THE

NIGHT THE ANGELS

WEPT

by

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AND SO IT BEGAN…..

 In 1917, three Portuguese children, Francisco and Jacinta Martos, aged eight and six, and Lucy dos Santos, aged nine, claimed to have witnessed three apparitions of the Virgin Mary on a hillside near the small town of Fatima.

 Lucy further claimed that Mary entrusted her with three secrets that would change the world. During the final apparition in October many observers swore that the sun swooped and danced across the sky.

 Francisco fell gravely ill soon after the last vision. He died on April 4th, 1919. Jacinta died of tuberculosis on February 20th, 1920. The brother and sister lie buried together in the great Basilica of Our Lady in Fatima.

 Lucy moved to Oporto in 1921 and at the age of fourteen lived with the Sisters of St Dorothy in Villar on the outskirts of the city.

 She returned to Portugal in 1946, where she entered the Carmelite convent of Santa Teresa in Coimbra, where she lived until her death on February 15th, 2005.

 Lucy died without revealing that Mary had given her the Prophecy of St Peter and the end of days.

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PROLOGUE

 **Western Australia, Friday, September 15th, 2017**

 Sister Rachel worked in the heat and dirt of a vegetable garden hosting the basic fare of potatoes, carrots and peas, most of them surviving. She had discarded her habit several days before in favour of a white linen dress and straw hat in an effort to give her frail body as much comfort as possible as it fought against the relentless pain of the anthrax. Her once strong face was sickly pale and her eyes dark-ringed with fatigue. She paused every few minutes, trying to suppress the deep, hacking cough that sent more pain stabbing through her chest.

 The Sanctuary grounds had deteriorated in the past few days. An Australian summer with twelve hours a day of brilliant, unforgiving sun, shining over the cloudless desert had been too much for all but the strongest of trees and shrubs. The garden’s fountain was drying up, the beautiful flowerbeds falling prey to the suffocating red dust. The only survivors were native kangaroo-paws providing splashes of dark red and green and wattles whose bright yellow flowers hung over the pebbled paths.

 Rachel stopped to wipe her brow, trembling and struggling for breath as she addressed a stone cherub. ‘I think an early lunch is in order.’ She moved slowly towards the living quarters, looking back to smile at the ancient statue, ‘Perhaps you’d care to join me?’

 She had taken only a few steps towards the cool shade of the kitchen when the dull roar of motorbikes echoed across the desert. The nun flinched like a frightened rabbit as she changed direction to make for the old metal gate set in the rock and mud cement wall that surrounded the buildings.

 Rachel reached the gate, raising a hand to shield her eyes against the shimmering heat haze, quickly identifying three machines, approaching fast, leaving great plumes of soft dust floating in their wake. Within seconds the bikes had closed the distance to a hundred metres. The riders backed off on the throttles, changing down through the gears, the snarling noise of protesting engines cutting through the stillness of the desert air. The motorbikes rolled to a stop and the riders switched off the engines. Silence settled over the Sanctuary and the flat, arid landscape, broken only by a few struggling ghost gums and scrawny saltbush. Clouds of dust, carried on a light breeze, rolled across the white crosses in the tiny graveyard nestled in the shelter of the wall.

 Rachel’s face hardened. She was used to renegades forcing their way into the convent, looking for food and fresh water. Thus far she had been able to avoid rape and assault through her ability to reason and co-operate with them. She recognized the male and one of the females. Calling themselves Cain and Midnight, they had given her a hard time a few days earlier, stealing food and looking for water. The anthrax was well advanced in both of them.

 Midnight, a sociopathic creature with a pale, hatchet face, had gone through life, hating every moment as Jane Jones, until the night she shot both her parents as they sat watching the Fox News coverage of the meteorites raining down, flooding the planet with the anthrax virus. As the echo of the second shot faded, the old grandfather clock in the corner of the room chimed twelve times. Jane had toyed with the idea of Midnight Jones for a few moments before going with the single name.

 Cain, a skinny, crippled lunatic, had been given to mindless killing long before the anthrax hit him. As Sergeant at Arms with God’s Garbage he had quietly and in one case noisily, killed three Hell’s Angels who had given offence in one form or another.

 The other female dismounted and walked swiftly towards Rachel. A sensation of irrational fear flooded through the nun as she slowly pushed open the gate and walked forward to meet the stranger, her stomach churning as she realized the woman showed no sign of the virus. She took a deep breath to regain control, shuddering and coughing up mucous as she spoke. ‘I am Sister Rachel. Welcome to the Sanctuary. The convent is always open to those in need.’

 ‘I am Dark Star. Give them to me.’ The guttural voice seemed to come from deep within her short, slim body. Her close-cropped hair framed a hard face with a reptilian mouth and coal-black eyes shining with demonic intensity.

 Rachel stepped back, bewildered. ‘What? I don’t understand.’

 Dark Star raised a threatening arm. ‘The boy and the girl. Give them to me before I lose my temper.’

 ‘There are no boys or girls. It’s been days since I’ve seen a .....’

 ‘Enough!’ Dark Star stared into Rachel’s eyes, black, hypnotic pools of hatred stabbing repeatedly into her brain. The nun trembled with each savage violation. Dark Star growled with satisfaction as her mind scan tore the truth from her. ‘Very well. But they will come here.’ She scanned the buildings she could see through the gates. ‘The God Bitch will bring them.’

 Rachel waited, immobile, trying to fathom the horror she knew was waiting to be unleashed upon her. Dark Star turned back to her. ‘Who else is here?’

 ‘I am alone.’

 Dark Star considered the reply and knew it was the truth. Her lips curled back in a savage snarl. ‘Do you know me?’ The harsh voice penetrated Rachel’s soul. ‘I am your deepest fear. I am here to claim the boy and the girl. They will be mine for eternity.’

 Rachel no longer had the strength to resist the overwhelming depths of depravity emanating from the creature in front of her. She began to weep, sobbing with fear and desperation, yet still holding her ground as the last defender of the faith that had sustained the Sanctuary for so many generations.

 Dark Star turned abruptly and stalked away towards her companions.

 Rachel dropped to her knees in the dust, looking up into the limitless depths of the afternoon sky. ‘Our father which art in Heaven....’ She had recited The Lord’s Prayer thousands of times, but now she put every last vestige of her belief into the words, calling for His help against a being she did not understand, a force she never once believed she would have to face.

 Dark Star snarled at Cain. ‘Arrange a meeting with her God.’

 Cain giggled, a high-pitched, childish squeal, forced from cracked and bleeding lips. He tumbled from his bike, lurching towards the nun – like a giant black spider.

 Rachel continued to pray, not faltering as she watched death coming quickly towards her.

 The Radiance crashed through Rachel’s mind in an explosion of light across the desert floor, the shock waves of energy sending her and Cain tumbling to the ground. Dried up balls of dead saltbush, feather-light and pale yellow, rolled and bounced across the ground. The waves hit the bikes, driving them into the dirt. Midnight tumbled to the ground, landing in a cloud of dust. Only Dark Star stood upright as a maelstrom howled around her.

 Rachel felt the mind scan slam through her brain as she recognized the blinding blue light of the corridor that came from the Radiance. Stumbling to her feet, she was beaten easily by Cain who rolled and staggered upright in one movement, looking to Dark Star who was staring into the Radiance with a grim smile of anticipation. Midnight dragged her bike up out of the sand, trying to keep Dark Star between her and the corridor – in which a dense gray cloud formed, quickly taking on a human shape.

 In a retina-searing flash the light was gone and Rachel could see the tall blonde woman who had been at the centre of her visions. Wearing only a slip of a dress in pure white cotton, her head and feet were bare. She had a serene, ageless face, her hair flowed to her shoulders and she emanated a warm inner strength. The sheer beauty and wonder of the apparition instantly overcame the nun’s fear and sickening anticipation of death.

 The woman strode swiftly towards the gates. Cain backed off fast, allowing her to reach a point between him and Rachel.

 Midnight moved out from behind Dark Star. ‘Where did she come from? Do you know her?’

 ‘Shut up, idiot!’ Dark Star spoke without taking her eyes from the woman.

 Midnight backed away, hissing softly like a mongrel cat.

 Rachel was too weak to move or speak, her strength now almost totally gone.

 The woman stood motionless on the hot desert sand.

 Dark Star’s voice sounded like a metal chain dragged across shattered glass. ‘Cain! Will you serve me unto death?’

 ‘You know I will.’

 ‘Bring her to me. I want her alive. Understand that Cain, she must be alive!’

 Cain giggled as he moved forward. Although badly weakened by the anthrax, Cain was totally confident. This would be easy. Perhaps Dark Star would allow him to enjoy the spoils of victory.

 Unable to comprehend the drama playing out in front of her, Rachel backed away towards the gate, hoping she might be able to close it in time to prevent the battleground moving into the Sanctuary.

 The woman waited calmly until Cain threw a straight right to her throat. She swayed gracefully to one side. Cain was both sick and stupid, but he was also streetwise and a survivor of a hundred brawls, many of them to the death. Instinct took over. He feinted to the left and aimed another strike from the right, his fist ripping into her rib cage. The woman gasped and staggered backwards as Cain leapt in for the knockout punch. She sidestepped, slamming a powerhouse kick into his belly. He folded instantly to his knees, painfully sucking in air and coughing up vile smelling liquid. But he never took his eyes from his prey.

 Midnight lurched forward, snarling frustration. ‘Ya got no idea, ya stupid….’

 Dark Star barked. "Stay!"

 Midnight did as she was told.

 The woman moved in fast with a series of combinations, some of them blocked, most of them sidestepped by Cain, now back on his feet. He forced a great gulp of air into his lungs, shaking violently as he tried to summon the remains of his strength. The woman took a fist to the side of her head, sending her to the ground. Cain moved in fast but she rolled away, coming smoothly to her feet. Cain grunted his fury as he pulled a Bowie knife from his belt.

 ‘No!’ Dark Star screamed.

 Cain ignored her, going in for the kill.

 Rachel instinctively made a move forward, then lost her nerve and froze where she stood.

 The woman tried desperately to avoid the blade, but the steel opened a gash on her arm. She staggered back and Cain came after her. He didn’t see the roundhouse kick that slammed into his head, spun him around and dropped him face first into the dirt.

 Midnight pulled her shotgun from its sheath but Dark Star raised a finger to warn her. She groaned with frustration, like an animal kept from its food.

 Cain staggered to his feet with the knife blade embedded to the hilt in his chest. There was no pain on his face, just absolute bewilderment as he took two stumbling steps towards the woman, then crashed in a heap at her feet.

 ‘She’s dead!’ Midnight swung the shotgun up to fire.

 ‘No!’ Dark Star pushed the gun down.

 ‘I can hit her easily from....’

 A savage backhand cracked across Midnight’s face.

 Dark Star stepped forward several paces. Her voice travelled easily through the hot desert air, her rigid arm held out like a weapon. ‘Can you face the Sentinels, you Bitch? They will torment you in the flames of Hell and I will claim the children. I’ll claim their hearts and I’ll claim their minds. I will destroy their souls and I will destroy the Testament!’

 Rachel saw the fear clouding the woman’s face, the fight to the death in her crystal blue eyes. The sound of the bikes broke the spell. Dark Star and Midnight were leaving, the bikes picking up speed in a few seconds.

 The woman watched until the machines were tiny black dots on the horizon, then approached Rachel, holding her injured ribs, her face taut with pain.

 Rachel looked into her eyes and saw eternity. ‘I was taken into the Radiance. You walked with a young boy and girl. There was fire all around you.’

 The woman sighed softly with relief. ‘Then my search is over. My name is Acima. I am the Daughter of God and I have come for the children.

**BOOK ONE**

**Prophecy**

**Prophecy 1:1**

 **Archbishop’s residence, Milan, Italy - October 15th, 1921.**

 Cardinal Achille Ratti felt uncomfortably hot as he picked up the telephone. Although it was eight o’clock in the evening, an unseasonal shower of rain had sent the humidity to ninety-six percent. Now, as he heard the tension in the Pope’s voice, the perspiration trickled from under Ratti’s hair, running down his forehead into the white cotton handkerchief, already damp with moisture mopped from his face.

 The conversation with Benedict was brutally short.

 Dropping the receiver back onto the cradle, Cardinal Ratti paused as a sickening premonition of death swept over him. He had been Archbishop of Milan for only a few months, and the urgent summons from the Pope demanding his immediate return to Rome came as a shock. The terse instruction to go straight to the secure room for a meeting of the Brotherhood, left Ratti in no doubt that it concerned the Prophecy. That the matter was serious Ratti also had no doubt.

 He walked swiftly to the dining room where he had barely begun his evening meal of pasta alla gricia. He consumed half a dozen mouthfuls, drank a glass of Barbera Superior and rang for his valet.

 An hour later the Archbishop crossed Milan’s Duomo Square on his way to the Stazione Centrale. Alongside him, his driver sweated profusely as he struggled with two heavy suitcases. Ratti had no idea how long he would be staying in Vatican City. He had never been inclined to leave anything to chance.

 The locomotive hauling a single, first class carriage had arrived from Rome only twenty minutes earlier. The engineers immediately took on water and rebuilt the head of steam. They stood by now in the cabin, peering out from time to time to see who was so important as to keep them awake all night.

 Colonel Jules Repond stood rigidly to attention by the carriage door. The Commandant of the Papal Swiss Guards wore his dark blue working uniform, the cut of the clothes making his tall, powerful body look even more impressive. The tailors, working inside the Guard’s barracks, had seen to that.

 The Colonel was not carrying a sword, pike or halberd, the weapons used by the Guards when on duty within the Vatican. Ratti was aware however, that Repond carried a revolver concealed within his uniform. His training would have ensured that he could hit a playing card at fifteen paces and a man at twice that, moving or not. Ratti also knew that should his life be threatened for whatever reason the Colonel would shoot his attacker without hesitation and with absolute impunity.

 Repond opened the carriage door. ‘Good evening, Eminence.’

 ‘Good evening, Colonel.’ Ratti entered the compartment without breaking his stride.

 Repond took the suitcases from the driver, not deigning to speak to the man, and followed Ratti into the carriage. The driver slammed the curtained door closed behind them. The two men sat silently facing each other. The high pitched shriek of escaping steam echoed through the station as the train lurched into motion.

 While Repond sat upright, looking determinedly at a point over Ratti’s left shoulder, the Cardinal, having drawn back the curtain, stared out of the window, his musings broken only by a respectful request from Colonel Repond that he might be allowed to sit at ease. He could see no point in the senior officer sitting at attention all night. The request was granted.

 As the hours slipped by Ratti took advantage of the time to prepare himself, as he always did, before a meeting of the Brotherhood, reflecting on all that he knew about the contents of the secure room.

\*

 Peter, Head of the Apostles, entered the Radiance to receive the Prophecy on the night following Christ’s crucifixion. He built a temporary secure room within catacombs in Jerusalem, into which he placed a small bronze Urn sealed with wax. It contained the greatest secret in the history of mankind, a secret that would last for two thousand years.

 In 36AD Peter moved the Urn to a permanent chamber beneath a small mausoleum in the maritime city of Caesarea. It remained there throughout sixteen papacies. Each of those Popes chose a trusted Patriarch to share the responsibility, memorizing the prophecy of St Peter and the end of days. They passed it on as circumstances demanded.

 The seventeenth in line, St Urban, died of natural causes in 230AD. He was buried in the catacomb of Praetextatus on the Via Appia, south of Rome. On his instructions, his tomb became the third of the secure rooms.

 At the request of Pope Sylvester, the Emperor Constantine built the Basilica of St Peter between the years of 315 to 349AD.

 During construction, with the builders sworn to secrecy, Sylvester had a chamber built beneath the structure, the last of the secure rooms. It was to hold the Urn for another thousand years.

 In 1506 Giuliano Della Rovere, serving as Pope Julius II, commissioned a complete rebuilding of the Basilica, including the construction of another entrance to the chamber. The architect and the small team of builders had no knowledge of the contents of the room. Their discretion was ensured by the threat of excommunication which they believed would cause their eternal damnation. They took to their deaths the location of the secure room and its concealed entrance.

 It was Julius II who created the Brotherhood. He had chosen Cardinal Giovanni de Medici, to share the secrets of the Prophecy. Medici was a grossly overweight man, even at the youthful age of thirty. There was a possibility, however remote, that Julius and Medici might die at the same time, leaving the knowledge of the Prophecy either lost or exposed. The Pope was also aware that from time to time rumors about the Prophecy were surfacing, rumors that had to be stopped. He and Medici, who became the last of the Patriarchs, inducted two more Cardinals, one of whom was charged with ruthlessly suppressing rumors and inquires, however vague, relating to both the Radiance and the Prophecy. From that day forth the Brotherhood consisted of the Pope and three Cardinals, each replaceable only upon his death.

 Four hundred years later, Achille Ratti had been inducted into the brotherhood, after listening to the most incredible story he had ever heard or could have possibly imagined.

**Prophecy 1:2**

 **Vatican City, Rome – October 16th, 1921.**

 The sun had barely made an impression against the night sky as the locomotive rumbled to a stop. The carriage behind it was still shuddering when Colonel Repond opened the door opposite a car parked on the platform.

 Ratti uttered an audible grunt of disapproval when he saw the gleaming royal blue and maroon Benz. He had no interest in the more ostentatious trappings of office, finding such overt displays embarrassing. Repond opened a rear door for the Cardinal before taking the passenger’s seat next to the driver. Ratti closed his eyes, praying silently during the few minutes it took to reach St Anna’s Gate on the Via di Porta Angelica.

 Repond was out of the car and reaching for the door as the Benz rolled smoothly to a stop. Cardinal Ratti nodded his thanks and set off at a brisk walk past the church of St Anna towards the Via del Belvedere and the Vatican Museums. He ignored the question of his bags. They would be waiting for him at the Papal Apartments, later that day. Turning to his left, Ratti started the long walk to St Peters Basilica.

 The Papal Swiss Guards were already on duty. Even at a distance they stood out, wearing their ceremonial uniforms of Medici blue, red and yellow.

 And they all carried the halberd, a two-handed pole weapon with an axe blade topped with a spike.

 Ratti avoided conversation with the few nuns and priests who acknowledged him, their heads down against the light drizzle of warm autumn rain. The several Cardinals who stopped in expectation of a conversation, their faces betraying their surprise at seeing him, he greeted with little more than a curt nod. The presence of the Archbishop of Milan in Vatican City was made even more curious, given the early hour. Ratti had obviously travelled overnight. His fellow Cardinals now had more than enough material for gossip; he would be the center of attention for most of the day.

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 In truth, Achille Ratti had always been regarded as something of an oddity throughout the Holy See. As a young man he had attended the seminary in Milan followed by three years at the Gregorian University where he received a doctorate in theology. During his next few years in a parish, the barrel chested, broad shouldered young priest developed an interest in mountain climbing. Pius X promoted him to Vice-Prefect at the Vatican Library in 1914. Three years later, at the age of fifty seven, he was appointed Prefect of the Library.

 By this time he was a mountain climber of world-class ability, often travelling north to Lake Como where he scaled the limestone peaks of the crags and walls between Lake Como and the town of Lecco.

 This “aberration in the ranks” was one of the reasons Ratti came to the attention of Pope Benedict XV. The Pope had been discreetly looking about for a Cardinal with whom the Brotherhood could share the secrets of the Prophecy, as one of their number had recently succumbed to a stroke. Ratti’s tenure in Poland was the deciding factor. Benedict had sent him to Warsaw in 1919 as apostolic visitor, the Pope’s unofficial representative. Within a year Benedict had upgraded him to the official position of Papal nuncio.

 When Trotsky sent the Red Army into Warsaw in 1920 and other diplomats fled the threat of Russian firepower, Ratti had stood his ground as the Poles fought back. After the authorities in Warsaw ordered his immediate expulsion, Benedict recalled him to Rome. Ratti’s courage and loyalty had made him the ideal choice for the Brotherhood. On the third of June 1921, Benedict promoted him to Cardinal and on the same day appointed him Archbishop of Milan.

 Four months later, Benedict made the phone call that bought Cardinal Ratti back to Vatican City.

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 The door at the rear of the Basilica was small and discreet, protected by a vine-covered trellis surrounding a courtyard. A single Swiss Guard, a Sergeant Major, stood close by the entrance. He had no idea why the Archbishop of Milan wanted to enter the Basilica at that hour or what he would do once inside. Ratti entered unseen by anyone but the soldier, who closed the door behind him. For a few moments he stood perfectly still in the ante-room.

 His heart raced in anticipation of his meeting with Benedict. Ratti took out his ancient pocket watch, a family heirloom, and flipped open the cover. It was 6:45am and the Basilica was due to open to the public in fifteen minutes. That was not going to happen. On the Pope’s instructions the Guards would already have in place barricades and signs announcing a late opening due to unforeseen circumstances. No one would enter the Basilica until further instruction from Benedict once he was back in the Papal Apartments.

 Ratti walked swiftly from the room and strode along the left aisle, past the monument to Alexander VIII. Increasing his pace, he turned towards the entrance to the Vestry. In a building capable of holding sixty thousand people, his lone figure had some distance to travel as he walked through the cold silence, surrounded by unfathomable wealth and beauty.

 Ratti found himself murmuring the words inscribed on the frieze beneath Michelangelo’s Dome, built above the site of St Peter’s tomb. ‘Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam et tibi dabo claves regni caelorum.’ “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven”.

 The words, nearly six feet high, had been read by millions of visitors over the years, not one of whom, Ratti knew, had any idea of their true meaning.

 He didn’t pause in his stride. St Peter had indeed held the keys that would open the kingdom of heaven. But who would use the keys? That was the question that had occupied the minds of the Brotherhood for five hundred years and that of the Popes and Patriarchs who had considered the question for fifteen hundred years before that. The only certainty had been that the answer lay in the Radiance. With the Prophecy of St Peter.

 Ratti was now within sight of the entrance to the Vestry, only minutes away from the genius of the design that would gain him access to the secure room. Four plates in a mosaic held the secret. The combination was highly specific and very precise in execution, requiring pressure on one plate, followed exactly four seconds later by pressure on another. After a pause of seven seconds, pressure on the last two plates at the same time, would set in motion a system of weights on ropes slung over wooden pulleys, all designed to open a sliding panel. The margin for error was less than ten percent in the timing and none whatsoever in the order of the plates. The chances of accidental discovery therefore were beyond calculation.

**Prophecy 1:3**

 Ratti reached for the heavy tungsten filament torch standing on a small shelf to his left. As the panel slid closed, he flicked the switch on the side of the torch, sending its dull, golden beam onto half a dozen steps leading down to a narrow passageway.

 As he approached the secure room, Ratti switched off the torch and placed it carefully alongside three others in an alcove set in the wall. Standing in the absolute blackness of the corridor, Ratti reached forward and pushed on a heavy oak door, which swung open easily.

 Entering in the middle of a long, rectangular room he looked immediately to his right. Against the end wall Benedict XV sat at a plain wooden desk, facing the room. As always, he was immaculately attired in the white Papal simar with shoulder cape and white-watered fascia, his head covered by the zucchetto. A slim gold chain supported the pectoral cross on his chest. His Episcopal ring, chunky and conspicuous, glowed softly in the yellow light thrown by the oil lamp on the wall above him.

 Two Cardinals sat with Benedict, one either side of the desk. Both wore the scarlet simar, fascia and the zucchetto.

 Karl Joseph Schulte, on Benedict’s left, had been inducted several years before Ratti. They had been friends since childhood, their careers in the church running almost parallel. Schulte’s moon face and gentle smile were totally misleading. “Il Cardinale che accenta il silenzio” was charged with suppressing rumors and idle gossip that surfaced from time to time about the Radiance and the Prophecy and the existence of a secure room somewhere within the Vatican City. Using threats of undesirable overseas postings, loss of rank, or if the opportunity presented itself, blackmail, Schulte went about his task with a ruthless efficiency that impressed even Ratti, a man not known for gentle persuasion.

 Donato Tazza, on Benedict’s right, was in his late sixties, short and slim with black-rimmed spectacles holding thick lenses. An old friend of the Pope, the Italian had been inducted into the Brotherhood in 1917, replacing a French Cardinal who had died while travelling overseas. Tazza was “Lui Cardinale mantiene le annotazioni”. He would memorize all that took place in the secure room and later write it in long hand, recording the names of the Brotherhood, prospective inductees and the names of those who had occasion to be “spoken to” by Cardinal Schulte, ensuring that a close watch could be kept on them. The notes were then sealed in the secure room for future generations of the Brotherhood.

 Neither of these Cardinals would speak unless invited to do so by Benedict.

 Ratti didn’t see the child until he turned and was about to close the door. She was seated against the wall at the other end of the room, sharing the light from a single lamp illuminating a portrait of The Virgin Mary.