into the guards, and by the time each man realized they hadn’t been stung by a bug, they were deep asleep, face down in the dirt.

Robert, Thorne and Sister Isabella grouped together. As planned, Thorne ran to the ten-foot wall, tossed up a grappling hook and climbed to the top with ease. Robert saw her use night-vision binoculars to scan the other side of the compound.

“Come one at a time, on my mark,” she said in Robert’s earpiece. “Three, two, one.”

Sister Isabella ran to the wall and made it up like a pro. By the time Robert pulled himself up and over, both women had neutralized two

guards and were hunched down behind a large truck parked five hundred feet from the house.

The main house, a two-story country home as picturesque as any Robert had ever seen, was dark inside, except for lights in two rooms on the second floor. The house was well lit outside, with floodlights beaming down on the surrounding grounds.

“I count four guards we’ll have to bring down to reach the house,” said Sister Isabella, in the earpiece. “Two to the left, one on the right, and one on the roof.”

Thorne volunteered to take the two on the left. Sister Isabella, the man on the right. After the women were in position, Robert pulled a rifle with scope from over his shoulder, screwed on a silencer, and waited. Thorne dropped both men without a hitch, her darts hitting them in their necks. Sister Isabella missed, but Robert caught hers twice in the chest before he could blink. The man on the roof leaned forward as though he’d heard a sound. Robert aimed carefully. The man caught a glimpse of Sister Isabella and put a handheld radio to his ear. Robert sent him falling backwards with a dead shot to the throat.

Robert ran for the house and pressed himself up against the wall. Thorne and Sister Isabella followed. “Stay away from the windows,” he said. “I’m sure they have sensors attached. We’ll climb to the roof. I’m sure our friend up top has an easier entrance available.” Thorne and Sister Isabella acknowledged with a nod.

Robert stepped back and readied the rope and grappling hook, while both women kept a lookout for any surprises. Once the rope was secure, Thorne grabbed hold first and pulled herself up in no time. Sister Isabella went next, struggled just a bit, but made it up too. Robert started his ascent, but halfway up, Thorne hissed, looked down, and pointed to his left. Two guards approached. Robert quickly lowered himself back to the ground.

One of the guards caught a glimpse of Robert and aimed. Robert pointed the rifle, but before he could get off a shot, both guards were flat on their backs. Robert looked up. Thorne and Sister Isabella smiled and gave him the thumbs up.

Robert hid the bodies, climbed up top, and found an open entrance down into the house. “We have to move quickly,” he said. “The sedative in the darts will keep them out for at least an hour, but not much longer.”

He led the way down into what looked like an attic bedroom, dim and musty, with cobwebs and rat droppings all over the floor. Fifteen feet from the window, he spotted a narrow row of steps that went down to a closed door. He carefully eased down, testing each step for creaks, not wanting to telegraph their presence. When they reached the door, Robert pressed his ear against it and listened, nothing. Thirty seconds later, they were on the second floor. Robert signaled for Thorne to check the rooms on the left. He and Sister Isabella took the rooms on the right.

Robert braced the rifle against his shoulder. Sister Isabella opened the doors. Each door they tried gave them the same, nothing. When they finished the floor, Thorne gave the all clear.

Robert pointed downstairs. The lights were off and they didn't hear any voices. They edged their way down, guns pointing in every direction. Robert smelled the sweet aroma of recently smoked tobacco, mixed with garlic and other unintelligible spices, all fighting for room in his nostrils. They crept down a long hallway, where a door was cracked open at the end. A light was on inside, and when they reached it, Robert gently pushed it open.

Sitting in large recliner was a grandfatherly man, in a black Polo shirt, burgundy sweater vest, smoking a pipe. On the couch sat a vivacious, buxom Italian woman, who would've shamed the most alluring movie star. *Rinaldo and Dianora*. Rinaldo waved them over. Dianora puffed on a cigar.

“Ahhh, Mr. Robert Veil, I presume. Come in, we've been waiting,” said Rinaldo.

Robert and the others burst inside, guns pointing at Rinaldo, Dianora, and all over the room. It was clear, except for the old man and his daughter.

“Get your hands up where we can see them,” barked Thorne, but the two were slow to comply. She walked over to Dianora, pulled her real weapon, a Glock, and pointed it at the Italian beauty's head. “I mean it, gorgeous, now!”

Dianora smiled, and slowly raised her hands. “No need for rudeness. We’re not armed.”

“My daughter speaks the truth,” added Rinaldo, packing his pipe with fresh tobacco. “If we wanted, we could’ve arranged a far more serious greeting, and you would not have gotten this far. But I wanted to meet you. Unfortunately, getting out won’t be as easy.”

Robert eased toward the old man, Sister Isabella right behind him. Robert checked Rinaldo for weapons. He was clean. Thorne gave Dianora a rough frisk.

“She’s clean,” said Thorne. Dianora gave her a hard scowl.

“Please, have a seat,” Rinaldo offered. “I have good wine, and enough tobacco to go around.”

Robert lowered his weapon, as did Sister Isabella. Thorne kept hers aimed at Dianora.

“Thank you,” said Robert. “But we don’t have time. We need information from you, fast.”

Rinaldo smiled. “If I can be of assistance, I surely will. What is it that you require?”

“We need to know the whereabouts of a little boy,” said Sister Isabella. “His name’s Samuel, Samuel Napier.”

“I’m sorry, Madam...” said Rinaldo.

“Sister,” said Sister Isabella, correcting him.

Rinaldo raised an eyebrow. “I’m sorry, Sister, but I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

Robert tensed. “Are you trying to tell us you’ve never heard of him, because we know different?”

“What my father’s saying is yes, we know Samuel, but no, we won’t tell you where he is,” said Dianora.

Thorne screwed on a silencer, and aimed lower. “I bet I can get you to talk.”

Robert leaned close to Rinaldo. “We don’t have time to fuck around,” he growled. “If you know something, tell us, or I’ll have my partner shoot Dianora.”

Rinaldo’s countenance changed from grandfather to tyrant in less time than it took for Robert to get out the words. “I said no, Mr. Veil, and I mean what I say.”

Robert turned and nodded to Thorne, who immediately shot Dianora in the left thigh.

Rinaldo jumped to his feet. "Bastardo!"

Robert pushed him back down. Dianora sprawled out on the couch, flailing up and down in pain.

Sister Isabella said a short prayer. "Tell us what we need to know, my child! Tell us!"

Dianora raised up, tears in her eyes. "Go to hell!"

Thorne raised the gun to Dianora's head. "You go first."

Robert grabbed Rinaldo by the collar. "Where's Samuel?"

"There are forces involved in this you can't stop. Power in places you know nothing of, and I..." Rinaldo began.

Robert turned to Thorne. "Shoot her again! Kill her!"

"Okay, okay!" Rinaldo bellowed.

Robert held up a hand. Thorne shot Dianora anyway, this time in the right kneecap. Rinaldo screamed louder than his daughter, reached under his desk and pulled out a revolver. Robert heard footsteps running through the house. Thorne shot Rinaldo in the chest as he fired. Sister Isabella stepped in front of Thorne, took the shot to the face, and dropped to the floor. Dianora reached under the couch cushions. Thorne hit her hard in the head with the butt of her gun, knocking her out cold.

Robert leaned over Rinaldo. "Tell us where he's at!"

Rinaldo opened his mouth, but only blood came seeping out.

Two armed men burst inside the den. Thorne killed both of them. More footsteps rumbled their way. Robert went to Rinaldo's desk and rifled through the papers. Thorne ran to the door and sent a stream of bullets down the dark hallway.

Robert poured through the papers and files, but nothing caught his attention. He dropped the tranquilizer rifle, pulled out two 9mm automatics and joined the fight with Thorne. Soon, they managed to push the guards back into the main house. Robert shot out a window and dove through it. Thorne followed.

Outside, Robert's men came dropping over the wall, and soon the guards, outnumbered by firepower, jumped the wall and fled.

Father Kong dropped over the wall and ran over. "Where's Sister Isabella?" he asked.

Robert took a deep breath. "She's dead."

He ordered his men to secure the area, while he, Thorne and Father Kong went back inside. The priest fell to his knees over Sister Isabella, and prayed.

"Father, she's gone," said Robert. "I need you to look over these papers and tell us if anything sparks a clue."

Father Kong stood, slowly walked over to the desk, and began looking at the papers. Thorne checked Dianora. "She's still breathing, barely, and bleeding badly."

"Do what you can to stop the bleeding. We'll call an ambulance on the way out," said Robert.

"There's nothing here," said Father Kong.

Robert rushed over. "There has to be, keep looking."

"It's useless. I don't see anything we can use."

"Maybe we should take Dianora," said Robert.

"She'd never make the trip," said Thorne. "She's almost dead now."

Robert cursed. "Then let's go."

"We can't leave Sister Isabella," said Father Kong. "We have to take her with us."

Robert looked into the priest's eyes. He agreed. Her presence would raise too many questions. They grabbed the nun and took her body outside. One of Robert's men hot-wired a truck. They piled inside and drove back to the cars, where they put Sister Isabella in the trunk, and headed back to the villa.

57

Cardinal Polletto sat alone in one of Bracciano castle's large, exquisite dining rooms, enjoying a late dinner of roast lamb, salad and red wine. He finished, savoring the brief sojourn into gourmet delight, then brought his attention and focus back to the matter at hand. He made his way upstairs to his next assignment, confronting Samuel and his brothers for the first time.

Although the effort had been rife with setbacks and delays, the satisfaction of knowing it was almost over brought a sense of impending relief to the cardinal. After all the years of planning and preparation, he was about to deal a death-blow to the Church, and as a bonus he'd get something he very much looked forward to, the death of Cardinal Maximilian.

Hands behind his back, Cardinal Polletto glided across the polished wooden floor, head high, eyes fixed on the last room to the left. He stopped at the door and waited. The irony that Samuel could soon be *his* master intrigued him. He pushed the door open.

On the floor, like three bundles of clothes, lay Samuel and his brothers, huddled together in the dim candlelight. All three sat up when a creaking board unceremoniously announced the cardinal's presence.

"Who's there?" Samuel asked, with a command in his voice that surprised the cardinal.

Cardinal Polletto lit a few more candles, and the boys' faces were more visible.

"Cardinal Polletto?" asked Samuel, surprised.

"Yes," answered the cardinal, "it's me."

Samuel stood, and slowly approached, the other boys behind him.

"You look well, Samuel," said the cardinal. "And I understand you've been quite active."

Samuel's maturity jumped out at the cardinal. "What's going on here?" he demanded. "If you're here, then you know why we've been taken." The authority in his voice was staggering for a ten year old. The cardinal felt himself flinch.

"That's why I'm here, to tell you why you're here, for this celebration," said the cardinal.

Felipe eased closer. “Célébration?”

Cardinal Polletto nodded. “We, Felipe, *depuris te*. For you. *Tout le te*. All of you.”

“*Te dire sciocchezze*,” said Eduardo, now shoulder-to-shoulder with his American brother. “You talk nonsense.”

Samuel smiled. “We’re tired of the bullshit. So tell us the truth, or leave us alone.”

Cardinal Polletto stared at the three, each of them defiant, determined. “Let’s have a seat,” invited the cardinal, pulling up a chair. The three boys remained standing directly in front of him. “What if I were to tell you, that each of you are royalty, destined for greatness?” he said, spluttering his words in French, Italian and English. Neither boy moved or said a word; they stared back at the cardinal, eyes focused, concentrating. “Each one of you has been sanctified since birth, to change history and usher in a new world. I know it will be difficult to understand at first, but over time your minds will be illuminated.”

“How can we change history?” asked Samuel. “We’re children.”

“Yes, for now, but you’ll grow up to be men soon enough. Before that time, there’s much to be done, and much you have to learn.”

“What about our parents?” asked Eduardo, in Italian.

“They’re not our parents,” answered Samuel.

Cardinal Polletto smiled. *Yes, you’re the one, the first born*. “That’s correct, **they**’re not. Your real parents are here, in Italy. Eduardo and Felipe have already met your father, Father Charles Tolbert.”

Samuel’s chin dropped, his eyes glued to the floor. He almost lost his balance, but caught himself. “How is that possible?” he asked, his voice cracked.

Cardinal Polletto watched Samuel as the truth did its work, bringing the boy under control. “I’ll explain it to you later, when you’re ready.”

Samuel looked up, hate burning in his pupils. “What about my mother?”

“Alison Napier is of no consequence at this point in your life. None of the people you grew up with mean anything as we move forward. You’ll have to learn to deal with life without them.” Samuel’s stern stance weakened. Felipe and Eduardo’s jaws quivered. Cardinal Polletto

smiled. “Now, now, all of you have a new family now, a true family that will never leave or forsake you. I promise.”

Samuel sniffled, his eyes and cheeks glistening with tears. “I don’t want a new family, I want my mother.”

“That’s not possible.”

“Then I won’t participate. None of us will.” The boys backed up and sat down.

The cardinal’s first impulse was to rush over, snatch and shake them into submission, but one look into Samuel’s eyes told him that would only drive them further away.

“I know this is a shock, and believe me, I understand. Anyone faced with such greatness would be foolish to run blindly into it.”

Samuel rocked back and forth. “We don’t care about greatness. We want our old lives back.”

Cardinal Polletto stood, walked just short of the three, and stood over them, their faces determined, intense. “I can’t force you to do what you don’t want to,” he said. “But your mother, Alison, will be disappointed. All of your surrogate parents will be.”

“I thought you said they weren’t important,” said Samuel.

“Not as important as your destiny,” the cardinal answered.

“I don’t believe you,” snapped Samuel, defiant. “My mother would never agree to this.”

Cardinal Polletto smiled, pulled a cell phone from inside his robe and dialed. Alison Napier answered and he handed the phone to Samuel.

“Hello,” said Samuel, somewhat sheepish.

Cardinal Polletto watched the tears roll down Samuel’s cheeks. Felipe and Eduardo looked on, curious. Samuel hung up and gave back the phone.

“You see,” said the cardinal, “everything will work out fine. Come, let me show you the area we’ve set up.”

The cardinal extended a hand to Samuel, who took it and pulled himself up. Cardinal Polletto sighed with relief. Samuel’s acquiescence quieted the others, and like sheep, they followed his lead.

Yes, your time will come, but today, follow me.

58

Samuel wiped his nose on his shirtsleeve and looked up at Cardinal Polletto, who gave him an encouraging nod and smile. *Moron!*

Seeing Cardinal Polletto there at the castle surprised him, and talking to his mother, knowing she was a part of everything that had happened to him shook him to the bone. Once more, Cardinal Polletto's words, that Father Tolbert was his father, didn't make sense, and Samuel refused to believe it.

Samuel and his brothers had made a pact. They'd lost trust in everybody and were determined to escape, for good, even if it meant defying the people they loved most. Everybody had let them down. They were on their own.

Samuel took in as many details about the castle as he could, as they made their way along a dark, eerie hall, downstairs, and then outside. Along the back of the castle were two sections of stadium seats, with large, bright lights shining down. Samuel stole a glance at his brothers, who, as planned, were taking in as much as they could remember too.

Eduardo nodded to Samuel's right. Carefully, he turned and saw thick woods and bushes down a slope of rocks. Cardinal Polletto babbled on about their place in history, but Samuel had long since tuned him out. *I'm getting out of here. That's all the history I need.*

Yet, something stirred in his gut as they walked through the elaborate stages. When the cardinal first mentioned their royalty and place in the world, a surge of unfamiliar recollection engulfed him, and he felt truth in Cardinal Polletto's words. Even now, as he looked out into the darkness and stared across the water, something raged inside him, fighting to burst out. A power he'd felt several times since he'd been taken away.

Samuel forced down the feelings, and fed the cardinal a few, "Yeses," and "Uh huhs," but continued to scan the area, making mental notes every step of the way. Later, he and his brothers would devise a final strategy, and run away as far as they could.

As Cardinal Polletto droned on, the voice of Samuel's mother forced its way into his mind. Hearing her speak was something he'd longed for

since this entire ordeal began, but something was wrong. *How could she allow this to happen to me? Why? And what about my father?*

Samuel shook it off. Cardinal Polletto looked down at him.

“It’s one of the most important days in all the world,” said the cardinal. “Everyone coming will be your servant.”

Samuel fixed his gaze hard on the cardinal. “How long have you been seeing my mother?”

He didn’t know where the words came from, but the look on Cardinal Polletto’s face told Samuel he’d hit his mark.

Cardinal Polletto cleared his throat. “I’ve known her for quite sometime. She’s been waiting for this day ever since I told her who you are.”

“Who am I?” asked Samuel.

“You’ll know soon enough.”

Samuel stepped forward. “Did you kill my father?”

The cardinal’s face went ashen. “Absolutely not. Why would you ask such a thing?”

Samuel moved even closer. “If I am who you say I am, and I find out you’re lying, I’ll kill you.”

Cardinal Polletto slapped Samuel hard. “Don’t you ever speak to me that way again.”

Samuel let the blood flow from his nose. Felipe and Eduardo took his side. “So, you are lying.”

Cardinal Polletto snatched Samuel and pulled him back toward the castle. Felipe and Eduardo ran to keep up. When they reached the front door, Father Sin was waiting, and soon they were back in their room.

Deep into the night, the three boys whispered what they remembered about the area surrounding the castle. Samuel’s nose stung, but he didn’t care. As they talked and planned, his mind drifted. *Uncle Robert, where are you?*

59

Robert paced the villa like a caged animal. Rinaldo and Dianora were the best lead they'd come up with since spotting Samuel at Torre Astura, and it had dissolved, leaving nothing behind, and nowhere to go. Worst of all, he had watched Sister Isabella get shot and killed. Sister Isabella wanted to see Samuel rescued as much as he did, and her sacrifice to save Thorne only intensified his desire to rescue the boy, and destroy The Order for good.

Robert's anger burned hot, but was nothing compared to that raging inside Thorne. Friends since thirteen, he knew her well, and watching her sit quietly, cleaning her weapons, told him she was boiling over, and that someone was going to pay big when the time came.

Father Kong and the others, according to the mandate set down for members of The Hammer of God, made final arrangements for Sister Isabella's funeral and burial. It would be a private affair, attended by only members of the team. Morale was low. Her death had taken the fight out of all of them.

The phone rang. One of Father Kong's aides answered, hung up, and whispered in the priest's ear.

"Dianora lived," said Father Kong. "She's unconscious, but she'll pull out of it."

"Maybe we can talk to her again when she does," said Thorne.

"It's possible, but I'm sure she'll be heavily guarded," said Robert. "So, let's not count on it."

Robert's words deflated everyone further. Thorne cursed loudly, and didn't apologize for it. The phone rang again, this time Father Kong answered it. His eyes widened.

"We're on our way." He looked over at Robert. "We have to go to the hospital immediately. Cardinal Maximilian is awake, and Bishop Ruini is dead."

The hospital was even more crazed and abuzz with chaos when Robert and the others arrived, with twice the crowd at the front door. Father Kong slowed down, but at the sight of a large contingent of police, kept going, and pulled around the corner. Robert and Thorne

ducked down. Their pictures had been plastered on every television station in Rome, and the police had offered a reward for their capture.

“We’ll go inside and get the details,” said Father Kong. “You and Miss Thorne wait for us in the other car. I’ll call you when I can.”

Robert and Thorne switched places with the men in the second car, parked in a barren alley, and waited. The phone call Father Kong received back at the villa delivered good news and bad. Cardinal Maximilian had awaked from his coma, but Bishop Ruini had fallen to his death from a fifth floor window. They weren’t sure if he was pushed or jumped.

“I wonder what this means?” Robert thought aloud.

“It means we’re close,” answered Thorne.

“But why kill Bishop Ruini?”

Thorne rolled down her window. “Maybe he wouldn’t talk.”

“Maybe, but why not kill Cardinal Maximilian too?”

Thorne didn’t answer. She checked the ammo in her shotgun and counted the extra shells in her jacket pocket.

An hour passed, then two. Robert saw a car pulling up in the rear view mirror. It slowed down and eased up beside them. Robert and Thorne readied their weapons, but when the car stopped, Father Kong rolled down the passenger side window.

“Follow me back to the villa. I think we’ve found Samuel.”

60

"Bishop Ruini was a mole," said Father Kong, ashamed. "He's been feeding information to The Order. For how long, we're not sure."

The priest gave them more details, explaining that Cardinal Maximilian had awakened, and overheard bits and pieces of a conversation between Cardinal Polletto and the bishop. Evidently, Bishop Ruini was ordered to finish Cardinal Maximilian, but when the cardinal opened his eyes, the bishop broke down in tears, opened the window and jumped.

"The cardinal says he overheard Cardinal Polletto say everything was in order at Bracciano," said Father Kong.

Bracciano. The word caused Robert's heart to thump hard against his chest. "And he thinks that's where they're keeping Samuel?" he asked.

"What does it matter?" asked Thorne. "It's the best we've got, so let's go with it."

Father Kong pulled up information about Bracciano on the computer, complete with a layout of the castle there. "This is probably where they're keeping him. It's large, and will probably be heavily guarded, but we have an advantage." Robert pulled a chair up next to the priest. "These castles were designed, not only to keep enemies out, but to allow those inside a way of escape in case they were trapped for long periods of time," said Father Kong. "Underneath Bracciano castle are several entrances accessible only under water."

"Good," said Robert. "Then let's get everybody ready for a full assault. Thorne and I will approach the castle under water. When we've confirmed that Samuel is there, we'll hit them hard and heavy."

"And what happens after we get the boys?" asked Father Kong.

"Thorne and I will connect with Alison Napier, and take all of them to the American Embassy, where they'll be safe," said Robert.

Father Kong stood. "Cardinal Maximilian would like a chance to talk to the boys first."

"He can have the other two, but Samuel's going home," snapped Robert. "And don't give me that Anti-Christ rap, 'cause I'm not going to hear it."

“It’s the reason The Order took the boys, and why we’ve sacrificed so much to get them back.”

“Do you really believe Samuel is the Anti-Christ? That’s crazy.”

“Is it, Mr. Veil? How can you be so sure?”

“For the sake of argument,” said Thorne. “Let’s assume Samuel is who you say he is. If that’s true, there’s nothing you can do to stop it. So why try?”

Father Kong stood in silence. “I can’t answer that, but I do know I believe it’s only right that we get to talk with all of the boys together, before you take Samuel away. It’s only right for all of us, including Sister Isabella.”

Robert felt a stab. He didn’t believe what Father Kong was saying, but couldn’t deny the commitment and sacrifice. *Why would they give so much if they didn’t believe it was true?*

“Okay,” Robert finally said, “you can talk with the boy, but he’s going home with us regardless of what you think.”

Father Kong bowed his head in ascent.

“So, how do we get this party started?” asked Thorne.

“I’m sure Cardinal Polletto knows about Rinaldo by now, and he’ll be prepared,” said Father Kong.

“Fine, but we’re taking my people along with us,” said Robert.

“I’ll send out a scout team to survey Bracciano,” said Father Kong. “Get an idea of what we’re up against.”

Robert laid out his guns on the dining room table. “Good, when they call back, I’ll determine how many men we need.”

“We should keep it small,” said Thorne. “A large group will give us away.”

“Agreed,” added Father Kong. “We have God and the element of surprise on our side.”

“I feel ya, Padre, but I want fully automatic weapons for everybody who wants one, just in case,” said Robert. Father Kong just stared.

“Look, Father, I know how you feel, but it’s necessary.”

“It’s not that,” said the priest. “I just thank God for you and Miss Thorne, and Cardinal Maximilian wanted you to know that you have his blessings, and that he’ll be praying.”

Robert smiled. "Amen. Now let's get it together. I want us ready to go in twenty-four hours."

There was a knock at the door. One of Father Kong's people opened it, and in walked another member of the Hammer of God, followed by a welcome surprise, Detective Nelson Reynolds.

"I understand there are a few asses that need my attention," the detective said, smiling at Thorne, who walked over and gave him a big hug and kiss, then introduced him to everyone in the room.

"I thought we could use a little extra help," said Thorne. "So I called Detective Reynolds a week ago and asked him to take a little vacation."

The detective smiled. "Hey, I can use the rest."

Father Kong walked over and shook the detective's hand. "Welcome to Rome. We're happy to have your assistance. If these two are vouching for you, then we're happy to extend our trust." Detective Reynolds bowed his head in respect and thanked the priest for his kindness.

Robert stepped forward and stuck out his hand. "Good to see you, big boy. I feel better already," he said. Detective Reynolds shook Robert's hand then pulled him in for a hug.

Thorne grabbed the detective's bags. "Your room's here in the back. I'll bring you up to date on the details."

The detective and Thorne disappeared to the back. Robert went back to cleaning his guns. *Just a little while longer, Samuel. We're going to win.*

61

Blindfolded, his hands tied behind his back, Father Tolbert lay on his side, motionless and calm. He heard the door unlock and someone enter, which he presumed was Father Ortega from the mix of sweat and cheap cologne, an unforgettable signature of the unholy henchman, not easy to forget. Father Ortega put a cup up to Father Tolbert's mouth, and he swallowed the ice-cold water in several thankful gulps. During the whole time, Father Ortega said nothing, even after Father Tolbert thanked him. The priest gently laid him back down on the hard, cold, stone floor, and relocked the door on his way out, leaving Father Tolbert alone with his nightmares.

Father Tolbert rolled over on his back and brought his heels up to his buttocks. His mind took him back to a childhood devoid and empty, the impetus of a sickness that had transformed him into a monster he couldn't control. A beast that feasted on the childhoods of those he envied and coveted.

He thought joining the priesthood would help drive away the ferocious cravings for young boys, but it didn't. Instead, the monster grew, nurtured by unfettered access to lambs ripe for slaughter, handed over to him by those who were supposed to shepherd the flock, not leave them abandoned and vulnerable.

The names and faces of countless children pushed their way into Father Tolbert's head, jumping, playing, wallowing in innocence that he, as a priest, should have protected and fought for. *Edwin, Anthony, Paul, Charles!* Each child, some round-faced, some slim with black hair, some blond with green eyes, brown and blue, all stood before him in the shadows of his mind, all wanting to understand, all wanting to know why.

"I'm sorry," Father Tolbert moaned. "Please forgive me, I didn't mean to hurt you." Each boy waded in the shallow river of Father Tolbert's remembrance, heads down, eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Please, help me Lord, I'm sorry!" he screamed.

The boys in his head kept walking, the river rising until each child disappeared and drowned, their bodies floating on a surface of liquid black.

Father Tolbert rolled over, threw up, and cried in his vomit. *It's right that I suffer! Right that I die! Please, oh Lord, take away the pain with death!*

Finally, a lone boy stood before him. *Samuel.*

When the gargoyle inside him turned its sights to Samuel Napier, a child full of life, and eager to fulfill it, Father Tolbert tried to do away with his demons, and confessed his sins to Cardinal Polletto. Counseling was suggested and attended, to no avail. In fact, the monster seemed to gain strength. Soon, Father Tolbert could only watch the demonic animal inside him hunt, kill and destroy.

Samuel stood on the bank of the black river, watching Father Tolbert with empty, sad eyes, then he looked over at the children floating dead in the water.

"Samuel, please forgive me! I love you! I didn't mean to hurt you!" said Father Tolbert.

Samuel turned and walked down into the river, parting the sea of lifeless children floating on the blackness, until he too disappeared. Moments later, he walked out of the water on the other side of the shore, but was different, more mature and powerful.

Father Tolbert flailed about, kicking and writhing in pain. Samuel smiled. Felipe and Eduardo walked out of the water, and the three of them disappeared into the woods.

"What does it mean? Lord, what have I done?" asked Father Tolbert.

"Tell me what you saw," a familiar voice asked from somewhere in the room.

"Who's there?" Father Tolbert cried. "Who are you?"

"Tell me what you dreamed," the voice asked again.

"Cardinal Polletto?" Father Tolbert's body shook. "I won't tell you! I won't!"

"Your time is short," said Cardinal Polletto. "Soon, I'll give you what you've longed for, death. But first, tell me your dream."

Father Tolbert struggled to break free. "I won't let you hurt him! I won't let you hurt Samuel!"

"Samuel can't be hurt, not by me, or anybody else."

“Liar, you filthy liar! I won’t tell you anything!” Father Tolbert struggled to his feet. “I should have protected Samuel, but you made me hurt him.”

“Don’t fool yourself. You’ve always been weak for the taste of the young. I protected you, for this day, and allowed you to have what you loved.”

“I’m a monster! A monster you helped feed!”

“You’re not alone,” Cardinal Polletto told him. “Your depravity, like the others, has gone a long way to help us.”

“Help you?”

“Yes, help The Order get a step closer to destroying what should have been killed off centuries ago.”

“The Church? You’ve used me to destroy God’s kingdom?”

Father Tolbert heard Cardinal Polletto stir and honed in on that direction.

“On the contrary,” said Cardinal Polletto. “The true kingdom is ours. A kingdom you helped bring about with your seed. You gave us three, and will be remembered for all eternity.”

“Arrrrh!” Father Tolbert screamed, rushing toward Cardinal Polletto’s voice.

A granite-like blow smashed into the priest’s face. Father Tolbert fell backwards, his entire body floating through the air and crashing down to the floor.

“Thank you, Father Sin,” he heard Cardinal Polletto say.

Unable to move, Father Tolbert watched in his mind as more children, each face familiar, file into the black river of his mind. He wanted to tell them he was sorry, but knew it was useless. He heard Cardinal Polletto and Father Sin leave the room.

Father Tolbert lingered on the edge of consciousness, then cried into the night.

62

Forehead sweaty, shoulders tense, Cardinal Polletto paced the cold, candlelit bedroom, unable to control his breathing or the pounding in his chest. He had asked not to be disturbed for the next few hours, while he readied himself for the ritual. As he stumbled about the room, catching his balance several times by grabbing hold of one of the antique oak bedposts. For the last twenty-four hours, anxiety had tortured his being, kneading him unmercifully, castigating his spirit.

The cardinal slid down to the floor, leaned back against the bed and closed his eyes, as much from the sweat burning his pupils, as from the blanket of nervous uncertainty drowning him. *Get up you fool! This is what you wanted, what you've been waiting for! Victory is at hand!*

He pulled himself up on the side of the bed, stumbled over to the dresser, lowered his aged frame down to the cushioned chair, and stared at the man in the mirror. He barely recognized the feeble-faced, gray-headed imp leering back at him, eyes red and bleary, purple veins branching out of his hawk-like beak. Looks that belied the image of strength and grace he had carefully nurtured since stepping into the realm of Vatican politics. Others boasted elegant good looks, playing on their God given handsome exteriors, but none matched the cunning charm, charisma and hallmark ability to persuade and manipulate that Cardinal Polletto used to construct a reputation of excellence, and build an international network of loyal supporters, from the Kremlin to the White House.

The cardinal looked over at the antique grandfather clock to check the time. *Less than four hours. I better get ready.* He picked up a washcloth off the dresser, soaked it in a basin of warm water and covered his face, the strength in his legs slowly returning, the warmth therapeutic and welcome. Cardinal Polletto walked over to the bed, where his rich purple and red vestment and gold lion's head scepter lay waiting to drape him in the power and glory he'd thirsted for most of his life. The sight of the vestment and glistening scepter conjured up the spirit inside him, reminding him of who he was, and who he would soon become.

He ran his bony fingers across the satin robe and thought of the majesty and influence he'd wield as Pope. Access to untold wealth and the power to use it would allow him to build alliances, wage war, or initiate peace as he saw fit. The cardinal straightened his back, raised his chin, and slipped the clothing over his head, playing the ritual over in his mind, as debilitating jitters turned into unwavering confidence. Near full strength, the cardinal went back to the dresser, and sat back down in front of the mirror. This time, the man staring back at him wore fierce fiery eyes, a strong, firm jaw line, and a countenance of royalty. *It's my time!*

Cardinal Polletto's thoughts turned to Samuel and his brothers. There was no doubt in his mind that Samuel was the one he and the others awaited. *Their* lord, the one who would lead them and rule the world, the first-born of the three.

He knelt down to pray to his god, Lucifer, sweat beading up on his brow. The face of the Black Pope pushed its way into his mind, sending a cold shiver down his spine. *Don't fail!*

Fueled with the renewed vigor that only prayer can bring, the cardinal grabbed the scepter; it's weight straining the muscles still active in his arms. Arrogance now his guide, Cardinal Polletto examined the flawless, hand-etched carvings on the three-foot alabaster shaft, images of their master's conquests over the centuries, and a jewel encrusted circle beneath a solid gold lion's head, which symbolized their master's true nature.

Cardinal Polletto took a few deep breaths then headed for the door. He stopped and took stock of himself one last time. When he returned, his life and the world would be very different. He opened the door, and Father Sin and Sister Bravo stood waiting.

"Get the others," the cardinal said softly, "it's almost time," he said, heading down to the Hall of Caesars, where the procession would assemble, head held high, his spirit renewed.

63

Samuel, Felipe and Eduardo sat on the floor, staring down at a makeshift layout of the area around the castle. A small plate stood in for the castle, a candle symbolized the woods to the south, and Samuel's shoe was the shore across the water to the north.

"Our best chance is to make it to the woods," said Samuel, his voice low, pointing to the candle. "I'm sure they'll have guards there, but the darkness will work to our advantage."

He used hand gestures and spoke slowly so his brothers could keep up. They had established a routine that enabled them to communicate well with one another. Samuel would point, and Felipe and Eduardo would confirm with nods, answering in French or Italian. Samuel would repeat the word in English, then Felipe and Eduardo would repeat the word again, this time in English. Remembering his school lessons back in Chicago, Samuel had given them a quick phonics lesson, which both boys picked up quickly.

What Samuel couldn't explain, not to his brothers or himself, was their ability to understand each other without speech, as though they could read each other's minds. Sometimes when Samuel spoke, his brothers answered and nodded, as if they fully understood. Other times he would think of something, and Felipe and Eduardo would nod as if they heard him say it out loud. And when they spoke to him in French or Italian, Samuel somehow knew exactly what they meant.

"We must jump," said Felipe, pointing to the area in front of the plate that signified the rocks below the castle.

"Si," added Eduardo. "Can we make it?"

"Yes," answered Samuel abruptly, surprised by the doubt in his brother's voice. "It's not that far."

Felipe pointed to the area between the woods and the north shore, the area designated as the lake. Samuel had caught a couple of quick glances of the water while Cardinal Polletto talked about their *royalty*, and their *place in the world*, and it worried him. The biggest part of their plan included swimming to the other side if they couldn't get away by land, and even though Samuel was a good swimmer, the size of the lake was

intimidating. He wasn't sure he could make it, but didn't let it show. He forced a smile.

"We can make it together," he told them, confident and assuring, watching their confidence boost. "Once we cross the lake, we'll make our way back to Rome."

Eduardo nodded. "I know the way from trips with my father. We buy eels here."

Samuel saw the hurt on Eduardo's face when he said the word *father*, and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Good," he said, soothingly. "Be strong. We need you."

Eduardo raised his head, determined. "Si, I understand."

Samuel knew getting back to Rome wouldn't be easy. Once they escaped and swam the lake, they'd have to walk all the way, avoiding the men Cardinal Polletto would certainly send to hunt them down. They'd stay out of sight, off the main roads, and take their time, working their way into the city. Once in Rome, they'd go directly to the American Embassy, and hopefully find someone who'd protect them, and take them home.

"I saw boats," said Felipe, pointing to the area along the shore just outside the woods. "Maybe we can use one."

"I saw too," added Eduardo. "Row boats."

Samuel didn't see the boats. He was too busy trying not to give himself away to Cardinal Polletto, but he believed his brothers. "Good, then we'll try for a boat, but be ready to swim." Felipe and Eduardo looked worried. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"If we get caught, what we do?" stammered Felipe. "Cardinal Polletto will hurt us."

"Yes," added Eduardo. "And what of Father Sin? He'll kill us."

Samuel gritted his teeth. "Don't worry," he told them, staring hard into their eyes, "we won't fail, I promise you, but you must believe." He smiled, then laughed. Felipe and Eduardo wiped their faces and joined him.

"Yes," cried Eduardo, determination now in his voice, "we will make it. I believe you."

The three boys hugged. Samuel slipped on his shoe, picked up the candle and plate, and placed them on the table, the vision of his mother

elbowing its way into his thoughts. Her image made his knees weak, his legs rubbery. He shook his head, forcing her away, focusing instead on the task he needed to complete.

“I miss you,” he whispered under his breath. “But I have to do this.” Samuel couldn’t explain it, but somehow in his mind, he knew he wouldn’t, couldn’t die. *I can make it. I know I can.*

Felipe and Eduardo flopped down on their cots and stared at the ceiling, smiles on their faces, occasionally stealing glimpses at Samuel, who made sure he maintained the picture of confidence. If they were going to escape, they had to do it together. As far as Samuel was concerned, Felipe and Eduardo were his only family now, and he wasn’t going to count on anybody but them.

Samuel eased down on his own bed and closed his eyes. The one person he hoped he could count on appeared before him; his godfather, Robert Veil. Samuel wondered if his Uncle Robert and Aunt Nikki were still searching for him, or if they’d simply given up. If they were alive, he knew they’d be looking, and Samuel hoped that they’d find him, but didn’t plan on it. *It’s just the three of us*, he told himself. *That’s all we can count on, us.* Again, he forced all thoughts, except their escape, from his mind and drifted into a light sleep.

Soon, he was back in Chicago at a Cubs game with his father. They ate hot dogs, guzzled soft drinks, and stuffed their faces with popcorn. Samuel looked into his father’s face and smiled. He was free.

The chamber door unlatched. Samuel left his dreams behind. When his eyes focused, Felipe and Eduardo were already on their feet. He joined them. Sister Bravo walked inside and lit the candle. Father Sin stood silent in the doorway.

“It’s time,” said Sister Bravo. She handed each of them a bundle of clothing and black soft sole shoes.

“Time for what?” asked Samuel, his voice edgy, demanding.

Father Sin stepped forward, but said nothing, with no sign of anger or meanness on his face. Sister Bravo walked over to Felipe and Eduardo and kissed them each on the cheek. Both of them stepped back and wiped their faces, defiant and unmoved. Sister Bravo smiled, looked down at Samuel, and stroked his face.

“I’m sorry for putting you through so much,” she told him. “But it was necessary to get you this far.” Samuel stood quiet, fighting the urge to lash out. “I understand Cardinal Polletto told you of your true father,” she continued. “The one from whom your seeds came.” Samuel clinched his fists, but again said nothing. “What you don’t know,” she continued, “is that I have just been given permission to tell you who bore you for nine months. Brought you into this world and gave you life.” Sister Bravo kissed both sides of his cheeks. Samuel flinched. When she pulled away, her eyes were wet, her face proud. “I’m the one who carried you, Samuel. I’m your mother, and the three of you are my sons.”

Samuel stood transfixed. He stared hard at Sister Bravo, her words reverberating through his head. She repeated what she said in French and Italian, but Felipe and Eduardo’s faces were already twisted with disbelief.

“You’re not our mother,” growled Samuel, his eyes boring into hers.

“I know this comes as a shock,” Sister Bravo said, still smiling, leaning close.

Samuel swung as hard as he could, slapping her, knocking her to the floor. Father Sin ran over and helped Sister Bravo to her feet. Felipe and Eduardo eased closer to Samuel’s side, heads high, determined.

“You’re not our mother and you never will be,” sneered Samuel. “Never say that to me again.”

Father Sin pulled the tearful nun back towards the door, both their faces etched with fear.

“Now, if you’ll leave us, we’ll get dressed,” Samuel ordered, turning his back and heading for his bed.

Father Sin and Sister Bravo left the room and locked the door; the nun’s sobs audible. Samuel, tense, but under control, directed his brothers to get dressed, and unbundled the blood red vestment and black pants she had given them. He quickly dressed, then grabbed the forks and butter knives they’d hidden under their mattresses to use as weapons. For the first time in his life, Samuel knew he could kill.

The three boys sat on the edge of their cots and waited. Samuel closed his eyes. *Who am I?*

64

Robert let his eyes roam around the crowded villa, a new location on the opposite side of Rome; a precaution taken at Father Kong's suggestion.

Thorne and Nelson were on the other side of the living room, taking inventory of the equipment they'd use during the incursion, including scuba gear and the underwater sea scooters that would pull them underwater from the shore to the castle. Several new faces Father Kong added to the effort were assisting them, making sure every piece of equipment was operational.

After several intense discussions, Robert and Father Kong had finally come to a compromise on whom and how many people would be involved in the rescue effort. Robert insisted on hiring a team of armed professionals to help encircle the area around the castle, ready to rush in on Robert's call. He suggested a team of fifty, but Father Kong convinced him that too many might be difficult to insert without notice, so Robert settled for twenty well-armed soldiers with hostage training, all of whom either he or Thorne had worked with in the past.

The rest of the team was rounded out by twenty-five priests and nuns, all dressed in black assault gear and leather jackets, each with a silver crucifix hanging from their necks, and each hand picked by Father Kong, with Cardinal Maximilian's blessing. They were trusted members of The Hammer of God, and all were prepared to sacrifice their lives for the moment at hand.

They were unlike any group Robert had ever seen, which was a tall order, given what he'd witnessed around the world. All of them, nineteen men and six women, were well conditioned, and just as in shape as any of Robert's people. But their manner was quiet, humble, almost serene, even in the face of obvious danger, where none of them would be armed with so much as a slingshot. Robert admired their faith, but questioned Father Kong's decision not to carry weapons.

"We'll carry the sword of faith," the priest had told him.

“I’d rather you totted a machine gun,” Robert had said, but the priest only smiled and assured Robert that they’d be armed with something much greater than bullets.

“In the spirit, more of them are with us than there are with them,” Father Kong said.

Robert took another look at the Bracciano Castle floor plans Father Kong had retrieved from the Vatican Archives. To his surprise, it not only gave a complete outline of every nook and secret passage in the building, but also included a series of diagrams, outlining an extensive underground system of tunnels, including three entrances accessible underwater.

“Everything’s in order,” said Father Kong, stepping up beside Robert. “I’ve gone over the details again with my people. We’re ready.”

“Good,” said Robert, his eyes fixed on the castle diagram. “Let’s go over the plan one more time to be sure.”

He pointed to the spots alongside the road into Bracciano, where both Robert and Father Kong’s people would be posted; some alongside the road, others inside the woods and trees. Additional teams would situate themselves in the woods directly behind the castle, and inside several homes Father Kong’s people had commandeered in the quiet village. Reynolds would join one of the teams inside one of the houses closest to the castle, ready to get there first when the final call came.

“The closer we get, the higher probability we’ll encounter The Order and those with them,” Father Kong said.

Robert agreed, and instructed his people to quietly neutralize any threat, but be ready to kill if necessary. He had no idea how many men The Order might employ, but guessed that they probably didn’t want to disrupt the ritual with a violent shootout, unless they believed all was lost.

“Thorne and I will approach the castle from the shore on the north side of the lake,” said Robert, pointing to Trevignano. “We’ll scuba dive to the tunnels under the building and enter. Once we’re inside, we’ll notify everyone on the radio.”

The castle diagram showed three tunnels, but at least one, maybe two, were now sealed according to Father Kong’s source. To make sure they got in, Robert and Thorne would haul an underwater laser to cut

through bars or steel plates if needed. It would slow them down, but there was no other choice.

“Once you’re inside, everybody will take up their secondary position,” said Father Kong.

“Correct. Once we locate Samuel and the other boys, we’ll all converge on the castle,” said Robert.

Father Kong stroked his chin. “I must make a last appeal that we limit any violence and deaths. Cardinal Maximilian insists.”

Robert faced the priest as everyone in the room turned to listen. “Again, I understand, but killing might be necessary. If The Order will hire the mafia, they’ll do anything.”

“We must make room for God. He’ll make a way,” said Father Kong.

“That way may be by the bullet,” answered Robert, glaring over at the others. “But I’ve instructed my people to use caution, and they’ll be armed with the tranquilizer darts. It’s the best I can do.”

Father Kong nodded his consent, smiled and walked away. Thorne took his place.

“Everything’s ready to go,” she said. “I secured our weapons in waterproof sacks and tested the underwater laser. That thing could slice through the hull of a battleship.”

“Make sure you tell our people to go easy on the trigger,” said Robert. “I want them safe, but careful.”

“That may work going in,” answered Thorne. “And I know these priests and nuns want everybody to come out alive, but let’s be real. Some of those assholes are going to die tonight, especially if I have anything to do with it.”

Robert knew better than to argue with her. “Whatever it takes to get Samuel out of there is fine with me,” he said.

Thorne smiled, handed him two nine-millimeter automatics, and went back to recheck the details with their team. The front door opened. One of Father Kong’s people entered carrying a single envelope, and handed it to the priest.

When Father Kong finished, he gave the letter to Robert. “It’s from the Holy Father.” Robert took the folded paper, but didn’t open it. Father

Kong took a deep breath. “Cardinal Maximilian informed him that the time was at hand, and he wanted to offer a few words of support.”

Robert unfolded the note and read it to himself as everybody watched in silence. The longer he read, the harder his heart pounded. His eyes narrowed, his forehead wrinkled. The Pope’s words ignited his spirit. When he finished, as the note instructed, Robert pulled a lighter from his pocket, set the paper on fire, placed it in an ashtray, and then faced everyone in the room.

“Tonight, we must be at our best. Many lives are at stake; ours, three little boys, and possibly untold millions. Be brave, courageous, and let’s have everybody come home alive,” said Robert.

Father Kong stood, serious, panning the room. “Those of you with Il Martello di Dio know our charge. First Peter, Chapter Five, Verse Eight. We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed. We are perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted, but not forsaken.” He then lowered his head and prayed.

When he finished, Robert nodded to Thorne, who barked out last minute instructions. Everyone gathered up their equipment and went outside. Detective Reynolds pulled Thorne to the side, gave her a long, passionate kiss then joined his team in one of the vans.

Robert, Thorne, Father Kong, and two others piled inside a black SUV. Each squad left in fifteen-minute intervals, Robert not wanting a parade. When they reached the main rode out of Rome, Robert relaxed and let his mind go. For ten miles nobody spoke. Father Kong’s cell phone broke the silence. Ten seconds into his conversation, the priest’s face went flush with horror.

“My God!” he cried, tears in his eyes. Robert’s back straightened. Father Kong put his head in his hands. “My God, my God!” he bellowed and sobbed.

“What is it?” asked Robert, anxious.

Father Kong lifted his head, eyes red, bottom lip trembling. “It’s the Holy Father, the Pope. He’s dead.”

65

Cardinal Polletto gave the procession assembling inside the Hall of the Caesars last minute instructions, carefully looking them over forty-five minutes before the midnight hour. Outside, members of The Order of Asmodeus were gathering from all over the world, taking their seats in the makeshift stadium behind the castle, next to the stage and wooden deck they'd be standing on shortly, all watching history change before their eyes.

Sister Bravo and Father Sin were tending to Samuel, Felipe and Eduardo, gently securing their hands and taping their mouths. Samuel glared at the cardinal, a murderous scowl on his face that Cardinal Polletto brushed aside. *Soon, you'll thank me for making you ruler of the world.* Each boy was lifted up and placed in a small, shiny black coffin, with three slits cut in the top for them to breath. To the cardinal's surprise, none of the boys flinched or struggled. *Maybe it's sinking in. Maybe now they're starting to realize.*

The coffins were closed tight, and two black-hooded priests were assigned to guard and carry each coffin. In front of the coffins, gagged, blindfolded and tied to a wide wooden board, lay Father Tolbert. The angry priest squirmed and fought, almost tearing free several times. Only after a generous dose of heroin filled his blood stream, administered by Father Ortega, did he settle down.

"You'll burn. You'll burn," Father Tolbert mumbled, eyes rolling up in his head.

Cardinal Polletto had received word an hour earlier that the Pope had died a solemn death in his sleep earlier that night. After the ritual, Cardinal Polletto would rush to the Vatican with all of the other cardinals, where they'd plan and perform the Pope's funeral, then be locked in conclave inside the Sistine Chapel, away from the public eye until they all agreed on the new Bishop of Rome, a position guaranteed to him by veiled forces more powerful than any known to the world. The Black Pope, old, frail, and a supremely powerful man, had also promised the cardinal certain death if he failed.

The extra security the cardinal set up in and around the castle, in light of the attack on Rinaldo and Dianora, gave him some comfort that the ritual wouldn't be disturbed. But it bothered him that his people hadn't been able to find any sign of Robert Veil, his partner, or The Hammer of God anywhere. He was certain they were responsible for Rinaldo's death, and Dianora's coma. Cardinal Polletto's snitch, Bishop Ruini, had jumped to his death at the hospital, the villa where Il Martello di Dio had been hiding was now empty. To add insult to an already tenuous situation, Cardinal Maximilian was still alive.

Cardinal Polletto began to chant in Latin, a signal to everybody in the room that the procession was about to begin. All of The Order's members, each draped in long black, hooded robes, took up their positions, bodies racked with nervous energy, eyes wide with anticipation. The cardinal nodded.

The three small caskets were lifted in the air, along with a near comatose Father Tolbert. Two hooded clerics stood in front of the cardinal, one holding a three prong, gold candelabra with the candles lit, and the other an upside down crucifix with their leader, Asmodeus, looking down on a suffering Jesus, and Lucifer looking down on them all.

The cardinal continued to chant, raising his voice an octave, to signal the men in front of him to begin the march downstairs. Along the way, members of The Order lined the route, faces hidden behind hoods, a single candle in their hands. The castle, pitch black except for the candlelight, took on an ominous, foreboding atmosphere, a dark calm before a new day.

Outside, the midnight sky draped the gathering with a clear, star-studded cloak of night. A windless, easy calm enveloped them, as if Lucifer himself held back any intrusion or interruption. The dead stillness caused Cardinal Polletto's voice to boom through the night like thunder, and as they entered the stadium and slowly marched toward the stage, everyone sitting stood, holding a single lit candle in their hands.

Cardinal Polletto stopped in front of a long table, covered with a dark red tablecloth, as the others took their positions. Father Tolbert to his right, the coffins on the wooden deck directly behind him, where twenty-five children, bound and gagged, lay shivering and shaking on the deck,

eyes filled with fear. Cardinal Polletto motioned for everybody to take their seats and finished the chant. Everything fell silent.

“Tonight is a night of triumph,” he told the crowd, loud and confident. “A night we will all bear witness to history, a night when the world will be born anew.”

In the front row of the stadium, Cardinal Polletto spotted the Black Pope, his pasty face and black smile camouflaged behind his black hood. Sitting next to him, dressed as all the others, sat Alison Napier, nervous and fidgeting, unaware that tonight would be her last night on earth.

The rest of the followers in the stands were some of the most powerful men and women in the world. Cabinet members, generals, heads of state, the influential, rich and powerful from every walk of life, were all ready to bow down and dedicate their lives to the boy who would rule every inch of the earth.

“Tonight, the old will give way to something new. A new way the world will grasp as its lifeline, and we, the ones chosen to serve and lead, will tonight bear witness to this rebirth,” stated Cardinal Polletto.

He began to chant again, this time paying homage to Lucifer, hands held high in the air, eyes to the heavens. The members in the stands blew out their candles and launched into the same chant, hands high, heads to the sky, some smiling, others dead serious, their voices filling the night like a harmonious choir.

“Curse you! Curse every last one of you!” the cardinal heard Father Tolbert scream. He looked over and saw the priest, head up, spewing and spitting, cursing and crying. “Hell is waiting for all of you! I swear it!”

Cardinal Polletto continued to chant. Father Ortega approached Father Tolbert, a long silver knife in his hand. Two priests hurried over and lifted Father Tolbert’s feet high in the air. Father Ortega braced to cut his throat and drain the blood into a silver trough on the deck, just below the struggling priest.

Father Tolbert caught a glimpse of the knife. “No, get away from me!” he screamed.

As Father Ortega moved closer, Father Tolbert screamed louder. The crowd raised their voices higher, drowning him out.

Cardinal Polletto looked behind him. Sister Bravo opened the three caskets. Hooded men lifted each boy out and gently stood them up on the

deck. The cardinal locked his eyes on Samuel, who looked over at Eduardo and Felipe, their eyes wide, their bodies trembling. But one look from Samuel and the boys seemed to steady. Samuel scanned the area, detached, unmoved by the theatrics.

“No, Lord, help me!” Father Tolbert bellowed.

Father Ortega now stood directly over the priest, waiting for the final signal from Cardinal Polletto. The cardinal raised his hands. Everyone fell silent. On the table in front of him was a small silver plate filled with rich black dirt. He poured water over it and walked over to the writhing, spewing Father Tolbert. Cardinal Polletto mixed the mud with his fingers, and smeared it all over Father Tolbert’s face, whose smoldering anger was now replaced with uncontrollable crying.

“From the earth you came, the Father of our savior. To earth you shall return. Your name will forever be written in our hearts and minds. Your blood, your seed, gave birth to the savior of this world, and in him you shall live forever.”

Cardinal Polletto stepped back and nodded to Father Ortega. The burly priest placed the knife to Father Tolbert’s neck.

“Urrrrh!” Father Tolbert struggled and writhed.

One of his hands pulled loose from the rope. He grabbed the hand in which Father Ortega held the knife and wrestled violently. Father Tolbert’s other hand tore free, his eyes on fire, his face a raging storm. He grabbed Father Ortega by his bulky black robe and snatched him to the ground.

Two men rushed over to help a distressed Father Ortega, but before they could reach him, Father Tolbert had the knife in his hand, and Father Ortega lay prostrate on his back.

The men grabbed at Father Tolbert, but were met with hard kicks and stabs, sending both to the ground. Father Tolbert, his eyes fixed on Cardinal Polletto, reached down and stabbed Father Ortega in the chest several times, to the horror of the panic stricken crowd.

“Father Sin, get him!” cried Cardinal Polletto.

Father Sin, already headed in that direction, pulled his own knife from under his robe. Father Tolbert’s eyes never left the cardinal. He smiled, saliva foaming around his mouth, nose flaring.

“Stop him!” Cardinal Polletto screamed.

Father Tolbert rushed forward, knife above his head. Cardinal Polletto braced himself, forearms in front of his face. “Arrrrh!” he cried, as the blade found his flesh.

66

Samuel stared down at the small black coffin in front of him, afraid, but not showing it. Sister Bravo and Father Sin tied his and his brothers' hands in front of them, something he had anticipated, but still dreaded. It would make their escape more difficult.

"Ouch," Samuel cried, wincing as Sister Bravo knotted the rope.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'll loosen the rope a bit."

"Thank you," answered Samuel, smiling inside.

Sister Bravo instructed Father Sin to do the same with Eduardo and Felipe. Samuel eyed his brothers. *They're fools. We're going to beat them.*

He watched Eduardo and Felipe fight back smiles, and looked away so he wouldn't laugh. Sister Bravo tore a strip of wide gray tape from a roll, placed it gently over Samuel's mouth, tossed the roll to Father Sin, who taped the mouths of his brothers. Samuel squirmed, twisted, and mustered the saddest eyes he could.

"There's nothing I can do about the tape," said Sister Bravo, smiling. "But relax, it won't be there long." Samuel looked away. Sister Bravo knelt. "Samuel, I hope we can be friends. I want to be a mother to you and your brothers, but you'll have to let me in. I've waited a long time for this day. I hope we can put the past behind us."

You're not my mother, and you'll never be! Samuel forced a smile through the tape and nodded. Sister Bravo's eyes watered, and she stood. Samuel turned his head toward the front of the room, hatred throbbing in his head. His eyes fell on Cardinal Polletto, who turned and looked back at him. The longer their eyes stayed locked on each other, the hotter Samuel's anger burned. He didn't care who the cardinal said he was, or what his place in history would be, he'd kill them all the first chance he got. If not that day, then another, but he was going to make them pay for tearing his life apart.

In front of the coffins lay Father Tolbert, twisting back and forth like he was in pain. *Bastard! You deserve to suffer. I hope I get to see you die.* Samuel never told anyone all of the horrible things Father Tolbert

had done to him. He told his friends, Paul and Carla, some things, like how Father Tolbert had fondled him, but kept the worst to himself.

Cardinal Polletto began to chant. Samuel recognized it as Latin, but had no idea what the cardinal was saying. All of the adults in the room pulled the hoods of their black robes over their heads. Two men approached Samuel, lifted him up and placed him in the coffin. Samuel caught one last glimpse of his brothers, who looked horrified. *Stay strong. Don't break. We can do this.*

Inside, the coffin smelled like a fresh Christmas tree. Samuel relaxed. *Rest, save your energy.* He closed his eyes and tried to block out the sound of Cardinal Polletto's grating tone. He focused on the task before them. Escape.

Samuel felt the coffin lift in the air and move forward. He opened his eyes, and stared up through the slits cut in the top of the box, barely able to make out the ceiling because of the dim light. He tested the rope tied around his wrists. It wasn't tight, but firm. He pulled and twisted, careful not to knock around or shift his weight. He felt the rope loosen, not much, but enough to spur him on. He closed his eyes again, and told his brothers to do the same.

Samuel felt the coffin tip downward. *We're going a flight of stairs..* Soon, he saw the stars up through the slits, and smelled the dampness of the lake in the night air. His ears picked up murmuring, and he imagined that the stadium Cardinal Polletto showed them the day before was filled with more jerks like the ones he'd already met.

Bright beams from the stadium lights streamed down into the coffin. The murmurs and buzzing grew louder, and he could tell from the sound of shoes clapping wood, that they were being carried across the stage. Samuel closed his eyes again. This time he conjured up the layout around the castle in his mind, imagining their exact location as they moved along. A few minutes later, they stopped, and his coffin touched down softly on what he knew was the extended deck. He wasn't sure, but he thought he heard the sound of children whimpering and crying.

"Tonight is a night of triumph," Samuel heard Cardinal Polletto bellow. "A night we all will bear witness to history, a night when the world will be born anew."

Samuel worked harder to loosen the rope, straining as hard as he could, sweat burning his eyes, the rope cutting into his skin. He gritted his teeth to keep from crying out. The blood seeping from small cuts around his wrists lubricated the rope, enabling him to pull free. Tears streamed down his face from the pain. He quickly rolled his head from one shoulder to the next, wiping his face dry. He retied his hands, but left them loose enough to break free when the time came.

“Curse you, curse every last one of you!” Samuel heard Father Tolbert scream. “Hell is waiting for all of you! I swear it!”

Samuel heard more chanting. Words he didn't understand. A few moments later, Father Tolbert let out a terrifying shriek.

“No, get away from me, no!” screamed Father Tolbert.

67

Robert and Thorne waited in a small, cliff-side house in Trevignano, across the lake from a well-lit Bracciano Castle, visible in the distance. When all was clear, the shops closed, and the streets empty, they crept across the street, through a brief section of woods to the beach, where one of Father Kong's men, Father Timothy Pastuer, a young Frenchman who resembled the long-haired surfers Robert had seen riding waves along the shores of Australia, waited with their underwater gear.

They both undressed and slipped into black wetsuits. Robert saw Father Pastuer almost gasp at the sight of Thorne's chiseled frame, perfect breasts and tight ass. Robert smiled. *I wonder how many Hail Mary's this will cost you.*

Thorne never gave either of them so much as a glance. It wasn't the first time they'd gone through this drill, and Robert had long ago immunized himself from Thorne's exotic looks, although every now and then she still managed to catch him off guard. Robert's radio cackled. He and Thorne pressed their earpieces. It was Father Kong.

"Everybody's in position," the priest said clearly. "Signal us when you're inside."

Robert affirmed the message, and he and Thorne went back to their preparations. Once inside his wet suit, Robert checked the air tanks, fins, laser, and underwater scooters they'd use to pull them through the lake. Thorne handed him a waterproof sack. Inside were two nine-millimeter automatics, plenty of ammunition, a set of night vision binoculars, and a Bowie knife. Robert removed his earpiece and radio and placed them inside.

"I'm all set," said Thorne, handing him a large, yellow underwater light that he attached to the top of his scooter. "We'll fire these up once we're ten feet under, so we don't give ourselves away."

Robert strapped the underwater laser to his shoulder. Thorne carried their weapons. They gave Father Pastuer the thumbs-up as he prayed, then slowly waded into the icy water, surrounded by complete darkness and the stars above.

Under the pitch-black water, Robert barely saw Thorne in front of him. Ten feet later, they turned on their lights. Fish and eels scrambled to

get out of their way, several crashing into Robert as he swam. He moved to Thorne's left and fired up his underwater scooter. Silent, the scooter pulled him through the water with ease, snatching him past Thorne until she started hers and caught up with him. They sliced through the water like dolphins, diving down two hundred feet, gliding toward the castle at twenty-five miles an hour.

According to the map, the three tunnels beneath the castle were spread out fifteen feet apart at the base, hidden in the small reef one hundred twenty-five feet below.

Twenty-five minutes later, Robert and Thorne reached the rocks below the castle and secured their scooters by wedging them in between large crevices, then detached the underwater lamps and swam along the reef until they came to the first tunnel. Robert peered inside, shook his head no, and pointed. Just past the steel grate was a wall of bricks. The only way through it would be to blast it open with explosives, which was not an option.

They reached the next tunnel, only to find another wall. This one was solid concrete, and had been built all the way to the steel grate. Robert cursed inside his mask and took off to find the next tunnel. When he reached the third steel grate and shined his light through, he saw another concrete wall, but this one was further down the tunnel, about fifty feet.

Thorne pulled hard on the grate, which was loose on one end. Robert fired the laser and began cutting the grate on the loose end. The rusted steel melted like butter. Fifteen minutes later, Thorne pulled the grate free and watched it disappear beneath them. Robert swam inside first, taking the laser torch with him as a precaution. The entryway was so narrow, he was unable to look back, but was sure his partner was close behind.

Thirty feet inside, the entrance widened enough for Thorne to swim up beside him. Twenty feet later, they stopped at the brick wall, but could see the surface above them. Robert sat the laser down. Thorne handed him the bag that contained his weapons. He motioned for them to ease up slowly, and they each swam up five feet apart.

Robert eased his head out of the water and looked around as they floated quietly, listening, looking around the dark cave. He signaled all clear, surveying the left side of the cave. Thorne checked their right, and

they quickly pulled themselves out, removed the scuba gear, slipped on a pair of rubber-soled shoes, and loaded their weapons. Robert screwed a silencer on one of his nines, as did Thorne.

To his surprise, Thorne had managed to bring along her signature Mosberg pistol grip shotgun. He smiled as she jammed in the shells and hung it from her shoulder.

“I see you brought her with you,” he said, attaching his radio and ear piece.

Thorne checked her other weapons, never looking up. “Bitches fair better in pairs.” She racked in a shell. “And this bitch is my favorite.”

Robert shined his light around the cavernous, dark cave, focusing the beam on a concrete stairwell to their right. The stairs led up to a heavy steel door that Robert initially thought was locked, but cracked open when he and Thorne leaned hard into it with their shoulders. The door opened up into a dusty basement filled with old artifacts, canvas covered paintings, tools, and other maintenance items apparently untouched for quite some time.

Thorne located another set of stairs that led up to another heavy steel door. When they reached the top, Robert pressed his ear to the cold steel and heard the faint sound of voices and footsteps. As far as he could tell, there were four men on the other side, all Italian speaking, probably natives. He and Thorne turned off their lights and readied their weapons.

Robert gently tested the door, pushing on it softly with his shoulder. It didn't move. He tried again, this time a little harder, but the door still wouldn't budge.

“Hit it hard. I'll cover us when we get inside,” said Thorne.

“High, low,” said Robert, meaning he'd shoot from the top, and she from a crouched position.

He whispered a three count and rammed the door hard. Thorne rolled inside and came up on one knee, Robert stood above her. Two men, armed in black hooded robes stumbled backwards. Thorne caught them both with headshots. Robert spun around and shot two more with one shot each to the chest and forehead.

Robert checked his kills, pulled off their robes and handed one to Thorne. They put on the robes and folded the hoods down over their

heads and picked up the Mac-10 machine guns the guards were carrying. Robert radioed Father Kong.

“We’re inside,” he told the priest. “They’re definitely armed, so stay sharp.”

“We read you,” Father Kong answered. “We’re moving up to the next position, and will wait for further instructions.”

Robert and Thorne made their way down a long, dim hallway, the Mac-10’s in their hands, and their other weapons secure under the robes. As they reached the end of the hall, Robert heard voices around the corner. He listened carefully, and held up two fingers. Thorne nodded. They folded their hoods down further over their faces and turned the corner, heads low, and headed for a large wooden door in front of them that looked like it led outside.

“You two!” a voice shouted behind them.

Robert fingered the trigger on the Mac-10, ready to fire. He saw Thorne do the same. They turned around slowly, heads low, eyes looking upward. A fat, bald, small-eyed man wearing the same black robes approached them.

“Are the other two still guarding the back?” the fat man asked.

“Yes,” answered Robert. “We’ll go back and give them a break in about fifteen minutes.”

“Fine, but you know weapons aren’t allowed in the stadium, cardinal’s orders.”

Robert apologized, and he and Thorne handed over the machine guns.

“I’ll put them in the weapons room upstairs. Pick them up on your way back.”

Robert and Thorne nodded, turned abruptly, and headed outside, where more black hooded followers of The Order milled back and forth from what looked like metal grandstands erected in front of a large wooden stage. They quickly made their way to the stands, checking to make sure nobody was watching them. As they approached the seats, a tall black man with hard, almost yellow eyes, stopped them. In the black robe, the man looked like a seven-foot death angel.

“There are no more seats up close, you’ll have to sit at the top,” he told them, in a creepy whisper.

Robert and Thorne nodded and walked up through the middle of the crowd. On their way up, Robert caught a glimpse of a familiar face sitting up front. *Alison!* He looked over at Thorne, whose angry eyes said she'd already seen her.

They sat down on the top row. Out front in the middle of the stage, behind a long table, stood Cardinal Polletto. To the left, tied to a wooden board, lay Father Tolbert, looking half out of his mind, and close by, stood the bulldog priest, Father Ortega. Three small black coffins, guarded by six men and a woman, were lined up behind the cardinal, and behind the coffins, on the widest part of the deck, was a sight that horrified Robert to the depths of his soul. A crowd of children, bound and gagged, some shaking and whimpering, others laying still with their eyes pressed shut, were piled on top of each other on a wooden deck.

Robert looked over at Thorne. "Do you see Samuel?"

"No, but he could be somewhere in that crowd of children," she whispered, through gritted teeth.

"We can't move until we see him," said Robert. "This is going to be our last chance."

"Tonight, the old will give way to something new. A new way the world will grasp as its lifeline," said Cardinal Polletto. "And we, the ones chosen to serve and lead, will tonight bear witness to this rebirth."

The cardinal began to chant something in Latin, his hands high in the air, his face toward the sky. Soon, the crowd in the stands chanted too, standing to their feet, jubilant, celebrating.

"Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen."

Robert and Thorne lowered their heads and mumbled in unison with the crowd. Robert stuck his hands in his robe and chambered a round in his gun. Cardinal Polletto continued to chant as two men raised the board Father Tolbert was tied to, so that the priest's feet were in the air and his head low. Father Ortega approached Father Tolbert with a large, glimmering knife.

"No, get away from me!" Father Tolbert cried.

Father Ortega moved closer to the bound priest, who screamed louder when he saw him. Robert continued to scan the stage and deck for Samuel, but there was no sign of his godson.

Cardinal Polletto turned around and said something to the woman standing next to the caskets. Each of the small black boxes was opened, and to Robert's amazement, Samuel was lifted out of the first casket and stood up on the deck.

"It's him," whispered Thorne. "And there are the other two."

They continued to watch as Samuel's twin brothers were placed on the deck. Robert focused hard on Samuel, recognizing the boy, but not the hard look in his eyes. *What have they done to you?*

Cardinal Polletto raised his hands and everyone fell silent. Robert watched as the cardinal poured water over what looked like black dirt on a silver plate, and walked over to Father Tolbert, who was screaming and kicking. The cardinal smeared mud all over Father Tolbert's face.

"From earth you came, the father of our savior, to earth you shall return," said Cardinal Polletto, in a loud commanding voice. "Your name will forever be written in our hearts and mind. Your blood, your seed, gave birth to the savior of this world, and in him, you shall live forever."

Robert and Thorne eased down the middle stairs toward the stage. Father Tolbert flailed and kicked until one of his hands tore free, just stopping Father Ortega's blade from finding his throat. Soon, the rabid priest was free and on his feet, slashing the knife back and forth. Robert kept a fix on Samuel, who stood on the deck, unmoved by the events. Father Tolbert stabbed Father Ortega then rushed Cardinal Polletto. Robert pressed the small transmitter to his lips.

"Move in!" Robert barked. "Go, go!"

The tall morbid man, who had showed them to their seats, rushed toward them. Robert pulled his gun and dropped him with one shot through his mouth, and one to his forehead. The giant hit the ground with a loud crash, as the crowd fell into a crazed panic. Thorne rushed the stage, *the bitch* in her hands shooting down anyone who stepped in their way.

68

Elbows in front of his face, Cardinal Polletto tried to fend off Father Tolbert, now out of his mind with rabid rage, spitting and spewing like a possessed demon.

The cardinal grabbed at the crazed priest, but got tangled up in the oversized sleeves of his vestment. Father Tolbert sliced at the cardinal's arms and hands, a menacing grin on his face. Cardinal Polletto looked toward the stands. Alison Napier was frantic. The Black Pope was gone.

Down the middle of the stairs, two of his people were rushing toward the stage. When they snatched off their hoods and pulled weapons from under their robes, the cardinal gasped. *Robert Veil!*

Cardinal Polletto felt a hot piercing pain in his stomach that quickly spread like an uncontrolled inferno. He looked down. Father Tolbert had plunged the knife into his stomach, pulled it out, and stabbed him again. *I...must... pull... the lever.* Everything around him slowed to a crawl.

He heard voices, but they sounded muffled, hollow. He stumbled over to the large wooden lever, looking toward Samuel, who was no longer standing in front of his casket. He looked over at the other two boys and saw Samuel, hands free, untying his brothers. *No!*

The cardinal, dizzy and weak, grabbed the lever, and with all he had left in him pulled. "Arrrrrrh!" He collapsed to the floor. Everything went black. Cardinal Polletto heard the deck give way and the splash of water. He smiled as hell opened its doors, blood pouring from his mouth. "It is done," he whispered.

69

The door to the casket opened. Samuel was lifted out of the coffin, his vision blurry, and his feet touched the deck. His eyesight cleared and quickly surveyed the area. Behind him, he saw a horrifying sight. Children, around his age, were tied up, mouths taped, piled up on the backside of the deck, wiggling like fish out of water.

Samuel looked over at his brothers. They looked as terrified as he felt. *Be brave! Stand strong!* Eduardo and Felipe's backs straightened. Samuel felt his stomach churn. He took several deep breaths through his nose, fought it off, and looked around the stage. They were exactly where he imagined. His eyes landed up front. Cardinal Polletto was staring straight at him.

Samuel kept his eyes firmly on the cardinal, who looked away and raised his hands in the air. The stadium fell silent. Samuel surveyed the crowd in the stands, not able to see everyone clearly. The faces he could make out had their eyes glued on him. He let his gaze fall down to the front row, and almost collapsed at the disturbing sight of his mother in the front row wearing a black hooded robe like all the others, standing next to a frail old man with scary yellow eyes. Alison saw him looking, smiled and blew him a kiss.

Samuel's hearing fell hollow, his eyes watered. Cardinal Polletto walked over to Father Tolbert with a tray in his hand, but Samuel had stopped paying attention. *Mommy, how could you?*

Samuel looked over at Felipe and Eduardo. Both looked down at their hands, signaling that their bounds were loose enough to make a break for it.

A commotion brought Samuel out of his stupor. Father Sin walked by him toward the stage. *Good, it's time.* Samuel pointed his head toward the rail to the left. If they made it over, he guessed the drop was about ten to fifteen feet down to the water. He looked at his mother, heartbroken, but her attention, along with everybody else in the stadium, was on Father Tolbert, who had broken loose from the wooden plank, and was now slashing a knife back and forth at anybody who tried to get close to him.

Two men grabbed Father Tolbert, but he kicked and stabbed them, sending both of them to the ground. The crazed priest reached down for a thick necked man, whose face Samuel remembered, but whose name he couldn't recall, and stabbed him in the chest several times, to the horror of Samuel and the now panicked crowd.

"Father Sin, get him!" cried Cardinal Polletto, looking frightened.

Father Sin pulled a knife from under his robe, but Father Tolbert didn't notice. His eyes were fixed on the cardinal, as he spit and cursed.

"Stop him!" Cardinal Polletto screamed.

Father Tolbert rushed the cardinal, who put his forearms in front of his face and screamed as Father Tolbert sunk the knife into his stomach. All of the adults around them, including Sister Bravo, rushed forward, leaving the boys alone.

Samuel eased over to Eduardo and Felipe, removed the rope from his wrists, and helped his brothers do the same. The boys ripped the tape from their mouths, then stared in awe at the heap of children writhing at their feet.

Samuel saw Cardinal Polletto stumble over to a large wooden handle and look over at him.

"Let's go!" shouted Samuel.

Cardinal Polletto pulled the lever. The deck collapsed, and seconds later, Samuel was underwater fighting for air, as the children who were lying on the deck kicked and squirmed all around him.

Samuel couldn't breathe. His chest ached. He felt dizzy and weak. The longer he fought, the faster his strength abandoned him. He felt himself losing consciousness, as tiny hands and feet clawed at his face.

70

Robert watched in horror as the deck Samuel stood on collapsed. Samuel, his brothers, and all of the bound and gagged children stacked behind them, crashed into the dark lake.

Robert picked up speed. “Thorne, I’m going in after Samuel!” He looked toward his partner, who didn’t answer, and saw her deep in hand-to-hand combat with two men.

Bam! Somebody hit Robert hard around the neck, knocking him head over heels to the floor. He dropped his guns, but adrenaline pumping, immediately sprang to his feet. A burly, thick-necked man stripped off his robe in front of him, revealing a white collar, black shirt and pants. *Father Sin!*

Robert chopped the behemoth’s throat, kicked him hard in the head, and brought his foot down hard on the inside of the priest’s knee, busting the kneecap, breaking his leg. The priest hit the deck hard. Robert looked over at Thorne. Both men she was fighting were down on the ground, still, lifeless. Behind her, Father Kong, Detective Reynolds, and the others rushed onto the scene. A woman tackled Thorne to the ground and punched her in the face.

Samuel! Robert turned, ran to the end of the deck, stripped off the robe and dove into the wet blackness.

Robert felt kicks and bumps as he entered the water. Small hands grabbed at his face and body. He reached for them, pulling the small bundles to the surface. Each time he reached the surface, which was crowded with kicking and struggling children, he found himself holding a child other than Samuel. Frantic, he untied the child, ripped the tape from their mouths, then went down for another, each time bringing up a child other than his godson.

He looked up at the stadium. Father Kong and several of his people dove in the lake to help. Robert went back under. As his eyes adjusted to the blackness, he could make out the mostly lifeless forms of children. His lungs burned. He felt a surge of anxiety. *No, please don’t let him die!*

Most of the bodies Robert swam through had stopped moving. He grabbed them in pairs and pulled them to the surface, crashing into others on his way up. Each time, his heart sank. *It’s not Samuel.*

Lake water mixed with the tears in Robert's eyes. He saw Father Kong and the others pulling children to the shore, as more of the members of Il Martello di Dio jumped in to assist. Robert dove down again and again. Each time he came up holding another dead child, his heart sank a little lower, and his soul emptied a little more.

“Samuel! Samuel!” he screamed.

71

Fighting through kicking feet and butting heads, Samuel fought his way to the surface, threw up a stomach full of lake water, and sucked in air that felt like piercing needles in his lungs. Some of the children that were tied to the deck had slipped out of their ropes and were clawing for anything they could hang onto, including Samuel.

Several times, panicked children pulled him under, almost causing him to drown, but each time Samuel punched his way free and clawed back to the surface, amongst terrified screams, wet fleshy mounds, some dead, others wiggling desperately.

He finally gathered himself and swam away from the crowd towards Trevignano, just as he and his brothers planned. Along the way, he searched the faces of dying, drowning children, knowing he would see Eduardo or Felipe. *We can't die. You're my only family now, and without you, I'd rather be dead.*

Samuel swam clear of the crowd, but could still hear splashing and crying. Mixed in the noise, he thought he heard someone call his name, but ignored it. Arm tired, legs weak, Samuel moved slowly across the lake, his energy almost gone. He ripped off the heavy robe, but it only helped a little, and he struggled to keep going.

“Samuel! Samuel!” he heard a weak voice call.

Samuel turned. Felipe, with Eduardo at his side, swam up to him, both crying with joy. The three floated in the water, hugging and kissing each other on the cheek.

“We made it,” said Eduardo, holding Samuel tight.

Samuel felt a surge of energy. “Yes. Now let's get to shore. We can make it the rest of the way.”

The three boys swam hard toward the shore. Samuel's body throbbed with pain, but he didn't care. He kicked and pulled at the water even harder, with Felipe and Eduardo on each side.

Thirty minutes later, Samuel saw the dark outline of Trevignano and its hillside cottages. He smiled, then laughed. *We made it!*

Samuel and his brothers lumbered out of the lake, fell down in the sand, and threw up lake water and bile. Samuel felt the muscles in his legs knot up, and his stomach cramp. Felipe and Eduardo cried out in

pain. Samuel relaxed. The pain continued, but his mind floated elsewhere. He'd lost everything and everyone he ever cared about. Everybody he trusted had let him down, and now, right there on the beach, Samuel changed forever. *I'll never trust anyone outside of my brothers again.*

He stood. "We have to keep moving. Let's go."

"Where?" asked Felipe. "We have nowhere to go."

"We'll make a way," Samuel told them, confident and sure. "But we have to get away from here now."

Felipe and Eduardo pulled themselves up, and the three of them walked into Trevignano, which was dark and deserted, except for a few lights in scattered houses on the hillside.

"Rome is this way," said Eduardo, pointing.

The boys walked toward Rome, making sure they stayed off the road, close to the thick brush.

"We'll get as close as we can," said Samuel. "When the sun comes up, we'll hide in the woods and sleep until nightfall." His brothers nodded their heads in agreement.

Suddenly, an old man appeared out of the woods, startling the three of them. Next to him, stood a tall, much younger man, with arms that bulged and stretched his black knit sweater.

"You boys are out quite late," said the old man. "And you're wet. Swimming this time of night?"

"What business is it of yours?" shot Samuel.

The old man smiled. "You made it out alive, so you are my business," he told them.

Samuel looked at the frail old man curiously. There was something familiar about him that he couldn't place. "What does that mean?" he asked.

The old man moved closer. "It means that if you chose, you can come with me, where you'll be free and safe."

"And if we don't?" asked Samuel, calm and cool.

"Then life will be much harder for you," said the old man. "You made it from the lake, so you will not die, that I can assure you. But why take the hard road? Mine is much softer and easy."

"We don't know you," said Samuel. "How can we trust you?"

The old man walked toward them. Eduardo and Felipe stepped back. Samuel calmed them with a touch.

“Come with me, and you’re free to leave anytime you find the situation unpleasing. You have my word.”

“How do you know who we are?” asked Samuel.

“I know because I need to know,” said the old man.

“We don’t even know your name,” said Samuel, taking a step closer.

“I have many names,” the old man told him. “But you can call me grandfather, because I’ll never do anything but take care of you.”

Samuel stood silent, thinking. The old man walked over to a black car, with pitch-black tinted windows. The tall man opened the back door. The old man looked back.

“I’ll wait for ten minutes. If you don’t come with me now, I’m sure we’ll meet again sometime in the future.” He slid inside and closed the door.

“What will we do?” asked Felipe.

“We should go our own way,” said Eduardo. “He looks evil.”

Samuel thought, *but it feels right*. He looked at his brothers. “We have nothing to lose. If we don’t like it, we’ll run.”

Felipe and Eduardo took deep breaths. Felipe stepped closer to Samuel. “I’m not sure, but I’m with you.”

Eduardo put a hand on Samuel’s shoulder. “We are we, and always will be.” He smiled.

Samuel hugged both of them, then walked over to the old man’s window and knocked on the glass. The door opened. Samuel and his brothers slid inside. The car started and headed down the dark road.

“If you lie to us, we’ll not only leave, we’ll find a way to kill you,” said Samuel, sure and matter-of-fact.

The old man smiled. “I would expect nothing less. Now rest. We have much to do ahead of us.”

Samuel closed his eyes, and left his past behind him.

72

Father Kong leaned down and helped Robert out of the water, as more of The Hammer of God members, along with Robert's men, jumped in and helped pull children out of the water, most of them dead or near death.

"I couldn't find Samuel or his brothers," said Robert, exhausted and frustrated.

"Let's check the children above," said Father Kong, wrapping a blanket around Robert's shoulders.

Up on the stage, the bodies of dead members of The Order, armed guards hired by Cardinal Polletto, and several of Robert's men, were lined up in a row of death.

More of Robert's team set up guard posts around the area, as Father Kong's people inspected the dead, said prayers, and tended to the wounded. On the right side of the stage were rows of dead children, their bodies covered with white sheets. Robert leaned over the rail and vomited. A soft hand patted his back. Thorne and Detective Reynolds stood behind him, barely a scratch on either one of them.

"Did you find him?" Thorne asked, her eyes hopeful.

"No," answered Robert. "We're about to look at the bodies up here. I didn't see Samuel or his brothers below." He looked his partner over. "You guys okay?"

"We're fine," said the detective, giving Robert a hug. "But I'm gonna be sore as hell in the morning."

"I'm solid," said Thorne. "Killed a few, including a woman who gave me hell, but I'm good."

"That was Sister Maria Bravo," said Father Kong, sadness in his voice. "She worked directly for Cardinal Polletto."

Robert looked over at the priest. "Is the cardinal?"

"Yes, he's dead," said Father Kong. "Stabbed to death."

"And Father Tolbert?" Robert asked.

"The bastard's over there," said Thorne, pointing. "I took care of him myself."

Father Tolbert, a crazed look in his dead eyes, was laid back over Cardinal Polletto's body, head tilted back, throat cut wide open.

Robert took a deep breath and started over toward the dead children. Thorne grabbed his arm.

“Robert.” He turned. Compassion filled Thorne’s face. “Alison’s dead,” she said.

Robert dropped his head. Even though she had betrayed them all, it still hurt. *This whole thing stinks.* “How?” he asked.

“She got caught in the crossfire when our people rushed inside,” said Thorne. “The Order’s people started shooting, and our people answered. I don’t know who hit her, but she took two small caliber shots to the head.”

They killed her. Robert turned abruptly. “Let’s get this over with.”

He walked over to the covered children and lifted the first sheet. Thorne, Detective Reynolds and Father Kong spread out and did the same. *Why? Why do this?* Each innocent face seemed to reach inside and suck a little life out of him. Almost every nationality was represented amongst the dead; Indian, Chinese, African, Middle-Eastern. *They must have taken them from all over the world.*

Father Kong, Detective Reynolds and Thorne walked over as Robert examined the last body.

“They’re not here,” said Thorne.

“Maybe they’re still in the water,” said Father Kong. “We can get a closer look in the morning.”

“No,” snapped Robert, tears in his eyes. “I’m going back in tonight.”

Father Kong opened his mouth to speak, but Thorne held up her hand. “I’ll go back in with you, partner. I’ll get our underwater gear so we can get a closer look. I’ll meet you down on the rocks.”

Robert nodded. “Thanks, partner.”

Thorne gave Robert a firm hug, then grabbed Detective Reynolds and headed for the castle.

Father Kong placed a hand on Robert’s shoulder. “I’ll go down with you.”

As they walked, a sinking feeling of complete dread exploded inside Robert. He fell to his knees and cried. “He’s gone! I’ll never see him again!”

Father Kong knelt down and prayed. When he finished, he helped Robert to his feet. “I know how difficult this is for you. Remember Sister

Isabella and the others who have died in this effort. But also remember, you have stopped a great evil tonight, and millions will live because of it.”

Robert heard the words, but they rang hollow. He wanted Samuel back in his arms. *I'd give a million lives to have him back.*

73

The following day, and for three months after, members of Il Martello di Dio, along with Robert and Thorne, dragged Bracciano Lake, searching for Samuel and his brothers, but found nothing except for the mangled body of an old man named Giovanni Telfair, and two wrecked vehicles.

Hoping the boys had escaped somehow, Robert, Thorne and Father Kong searched Rome and the surrounding area, using every contact and resource at their disposal, but found nothing.

Detective Reynolds stayed for the first two weeks then headed back to Chicago. Robert had never seen Thorne happer.

Director Thompson showed up with questions Robert wouldn't answer, but he didn't press the matter. He offered CIA resources if they were needed. Robert declined.

Now, he and Thorne sat in front of Cardinal Maximilian, now known as Pope Pius VX. The first Pontiff of African-American decent in Roman Catholic history. Father Kong stood by the new Bishop of Rome's side.

"We'll never forget you," said the new Pope. "Here at the Vatican, you have a friend."

"Thank you, Your Excellency," said Robert, proud to see a man he respected sitting in the seat in front of him. "If you ever need us, we're here for you also."

"Thank you. Father Kong will now lead Il Martello di Dio. We'll stay in touch through him."

"Why keep The Hammer of God going?" asked Thorne. "I thought this put The Order down for good."

"It hurt them, but we fear they still have an ember of life. Father Sin and several of the others managed to escape," said Father Kong. "And where there's a small fire, a raging inferno looms."

Robert shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "If you ever get word of Samuel, anything, please let us know."

"You'll be the first to know," said the Pope, standing, extending his hand. They said their goodbyes, and Robert and Thorne headed for the door. "God be with you," said the Holy Father. "His favor and His blessings."

Robert turned and smiled. "And also with you."

When Robert and Thorne were gone, Father Kong sat down in front of the Pope's desk. "Holy Father, shouldn't we tell them?"

"Tell them what?" asked the Pope. "We have no real proof."

"But the chance of all three going missing is almost impossible."

"Yes, and I too believe they're alive, but we have nothing firm."

Pope Pius stroked his chin. "Deep down, I'm sure Mr. Veil feels the same. Keep an eye on him. If he finds the boy, we need to be there."

"Yes, Holy Father. I understand."

Epilogue

High in the snow drenched mountains of Switzerland, an old man sat on the porch of his private retreat, rocking back and forth in his chair. He watched three boys playing in the snow, each of them snug and warm in new snowsuits; one wearing blue, one red, and the last green, making it easy for the Black Pope to identify them from a distance.

Already a year after coming to live with him, the boys showed even more promise than he first realized. Each of them had developed a special skill. One showed extreme depth of thought, one brilliant strategy, and the last, a magnificent writer and orator. All three picked up languages with ease. Math, history and science seemed like playthings in their hands.

But one of the boys, the child in the red snowsuit, now on his back making an angel in the white powder, possessed a trait that the Black Pope and his people had waited for over a decade to boast about.

The Black Pope had watched the child grow stronger each day, directing the other two boys as a general would his troops. *Marvelous. The leader, the boy in red will one day rule the world.*

Samuel ran up the stairs. “Grandfather, come play with us. We’re going to build a snowman.”

The Black Pope smiled. “Let me sit for awhile and rest. I’ll play with you a little later.”

Samuel gave the old man a hug and jumped down the stairs. He headed back toward Eduardo and Felipe, then stopped and turned. “And thanks for the new snowsuit, Grandfather. Blue’s my favorite color,” he said.

PREVIEW

BLOOD
A NOVEL BY
REGINALD COOK

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This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *Blood* by Reginald Cook. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect content of the forthcoming edition.

Prologue

Abdul Aziz Muhammad pushed his seat back as soon as the pilot turned off the seatbelt sign, and announced that it was safe to move about the cabin. Not long after, he felt the Boeing 707 level off and cruise at what the pilot said was forty thousand feet. The passengers were informed that the flight would be a smooth one, with clear skies and cooperative weather all the way to Washington D.C., his final destination.

Abdul's business in Los Angeles had gone well, but he still had much to do, and couldn't completely rest, even though he'd been awake for nearly seventy-two hours. A tightness in his stomach gnawed at him. He rubbed his belly, took a deep cleansing breath and the cramps subsided.

"I know how you feel," said a woman's soft voice from the aisle seat next to him.

Abdul opened his eyes, and the gentle gaze of an elderly woman, the perfect picture of a grandmother, smiled back at him.

"I don't quite care for flying either," she continued. "But my son thought it would be nice for me to get out of Virginia and see the grandkids."

Abdul was in no mood for small talk, but forced a smile. "Thank you," he said. "It gives me comfort to know I'm not alone."

The elderly woman extended her hand. "Norma," she told him. "Norma Jennings." Abdul sat up, introduced himself, and gently shook Norma's hand. "Were you in Los Angeles visiting?" she inquired.

"No, business," Abdul answered, his smile fading as he remembered the task at hand.

Norma's face went flush. "I'm sorry," she said, "I didn't mean to pry."

Abdul took her hand and stroked it. "No, no, forgive my rudeness. I'm just a little tired. I need a good night's sleep."

Norma made small talk with him for the next thirty minutes. As she droned on about her grandkids, her dead husband and her children, Abdul feigned interest, but inside, the pressure of his mission, his task,

loomed large and heavy. It took everything in him to keep from shaking uncontrollably.

Abdul excused himself and headed for the bathroom. He doused his face with cold water, sat down on the toilet, head in his hands, and gathered himself. When he agreed to the meeting in Los Angeles, he didn't expect to be hit with so much, so fast. He dried his face. *Soon it'll be over*, he thought. *I'll make contact with Robert Veil and Nikki Thorne in Washington, pass on the information provided by my associates in Los Angeles, and my duty will be done.* His mind drifted to his wife, Elise, and their ten year old twins, Rommel and Maxine.

The plane shook hard, almost throwing Abdul to the floor. The seatbelt sign appeared with a simultaneous ding, and the captain asked everyone to take their seats. When Abdul reached his, he found Norma, eyes closed, gripping the armrests like her life was at stake.

Abdul touched her shoulder, and this time, *he* comforted her with a smile. "Don't worry," he told her, "*it's* just a little turbulence. It'll pass soon."

Norma gave a nervous smile, and again, pressed her eyelids tight. Abdul fastened his seatbelt and looked out at the noon day sky. He smiled. He'd done the world a great service, and was sure Allah would smile on him.

A bright flash and a loud explosion slapped him out of his trance. The plane rocked back and forth, tossing several passengers, who had obviously ignored the seatbelt sign, around the cabin like confetti. Screams filled the cabin as the plane nosed downward. Abdul looked over at Norma, who clutched her chest, face purple, tongue protruding, eyes bulging.

Abdul asked Allah to keep him, and looked out at the plane's right engine, now ablaze, leaving a trail of black steaming behind them. Suddenly, the plane leveled off, but continued to rock and shake, and the captain ordered everyone to prepare for an emergency landing.

Abdul looked over at Norma, and knew at once she would not have to suffer through the catastrophe about to happen. He stared out through the smoke and fire. The voices and screams faded away. Below, patches of gray, green and brown moved up fast. Abdul gritted his teeth. *If it's*

my time to meet Allah, I won't do so as a coward. He braced himself, leaned over and prayed.

It was unlike anything Abdul had ever experienced, even as a soldier fighting the Russians in Afghanistan. There was a hard crash and he watched the plane tear apart. He heard the screams and cries of the others fade away, and realized he'd been thrown from the aircraft, still strapped in his seat. He hit the ground and felt his right arm break, bounced several times and came to a hard, grinding stop. His body racked with pain, and unable to move for half an hour, maybe longer, Abdul laid face down, nearly suffocating in the dirt. Finally, he rolled the tattered seat over and faced the sky, the sun beating down on his throbbing face. He tried to move his right arm, but a searing pain protested, so he reached over with his left hand, undid the seatbelt and struggled to his feet, sweat burning his eyes.

His vision adjusted. He focused hard on the area around him. They had crashed in rocky terrain, and below him, in a flat ravine about a hundred yards away, lay most of the plane wreckage. At first, Abdul saw only the smoldering remnants of what once was a masterpiece of human ingenuity and craftsmanship. Then, amongst the sea of twisted, fragmented steel, torn and burnt clothing, cooked flesh, and scattered body parts, he spotted movement in six different areas, and realized he was not the only one to survive. He fell to his knees, unable to stay on his feet any longer, thanked Allah through his tears, then bent over and threw up in the dirt.

A black helicopter roared overhead and made a beeline for the wreckage. *Good*, Abdul thought, *they've come to help us.* He leaned back against the rocks and gathered his strength. When he rose up far enough to see what was going on, he counted six men, three attending to the injured, three more examining what was left of the plane, sifting through the remains. Abdul's cries seeped out as only whispers. He closed his eyes. *It's okay. Praise be to Allah. I'm alive.* When he finally opened his eyes, his mouth dropped in horror. Systematically, the six men, now holding machine guns, rounded on each survivor and shot them down where they sat or lay.

Abdul gasped and ducked down in the rocks, frantic, terrified. He crawled further into the mountainous area, and curled up like an infant beneath a narrow slab of rock and waited.

“There’s a chair here,” a voice bellowed. “It’s empty!”

“Probably was thrown clear,” came the answer. “We’ll search the area a quarter mile around!”

Abdul listened intently, but didn’t move, his mind racing to make sense of what he had witnessed. He felt his head go light and fought to stay awake, but the pain clawed back and his brain threatened to explode. Unable to fight any longer, he blacked out.

When he awakened, it was pitch black and completely silent. Stiff and aching, he crawled out from under the rocks, pain racking his body, tears in his eyes. He didn’t know if the men he’d seen earlier were still there, and had no idea how long he’d been unconscious, but he made his way over to the area where he had landed. His seat was gone.

Abdul’s eyes adjusted to the light of the full moon as he glared down into the ravine, eyes wide. “It’s gone,” he whispered to the night. “Everything is gone.”

He rubbed his stomach then lifted his shirt, exposing the envelope heavily taped to it, information he was to deliver to Robert Veil and Nikki Thorne. He fell to his knees, hands raised to the sky.

“Allah save me,” Abdul gasped. “I’m a dead man.”